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## FEATURED Q&A

# How Much Is Fake News Influencing Latin Elections?



Popular messaging service WhatsApp was recently flooded with misleading propaganda and conspiracy theories ahead of Brazil's presidential election. // File Photo: maxpixel.net.

**Q** Reports claim countless messages with false information flooded Facebook-owned WhatsApp in the last weeks ahead of Brazil's highly polarized presidential election. Before the election, Fernando Haddad of the Workers' Party alleged businessmen supporting his far-right rival, Jair Bolsonaro, were behind the spread of misleading propaganda on the instant messaging application, which has more than 120 million users in Brazil. Bolsonaro denies the claim. Moreover, Facebook shut down dozens of pages and accounts linked to a pro-Bolsonaro marketing group, though the social media network insisted they were closed because they repeatedly posted spam and not because of their posts' content. How much impact did the spread of misinformation have on Brazil's election? How did this play out in other presidential races in the region this year, such as in Colombia and Costa Rica? What effects does false propaganda on social media have on Latin American democracies, and what should be done, if anything, to control it?

**A** Laura Chinchilla, former president of Costa Rica and head of the Organization of American States' mission of observers in Brazil's election: "Brazil's recent election once again demonstrated the incontestable importance that digital technologies and social media have gained in campaigns' communications strategies. The winning candidate in this election only had seven seconds of paid advertisement time on television before the first-round vote, in accordance with the distribution rules outlined in Brazil's electoral laws. But this didn't impede the rapid growth of his support, thanks in part for his

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## U.S. Sending Nearly 8,000 Troops to Border

As of this morning, more than 5,000 troops are expected to be posted along the U.S.-Mexico border, with more than 2,000 additional troops being sent within days. The service members are being sent as migrant caravans make their way north.

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### ECONOMIC

## Ecuador Faces Suit Over Mining Rights in Forest

The local Cotacachi government is seeking an injunction on mining activity in the Los Cedros reserve.

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### POLITICAL

## Mexico Caps Public Workers' Salaries

Lawmakers decreed that public workers cannot earn more than the president and eliminated so-called "golden parachutes" for elected officials. President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador pushed for the change and pledged to limit his own salary.

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López Obrador // File Photo: López Obrador Campaign.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## U.S. Sending Nearly 8,000 Troops to Border States

Within days, the United States will have nearly 8,000 troops posted in three states along the country's southern border as caravans of migrants make their way north from Central America and through Mexico in hopes of reaching the United States, The Wall Street Journal reported Monday, citing an unnamed U.S. official. As of this morning, more than 5,000 troops are expected to be posted in Texas, Arizona and California, the Pentagon said. More than 2,000 additional troops are expected to be sent within days, bringing the total number to nearly 8,000, according to the official. The latest increase in the number of troops sent to the U.S.-Mexico border resulted from the military responding to requests from the Department of Homeland Security, according to the Pentagon. The caravans of migrants heading toward the United States has become a heated political issue ahead of today's midterm elections in the United States, in which voters will select members of Congress, governors and local officials. U.S. President Donald Trump has likened the caravans to an "invasion" that requires a military response. However, the Pentagon has said troops being sent to the southern border will not receive combat pay, which is typically given to military personnel posted in war zones. Some former military commanders have criticized the deployment of troops to the border, saying the move would take away resources needed to address external threats. The majority of the military personnel sent to the border will not be armed and will be performing duties such as medical support, logistics and engineering, Army Col. Rob Manning, a spokesman at the Pentagon, told reporters on Monday, The Wall Street Journal reported. Military police, who will be stationed in areas where the migrants are expected to arrive, will be armed, according to unnamed defense officials, but Manning did not specify how many of them would be carry-

ing weapons. Marine General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Monday that the military does not plan to put troops in a position of denying anyone entry to the United States. "There is no plan for soldiers to come into contact with immigrants or to reinforce Department of Homeland Security as they're conducting their mission," Dunford said at Duke University. "We are providing enabling capabilities." Last weekend, U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis signed the order to send the troops to the border, according to a U.S. official. The Pentagon reportedly does not have a specific figure for the cost of the operation, which is scheduled to last until mid-December. In related news, the U.S. military last month declined a draft request from the Department of Homeland Security to build housing along the border for detained migrants, The Guardian reported Monday. The Pentagon's objection to the request kept the military's mission geared solely toward providing support to government personnel in the area, the newspaper reported.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Ecuador Faces Suit For Granting Mining Rights in Forest

