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Jair Bolsonaro and Women in the 2022 Presidential Election: An Analysis of Media Coverage from the Watchdog Journalism Perspective

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Abstract

The present article examines the journalistic coverage of the relationship between Jair Bolsonaro and women during the 2022 elections. It analyzes the content of articles from three news portals: Folha de S. Paulo (n = 62), G1 (n = 37), and R7 (n = 22), in light of journalism's watchdog role. The findings reveal that R7 demonstrated timid vigilance, characterized by a low number of articles and a lack of critical perspective, often favoring Bolsonaro. G1 and Folha de S. Paulo, in contrast, displayed a more pronounced and detached watchdog approach, with criticism and questions predominantly sourced from external voices. The present study highlights the importance of considering the political context and changes in the journalistic market to better understand the relationship between the press and power in Brazil.

Keywords

Watchdog journalism; Elections; Women; Content Analysis.

Introduction

“Women are practically integrated into society.” This statement, made by former President Jair Bolsonaro, dominated news headlines on March 8, 2022, International Women’s Day (Holanda, 2022). Two months earlier, on December 20, 2021, political news coverage focused on Bolsonaro’s vacation on the coast of Santa Catarina, particularly a video showing him singing a funk song that compared leftist women to dogs (Poder360, 2021). During his four years in office, Bolsonaro frequently offended female journalists. In one notable instance, in 2020, he made a sexual insinuation about the professional conduct of journalist Patrícia Campos Mello, from Folha de S. Paulo, which resulted in a court ruling against him for moral damages (G1, 2022a).

These incidents, along with numerous others from his time in congress, illustrate Bolsonaro’s history of sexist and misogynistic remarks, as well as the media’s extensive coverage of such behavior. It is worth noting that, in the 2018 election, first-round polling by Datafolha revealed significant rejection by female voters. Despite these findings, Bolsonaro’s campaign continued to make inflammatory and discriminatory statements. Just 20 days before the first round of voting, on September 17, his vice-presidential candidate, Hamilton Mourão, stated that households with only mothers and grandmothers were “factories of misfits” (Gielow, 2018). This echoed Bolsonaro’s previous remark made in 2017, in which he attributed the birth of his daughter to a moment of “weakness” (Grego, 2017).

In response, women organized anti-Bolsonaro events, culminating in the #EleNão (#NotHim) campaign, which mobilized millions of women in cities across Brazil and worldwide (Oliveira, 2018). According to Bittencourt (2020), this movement “gained strength and organized street demonstrations against the candidate in light of his recurring sexist and misogynistic statements.” Nicolau (2020) highlights that one event, held on September 29, 2018, was initiated by the Facebook group Women United Against Bolsonaro. He notes that, for the first time since Brazil’s return to democracy, people took to the streets during an election campaign to protest against a candidate rather than to support one.

During his presidency, Bolsonaro made further controversial statements. For instance, in a live broadcast, he expressed doubts about whether to approve or veto a bill punishing companies for wage discrimination, arguing that it could make hiring women “almost impossible” (Folha de São Paulo, 2021a). Conversely, he had no reservations about vetoing a bill in October 2021 that aimed to provide free sanitary products to low-income women (Folha de São Paulo, 2021b). The following month, speaking to supporters, he questioned whether women had started menstruating under his administration (UOL, 2021). However, on March 8, 2022, International Women’s Day during an election year, Bolsonaro reversed his stance and announced the distribution of sanitary products (G1, 2022b).

The present study analyzes the 2022 presidential election from the perspective of the relationship between watchdog journalism and democracy, examining how the media covered Bolsonaro’s interactions with women from August to October of 2022. To achieve this, we conducted a content analysis (Carlomagno & Rocha, 2016; Sampaio & Lycarício, 2018, 2021) of coverage by major news outlets, specifically G1, Folha de S. Paulo, and R7. The analysis sought to uncover how these media platforms reported on Bolsonaro’s relationship with women during the election and how this coverage aligns with the broader discussion on journalism’s role as a watchdog over authorities in Brazil and beyond.

The present article, in the section following this introduction, explores the conflicts between Jair Bolsonaro and the media, particularly his disputes with female journalists. It also examines his attacks on the press and underscores the critical importance of journalism’s watchdog function, referencing previous studies and data on violence against journalists. The section concludes by questioning how the press responded to Bolsonaro’s attacks and investigating whether a significant reaction occurred during the 2022 election coverage.

The next section outlines the methodology used to collect and analyze articles from G1, R7, and

Folha de S. Paulo. It details the criteria for inclusion and exclusion, the keywords used in searches, and the process of content analysis. The subsequent section presents the results of this analysis, highlighting differences in the coverage, and the performance of the watchdog role, across the analyzed outlets.

The section titled “Discussion” interprets the findings, comparing them to previous studies. Finally, the conclusion evaluates the implications of these results for journalism’s watchdog role, contributing to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the press, democracy, and political power in Brazil. It emphasizes the dynamics of alignment and conflict that have characterized the relationship between the country’s media and political systems throughout its history, particularly in recent years.

Journalism, Misogyny, and Democracy in Brazil under Bolsonaro

Discussions about misogyny and conflicts with the press, particularly with female journalists, have been a consistent theme throughout Jair Bolsonaro’s nearly 30 years as a federal congressman and his four-year tenure as President of Brazil.

