

# Veracity and narrative: the criteria of truth in Bolsonaro's interview with *Jornal Nacional*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-58442021210>

**Julia Lery**<sup>1</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4872-3561>

**Paulo Basilio Santana**<sup>2</sup>

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3089-698X>

<sup>1</sup>(Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Departamento de Comunicação, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brasil).

<sup>2</sup>(Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Comunicação e Artes, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação Social. Belo Horizonte – MG, Brasil).

## Abstract

The work proposes an investigation into the truth criteria that underpin the interview that Bolsonaro, as a candidate, gave to *Jornal Nacional* on August 28, 2018, as well as the simultaneous check done by Agência Lupa. The search is to understand which mechanisms give veracity to the candidate's speech and which are claimed by the check. For this, we work with the concepts of truth (ARENDR, 1972), lie (DERRIDA, 1996) and narrative (FIGUEIREDO, 2016, PIGLIA, 2001).

**Keywords:** Fake news. Truth. Check.

## Introduction

In an interview to *Jornal Nacional* (Rede Globo) on August 28, 2018<sup>1</sup>, the then candidate for the presidency by PSL-RJ, Jair Bolsonaro, took a book with a purple cover that he claimed to be part of a “gay kit” distributed in public schools in Brazil. The statement came in response to a question by anchor Renata Vasconcellos, who questioned the presidential candidate about homophobic positions. According to Bolsonaro it was not a matter of homophobia, but he was opposed to the teaching of homosexuality in schools, materialized in that book, which would have been distributed as part of the “gay kit” and would teach children issues related to homosexuality. “I was defending children in the classroom at all times,” said the then candidate.

Then, a competition begins for the use of images as promises of truth in the newscast interview. The anchors asks Bolsonaro to keep the book, as it is forbidden for respondents

---

1 Part of a series of interviews with all 2018 presidential candidates.

to show documents. The candidate asks viewers to take the children out of the room and promises a live<sup>2</sup> on social media showing the book as proof of what he said (and free from the mediation of *Jornal Nacional*). The camera, previously closed in Bolsonaro's image (Figure 1), changes to an open plan in which it is no longer possible to see the book in detail (Figure 2). And the false news of an alleged "gay kit", which was subsequently denied by the TSE<sup>3</sup>, gained space in the country's most popular television news. Instead of questioning the veracity of the speech, the dispute between presenters and interviewee was about the monopoly on the use of the image, taken as a synonym for truth. The real distribution of the book was never questioned, only if Bolsonaro should show it or not. With Bolsonaro's live on social media immediately after the end of the news, this dispute over the image proves to be even more infertile than it already seems when we notice the lack of questioning: the book had already been shown in the interview and was shown even longer on the networks, using the dissent of the interview on national television as a disclosure.

**Figure 1** – Bolsonaro showing the book



Source: *Jornal Nacional's* Frame.

**Figure 2** – Open plan



Source: *Jornal Nacional's* Frame.

The check that took place in parallel to the interview, by Agência Lupa, was also not able to deny what William Bonner and Renata Vasconcellos did not question. The publisher, Cia das Letras, and the MEC subsequently released notes explaining that the book had never been distributed in public schools, that it was a swiss book and suitable for children aged 11 to 15, contrary to what the candidate said. But the scope of these notes is limited compared to the circulation of an interview shown in the *Jornal Nacional*.

Based on this case, in which Jair Bolsonaro uses an interview on a newscast to broadcast a false news, the question arises about the truth criteria claimed by the then candidate in the interview, as well as what is the truth checked by Agência Lupa. The questions that guide us

<sup>2</sup> Live streaming over the internet.

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/amp/eleicoes/tse-diz-que-kit-gay-nao-existiu-e-proibe-bolsonaro-de-disseminar-noticia-falsa/>. Accessed on: Oct. 21, 2019.

are related to the idea of truth that exists behind the speeches of the candidate, the presenters and the checking.

## Methodological path

We started from the following problem: what are the criteria used by Jair Bolsonaro, as a candidate, and by the anchors of *Jornal Nacional* to claim truth for his speeches during the interview? What are the criteria used by the checking agency to classify the interviewee's statements as truths or lies? Are these criteria sufficient to question the candidate's speech?

The proposal, here, is to undertake the analysis of audiovisual discourse in the television interview based on theoretical references that discuss the concepts of Truth, lie and narrative. The analytical categories that will guide the study and that will be theoretically justified and presented throughout the text are, here presented in the order in which they appear: the use of proof-image (RANCIÈRE, 2014); the claim of the truth from the personal and fragmented experience (FIGUEIREDO, 2016, 2017); the use of metaphors (PIGLIA, 2001); the truths of the fact in conflict (ARENDR, 1972); the insufficiency of dichotomous thinking between truth and lies (DERRIDA, 1996).