Ecuador's government faces a lawsuit this week for granting exploration rights to mining companies in a protected forest, Reuters reported Monday. Brought by the local Cotacachi government, the lawsuit requests the regional court place an injunction on all mining activity within Los Cedros reserve in the Intag Valley. National mining company ENAMI is developing the concessions in Los Cedros in partnership with Canadian mining firm Cornerstone Capital Resources. The project is still in the early stages of exploration and is not yet utilizing drills or other heavy equipment, according to Brooke Macdonald, chief executive of Cornerstone Capital Resources. The lawsuit claims Ecuador's government violated the Constitution and forestry laws by ignoring Los Cedros' conservation status and concessioning mining activity

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Mexican Lawmakers Cap Public Workers' Salaries

Mexican lawmakers on Monday officially decreed that public servants cannot earn more than the president and eliminated so-called "golden parachutes" for elected officials, the Associated Press reported. President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who takes office Dec. 1, had pushed for the change, pledging to limit his own salary to 108,000 pesos (\$5,390) per month. The new rules allow for some exceptions for salaries of employees with high levels of specialization, but even those salaries will be capped at 50 percent more than the president's salary.

## Detained Former Panamanian President Martinelli Hospitalized

Former Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, who has been detained since June on wiretapping charges, on Monday was hospitalized in stable condition in Panama City, Reuters reported. Martinelli, who was in office from 2009-2014, was being held in the public hospital's coronary unit, according to Carlos Carrillo, one of the former president's lawyers. Carrillo declined to provide additional details about Martinelli's health.

## Brazilian Central Bank Expects Inflation to Peak Next Year

Brazil's central bank today released minutes from its latest monetary policy meeting that suggest inflation will peak in the second quarter of 2019 before easing toward its target, Reuters reported. Last Wednesday, the bank's monetary policy committee left the Selic policy rate unchanged at a record low 6.50 percent in a unanimous decision. In their minutes, bank officials said underlying inflation is currently at "appropriate" levels and that upward risks to inflation have lessened.

in the protected forest without informing local officials, according to the report. The Constitution gives the state the right to extract minerals regardless of whose land they are located under, but the law also requires the national government to consult with communities about “plans and programs for prospection, exploitation, and commercialization of non-renewable resources found in their land.” Ecuador’s government has set a goal to more than double the value of mining to its economy by 2021 and is seeking more joint venture partners for its state-owned mining company, Fernando Benalcázar, the vice minister for mines, told a mining conference in Melbourne last week, Mining Weekly reported.

## BUSINESS NEWS

# Sempra Energy, Total to Partner on LNG Export Project

San Diego-based Sempra Energy and France’s Total on Monday signed a memorandum of understanding to cooperate on further developing a liquified natural gas export project already underway on the U.S. Gulf Coast and an export facility under consideration in Mexico, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported. Total is considering contracting for up to nine million tons per annum (Mtpa) of LNG in the second phase of the \$10 billion Cameron LNG facility in Hackberry, La. In addition, Total may also acquire an equity stake in an anticipated LNG export facility at the Energía Costa Azul facility near Ensenada, Mexico, which is operated by IEnova, a Sempra subsidiary. Sempra has a long-term goal of developing more than 45 Mtpa of LNG export capacity in North America, Sempra CEO Jeff Martin said in a statement. In addition to its operations in Mexico, Sempra Energy holds investments in electric generation and transmission companies providing energy service to more than 6.9 million consumers in Chile and Peru.

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successful positioning on social media, on which the number of followers he had vastly surpassed those of his contenders. Digital platforms not only allowed candidates to present their messages and interact directly with supporters, they also became a channel to attack, offend and disinform not just the candidates, but also the electoral system’s institutions. This has been a theme in many other campaigns across Latin America. In Brazil’s case, something unprecedented also occurred: private messaging platform WhatsApp became the preferred medium to spread false content. Despite electoral authorities, the media, social organizations and social media companies’ many efforts to prevent and counteract the spread of false news, the phenomenon achieved unparalleled dimensions, truly becoming a misinformation tsunami. At the same time, digital technologies offer the electorate many opportunities that before were out of reach—not just to access information about political parties and candidates and make their voices heard, but also to monitor and inspect the use of public resources in electoral campaigns, including private financing assigned to political parties and candidates. The real challenge is to enhance the virtues that social networks offer in order to improve the quality of democracy and more effectively contain the risks that can be generated by a perverse use of them.”