Amorim (2021) highlights that, during this period, the former president engaged in activities to delegitimize and discredit the work of the press, to accuse journalists and media companies of persecution, and that he also promoted the dismantling of public communication. Supporting this analysis, data from the 2022 Report on Violence Against Journalists and Press Freedom in Brazil, released by the National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ) in January 2023, indicate that there were 376 attacks on journalists and media outlets in 2022 (FENAJ, 2023). Former President Jair Bolsonaro was identified as the main aggressor, responsible for 104 cases (27.66% of the total). According to FENAJ, Bolsonaro, who was running for reelection in 2022, reduced his attacks on press freedom compared to the previous year, with 43 fewer cases than in 2021 (147). However, also according to FENAJ, Bolsonaro remained the primary aggressor from 2019 to 2022, with a total of 570 attacks on communication outlets and journalists, averaging 142.5 aggressions per year; an attack every two and a half days (FENAJ, 2023).

According to the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (ABRAJI), these attacks on the press were a method employed by the Bolsonaro government (ABRAJI, 2020). In 2021, the institution published the report “Gender Violence against Journalists,” which provided an overview of the violence against female journalists and attacks on communicators in Brazil that year. According to the report, 127 journalists and media outlets were targets of gender-based violence, with female journalists constituting 91.3% of the victims. The main identifiable aggressors were men, accounting for 95% of the abuses both online and offline.

Reaction in the Press to Systematic Attacks: The Watchdog Function in Action

In the face of systematic attacks on the press and women by Jair Bolsonaro, the present study seeks to explore the extent to which these assaults prompted a broad reaction from the Brazilian press during the 2022 electoral coverage. Specifically, it concerns issues related to women. This inquiry stems from the expectation that a forceful response would not only be anticipated as a self-protection movement by journalistic enterprises and female journalists themselves but also, fundamentally, in light of what scholarly research refers to as the watchdog function of journalism.

Hellmueller et al. (2016) provide a brief history of watchdog journalism, explaining that in the 1960s, amid the Vietnam War and the civil rights movements in the United States, the term began to be used to refer to in-depth and investigative reporting. The concept gained further prominence with the Watergate scandal. Maia (2006) suggests that even when the exposure of acts does not lead to investigation and punishment, the press still has the role of setting the agenda for public discussion on specific topics.

Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020) also emphasize the role of watchdog journalism in the functioning of democracies, as it acts to monitor “established powers and scrutinize the behavior of elites.”

Mellado (2015) elaborates that under the watchdog function, journalists may question the truthfulness and validity of acts and statements, critique, and turn to sources and institutions to verify information. Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020) analyzed 64 media outlets from 18 countries, categorizing their watchdog journalism coverage as either “interventionist” or “detached.” Among their findings, the researchers concluded that the “interventionist” approach is more common in countries with a tradition of partisan press or those undergoing a sociopolitical crisis. Conversely, the “detached” approach prevails in countries with journalistic traditions linked to ideals of objectivity, which includes Brazil. In nondemocratic countries, they assert that the watchdog function of journalism is nearly nonexistent. “Overall, the performance of a detached form of the watchdog role is significantly greater than that of an interventionist watchdog role worldwide,” with the detached approach notably prevalent in the press of the United States and Poland, followed by Germany, Spain, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Greece, and Hungary.

This discussion is crucial for the present study, as we will analyze the coverage of the relationship between Bolsonaro and women presented in three news portals from the perspective of their watchdog function.

Folha, Globo and Record Groups

The news portals analyzed in the present study (Folha de S. Paulo, G1, and R7) belong to three of the largest media conglomerates in Brazil.

First, there is the Folha Group. This group manages the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo and the portal folha.com.br, as well as the news agency Folhapress and the research institute Datafolha¹. It is one of the country’s major media groups and describes itself in its institutional profile as “Brazil’s most influential newspaper,” which has grown on the pillars of “pluralism, non-partisanship, critical journalism, and independence.” In March 2019, it updated its Editorial Project, publishing 12 “editorial, political, and ethical principles” (Folha de São Paulo, 2019a) on its website, under the title “Professional journalism is the antidote to fake news and intolerance” (Folha de São Paulo, 2019b).

Next, there is the Globo Group. This group is responsible for the news portal G1, Rede Globo, and several radio and TV stations across the country. Starting in the 1960s, the group was explicitly aligned with the military governments (Dias, 2019; Porto et al., 2020), which significantly helped its newly launched TV network to grow, “shaping the structure of a media system that remains largely unchanged to this day” (Dias, 2019, p. 477). With democratization, the broadcaster’s political and editorial stances have been evident in presidential elections, as Porto et al. (2020) note.

Finally, there is the Record Group. This group’s main outlets include Record TV, Record News, and the portal R7. Interestingly, the site does not disclose any information about its history or journalistic principles, but it features the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God prominently in the group’s institutional space². Despite the lack of transparency regarding its journalistic practices, Porto et al. (2020) highlight that Record TV, acquired in 1989 by Bishop Edir Macedo, leader of the Universal Church, has solidified its position since 2008 as the country’s second-largest television network, capturing 17% of the national audience between 7 AM and midnight.

Recent events that have marked Record Group include the 2018 presidential election and the alignment of its outlets with Jair Bolsonaro’s candidacy. A notable incident during that campaign was the exclusive interview given by Bolsonaro to Record TV while the presidential debate was being simultaneously

1 “Conheça o Grupo Folha”, retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3hmkkers>.

2 Retrieved from: <https://recordtv.r7.com/institucional>.

hosted by Globo TV..

While there is a seemingly peaceful and cordial relationship between the Bolsonaro government and Record, there have been repeated attacks by the president and his supporters on the Folha and Globo outlets. According to Abranches (2019), Bolsonaro added Folha de S. Paulo to the “axis of journalistic evil” alongside Rede Globo. In May 2020, both Folha de S. Paulo and the Globo Group’s stations announced the suspension of their coverage at the Alvorada Palace due to the lack of security for journalists (Valor, 2020).