From these categories, and pointing to the way they are transversal and transdisciplinary, we undertake the analysis of both the interview and the check.

## Truth and politics

For Arendt (2016), the truth is multiple. There is the truth of reason, one that is not seen in a given way, nor revealed to humanity, but, rather, as a product of time and its efforts. It is a truth constructed from theories, and mathematics, science and philosophy are some examples.

There is, on the other hand, the truth of the fact, which is composed of "indisputable" facts and events. This truth is passed from person to person through the account of those who experienced certain events. Although this account is linked to an interpretation, history is not free to modify a factual truth.

As an example of this truth of the fact, Arendt (2016, p. 357) states about the possible interpretations of the First World War: "I am sure that they will not say that Belgium invaded Germany".

There is, in Arendt's (2016) reading about the truth, an idea that it prevails over the lie, that there is something undeniable in the fact that it overlaps any confabulation. The author understands that lying is one of the oldest tools of politics, but claims that it is relatively well regarded because it is not an end in itself, but a means that can sometimes prevent more violent forms of conflict. Political lying, however, used to be validated in its resemblance and approximation to truth. The modern political lie, in turn, differs from the previous one precisely because it does not seek this legitimation in the truth or in the event. For Arendt

(2016), who has totalitarianism as a reference, modernity lies “in broad daylight”, about phenomena that the population experienced, and not about State secrets.

Derrida (1996), quoting Arendt (2016), talks about the ability of the mass media to falsify truths through images. Modern political lies, unlike previous ones, deal with things that are not secrets in any way, facts known to all, but that falsify these realities, replacing them with images. For Arendt (2016), therefore, even if there is a factual truth, the production of narratives that gain the status of truth occurs through reports. She also highlights the role of images as responsible for carrying the truth. Images can endorse these lying reports, bringing truthfulness.

For Rancière (2014) a problem in the representation occurs when we start to understand the images as evidence, and not as a testimony or a version of the event. The author points out that “the image is not the double of a thing. it is a complex game of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and the word, the said and the unsaid”(RANCIÈRE, 2014, p. 92). It is, however, in many cases, read as equivalent to the represented object.

This idea of proof-image is strong in our society, and it is well demarcated when we think of the profusion of videos from security cameras, live television broadcasts, and even video arbitration, recently adopted by football. In Bolsonaro's speech it is possible to note not only the strength of the idea that the image is capable of proving something, but also a suggestion that the image would be the only acceptable type of evidence of an event. When asked by Renata Vasconcellos about his controversy, he says that women should have lower salaries than men, since they can get pregnant, the candidate reacted: “Renata, did you read this, did you hear or see?”. When the presenter replied that she read and heard, the candidate said that she did not see it because there was no video and that he never spoke that sentence. Thus, he claims audiovisual evidence not only as evidence, but as the only possible evidence. The truth, in Bolsonaro's speech, would be contained in the image.

From this discussion it is possible to think about the condition of image-proof that the book shown by Jair Bolsonaro wins as part of the “gay kit”. Although the truth of the facts (ARENDR, 2016) is widely available, that is, even if any citizen with children enrolled in public schools has access to didactic material, the image's persuasive power overrides this factual and easily accessible truth. Mind yourself “in broad daylight”. With these images, a narrative is created, an interested organizing account.

## **Truth and narrative**

We use the concept of narrative to analyze the chosen case thinking about its approximation with the concepts of confabulation, intrigue, lie or interested report, and we think and its opposition to the Truth, based on the discussion proposed by Figueiredo (2017) based on Arendt (2016) and Derrida (2006). Therefore, we do not make a reference to the narrative in its structural sense, which involves plot and narrator, but rather statements that construct the panorama of a political project or the common repertoire. Our understanding

of the concept of narrative is, therefore, as a way of organizing the world, a guiding thread without which facts do not become events, and apprehension does not become understanding. To narrate is to make sense, to organize.

The narrative in the sense of an interested organizing account is not, in itself, good or bad, progressive or reactionary. In order for us to enter this type of classification, the question that arises is who has the power to organize events in explanations, worldviews, chains of causes and consequences, and what use is made of that power.

Even the concept of lying does not seem absolute. Derrida (1996) points to the fact that accusing someone of lying presupposes the knowledge of an unfathomable intentionality. In addition to not believing, like Arendt (2016), that the truth overlaps the lie, the philosopher claims that the borders are blurred. He therefore proposes that, in addition to the insufficient judgment between truth and lies, another way of valuing statements is necessary.

the value of a statement about real facts (because the truth is not reality, but above all a statement according to what we think) could depend on a political interpretation regarding values, which are heterogeneous, in fact (possibility, opportunity, necessity, fairness or justice) (DERRIDA, 1996, p. 18).

