

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: PROBLEMATIC POLITICS OF LIVESTREAM WITNESSING AND DIGITAL MARKETPLACES IN BRAZIL

O Bom, O Mau e o Feio: Políticas Problemáticas de Testemunho ao Vivo e Mercados Digitais no Brasil

Lo Bueno, Lo Malo y Lo Feo: Políticas Problemáticas de la Transmisión en Vivo y Los Mercados Digitales en Brasil

Tom Kissock-Mamede¹

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Abstract: Populists in Brazil have created streaming apps to discuss Indigenous rights and the environment. This paper argues that a witnessing framework can be used to investigate these livestream apps. It examines good and bad cases and how they're synthesised into an ugly space scaffolded by digital marketplaces. Since these apps incentivise offline behaviours that affect the environment and democracy, this paper recommends that digital marketplaces regulate themselves and we bear witness to them.

Keywords: Livestreaming. Applications. Witnessing. Indigenous. Brazil.

Resumo: Populistas no Brasil criaram aplicativos de streaming para discutir os direitos indígenas e o meio ambiente. Este artigo argumenta que o testemunho pode ser usado para investigar esses aplicativos. Ele examina casos positivos e negativos e como são sintetizados em um espaço feio, estruturado por mercados digitais. Esses aplicativos incentivam comportamentos offline que afetam o meio ambiente e a democracia, e o artigo recomenda que os mercados digitais se regulem e que testemunhemos sobre eles.

Palavras-chaves: Streaming. Aplicativos. Testemunho. Indígenas. Brasil.

Resumen: En Brasil, populistas usan aplicaciones de streaming para debatir derechos indígenas y medio ambiente. Este artículo propone el testimonio como forma de analizarlas. Examina casos buenos y malos, mostrando cómo estas aplicaciones, en un entorno digital hostil, promueven acciones dañinas para el ambiente y la democracia. Se sugiere regular los mercados digitales y testimoniar sobre sus efectos.

Palabras-clave: Transmisión. Aplicaciones. Testimonio. Indígenas. Brasil.

¹ Doutor; University of Cambridge, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom. Tmk36@cam.ac.uk | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7482-8818>

Introduction

This paper expands our understanding of the witnessing scholarship by attributing it to social media livestream applications. It's aimed at researchers and policymakers to connect this scholarship on human rights to the crisis of mis and disinformation on livestream applications and the digital marketplaces that host them. Approaching digital marketplaces from this scholarly perspective, allows researchers to investigate the subsequent 'ugly' digital space where populist politicians like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro create their own social media platforms. Consequently, the paper seeks to investigate what livestream witnessing can tell us about offline anti-democratic behaviour, and what these livestream applications might reveal about the digital marketplaces that host them. It raises the question whether witnessing can provide a lens to examine the ambivalent nature of these applications, and if so, the framework presents an approach for engaging digital marketplaces as more than just entities who see their responsibilities terminating as service providers rather than content moderators (Kreiczer-Levy, 2021).

The paper elaborates on three cases that provide conceptual reflections on the topic of digital marketplaces and livestreams affecting our offline world. These cases problematise and demonstrate how livestream witnessing results in either good or bad outcomes. The good and bad cases are thematic of subjects and discourses surrounding Indigenous rights, citizenship, and Brazilian ethno-politics. It compares the good case narratives of Indigenous aligned political activism and disaster relief narrowcasting (targeting specific audiences), with the bad cases. This paper conceptualises one bad example whereby Bolsonaro weaponised Ysani Kalapalo, a conservative Indigenous activist, in a livestream to discredit climate science and the international media. The examples demonstrate how

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Indigenous and far-right activists are increasingly active on Instagram, TikTok, and Kwai, using them to livestream in real-time (Whitson, 2021). Placing these examples in unison, the good/bad binary becomes synthesised as a dialectic, uncovered through the lens of witnessing. This ugly space is understood as the digital marketplaces and the platforms they host, who monopolise and profit from human behaviour (Meyers, 2022). By exploring the digital infrastructure behind the platforms, the actors creating them and the videos they post, the paper shows how video becomes evidential artifact for contextual knowledge construction surrounding the right to a healthy sociopolitical environment. However, only when said videos are holistically contextualised through the web of digital infrastructure that delivers them to us (Hunter, 2019). This is of timely political importance, with the Brazilian Supreme Court Judge Alexandre de Moraes determining that social media applications are responsible for the content that exists on their platforms (Borges, 2025).