According to an analysis by Piauí magazine, Bolsonaro attacked the Globo Group’s outlets in 45% of the live broadcasts he made from March 2019 to September 2022. The second most frequently targeted outlet was Folha de S. Paulo, criticized in 34% of the live broadcasts during that period (Piauí, 2022). Such data are vital for understanding the context surrounding this research on the 2022 presidential election and the analysis of these three portals. This topic will be addressed in the following sections.

Research Problem

The objective of the present study is to analyze journalistic articles that addressed issues concerning the relationship between Jair Bolsonaro and women published during the two rounds of the presidential election, from August 16 to October 30. The aim is to investigate how the selected portals—G1, R7, and Folha de S. Paulo—framed this topic: whether they gave it visibility, how they positioned themselves, whether they offered a critical perspective, and, if so, whether this was done through the use of sources or merely by reporting the candidate’s statements and actions without fostering a discussion on the topic.

The selection of these three portals reflects attempts to explore potential differences in the media’s stance, considering that Record Group has been more aligned with the government, while the Globo and Folha groups have been targeted by the president and his supporters. Amorim (2021) notes, for example, that the survey “The Face of Democracy: 2020 Elections,” conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Communication Democratization, shows that respondents who were informed by TV stations such as Record, Bandeirantes, and SBT, tended to rate Bolsonaro’s government as “good” or “excellent.” This sentiment is not shared by viewers of Globo. Amorim also references data from a dossier prepared in 2020 by the non-governmental organization Artigo 19 about violations against journalists during the first 20 months of Bolsonaro’s government. The specific media outlets attacked were Globo and its affiliates (114 times or 25% of cases), Folha de S. Paulo (56 times or 12%), and O Estado de S. Paulo (22 times or 5%). Conversely, “media outlets that followed an editorial line or coverage closer to the president’s positions, like SBT and Record, were mentioned in a positive and non-violent manner, highlighted as examples of good journalism” (Amorim, 2021, p. 469).

These insights led us to formulate the following research question:

RQ: In what ways, and with what potential differences, did the portals G1, R7, and Folha de S. Paulo exercise their watchdog function in covering the relationship between Jair Bolsonaro and women in the 2022 elections?

Methodology

Content analysis techniques (Carlomagno & Rocha, 2016; Sampaio & Lycarião, 2018, 2021) were employed to examine the different levels of accountability demonstrated by the three selected news portals—G1, R7, and Folha de S. Paulo—regarding the relationship between Jair Bolsonaro and women in the 2022 presidential election. The analysis covers the period from August 16 to October 30, 2022, during the two rounds of the presidential election. It is important to note that for the portals G1 and R7, news may originate from various media within each group. For Folha, news may originate from its print edition,

news agency, or the portal's own journalistic production.

For the present survey, we chose to search the headlines and subheadings of journalistic articles, excluding editorials and opinion pieces, using keywords that link Bolsonaro to women. Given their relevance, we also chose to include the blogs of the three portals that cover politics. After a preliminary analysis of the three media outlets, terms such as "mulher/mulheres" (woman/women), "meninas" (girls), and, due to repeated incidents of Bolsonaro attacking female journalists, the terms "repórter" (reporter), "jornalista" (journalist), and "apresentadora" (presenter) were included.

The initial search also highlighted the importance of topics such as abortion and the policy of distributing sanitary products, which were included in the search criteria. Additionally, the expression "primeira-dama" (first lady) and the names "Michelle" and "Damares," a minister in Bolsonaro's government, were added. From this initial data collection, we excluded articles that did not deal with the presidential campaign, such as those related to Senate and state-level elections.

Table 1 – Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Search for headlines and leads of journalistic articles; <input type="checkbox"/> Political blogs from the three portals should be considered; For Folha de S. Paulo, include the Mônica Bergamo and Pánel columns; <input type="checkbox"/> Terms such as "mulher/mulheres" (woman/women), "garotas" (girls), "repórter" (reporter), "jornalista" (journalist), and "apresentadora" (presenter) were considered, in addition to topics like abortion, the policy of distributing sanitary products, "primeira-dama" (first lady), and the names "Michelle" and "Damares". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Exclude editorials and opinion articles; <input type="checkbox"/> Exclude articles not related to the presidential campaign, such as those related to Senate and state contests; <input type="checkbox"/> Exclude content from lifestyle columns and blogs from areas other than political coverage.

Source: Authors

In the search, we identified 37 articles from G1 and 22 from the R7 portal, from which we excluded one pre-selected article (B22) because it pertained to Damares' Senate campaign. From Folha de S. Paulo, we arrived at 62 articles after excluding six pre-selected pieces that originated from lifestyle columns and other non-political areas.

Table 2 – Data Collection Results

Portals	Number of news articles
G1	37
R7	22
Folha de S. Paulo	62

Source: Authors

Having completed the initial phase of searching and collecting articles, we moved on to analyzing the content of the selected articles according to specific analytical categories.

For this purpose, we adopted a version of the methodology used by Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020), where two variations of the watchdog role were identified—detached and interventionist. This approach considers three main elements: the intensity of scrutiny, the voice of scrutiny, and the source

of the event (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). Novais (2022), who also used this methodology to analyze coverage of the far right in Portugal, explains:

In summary, their logic is as follows: the greater the level of intensity (ranging from questioning to criticism and denunciation), the presence of the journalist's voice in the report (instead of a third party or source), and the reporter's initiative to seek and reveal disclosures (with legal proceedings or external investigations), the more interventionist the form of watchdog journalism is, and vice versa (Novais, 2022, p. 322).