Piglia (2001), seeking this valuation of statements, believes the problem with the exercise of power in relation to narratives is that the State has the power to narrate, and that it does so by creating stories of violence and stories that serve to hide it. For him, power narratives are didactic narratives, moral stories, and also horror stories. The author's search is for a popular voice, for scattered, fragmented, partial reports, which, together, can cope with facing these official fictions. Piglia (2001) equates, in a way, narrative, fiction and lies when talking about the State's narratives. The idea of narrative for the author comes close to an official discourse. Popular counter-discourse, for the author, appears in a more fragmented way. Both speeches, both the official narrative and popular reports, are thought beyond the text, as something alive that circulates in culture.

In a reflection on the truth criteria of the statements, Figueiredo (2016) states that self-referentiality becomes central in contemporary times, marked by growing distrust around the act of narrating. For the author, the disbelief in the possibility of reaching an ultimate truth, added to the fear of a narrativization of the world by the media and an anguish resulting from a fragmented perception of reality, makes contemporary subjects turn more and more to personal narratives, testimonial and memorialistic. This turning point in the reports, which no longer seeks to account for universality, can be seen in literature, in cinema, in the media. The author's argument goes through the idea that the modern ideal of Truth is discredited from the totalitarianisms of the 20th century, and the perception of history as a narrative construction can, in its extreme, equate history and fiction. The author seems, therefore, to claim the space of resistance that fiction and narratives can occupy, and to criticize the perspective that equates narratives and

totalizations, understanding that this is more related to the place of power than to the act, in itself, of creating an organizing account.

In this process, it is evident that the truth criteria of the narratives change over time, moving from the search for a universal truth to the search for smaller, testimonial truths, linked to experience. The question posed by Figueiredo (2016, 2017), however, is that this fragmentation of the narrative can also serve power and exclusive discourses, as well as narratives that sought to account for greater truths.

As an example of a moment when the claim to the truth occurs, in Bolsonaro's speech, from this idea of minor truths, linked to experience, we observe the metaphor that the candidate uses to justify the early choice of the name that would occupy the Treasury Ministry. When asked by William Bonner if he would not be held hostage by Paulo Guedes, since he assumes that he does not understand anything about economics and launched the name of the nominee for minister even during the candidacy, promising not to break with him, Bolsonaro says his connection with Guedes is trustworthy, like at a wedding. He tells the interviewer that they are both divorced men, and that they therefore know that he does not marry thinking of ending. When comparing the two situations, the candidate emphasizes the dimension of personal experience that serves to legitimize his poorly based speech on economic direrelating this issue, which traditionally seems distant and difficult to understand, to thections, daily experience of part of the electorate, thus conquering a real effect. The metaphor disregards the public interest character of the relationship between candidate and possible minister, and also brings up the personal life of the presenter, working with the blurred boundaries between the public and the private and emphasizing the everyday experience, the minor truth, the lived. It does not create a narrative, in the sense of a larger organizing account, but it is nevertheless not more true.

Piglia (2001) speaks of the metaphors used by power as fictions of the State. He claims that the medical metaphor that the Argentine Military Dictatorship used to refer to repression perfectly exemplifies how these fictions are created. According to the author, the military spoke of Argentina as a sick body, with tumors, and that it was necessary to mutilate in order to save. Thus, a narrative was created, an aseptic report on repression, talking about surgeries without anesthesia. And this speech was like a fictional version through which the State enunciated repression, murders and torture, but in a covert and allegorical way.

When something is stated through metaphor, a question about the truth or lie of the situation is not applied. That is why this line of Bolsonaro is not even checked by Agência Lupa. The checking agencies deal with truths considered by Derrida (1996) to be natural, as opposed to what the author calls performance truths. Natural truths are more factual and less relativizable. The performances are not exactly the opposite of the lie, but truths that lie beyond this dichotomy, as the candidate's metaphor. Even though Agência Lupa creates the categories called "true, but", "exaggerated" and "contradictory" in order to present reservations about the strict opposition between truth and lies, there are no criteria to assess the consistency of a metaphor. Among the ten statements made by Bolsonaro found by Lupa,

there is therefore no relationship between the economic plan and marriage. Still, this speech creates a truth criterion based on performance, which hides the inconsistency of the speech.