Through the analysis of the livestreams, we can track the trajectories for why the ugly space appears. Livestreams have afforded some individuals the ability to film rights violations and hold power to account (Gregory, 2015), but they've simultaneously provided politicians and malicious actors avenues to circumvent journalistic questioning as a 'symbolic accountability mechanism' to those same rights abuses (Kissock, 2020a). This is because it's harder to contextualise and triangulate video dis and misinformation in real-time. Thus, livestreaming environments are ambivalent and can be manipulated to set agendas surrounding rights and dis/misinformation which is easier to achieve with live video. Exploring contestations in these social video environments illustrates how individuals strive to control narratives surrounding rights and information. Herein, we should broaden our conceptualisations of 'video as evidence' through the paradigm of witnessing to scrutinise how digital marketplaces have

enabled political demagogues to create their own livestreaming platforms and propagate messages to audiences in real-time, with little to no scrutiny. Digital marketplaces don't appear to be regulating themselves (Cusumano, Gawer and David B. Yoffie, 2021), hence expanding interpretations of livestream witnessing to investigate them may inform us on how to respond.

Overview of the Witnessing Framework

Today, video and surveillance are ubiquitous (Nassauer and M. Legewie, 2022) and camera phones are omnipresent (Mortensen, 2015), yet not all human rights abuses are caught on film (Aronson et al., 2018). Therefore, the objectivist view of the camera as a single use tool for providing evidence of a rights violation only captures half the picture. Instead, we need to move towards researching the digital environments that go beyond the camera and social media, to see how video becomes an embedded practice for disseminating evidence of wrongdoing. Furthermore, that the videos can create meaning through the examination of the digital infrastructures that host and traffic said videos. Adopting this perspective is to remain vigilant to threat vectors and not overlook ugly market mediators who allow democratic rights to be infringed upon through disinformation spreading.

Here we can turn to the human rights literature on witnessing. Broadly, this scholarship examines evidence of violent event(s) and focuses on the provision of testimony with the normative empathetic objective to right a past wrong for an individual or community as a form of justice (Ristovska, 2016). This is achieved through a legal understanding of testimony in rights-based cases (Fregoso, 2024), yet testimony can come in a multiplicity of media, literary, memory, and oral forms (Felman and Laub, 1992).

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When reinterpreting witnessing for the analysis of social media platforms and digital marketplaces, by proxy we must also reinterpret how we provision testimony to them. Thus, it's novel to place this study within the literature on citizen, media, and distant witnessing (Felman and Laub, 1992; Songtag, 2003; Luc Boltanski, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Allan, 2013; Kozol, 2015; Thorburn, 2017). An often-cited example is Peters' (2001) essay 'Witnessing' that asserted one must be present at a scene to 'bear witness', where there's even a responsibility for the person to be at the scene. Yet, this has been disputed by scholars like Frosh (2009), who asserts that television and the media give audiences a form of 'witness intentionality'. Livestream scholars now suggest that one can be 'co-present' (Gregory, 2013; Hunter, 2019) by reacting to online events in real-time by sharing and commenting on videos.

These are normative postulations for how this framework creates knowledge after an event. Through this 'distanced and mediated witnessing', Reading (2011) postulated that mobile witnessing and narrowcasting after the 7/7 London bombings created reflective space and collective zeitgeist of mobile 'live'd' memory. Since then, Mortensen (2015) argued for an understanding of live-witnessing and video activism focused on collective witnessing rather than singular episodes. This expanded digital witnessing into the inquiry of form rather than content and drew parallels to similar positions of witnessing as an act of asserting one's citizenship (Allan, 2013). This perspective of collective citizen witnessing allows for testimony to conceptually hold digital marketplaces accountable for their political indifference as these marketplaces make the act of modern digital witnessing possible.