Following this rationale, Table 3 presents the categories of analysis, which were applied to all selected articles from each of the three portals.³

Table 3 – Categories of Analysis

Indicators
<p>Information on judicial/administrative processes The news piece includes information about trials, judicial or administrative proceedings against individuals or groups in positions of power. Example: A10: Attack on journalist tarnishes Bolsonaro and becomes a problem in the final stretch of the campaign "The incident involving State Deputy Douglas Garcia and journalist Vera Magalhães has, however, become a headache for the president's allies. The Republicans, Garcia's party, summoned the lawmaker to explain his actions to assess whether it warrants disciplinary action, including the possibility of expulsion from the party."</p>
<p>Questioning by Sources Questioning individuals or groups in power through quotations, statements, and/or opinions, provided by someone other than the journalist. Example: C42: Senator appeals to the Supreme Court* after Bolsonaro remarks about 'a vibe' with girls "The case is extremely serious and requires explanations from the President of the Republic. The President needs to clarify what he meant by 'a vibe.' The President must respond whether it was a case of child prostitution, and if so, why he did not take action or report it to the competent authorities during his presidency," says Randolfe to the column. *The previous category concerning administrative proceedings is also considered present in this article. This is because a single news piece could encompass more than one category simultaneously.</p>
<p>Criticism by Sources Criticism directed at individuals or groups in power is expressed through quotations, statements, and/or negative opinions provided by someone other than the journalist. Example: C7: Debate featured misogynistic remarks and a lack of reference to Black women, experts say "Gabriela Souza, lawyer and partner at the Brazilian School of Women's Rights, shares the same perspective. 'We have a [Jair Bolsonaro] candidate who is misogynistic, clearly disregards women, and it is important to say this without any political ideological discourse,' she asserts."</p>
<p>Denunciation by Sources Quotations and/or testimonies are provided by individuals, other than the journalist, who report, accuse, or reveal something hidden — not only illegal but also irregular or inconvenient — regarding individuals or groups in power. Example: A37: Deadline for the Ministry to provide details to the Federal Prosecutor's Office after Damares' remarks on alleged child torture in Marajó ends this Monday "Following the statements, the Federal Prosecutor's Office (MPF) requested information from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights (MMFDH) on what actions were taken. The ministry stated in a press release that Damares' claims were based on 'numerous ongoing investigations that reveal a series of grave offenses committed against children and adolescents.' However, the Federal Prosecutor's Office in Pará argued that 'in the past 30 years, no reports to the MPF about child trafficking in Marajó have mentioned the tortures cited by Damares.' The Pará Civil Police also confirmed that there are no investigations related to these allegations."</p>

³ Direct quotations from news pieces in this paper have been translated by the authors.

External Investigation

The news piece includes investigations not conducted by the journalist — such as judicial, administrative, specialized, or academic inquiries — but covered extensively by the journalist.

Example: A1: Poll leaders make mistakes, and women take center stage in the 1st debate

"According to assessments by campaign members and various groups of undecided voters being monitored, the two female candidates, Simone Tebet (MDB) and Soraya Thronicke (União), managed to stand out in the first presidential debate held this Sunday (29)."

Questioning by the Journalist

Through statements and/or opinions, the journalist questions the validity or truthfulness of the actions or statements made by individuals or groups in power.

Example: B1: Bolsonaro discusses policies for women and resistance from female voters

Video: "Eduardo Ribeiro [interviewer] references arguments made by Jair Bolsonaro's opponents, claiming that the reelection candidate from the PL [Liberal Party] does not value women or implement public policies for this segment of the population. Watch what Bolsonaro said on the topic during the Jornal da Record interview."

Criticism by the Journalist

The journalist makes a statement or reference that negatively evaluates or condemns the actions or statements of individuals or groups in power.

Example: A23: Human Rights Commission of the Legislative Chamber of the Federal District requests protection for Venezuelan teenagers after Bolsonaro's remarks

"In his live broadcast, the president did not clarify what he meant by the expression 'a vibe,' nor did he indicate whether he had reported the situation he witnessed at the house where the teenagers were present to any authorities."

Denunciation by the journalist

The journalist makes a statement or reference that accuses or exposes something hidden—not only illegal but also irregular or inconvenient—regarding individuals or groups in power.

Example: C30: Government is not the author of women-related projects sanctioned by Bolsonaro and cited in the campaign

"One of the statements President Jair Bolsonaro (PL) has frequently repeated in the final stretch of the campaign is that he sanctioned more than 70 projects in defense of women. However, this number omits the fact that the government authored only one proposal on the list cited by the president. Additionally, some items included in the count do not address policies for women."

Reporting of conflict

The journalist cites a source, institution, or individual from a sphere of power as an opponent.

Example: A17: Bolsonaro conducts a live broadcast at dawn to defend himself after remarks about Venezuelan girls

"During the 22-minute broadcast of the visit, Bolsonaro did not mention prostitution. The president criticized the social isolation measures from the pandemic, inquired about living conditions, and also attacked governors and the Venezuelan dictatorship.

Requests to the PGR and STF

This Saturday (15), Bolsonaro's remarks on the podcast gained traction on social media and were criticized by opposition politicians. Federal deputy-elect Guilherme Boulos (PSOL-SP) called the president 'disgusting and perverted' and questioned: 'Is this the candidate who claims to defend morality and family values?'"

Source: Produced by the authors based on Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020)

To ensure the reliability of the present study, two rounds of content analysis were conducted. The first took place between August and September 2023, with results checked after one month, as recommended by Sampaio and Lycarião (2021), given that the coding was performed by a single individual. It is important to note that adjustments were made to the codebook between the two analyses. One significant adjustment was the exclusion of articles unrelated to the presidential election as well as columns outside the political domain, resulting in the exclusion of seven articles during the review process.

Another critical aspect of the analysis process was addressing the difficulty of distinguishing between questioning and criticizing (whether from sources or the journalist). Based on the JRP Project Codebook, we decided that, for a statement to be considered a question, an explicit mention in the article is required. Regarding criticisms, they can appear anywhere in the article, including captions, infographics, and videos. These observations were necessary because they were the primary points of disagreement between the two analyses, and they were resolved by adopting these criteria. Additionally, articles about electoral polls were categorized as containing external investigations.