## Truth and conflict

The candidate is not, however, the only one to claim certain criteria of truth in the search to legitimize his speeches. The news anchors establish a combative interview style, which has been adopted at least since the 2014 elections, in which the idea of the truth of the complaint prevails.

The interview would be more true as it is more combative. Thus, there are many interruptions on the part of the anchors, the attempt to “summarize” the candidate’s speech, a reinforcement of the hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee with strict control of the time and requirement of monopoly of documents and image. What happens, therefore, is a discursive dispute with claims for truth by two sides. Interviewers also seek to declare the versions of events to be true.

The most evident conflict in this sense occurs when Jair Bolsonaro, answering a question about the defense of his deputy, General Mourão, against the Military Dictatorship, quotes the words of Roberto Marinho, founder of Rede Globo, to defend that what happened in 1964 it would have been a democratic revolution. Under protests by William Bonner, Bolsonaro claims a historical, factual truth when he quotes: “We participated in the 1964 democratic revolution identified with the national aspirations for preserving endangered democratic institutions for ideological radicalization, social unrest, strikes and widespread corruption ”, accurately attributing the words to Roberto Marinho. He also asks, in a provocative tone: “Was Roberto Marinho a dictator or a democrat?”.

This factual and historical truth (Roberto Marinho’s statement), however, appeals to the legitimation of speech through the credibility that a figure that, in that context, could not be questioned. Roberto Marinho, already deceased, was the owner and founder of Rede Globo, the newspaper’s broadcaster, and, in fact, supported the 1964 military coup in Brazil, guiding the broadcaster, at first, to do the same. In this episode, the truth of the facts of Arendt (2016) supports both Bolsonaro’s speech about the support of Roberto Marinho to the Military Dictatorship and the opposite speech that confronts him, by Bonner, who says that historians recognize the event of 1964 as a blow. Bolsonaro, engaging in this dispute of narratives based on factual truths, says: “let historians go. I stay with Roberto Marinho ”. In this case, there is no lie or error. The legitimation of speech comes from the credibility that the viewer can attribute to the figure of Roberto Marinho. Again, the checking has limited performance, since Bolsonaro’s statement is factually correct. Roberto Marinho’s quote, as well as the marriage metaphor, acts as a shield for discourse.

Tiburi (2017) states that what is known today as post-truth is exactly related to the credibility of those who say it. This helps us to understand the effectiveness of the quote by Roberto Marinho by Bolsonaro (in addition, of course, to the evident provocation). For the

author, this post-truth expression arises from a need to understand, from a contemporary perspective, the close relationship between truth and lie already postulated by Arendt (2016) and Derrida (2006). Tiburi (2017) states, therefore, that the post-truth is a well-accepted lie, that it does not demand argumentative or logical truth and that, for this reason, it is ultimately the public's responsibility, as it is he who chooses as truth the sound better or more convenient. "The truth is the palatable. And the palatable is bearable. The truth depends, in some way, on our taste "(TIBURI, 2017, p. 100). According to Tiburi (2017), we live in a market of truths, in which they are offered to us for consumption, as brands, and we choose the one we want.

It is noted, therefore, that the dichotomy between truth and lie, although it is very potent in maintaining edges that guide an ethical discourse analysis, seems insufficient to account for all the nuances that function as shields and as criteria of truth. We therefore resort to Derrida (1996), who proposes that the concepts of truth and lie not be taken as given. The author and thinks the lie differentiating it from error, untruth, fabrication, ignorance. The lie presupposes an intentionality that, in the final analysis, is beyond comprehension. It points to the impossibility of accusing someone of lying, as it would require a judgment of intention. Derrida calls *contra-verité*, or counter-truth, a false statement that gains the effect of truth. For him, the capitalistic-technological power of the media makes it capable of creating these effects. At the same time, we call these statements fakenews, and we tend to attribute their circulation to the internet, forgetting that they may also be (and are, as shown) present on the news.

We point out here that there is a planned continuity relationship between the statements of Jair Bolsonaro on the biggest newscast in the country and the fakenews that his team posted on social networks. The television interview worked, in this case, to give visibility and veracity to the lie that, later, the candidate told more freely in his livenas networks, without the intervention of the anchors, as was clear in the case of the book.