**A** **Maria Velez de Berliner, managing director of RTG-Red Team Group, Inc.:** “Brazilian subscribers to WhatsApp received large numbers of election-related postings stating blatant misinformation and disinformation either by or on behalf of the two leading candidates. More than 50,000 postings were misleading, urging to vote number 17, as if it were Lula’s (who was not running) when 17 was in fact Bolsonaro’s ballot number. In Colombia, some political analysts claim the 11.7 million votes cast in favor of the anti-corruption referendum in August 2018

resulted from misinformation and disinformation messages posted on social media, radio, and TV by the Green Alliance Party, the originators of the referendum. Facebook’s effect on Costa Rica’s run-up to the presidential election is mixed. ‘Likes’ seem to have affected the presidential preferences of tech-savvy young, but most Costa Ricans chose Carlos Alvarado Quezada’s promises of same-sex marriage, gender equality, skilled jobs and technical education, based on his previous experience as minister of labor. A free and truthful marketplace of competing ideas is essential to the effective workings of any democracy, more so in Latin America where democratic institutions are weak and political corruption and collusion are rampant. Given the prevalence of the distortions of facts, if not outright lies, on social media, radio, and TV, it seems truth in advertising by and for politicians lies in governments holding those companies liable for the false postings of their subscribers, advertisers and sponsors. The companies’ breast beating, apologies and promises of ‘doing better next time’ will not solve the problem. As providers of a service, these companies must be as liable as any other service provider who intentionally and willfully misleads the public.”

**A** **Cristina Tardáguila, executive director of Brazilian fact-checking agency Agência Lupa:**

“There are many factors involved in deciding a vote, including your family, your friends and your education level. For the first time in Brazil, what you received and read on your phone seemed to have had a crucial role. It is still too early to measure the impact of misinformation on the final decision, but there is no doubt—and Laura Chinchilla’s statement from the OAS is clear about it—that false news was a bad surprise in our 2018 election. What we know for sure is that 44 percent of Brazilians recognize that they inform themselves through WhatsApp, which means the app plays an important role in the

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country. Agência Lupa, along with the University of São Paulo and the Federal University of Minas Gerais, has monitored 347 public chat groups on WhatsApp (with 18,000 people and more than 850,000 messages) and found an amazing amount of disinformation. Analyzing only 50 images (the most shared ones), we found out that only four of them were 100 percent true. But false information is all over. From Oct. 27 to Oct. 28, Lupa and other fact-checking platforms in Brazil worked together in a collaborative initiative. In 48 hours, we debunked 50 posts of false content. This means we face more than one big lie per hour in a very important weekend. And we were less than 50 fact-checkers. Brazil's election served as an alert to the rest of the world in many senses. We have been spending too much time thinking about ways to prevent false news on Facebook, Twitter and Google. But what about encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram? We have been spending too much time thinking about legislation around fake news. But fake news is hard to define. So why don't we invest time and money on news literacy programs? These kinds of ideas are what we need to develop."

**A** **Silvio Waisbord, professor at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University:** "We may never know with absolute certainty if elections in Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia and Mexico were decided by misinformation. But we know that misinformation spread, that campaigns flooded social media with fantasies and that candidates poisoned public opinion with lies. All major social media brands and companies have been accused of facilitating the wide dissemination of falsehoods. The evidence is undeniable. Folha recently exposed actions by the Bolsonaro campaign to flood WhatsApp with false messages. WhatsApp has been recently accused of aiding misinformation in several countries. In India, the company imposed restrictions on the number of times messages can be

shared and the number of contacts for individual users. Yet companies are slow to react. Democracies are playing a game of whack-a-mole with misinformation on social media. If it's not one platform that serves to spread lies, it's another. The conventional wisdom that digital giants should self-reg-

**“If it's not one platform that serves to spread lies, it's another.”**

– Silvio Waisbord

ulate and get rid of lies has problems as corporate decisions, primarily concerned with keeping sites popular and traffic constant, do not fit well with the needs of democracies. Yet it is not clear that there are obvious policy solutions that have strong popular support and that won't interfere with free expression. In Latin America, this issue is particularly treacherous given the spotty record of public-oriented regulation of media content which has often devolved into plain censorship. We may never know exactly whether misinformation tilted electoral results in one direction. Yet we know that when misinformation is prevalent, democracies confront a dark situation. Democracy is premised on the presence of an informed citizenry. Recent elections, in contrast, show the broad circulation of falsehoods among the public and a steady diet of lies promoted by candidates as well as their allied media and influencers. It is not obvious that responses such as fact-checking or in-depth investigations by news organizations and other associations are effective in stopping false information or changing minds. They do unmask lies, but it debatable if they effectively counter common lies in certain pockets of the Internet. As long as lies inundate everyday digital platforms, democracies are in peril."

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