The entire process and documentation of the analysis (including the codebook and spreadsheets with the coding for each portal) is publicly and anonymously available in the supplementary materials for the present study research. This material can be accessed freely (without registration or payment) at: <https://figshare.com/s/e4d4931ff49367a41f7d>.

Results

To analyze the relationship between Bolsonaro and women during the 2022 presidential campaign, we selected news portals from three major Brazilian media conglomerates: Globo Group, Record Group, and Folha de S. Paulo. After applying all the inclusion and exclusion criteria described in the codebook, we identified a total of 121 articles: 37 from G1, 22 from R7, and 62 from Folha de S. Paulo.

The data reveals a significant discrepancy in the coverage provided by R7, compared to the other outlets. The limited number of articles ($n = 22$) suggests a low priority given to the topic of Jair Bolsonaro's relationship with women. G1 comes in second, with 37 articles, in terms of coverage volume, while Folha de S. Paulo published nearly three times as many articles as R7.

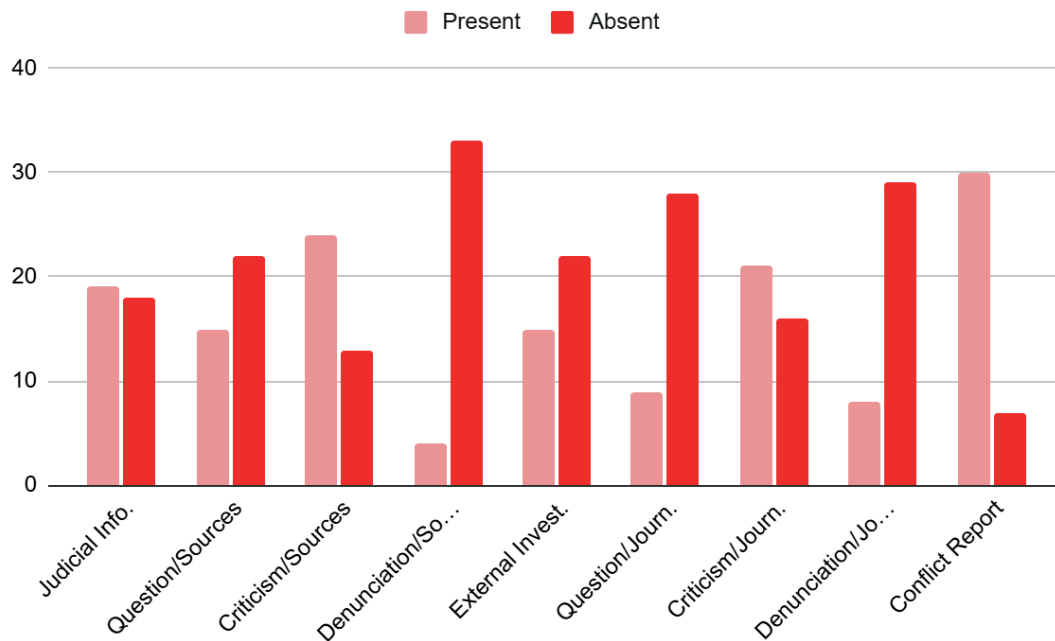
G1

The results from G1, summarized in Graph 1, highlight the extensive use of conflict reporting (81.1% of the articles) and criticisms from sources (64.86%). More than half of the articles also included information on legal or administrative proceedings (51.35%). The use of denunciation as a resource was the least common, appearing in only 10.81% of articles citing sources. Regarding the journalist's voice in the articles, the most notable findings include: journalist criticism in over half of the articles (56.75%), journalist questioning (24.32%), and journalist denunciation (21.62%).

The data indicates that G1 gave visibility to the issue of Bolsonaro's relationship with the female electorate, maintained a concern for balance in its articles, and, in some cases, included explicit criticism in the headlines. Examples include: "A classic tactic of machismo," says Sadi about Bolsonaro's comparison between first ladies;" "Bolsonaro gives men permission to attack women, says anthropologist Isabela Kalil;" and, "Comment about Venezuelan women damages Bolsonaro and benefits Lula, say PT and Bolsonaro supporters."

The strategy of using Michelle Bolsonaro's image to attract more female voters was also a recurring theme in G1's coverage. Examples include articles A12 ("Bolsonaro's campaign creates a task force to reduce rejection among women; Michelle to lead efforts") and A14 ("Michelle travels to more states than Bolsonaro, focusing on the North and Northeast"). Article A24 ("Bolsonaro now denies prostitution in a house of Venezuelan girls and, alongside Michelle, says women there were workers"), which addresses the crisis triggered by Bolsonaro's comments about Venezuelan women, underscores this approach in its headline. Similarly, article A30 ("Roberto Jefferson case: Bolsonaro's campaign fears losing women's votes") presents concerns about the female vote.

