

## WhatsApp and the Platformization in Brazil: a dense description of agents articulated in control practices mediated by the platform

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### Abstract

This article aims to describe the structured control system based on the use of WhatsApp in Brazil, locating the relationships between influence strategies of the public debate carried out by national agents and the data market and algorithmic modulation strategies of Meta Platforms Inc., a company of technology that owns the platform. Starting from the concept of platformization and an analytical approach influenced by the Actor-Network Theory, WhatsApp is positioned in the analysis as a non-human sociotechnical member of a relationships network that involves economic and political objectives of human actors, leveling both in importance and understanding that the insertion of the platform profoundly changes the practices and forms of social organization in the country. The goal is to understand the conjectural conditions that make WhatsApp an important element in the lives of Brazilian people and what is Meta's market model role for the control techniques that emerge with this use.

**Keywords:** WhatsApp. Plataformization. Datafication. Algorithms. Dataism.

## Introduction

Communication mediated by social media platforms has become an important topic for analyzing the political and cultural reality in the contemporary world, as these platforms are increasingly present in various aspects of everyday life, organization, and administration.

José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and David Nieborg (2020) use the term “platformization” to characterize this constant expansion of the platform’s role in current relationships and the social transformations this process implies. According to the authors, the concept describes “the penetration of platforms’ infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental structures into different economic sectors and spheres of life. [Conceiving] this process as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms” (VAN DIJCK, POELL and NIEBORG, 2020, p. 5). This regime of social relationships reorganizing through platform mediation and their resulting power dynamics are linked to the monopoly of the digital technology market in the hands of a few conglomerates and the business model applied in the development of these technologies, based on the sale of users’ personal data and algorithms for advertising content suggestion. As stated by Couldry and Mejias (2019, p. 18), the platformization process establishes a world where “new types of corporate powers, with privileged access to data streams extracted from the flows of life, can activate a metaphorical button [...] that reconfigures human life, continuously contributing to data collection and, potentially, profit generation.”

In this sense, giant tech corporations like META or Google become significant agents in the control and organization of information flows, thus becoming agents of political power. WhatsApp, one of the platforms within this monopolized market system, has had a considerable impact on social organization processes in Brazil. The application is now one of the most important in shaping public discourse, as demonstrated by several nationally influential events that had the platform as the primary means of information, such as the truckers’ strike<sup>1</sup> and the presidential election in Brazil, both occurring in 2018.

Recognizing the social impact of digital platform-mediated communication and its relationship with the market strategy of the technology companies that develop them and noting the particular importance of WhatsApp in Brazil, this article aims to locate and outline the process of platformization of Brazilians’ lives through the application.

The study will intend to provide a dense description of the elements connecting the technical functionalities of WhatsApp usage, the market strategy linked to META’s data policy<sup>2</sup>, and market or political episodes involving the platform that had a significant impact on the country. In this way, the aim is to clarify the circumstantial features of WhatsApp usage

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1 National strike by independent truck drivers, which began on May 21 during Michel Temer’s government, officially ending on May 30 with the intervention of the Brazilian Army and the Federal Highway Police to unblock the highways.

2 Meta Platforms, Inc. is an American conglomerate in the technology and social media industry headquartered in Menlo Park. Previously, the company was known as Facebook Inc., but it was renamed in January 2022 to encompass the corporate marketing and technological objectives that go far beyond social networks. The conglomerate owns various social platforms, such as Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp, which are analyzed in the current study.

in Brazil that make the platform an important tool in the lives of Brazilians and to understand the impact and consequences of META's market model on the control techniques that emerge from this usage.

The analysis will be influenced by Actor-Network Theory (LATOURET, 2012), positioning WhatsApp as a non-human sociotechnical member of a relations network involving economic objectives, social issues, and political demands of human actors, leveling both in importance for structuring relations. The premise is that the communicational universe mediated by platforms goes beyond the simplistic logic of instrumentalization of digital technologies, constituting a complex element that articulates various instances of political decisions and intentions. As stated by Latour (2012, p. 280), "the ways in which most ingredients of action interact are traced by the multiplication, enlistment, implication, and concentration of non-human actors." This approach's proposition will be used in the present study.