However, we can ask, citizen witnessing to what end? Martini (2018b, 2018a) focused on this question surrounding activism and user generated content techniques and tools with the objective of

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informing policymakers. This potentially explains why multiple variants of similar arguments have emerged attempting to reframe witnessing surrounding digital infrastructures such as Connective Witnessing (Mortensen, 2015), Viral Memorial (Papailias, 2016), Data Witnessing (Gray, 2019), and livestream witnessing (Gregory, 2017). Yet, many studies fail to quantify if witness engagement leads to policy change (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2014). One example of why this might be the case comes from Hunter's (2019) critique of Haimson and Tang (2017) analysis of Diamond Reynolds livestream. The stream was of Reynolds boyfriend being murdered by a police officer, where Haimson and Tang placed the stream within their study's catalogue of 'engaging streams'. Hunter argues that even though the stream is 'engaging' it lacks fundamental information, critical for human rights researchers to verify parts of the incident for evidential use. Though Hunter (2019) unpacks the affordances that social media app provides streamers, there's room to examine how the digital marketplaces that host the applications also influence platform affordances and streamer behaviour. These should also be scrutinised from a human rights and political perspective for us to have a civic response.

Witnessing as a Civic Framework to Scrutinise Digital Marketplaces

Investigating livestreaming applications on digital marketplaces is important because streaming is a democratising tool for affirming ones belonging to a community and capturing video as evidence (Lo et al., 2022; Kiskey-Mamede, 2023). Yet, performing evidence of communal belonging is political in nature, and can also exacerbate nationalism and the attempted coups as we have seen in the United States and Brazil. These were fuelled by Trump and Bolsonaro's echo chambers on social media. This kind of communal belonging has further scaffolded the weaponisation of populist victimhood

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(Chouliaraki, 2024), with livestreaming being the chosen method (Piauí, 2022). On the other side of the communal coin pertaining to the cases discussed below (Indigenous activists and Politian's not aligned to Bolsonaro), there's a growing community of connected Indigenous activists livestreaming about environmental rights (Salazar, 2004; Kissock, 2020c, 2020b). Both cases are conceptualised by Holston (2008) as Insurgent Citizenships whereby actors expand and erode democracy through their courses of civic action.

Despite the Covid-19 Pandemic, since 2019 there's been a rise in demonstrations and protest movements driven by the trend of curtailing democratic rights (BBC, 2019; Hui, 2019; Frey, 2020; Osborne, 2020). Whether it's streams of the Arab Spring (Higgins, 2021) or the CUTV Quebec University fee demonstrations (Thorburn, 2014), events (not just episodes) like these laid the foundations for attempting to disseminate information to distant witnesses with the goal of fostering solidarity in the right to assert one's citizenship. Though this assertion could have been either for or against a political actor or state policy, it's rarely been a direct confrontation against the internet companies facilitating the backbone of our data and livestreams. Nevertheless, livestreams provided a conduit through which individuals could exercise their rights to protest, claim ownership of spaces, and actively participate in political processes.

In view of this, there are dialectical cycles within these social movements (Gogol, 2016). In this paper it's synthesised as the ugly space in the form of the digital marketplace where we downloaded the social media applications from. Today, we've democratised barriers for entry concerning the creation of livestream applications and both activists and populist politicians are taking advantage of this. Democratisation and citizenship of this kind is described by Holston (P. 3, 2008) as:

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“The worldwide insurgence of democratic citizenship in recent decades has disrupted established formulas of rule and privilege in the most diverse societies. The result is the entanglement with democracy and its counters, in which new citizens arise to expand democratic citizenship and new forms of violence and exclusions simultaneously erode it.”