Graph 1 – G1 Results



Source: Authors

R7

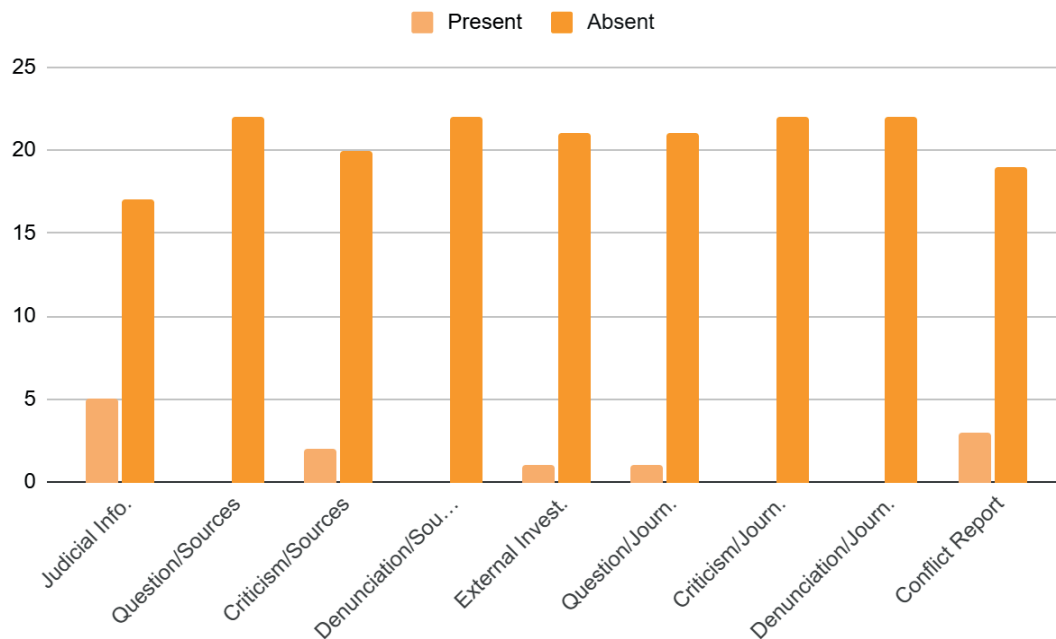
The analysis of articles from the R7 portal revealed a particularly noteworthy finding: in four out of nine analytical categories (source questioning, source denunciation, journalist criticism, and journalist denunciation), none of these indicators appeared in the collected articles (see Graph 2). Additionally, in two other categories (external investigation and journalist questioning), there was only one occurrence each. Furthermore, the articles from R7 were predominantly very brief and declarative, most of which lacked counterpoints or additional information to enrich the content.

Notable aspects of the R7 coverage were the positive bias, as well as the brevity of the articles and the selection of images used to illustrate them. Most articles either adopted Bolsonaro's campaign perspective or used a reporting style that did not incorporate alternative voices. For instance, in the article titled "Michelle and Damares meet with Venezuelan women mentioned by Bolsonaro," the choice of the word "mentioned" and the lead stating, "The meeting, which took place on Monday (17), lasted more than an hour; 'The goal is to embrace and support them,' said the senator-elect," stand out. At no point does the article address the negative repercussions of the topic or the calls for investigations from various political actors, which were covered by other outlets.

Another observation from the analysis of the Record Group's portal is the prevalence of topics addressing violence suffered exclusively by Bolsonaro supporters. Examples include: "Man shoots at church before event with Michelle Bolsonaro," "Michelle Bolsonaro cries while recounting that her daughter was insulted by classmates," and "Yudi declares his vote for Bolsonaro, is harassed by haters, and receives support from the First Lady."

In articles discussing judicial proceedings, a positive bias toward Bolsonaro's campaign was also evident. An example is "Moraes prohibits PT from using videos that falsely associate Bolsonaro with pedophilia," where the use of the term "falsely" in the title is notable. Furthermore, in many articles, the portal avoided using the full name of Lula's coalition, opting instead for "PT" (Worker's Party), thus adopting the language of Bolsonaro's discourse.

Graph 2 – R7 Results



Source: Authors

FSP

Finally, Folha de S. Paulo published the greatest number of articles ($n = 62$). Its content analysis, shown in Graph 3, highlighted the use of conflict reporting (59.67%) and source criticism (56.45%). Journalist criticism was also significant, appearing in 43.54% of the articles. External investigation was present in 38.70%, while judicial information and administrative proceedings appeared in 32.25% of the coverage. The category measuring denunciations showed the lowest incidence, with 8.06% for sources and 6.45% for journalists.

Titles exemplifying the critical stance of this outlet include:

C15: “Bolsonaro makes sexist joke and says good news for women is a kiss and a gift” (coded as journalist criticism);

C30: “Government is not behind women’s projects sanctioned by Bolsonaro and cited in the campaign” (coded as journalist denunciation);

C33: “Bolsonaro government slashes funding for women’s programs by up to 99% in 2023 budget” (coded as journalist denunciation);

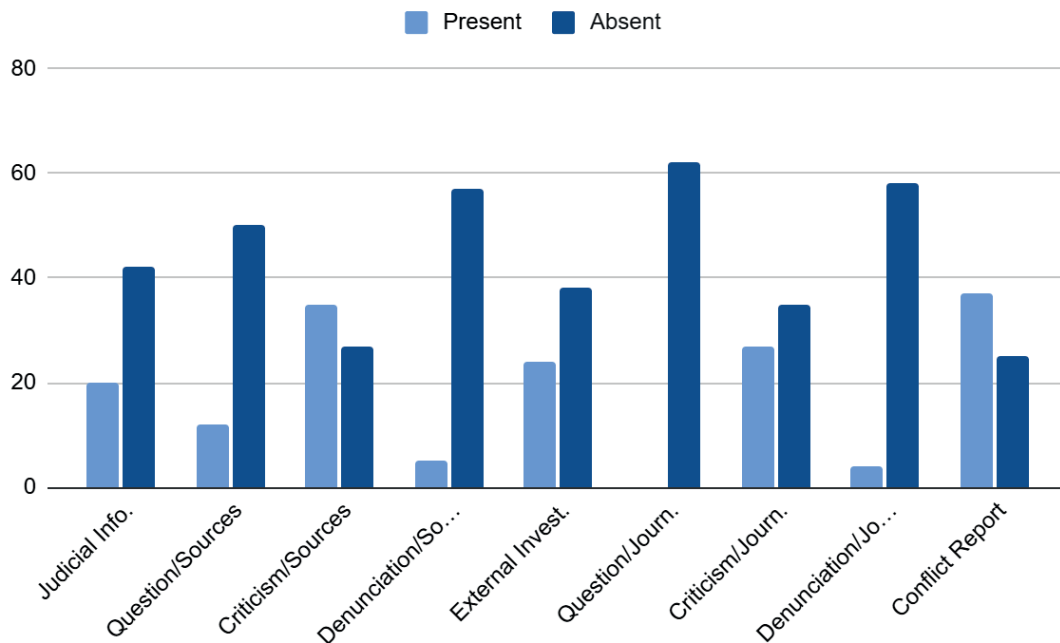
C40: “Venezuelan refutes Bolsonaro’s statement, says house hosted a social program” (coded as source denunciation, as the Venezuelan woman contradicts Bolsonaro’s narrative).