In this way, the text will be structured as follows: first, we will describe the emergence and integration of WhatsApp into the global digital data market through its acquisition by Facebook Inc., the company that would become the current META Platforms, Inc., its role in the company's marketing plan, and the consequences for the technical development and changes in the application's data policy. Following that, we will outline the dynamics of the platform's usage in Brazil, the emergence of influence and control strategies that arose with this integration, and how they relate to META's market model. Next, we will analyze META's response to these processes of public debate influence through technical adaptations made to the application after these practices were disseminated. Finally, we will present a concluding reflection on the specific power relations that emerge from WhatsApp's integration in Brazil, connecting the various instances of sociotechnical analysis conducted throughout the text.

## **WhatsApp and the data market**

WhatsApp is an instant messaging application capable of sharing multimedia content such as text messages, images, videos, links, and voice recordings, in addition to enabling voice calls. Communication can take place directly between two users or among groups of users gathered through the application's group creation feature. Users belonging to the same group can share content that will be viewed by all other members, as well as view all sent messages. WhatsApp uses the phone's contact list to establish its communication network. Therefore, it is only possible to initiate a conversation with people from the phone's contact list on which the application is installed.

The platform was created in 2009 and experienced rapid growth, catching the attention of Mark Zuckerberg, the owner of Facebook Inc., a giant media and social technology conglomerate that would be renamed Meta Platforms, Inc. in 2022, the current name of the company. In the preceding years, the conglomerate had already acquired platforms with the potential to become

significant in the market<sup>3</sup>. In 2014, Facebook Inc. acquired the application in a billion-dollar transaction. WhatsApp's initial profit strategy was based on an annual fee of \$0.99; however, after the acquisition, the fee was soon discarded, as the application became part of a corporate network with a much more effective market strategy than fees and usage charges, where the denial of privacy rights and the modular control of subjectivity are the foundations of profit acquisition.

This model is based on the so-called microeconomics of personal data interception (SILVEIRA, 2017), in which the market and marketing can capture and capitalize on relationships mediated by social networking sites. This capture occurs through the quantification of interactions on these platforms into data, using algorithmic technologies and Big Data capable of analyzing, categorizing, and relating this captured data, thereby instrumentalizing human behavior for consumption by offering the most relevant advertising content to users at their most vulnerable moments to advertising. This process has allowed tech corporations to aggressively and predatorily capitalize on human life, completely subjugating it to the market's logic and incorporating various aspects of sociability into this system that transforms digital platform interactions into data for algorithmic analysis. This subjugation primarily occurs through the algorithmic modulation of users' attention and emotions, causing the discourses organized by these algorithms to be "controlled and seen, primarily, by and for those who adhere to the constituent criteria of interaction policies in these virtual spaces" (SILVEIRA, 2019, p. 22).

Zuboff (2020) also discusses the behavior control processes on platforms. For this purpose, the author refers to "instrumental power" as the ability of algorithms to shape user behavior. This control is achieved through a computational architecture based on systems of action and reward. Since there is a vast amount and variety of data about people's behavior on the platform, the powerful processing and calculation capability of Big Data allows algorithms to analyze a user's likely reaction to the content they are exposed to. In this way, these algorithms can suggest a post to the user, with their likely reaction being a part of the calculations that compose it.

However, WhatsApp could not be incorporated in the same way as other Facebook Inc. social networks into this algorithmic marketing system. This is because the app did not offer an advertising viewing feature within the content shared by users. Additionally, unlike other social networks, WhatsApp does not directly collect usage data from the content produced by the app users. Since 2016, following criticism from digital security organizations about the app's security system, the company began developing its end-to-end encryption. Thus, messages are encrypted when sent and decrypted upon arrival, ensuring that only the people involved in the conversation have access to the sent content.