It is also interesting to note that, in the logic of force, but at the same time as the dichotomy between truth and lie is insufficient, the very title of the Lupa Agency check avoids the open accusation of lying. Although the body of the article classifies the statements as "false", "true", "exaggerated", "true, but" and "contradictory", the title talks about "mistakes and successes" by Jair Bolsonaro, erasing the epistemological difference that Derrida points between error and lie: there is no lie without bad faith. What can be seen, therefore, when the Lupa Agency's article equates error and falsehood, is that there is no intention of making a judgment of intentionality. There is no moral judgment on the part of the checking agency, such as what is claimed by the candidate in his statements. The idea that seems to prevail in fact checking is that of truth as a maximum value, in which error, falsehood and exaggeration are equated. There is, still, an idea of possible factual truth and, to some extent, verifiable, which dialogues with the idea of truth of the fact of Arendt (2016). Despite the contemporary emergence of the checking agencies (the website of Agência Lupa talks about the first checks that follow this model to have happened in the United States in

1991), the ideal of factual truth that underlies them is modern, as defended by Arendt (2016), and departs from the relativism proposed by Derrida (1996).

## Final considerations

Far from proposing a conclusion, but in order to present a reading and open a discussion about the truth, the lie, the narrative and the criteria of truth claimed in the interview and in the check, we started to resume and emphasize some of the points addressed. We noticed that the truth criteria of the speeches are the most varied. They range from the claim of factual truths, through the use of proof-image, truths based on predetermined political perspectives, and performance truths.

There is fragmentation in the speeches, using personal experiences, but also the construction of a narrative, in the broad and less formalistic sense of the word. A narrative like a partial account of the facts. We can also observe in the interview, the process described by Arendt (2016) of building a modern lie, “in broad daylight”, that is, a created narrative that overlaps the common experience.

The checking agency, in turn, claims a journalistic truth whose value is strictly related to the factual truth, and starts from the assumption of Arendt (2016) that there is a truth of the facts that persists and resists the idea of generalized lying. However, not all statements can be checked when adopting this perspective of truth. Assertions that are legitimized through metaphors, for example, cannot be judged by the traditional scheme that divides truth and lies, even when other categories are created such as “truth, but”, “contradictory” and “exaggerated”. The dichotomy truth and lie is important and potent, but it does not take into account the complexity of the processes that give real value to Jair Bolsonaro’s speech in the interview.

## References

- ARENDR, H. **Entre o passado e o futuro**. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1972.
- DERRIDA, J. **História da mentira**: prolegômenos. *Estudos Avançados*, v. 10, n. 27, 1996.
- ESCÓSSIA, F. **Ombudsman da Lupa**: Lupa erra ao classificar como ‘exagerada’ afirmação ‘falsa de Bolsonaro. São Paulo: Revista Piauí, Agência Lupa, 30 de agosto de 2018. Available at: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2018/08/30/ombudsman-2-bolsonaro/>. Accessed on: Sep. 25, 2018.
- FIGUEIREDO, V. L. F. A narrativa sob suspeita: primeira pessoa e declínio da perspectiva utópica. *In*: DUARTE, M. R.; PALO, M. J. (Org.). **Impasses do narrador e da narrativa**. 1a. ed. São Paulo: EDUC, 2016, v. 1, p. 50-65.
- FIGUEIREDO, V. L. F. Ficção e resistência na cultura de arquivo. *In*: XXVI ENCONTRO ANUAL DA COMPÓS, Faculdade Cásper Líbero, São Paulo - SP, 06 a 09 de junho de 2017. **Proceedings...**
- JAIR BOLSONARO É ENTREVISTADO NO JORNAL NACIONAL. **Jornal Nacional**. Rio de Janeiro: Globo, 28 de agosto de 2018. Available at: <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/6980200/>. Accessed on: Sep. 25, 2018.

MARES, Chico *et al.* **Erros e acertos de Jair Bolsonaro no Jornal Nacional e no Jornal das 10**. São Paulo: Revista Piauí, Agência Lupa, 28 de agosto de 2018. Available at: <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/lupa/2018/08/28/jair-bolsonaro-tv-globo/>. Accessed on: Sep. 25, 2018.

PIGLIA, R. Modos de narrar. *In*: PIGLIA, R. **La forma inicial**. Buenos Aires: Eterna cadencia editores, 2015. p. 43-53.

PIGLIA, R. **Tres propuestas para el próximo milenio - y cinco dificultades**. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2001.

RANCIERE, J. A imagem intolerável. *In*: RANCIERE, J. **O espectador emancipado**. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2014.

### **Julia Lery Miranda**

Doutoranda em Comunicação Social pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, linha de pesquisa Comunicação e Produção. Mestra em Comunicação Social pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais. E-mail: [lery.julia@gmail.com](mailto:lery.julia@gmail.com).

### **Paulo Basilio Santana**

Mestre em Comunicação Social pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais. E-mail: [paulobasilio28@gmail.com](mailto:paulobasilio28@gmail.com).

Received on: 10.28.2019

Accepted on: 09.16.2020