A subsequent revision of this elastic dialectic has been updated by Ochigame and Holston (2016) to investigate how actors on social media use algorithmic manipulation to filter what their audiences bear witness to online. Ten years on this shouldn't come as a shock, but their case is empirically significant because it explains the epistemological wedge driven between Brazilian audiences sympathetic to farmers and those to the Guarani and Kaiowá Indigenous communities involved in land disputes. As this is sadly still the case between these two groups, how can we bear witness to the elasticity of democracy and its counters? Perhaps, we need to focus on the agents and institutions profiting from this elasticity, some of which are digital marketplaces, to perceive a holistic picture of the offline violence. Approaching social media through the perspective of witnessing and citizenship helps uncover cases that expand and contract this democratic elasticity through amplifying what, who, and how we witness online content. This is akin to what Holston (2008) terms Insurgent Citizenship. However, he reminds us that the analysis of this concept isn't normative, moral, or democratic, but entangled with contradictions and must be “evaluated on a case-by-case basis” (p.34, 2009). So, to understand the entanglements we must first bear witness to the online sites that host the applications whose content scaffolds these insurgencies. Yet, how can we bear witness to these marketplaces and provision testimony as scrutiny?

Methods: First Steps for Bearing Witness

Livestreaming is one way to contextualise how these markets operate. However, they pose a methodological problem because they're difficult to archive for the purposes of research and thus examine their political affordances and/or constraints that lead to offline violence. Therefore, it was decided for this study to use the traditional method of video data analysis (VDA) that would be conducted with pre-recorded videos of livestreams, which had already been recorded and were thus available on social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube). As Ropers-Huilman (1990) would argue, metaphorically capturing data as a form of evidence is akin to the practice of witnessing. Hence, rundown analysis scripts were made of the livestreams and the content of the events which occurred within them to explain the micro to macro movement of situational dynamics within each stream based on Nassauer and M. Legewie, 2022 VDA guidelines. Through discourse and the interaction analysis between Bolsonaro and conservative Indigenous activist Ysani Kalapalo, it was possible to demonstrate Bolsonaro's broad policy position (or lack thereof) surrounding the Amazon Rainforest fires and why he decided to use livestreaming as his tool of choice. This is because during each livestream it's difficult for audiences to fact-check and respond in real-time. Hence researchers must find ways to capture, witness, reflect, triangulate and provision research as a form of testimony to politicians on livestreams.

VDA was also used on the good example of Indigenous activist YNK's livestream to discuss the flooding in her territory. However, this application of VDA was instead used to investigate the movement from macro to micro situational dynamics when discussing the *Brasileiros Pelo Brasil* program as a positive aspect of the stream. For the example of then ex-president, and now President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's speech at the ATL Indigenous Free Land Camp demonstration in 2022, this was analysed via

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VDA and triangulated with policy analysis sources Lula discussed. All the corresponding data in the form of news reports, policy documents, and secondary journal articles were then correlated to highlight the intricacies between the two epistemological positions.

For the second stage of the methodology, Brock's (2016) critical technical discourse analysis (CTDA) was applied to the ugly case to investigate the platform affordances of Bolsonaro.TV and what the application could accomplish in reference to amplifying Bolsonaro's misinformation campaign (Costa, 2020). CTDA was an informative method to action pertaining to the ugly case as it's conceptually flexible but simultaneously investigates both the visual and material interconnected digital designs whilst continuously incorporating user interactions. From here, conclusions were extrapolated surrounding how these platforms produce social meanings. By virtue of conducting CTDA analysis on the policy and discourse of the Bolsonaro.TV website, it was possible to juxtapose the VDA of the livestreams from Lula, YNK, Bolsonaro, with the policies of Google and Apple's digital marketplaces. This contextualisation between datapoints is like Gray's (2019) conception of data witnessing, whereby cross-correlations of datapoints supplement what Peter's (2001) would term as the veracity gap in how witnessing can construct knowledges based on the truth in the information presented to an observer. The methodological choice for implementing VDA coupled with CTDA informed how to witness the creation of an ugly digital space made up of questionable social media platforms hosted on digital marketplaces that appear to be indifferent to their applications form and content. This amalgamation of methods can be seen as an attempt to bear witness, not to the content, but to the form where the site of distant digital witnessing takes place.