This apparent contradiction, where an application that does not offer advertising and to which one cannot access the content produced by its users is integrated into a data collection and

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<sup>3</sup> In 2012, the company had already acquired the social network Instagram and, in the same year, also attempted, unsuccessfully, to purchase Snapchat.

advertising-based market system, results in an adaptation of WhatsApp's role in the marketing plans of Facebook Inc. The application is thus strategically planned from the holding company, the centralized and relational control of the platforms owned by Facebook Inc., and the data produced from them. It is now seen as a tool to adapt, enhance, and expand the algorithmic systems for advertising content suggestions of the company's other social networks. Even though it does not directly collect data from the content of sent messages, it starts collecting users' phone numbers, as well as metadata, peripheral data that aids in the categorization and relational analysis of other data. In 2016, the platform's data-sharing policy was updated, and the company's official text explaining the changes details the type of data collection being performed and how they share information with the other social networks of the company.

In the section of the document called "Information provided by you," it is described that, in addition to their own number, to use the application, the user also provides "the phone numbers from their regular contact list, both from users of our services and from other contacts." In this way, even the contacts in the user's address book who are not WhatsApp users are co-opted by the company. Further on, in the "Automatically collected data" section, some vague information about data collection, such as the indication that information is captured about "how our services are used, how your interaction with other users occurs during the use of our services, etc.," without explicitly specifying what these usage data are, there are also descriptions indicating some metadata collected by the platform, such as log files, diagnostic logs, failures, website and performance data, hardware model, operating system information, mobile network information, location information, among others. Further, in the "How we use information" section, the use of the metadata collected in WhatsApp for the targeted marketing system of other Facebook Inc. platforms is evident. The text states that "Facebook and other companies in the same group may also use WhatsApp data to make suggestions (for example, friends, contacts, or interesting content) and show relevant offers and advertisements" (WHATSAPP..., 2016, our translation).

There are four layers in the platform's data market: the first for collection and storage, the second for processing and mining, the third for analysis and sample formation, and the fourth for modulation (SILVEIRA, 2017). From the description provided, it is understood that WhatsApp's role in Facebook Inc.'s market strategy primarily lies in the first two layers, the collection, storage, and mining of data, with the aim of enhancing and empowering the analysis and modulation of other social networks. However, to address WhatsApp's role in a conjectural environment involving a wide variety of social actors who converge around the platform, refining practices of power and influence, it is necessary to go beyond the operational development of the tool and its relationship with the economic goals of technological conglomerates to characterize the power relations that emerge from its use. It is also necessary to demonstrate how these elements intersect with the interests and practices of local actors, structuring new ways to intervene and control the lives of users within that locality. In the next section, we will attempt to show the local specificities that make WhatsApp such an important tool in processes of political control and influence in Brazil.

## WhatsApp in Brazil and the power networks

In the text “Datafication, Dataism, and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology” (2014), José Van Dijck introduces two central concepts for understanding power relations manifested through the use of digital platforms. The first one is datafication. According to the author, the profit system of technology corporations based on data collection and analysis has established a technical paradigm that seeks the constant expansion of the data production model resulting from interactions among users of social platforms. This condition means that every technical adaptation and enhancement of the platforms aims to increase the variety and volume of created data, completely subjecting life to a datafied rationalization for purely economic purposes and instituting surveillance as the norm in platform-mediated communication.

The second concept, directly related to the first, is dataism. For corporations, it is not enough to merely collect data and control the algorithmic systems for content suggestions. They must also be institutionally legitimized as authorities capable of producing knowledge about the people using their platforms. In this way, technology companies need to position themselves as agents capable of understanding the nature of human action on the platforms to the extent of predicting user behavior when viewing specific content. To achieve this, it is necessary to disseminate and persuade economic actors that the concentration of a vast amount of data and the algorithmic power to analyze it are equivalent to the ability to comprehend the essence of human behavior. However, as Van Dijck (2014) points out, data is, above all, an interpretative and arbitrary category, the result of rationalization and adjustment of reality to a specific epistemic basis, which, in the case of social networking platforms, seeks to adapt all forms of social interaction to the logic of marketing and the market. The widespread and uncritical belief in the power of data knowledge, without taking into account this marketing bias, is what Van Dijck (2014) refers to as dataism.