To illustrate how multiple categories were identified within a single article, we consider C3, titled: “Bolsonaro attacks journalist Vera Magalhães and Tebet, calls them a shame; watch video.” This article was coded for journalist criticism, source criticism, and source questioning. The latter appears in the following excerpt: “In the final debate round, when candidates could question their opponents, Tebet asked the president why he had ‘so much anger toward women.’”

Articles such as C36 (“Bolsonaro deploys Michelle and Damares to try to reduce rejection among women”), that discuss the strategy of placing Michelle Bolsonaro and Damares Alves at the forefront of Bolsonaro’s campaign, make no mention of events or factors that could explain this rejection among female voters.

The same applies to C57 (“Don’t look at my husband, look at me, I’m a servant of the Lord,” Michelle tells evangelicals”), which is largely reportorial except for a paragraph where the journalist corrects Michelle’s statement: “(...) ignoring others who preceded her, she claimed that Brazil had never had ‘an active First Lady’ before. Notably, anthropologist Ruth Cardoso, wife of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, was actively engaged in social policies.”

Graph 3 – FSP Results



Source: Authors

The data from the three portals shows that G1 recorded the greatest percentages across all analyzed categories: judicial information (51.35%), source questioning (40.54%), source criticism (64.86%), source denunciation (10.81%), external investigation (40.54%), journalist questioning (24.32%), journalist criticism (56.75%), journalist denunciation (21.62%), and conflict reporting (81.1%). These findings indicate that the portal from Globo Group made the most comprehensive use of all available monitoring resources during their 2022 election coverage.

However, when counting the total number of articles, Folha de S. Paulo surpasses G1 in key categories. For instance, Folha published 27 articles with journalist criticism and 35 articles with source criticism, compared to 21 and 24 articles, respectively, from G1.

The Venezuelan women's case stands out prominently, having generated the highest number of articles in both Folha de S. Paulo (16) and G1 (13). As a consequence of this case, Martins (2023) notes that the Observatório das Eleições documented discussions linking the then-president to pedophilia. According to the author, the controversy stemmed from Bolsonaro's own statement in which he claimed there was “a vibe” (“pintou um clima”) between him and Venezuelan girls, whom he associated with prostitution (Martins, 2023, p. 114).

Martins, who monitored references to this topic on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups between October 14 and 18, reveals that the discussion extended beyond the Lula-aligned networks, reaching the Bolsonaro-aligned sphere. This forced Bolsonaro's supporters to respond to the allegations. Martins (2023) argues that this development curtailed the production of further disinformation campaigns from Bolsonaro's sphere of influence, as their focus shifted to damage

control: “Bolsonaro supporters had to suspend their artillery to provide responses” (Martins, 2023, p. 117).

Discussion

The present study addressed the following research question (RQ): In what ways, and with what potential differences, did the portals G1, R7, and Folha de S. Paulo exercise their watchdog function in covering the relationship between Jair Bolsonaro and women in the 2022 elections? To answer this, we analyzed articles from the news portals Folha de S. Paulo, G1, and R7, associated with three of Brazil's largest media conglomerates: Folha Group, Globo Group, and Record Group. News articles published in these portals between August 16 and October 30, 2022—the official campaign period—were collected and analyzed.

Using this content, we examined the articles from the perspective of watchdog journalism. We investigated specifically whether there were instances of questioning, criticism, denunciation, and investigation aimed at defending the public interest (Hellmueller et al., 2016; Maia, 2006; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Mellado, 2015). For this purpose, we adapted the methodology of Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020) to analyze the presence or absence of the following indicators in the articles: judicial/administrative information, source questioning, source criticism, source denunciation, external investigation, journalist questioning, journalist criticism, journalist denunciation, and conflict reporting.

The results presented in the previous section show that the different media outlets exercised their watchdog role in covering Bolsonaro's stance on women's issues in markedly unequal ways.

The content analysis revealed a timid level of vigilance on the part of R7. This portal exhibited the lowest scores and showed the absence of four out of the nine indicators. The limited number of articles, coupled with the adoption of a narrative favorable to Bolsonaro's campaign and the lack of any counterpoints, raises doubts about whether R7 can be considered to have performed any watchdog function at all.

In contrast, G1 and Folha de S. Paulo demonstrated a more detached style of watchdog journalism, characterized by greater use of criticism and questioning, particularly of sources. Notably, G1 displayed journalist criticism in 56.75% of its articles, indicating a more interventionist approach to its watchdog role.

According to Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020), routine journalistic practices such as criticism and questioning already demonstrate a degree of monitoring and vigilance. The authors argue that “scrutiny does not always result in real accountability, but a partial, timid, or partisan watchdog is still better than no watchdog at all” (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020, p. 70).

When viewed in light of the findings of Márquez-Ramírez et al. (2020), the data from the 2022 elections demonstrate that Brazilian journalism predominantly practices a detached watchdog role, which is significantly more common than an interventionist approach. This means that the watchdog function is more frequently performed using third-party voices, rather than the journalist's own voice. Furthermore, the intensity of scrutiny tends to manifest more through questioning and criticism, and less commonly through denunciation.