The central issue is that this process of epistemological legitimization of data created on platforms extends to broader political realms of human organization beyond the data market. Van Dijck (2014) shows how other institutionalized dimensions of social life are embracing the value of datafied knowledge from technology corporations, especially through academia, where research on human behavior uncritically uses platform data, and from state governments, which use data as a means of knowledge to inform governmental actions.

Here, two important movements are at play in understanding the process of platformization and its characteristic power relations. First, the constant integration of life into the datafied logic through the insertion of social networking platforms as mediators in various social spheres. Second, the re-articulation of agents of power and influence stemming from this new reality of communication mediations by adapting their practices to the corporate marketing system. These movements do not occur based on universal rules and predetermined agents and institutions, even though Van Dijck (2014) focused her study on academia and state government.

Social networking platforms, as technologies that reproduce the market's logic in life, are tied to economic and political determinations directly related to local circumstances and specificities that influence them. Therefore, by following these movements while also framing the local economic and political specifics, one can analyze the peculiarities of platformization in Brazil, understanding the reasons that make WhatsApp such an important tool in this process.

The first point to be made in order to establish these connections is that Brazil has gone through several economic crises in recent years and has consistently increased its figures related to the average unemployment rate of the country, thereby widening levels of inequality. Roberta Teodorico Ferreira da Silva *et al.* (2017, p. 9) explain, when addressing the issue, that:

Civil society experiences an extensive lack of control in the field of Social Policies through the increasing growth of various forms of employment and unemployment precariousness, with a shift towards entrepreneurship, a concentration of public spending on highly selective anti-poverty programs, a reduction in social spending, and an increase in social inequalities, among other ills stemming from the current stage of capitalism.

Official indicators reaffirm this process of social deterioration that the country is experiencing. The National Household Sample Survey (PNAD), conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in 2019, shows that economic inequality figures were the worst since 2012, steadily increasing since 2015 (IBGE, 2020). Social inequality is a crucial conjectural aspect for reflecting on and analyzing the platformization process. The ability to access the Internet is directly linked to the equipment used and the available connectivity infrastructure. In turn, these factors are tied to the purchasing power of those who can afford the costs of this equipment and internet service.

It is in this scenario that mobile devices and WhatsApp become such important tools. Cellphones are more accessible devices for economic classes with lower purchasing power as they are cheaper than computers. According to a study conducted by the Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br), mobile devices are used by 99% of people connected in the country, with 58% of the population accessing the Internet solely through their mobile phones. Among social classes D and E, exclusive access through mobile devices reaches 85% of the population (CETIC, 2020). WhatsApp has become a particularly important platform because it is software that requires little processing power from the hardware and occupies little storage space in the device's memory, capable of running on almost any type of mobile phone, even the cheapest ones.

The internet access infrastructure is also a factor that enhances the use of WhatsApp in the country. The sale of mobile digital network packages by telecommunications companies is a significant part of internet consumption in Brazil. In 2018, 80.2% of people had mobile broadband connections, 3G or 4G, while the percentage for fixed Internet was 75.9% (CETIC,

2019). Within their strategies for selling mobile internet packages, these companies offer privileged access to certain platforms, not charging mobile data usage for these apps. This practice is known as the zero-rating policy and is the result of consumers substituting taxed services from telecom operators with free services from digital platforms. In this way, the operators ensure that their internet services cover the cost of internet access required for these platforms. WhatsApp, an app that offers essential mobile phone services for free, such as messaging and voice calls, is one of the platforms that benefit the most from the zero-rating policy, being offered for free in 93% of plans of this type (CETIC, 2020).

These factors help explain the wide reach of WhatsApp among the Brazilian population, encompassing various age groups and social classes, with particular significance for lower-income groups (CETIC, 2020)<sup>4</sup>. The concentration of a large number of Brazilians using the app and the expansive datafication of relationships in a society permeated by digital technologies, positioning platforms as an important means of information management and control, led national actors to see the tool as an opportunity to influence the behavior of these people in pursuit of their objectives. One of the first significant examples of the political-strategic use of this communication network occurred during the 2018 Brazilian presidential elections.

Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected president at the end of this electoral process; however, there are significant indications that this victory was largely due to a strategy of mass dissemination of defamatory content about political opponents in WhatsApp group networks. In a report published in the *Folha de S. Paulo* newspaper in October 2018, Patrícia Campos de Mello (2019) revealed a multi-million-dollar scheme for the purchase of fake news blasts carried out by robots that benefited the then-candidate Bolsonaro.

According to the report, business supporters of the electoral campaign hired digital marketing companies to send out messages targeted by income level, region, and level of support for the candidate. The strategy relied on the broadcast list feature of the tool, which allows creating lists with phone contacts and sending the same message to all of them at once. Bolsonaro was elected by reaffirming many of the denialist and defamatory discourses that circulated within his support network on the platform.

This episode demonstrates the power over users that social dynamics around WhatsApp-mediated communication possess and how local political groups exploit this power in a given social context. As mentioned, the dominant logic of the data marketplaces of these platforms establishes the role of technology corporations as intermediaries in the complete submission of users' lives to clients who hire their marketing system. The fact that this system subjugates life in an unregulated manner, with no limitations other than data policies developed by the corporations themselves, erases the political aspects of each locality where these platforms are widely used.

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4 The research from the Regional Center for the Study of the Development of the Information Society indicates that the usage among the lower-income classes is concentrated on functions that can be performed on low-connection and low-processing power devices, such as sending messages through an app. This usage covers 46% of the D and E classes and 67% of the C class.



Local disputes and specific power structures are irrelevant to those who manage these conglomerates and develop these technologies, even though these elements directly influence the process of platformization in a given locality, giving rise to new techniques of control over the user population. In the case of Jair Bolsonaro's election as President of Brazil in 2018, it can be said that at a time when the country was experiencing significant political strain on democratic institutions and the national political class since the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the unregulated influence capacity at the population level offered by WhatsApp was a golden opportunity for political groups to capitalize on this strain and operate outside these institutions through criminal practices of public opinion manipulation. The combination of the opacity of the application's operation and institutional deterioration in the country ensured the impunity of this crime and Bolsonaro's election.

It is in this conjunctural network that combines economic conditions that allow platformization to materialize as an important element in the relationships of a particular community and the re-articulation of political and economic agents in that location in the face of this insertion that one can analyze the specific techniques of power characteristic of this process in different realities, such as the case of WhatsApp in Brazil and its use to influence public discourse. However, it is also necessary to put into perspective the actions of conglomerates through the analysis of the technical enhancement of these platforms and, thereby, highlight the intentions and values associated with this technique in light of the control conditions already materialized by the platformization process. In the next section, we outline this analysis based on the description and study of new functions developed in recent years by the company to enhance the platform's marketing use.

## **WhatsApp business and power adapted to the market**

This dual movement of platformization that spread WhatsApp in Brazil as a data production tool for the segmented marketing logic of platforms and simultaneously established a process of re-articulation of national agents interested in the control capacity through information dissemination using the tool compelled META to combat and at the same time, appropriate this system.

The legitimization of platforms as agents of social governance and organization requires a certain effort of engagement between the companies that create them and the institutional pillars that underpin the liberal democracy of nation-states, as demonstrated by Van Dijck (2014) in the connections formed between technology corporations, governments, and universities. Thus, the combat against potential practices that threaten this institutional framework becomes an unavoidable challenge for these companies seeking to legitimize the economic use of data. However, the complete subjugation of life imposed by the platform datafication system, the foundation of the entire data market profit system and, therefore, essential for these companies, is the technical aspect that enables these control practices to occur. Therefore, corporations are

compelled to operate at the fringes of institutions, ostensibly defending democratic values. At the same time, through the opacity of the technical operation of algorithmic systems and the discourse of neutrality associated with this operation, they aim to increase the exploitation of human relationships on these platforms for profit, consequently enhancing the control capacity of third parties interested in co-opting public discourse and user affinities.