Across all three portals, conflict reporting was highly prevalent in G1 (81.1%) and Folha de S. Paulo (59.67%), but significantly less prevalent in R7 (13.63%). However, the high incidence of source questioning and criticism in G1 and Folha also far exceeded the proportion of denunciations, reinforcing the detached approach to watchdog journalism observed in Brazil (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). R7, moreover, stands apart with consistently low percentages for all indicators.

It is important to contextualize these findings, as discussed in the earlier sections of the present article. Between 2019 and 2022, Record Group's media outlets adopted a posture that aligned with

Bolsonaro's administration, while the other two groups maintained a more adversarial relationship with the federal government.

Final Remarks

The present study was conducted against the backdrop of a broader discussion regarding the role of journalism in defending democracy, particularly in contexts where extremist and violent rhetoric emerges from the margins of the public sphere and is adopted by the central authorities of the political system. Marques (2023) highlights that professionals and scholars have increasingly questioned whether traditional normative values of journalism, such as impartiality and objectivity, remain adequate in these challenging circumstances.

These concerns underscore the importance of evaluating how different media outlets have acted—or failed to act—in scrutinizing the statements, behaviors, and actions of public authorities, especially those targeting the dignity of historically marginalized social groups. With this in mind, we sought to analyze how three major Brazilian news outlets—G1, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and R7—fulfilled their watchdog role in their scrutiny of the conduct of then-president Jair Bolsonaro in relation to issues involving women during the 2022 elections.

As detailed in the preceding sections, the performance of these outlets was notably uneven. R7, in particular, displayed a posture far removed from the expectations of vigilant journalism aimed at holding public authorities accountable for misconduct. Based on the data collected, we conclude that R7 went beyond mere reportorial journalism, actively adopting a stance defending Bolsonaro's campaign. In some articles, the alignment with the former president's rhetoric was so pronounced that any watchdog function was completely absent.

As Albuquerque (2022) reminds us, the watchdog role involves exposing abuses by state agents and powerholders. However, in some cases, this role is so diminished that journalism effectively assumes the role of a "lapdog" for the powerful (Albuquerque, 2022, p. 188).

Higher expectations for the watchdog function were better met by G1 and *Folha de S. Paulo*. While the latter published a higher volume of articles overall, many featuring source criticism, the former demonstrated a more interventionist approach, with greater emphasis on journalist-driven critiques and questioning. This suggests that, while R7 aligned itself with the incumbent government, G1 and *Folha de S. Paulo* were more responsive to the expectations of defending historically marginalized groups and, by extension, democracy itself.

Nonetheless, it is essential to note that the findings of the present study are tied to a specific moment and period in the relationship between the media and politics in Brazil. As Albuquerque (2012) argues, the dynamics of this relationship are characterized by recurring instability, marked by constant realignments between media and political agents. This instability, as the author later points out (Albuquerque, 2019), can, at times, weaken democracy itself.

Given this context, it is worth questioning the extent to which the results presented here—partially consistent with those of Porto, Lima, and Neves (2020)—indicate the emergence of "a new form of political parallelism in Brazil" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).⁴ The historical antipathy toward the Workers' Party (PT) and the alignment with elite economic interests that has characterized much of the Brazilian press (Azevedo, 2023) complicates the interpretation of the watchdog role exercised by parts of the press in response to Bolsonaro's misogynistic rhetoric and actions in 2022. This watchdog behavior does not

4 According to Hallin & Mancini (2004), the concept of political parallelism (originally developed by Colin Seymour-Ure) refers to the degree to which media outlets are aligned with or connected to political forces, such as parties, ideologies, or social movements. In systems with high political parallelism, media outlets often explicitly express political views, advocate for partisan agendas, or are directly linked to political groups.

resolve the longstanding issue of the Brazilian media system's low level of external pluralism,⁵ a legacy of the 1964–1984 authoritarian regime (Albuquerque, 2022).

A broader perspective reveals a media system that, rather than amplify voices historically silenced by the military dictatorship, expands its external pluralism by incorporating and strengthening reactionary and authoritarian worldviews aimed at establishing an illiberal regime in Brazil. The present study, consistent with previous research, highlights Record Group as a notable player in the expansion of media aligned with the far-right. However, it is not alone. Other influential actors from both traditional media (e.g., Chagas & Da Cruz, 2022; Tavares, 2020) and digital-native outlets (Bonsanto, 2021) contribute to this trend.

This advocacy-driven orientation among certain outlets supports the analysis by Lycarião, Magalhães, and Albuquerque (2018), who argue that structural transformations in the journalistic market increasingly favor models that deviate from independent journalism (marked by objectivity and editorial autonomy). Instead, they point to a rise in advocacy journalism, where opinionated and ideological dimensions often overshadow informational ones (cf. Lycarião & Maia, 2015).

Moreover, as the present study and previous ones (Bonsanto, 2021; Chagas & Da Cruz, 2022; Tavares, 2020) suggest, the type of advocacy journalism gaining prominence is largely illiberal in nature. This underscores the necessity of implementing public policies and regulatory frameworks to foster meaningful external pluralism and accountability in Brazil's media system. Such measures should aim to provide diverse and high-quality informational and entertainment options, while reducing incentives for predatory market practices. As observed, these practices tend to perpetuate and reinforce misogynistic and authoritarian worldviews, undermining democratic values.

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⁵ The concept of external pluralism presented by Hallin & Mancini (2004) refers to the ideological or political diversity that exists among different media outlets within a media system. This pluralism is characterized by a landscape in which various outlets explicitly represent different perspectives, often associated with political parties, social movements, or specific ideologies.

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