In the case of WhatsApp, this dual role resulted in an effort by Facebook Inc. to classify the mass dissemination practices of content originating from civilian members of society as potentially harmful to democracy while simultaneously adapting these practices for use by private enterprises and economic agents as a legitimate and non-dangerous use. Thus, in 2019, following episodes of mass distribution of fake news for electoral purposes in Brazil, the platform restricted the maximum number of message forwards for regular users from 250 forwards to just 5. In 2020, the company further limited this number, allowing a message to be forwarded only once.

On the other hand, in recent years, Meta, formerly Facebook Inc., has developed functionalities that adapt the system of mass automated message sending for marketing purposes. WhatsApp Business, a special feature of the platform launched in 2018, offers tools to assist in the sale and promotion of products by medium and large companies and serves as an example of this technical adaptation.

Through WhatsApp Business, the application enables the creation of a professional and verified profile for your company, including address, profile description, e-mail address, and website. It also allows the creation and access of a product catalog with items for sale and their prices. What further facilitates the implementation of message-sending strategy are the automation features, chatbot<sup>5</sup> programming for automatically responding to frequently asked questions directed at the profile, and the scheduling of message sends based on data provided by the platform regarding customer interactions, such as average response time, peak hours, primary reasons for contact, and so on. META does not directly charge for the use of WhatsApp Business but requires companies to use a paid Business Solution Provider (BSP) to access the application's API<sup>6</sup>. BSPs are authorized and official WhatsApp partners that provide access to the WhatsApp Business API, offering various services such as consulting, technical support, integration with customer relationship management (CRM) systems, workflow automation, data analysis, and marketing campaign management. The cost of hiring a BSP varies depending on the scope and quality of WhatsApp Business functionality management offered by them. Despite WhatsApp Business setting limits on automated messaging by companies, depending on the chosen BSP and their ability to design a marketing strategy aligning with the company's

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5 Software applications designed to simulate repetitive human actions in a standardized manner in applications and/or messaging tools

6 API stands for 'Application Programming Interface,' which refers to a set of rules, protocols, and tools that enable different software to communicate and interact with each other in a standardized manner. An API defines how software components should communicate and what operations can be performed. It allows developers to create programs and services that other developers can use without the need for them to understand the internal implementation details.

objectives and WhatsApp Business usage policies, this automated sending can reach thousands of messages in a single day<sup>7</sup>.

The main factor of effectiveness in this strategy is the relationship between the powerful message dissemination capability of WhatsApp, the provision of usage metadata by the platform to customers who contract the WhatsApp Business function, and the cross-referencing of these metadata with data from other sources. It is through this system that blends a local data policy with the comprehensive datafication system of platforms that it becomes possible to replicate on WhatsApp the processes of modulating subjectivity characteristic of Meta's data market.

An example that illustrates this technique well is the use of the tool by Via Varejo, one of the largest retail companies in Brazil, owner of two of the country's biggest retail brands, Casas Bahia and Ponto Frio. In 2020, the company created the "Me Chama no Zap" project, a strategy for customer service and product purchases through WhatsApp. Customers need to sign up to participate by providing their CPF on the project's official website. Through this information, the company can access other customer consumption data within its databases, such as other purchases made in the store, the time of day when purchases were made, preferred payment methods, and more. Thus, by cross-referencing this data with other data provided by the WhatsApp Business API, the company can send messages containing promotions that the user's profile is more likely to interact with at the time when they are most inclined to engage with such content (YUGE, 2020). The technique is similar to the content suggestion model used by social media algorithms like Facebook or Instagram.

In January 2021, the then Facebook Inc. announced a new data collection and sharing policy on WhatsApp, which, in addition to expanding the variety of collected metadata, further highlights the relationship between control practices by local power agents and the economic goals of the conglomerate. According to the new guidelines, in addition to making mandatory the data sharing that the 2016 data policy defined as optional, the new policy also allows this data to be used to help users complete purchases and transactions mediated by the platform, increasing the support provided to companies using WhatsApp Business. In a brief article released on the official WhatsApp page explaining the changes, there is a passage that says, "To ensure quick responses, [...] companies may use Facebook as a technology provider to manage some responses [via WhatsApp]" (WHATSAPP, 2021). In other words, it allows the data to be used even more widely and effectively by local economic agents. The change was met with strong resistance from civil society and organizations specializing in digital data security, leading Facebook Inc. to postpone the changes to May 2021, when they were implemented.

It is worth noting that the user control structure of WhatsApp is acceptable to Meta as long as it enables the improvement of the marketing system that generates profits for the company. However, it is difficult to define a clear separation between control practices aimed

<sup>7</sup> Information extracted from official texts available on the informational platform about the WhatsApp Business API on May 5, 2023. The texts can be accessed through the following page: <https://developers.facebook.com/docs/whatsapp/cloud-api/get-started>.

at selling products and those aimed at disinformation for political purposes, as knowledge of the specifics of the sociotechnical network of influence and power is hampered by the opaque nature of the technology and the company's global profit strategy. It is even more problematic to attribute these control practices for political purposes solely to individual user initiatives while absolving the role of the private sector. The strategy of spreading fake news carried out by Bolsonaro's campaign team had a decisive involvement of digital marketing companies hired to execute message blasts and entrepreneurs sympathetic to the candidate who financed the hiring of these companies (MELO, 2018). The technical adaptations made to give companies more control over platform-mediated communication can potentially enhance the business class's capacity to influence the population and thus intensify their ability to assert their political preferences and influence over public discourse.

By conditioning life mediated by digital platforms to constant submission and modulation and by not taking into account in its horizon of technical adaptations and data policy the conjunctural characteristics of the localities where the platform is inserted, the company establishes the potential for control as an element for action by local agents interested in these lives, whether they are economic or political.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we seek to address the conditions that allowed WhatsApp to become a central tool for the process of platformization in Brazil, as well as a significant means of social influence and control for local political disputes. To do so, we analytically connect the country's economic and political conjunctures with the digital data market system of Meta, formerly known as Facebook Inc., through the use and the development of political and economic influence strategies stemming from the introduction of the tool in the national territory.

It is evident from the analyses presented that the country's economic situation and the specific technical characteristics of the tool made WhatsApp materialize as a particularly important platform for the processes of platformization in the Brazilian digital reality. It is also possible to observe that Meta's digital data collection and algorithmic organization of advertising content are directly related to the re-articulation of power agents and the emergence of strategies to influence public discourse through the application. This is because both practices are fundamentally based on the complete subjugation of relationships mediated by digital platforms to forms of constant intervention and surveillance, as well as operating at the fringes of state oversight and control institutions. Meta, as it requires institutional legitimization to realize its algorithmic marketing strategy, establishes a process of appropriating control strategies associated with the platform for market logic under the premise that its modes of operation are more ethical than those of civil society. However, in the very political events where the tool was used to influence the decision-making processes of the population, there was

significant involvement of economic agents and the private sector, highlighting how the notion of political neutrality of market agents is fallacious.

Therefore, to deal with this reality in which WhatsApp significantly reshapes collective agency processes in the country, it is necessary to consider the complex network of connections that links the market model of technology corporations, the technical specifics of the platform, and the local conditions and demands related to the digital realm. It is from these three pillars that support the control structures of digital technologies that civil and governmental actions can be developed to address the issue.

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### **Authors' contribution**

Faria Júnior, M. A.: conceptualization - methodology – investigation - data curation - formal analysis - writing – original writing - reviewing and editing; Silveira, S. A.: project administration – conceptualization – supervision - methodology – investigation - data curation.

### **Data availability**

The authors declare that the data supporting the research are contained in the article and/or supplementary material.

### **Conflict of interest**

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