The Good: A Case for Indigenous Activism

Livestreaming has been successfully employed to advance social justice objectives within Indigenous communities (Kummels, 2023). It's been instrumental in transmitting their rights claims to their ancestral land and concerns about the land's environmental preservation. This multifaceted utility underscores the exigency of revitalising the exploration of livestreaming within the broader spectrum of social justice activism. One notable example of this was in the United States with Indigenous communities demanding their right to a healthy environment. The Standing Rock Sioux community during the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 livestreamed their fight for environmental rights and used distant witnesses to geotag themselves at the protest on Facebook to confuse the authorities (Thomas, 2016). Gregory (2013) would posit that this case represents his idea of the audience being 'co-present' to the events being witnessed and thus, as Frosh would say, has given them a form of witness intentionality to act upon what they're seeing, be it through a digitally mediated medium. This same normative lesson could be taken from another livestream case which occurred in Brazil during the 2022 Presidential elections involving Indigenous ethno-politics. In turn, these examples highlight the importances of discussing video as evidence and how livestreaming can be understood when thinking about citizenship and witnessing be it physical, digital, near or far.

To provide some brief historical context to the following case, we need to understand that Indigenous politics through real-time media and video representation commenced in the 1980s when the Kayapó Indigenous population filmed human rights violations taking place with illegal mining and land invasions (Pace, 2018). The filming was helped by anthropologists such as Terrence Turner and projects like Video in the Villages (Carelli, 2023) along with other programs like Survival International working with

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the Yanomami. This came to scaffold the Pan-Indigenism movement that spread across the world as Indigenous activists realised the importance of video for achieving justice to human rights violations committed against them and their territories (Ramos, 1998). Video became an important tool in holding politicians and companies accountable for the socio-economic roles they played in these scenarios. Hence, scholars like Ristovska (2016) would argue that this form of witnessing should always be the normative objective of conducting video activism. Today with the ubiquity of video it's now a case that political actors can also use this tool to speak back to these populations and discuss the environments of which they live and the human rights they're owed (Mortensen, 2015).

Stocked in mind, the case in question was an event that occurred at the 2022 ATL land camp, the largest Indigenous demonstration and gathering held annually in Brasília. Approximately 7,000 Indigenous demonstrators from across the country gathered to protest Bill PL191 by using livestreaming. This proposed legislation threatens up to 43 Indigenous groups across 25 demarcated territories and potentially might impact isolated groups (Villén-Pérez et al., 2021). The urgency of the 2022 demonstration was heightened by the Brazilian Congress's fast-tracking of the bill, citing the potentiality of fertilizer supply shortages due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Boadle, 2022), even though it's unconstitutional according to the 1988 constitution, Article 231 (Art. 231 da Constituição Federal de 88, 1988; Langlois, 2022).

Since 2008, there's been a troubling trend of deforestation, which reached record levels in 2022, leading to scientists warning that the Amazon is near a tipping point (Lovejoy and Nobre, 2018). Although deforestation rates in the Amazon declined in 2023, dangerous legislative proposals like PL490, PL2903, and PL2159 continue to float around or have been voted in by Brazil's Congress. These

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laws might prove to be disastrous for Indigenous populations, as they require evidence of their land occupation prior to the 1988 constitution being enacted, disregarding the Indigenous populations' mass displacement throughout Brazil's history (Brown, 2023). In the backdrop of these legislative perils, research by Global Witness (2022) reported an increase in assassinations of land defenders and territorial invasions under Bolsonaro's administration (Roy, 2022). This prompted the Articulation for Indigenous Peoples to bring a genocide case against Bolsonaro to the ICC (Freeman and Vazquez Llorente, 2021).

On April 12th, the final day of the 2022 ATL Land Camp these compounding existential threats to Brazil's Indigenous population culminated in prompting the now current President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to address the crowd. He promised epistemic justice through reparations to the Indigenous population for the damages caused by Bolsonaro's government, including the creation of a new Indigenous Ministry. Lula's speech was livestreamed across multiple Indigenous social media channels and later covered by journalists from *Folha de São Paulo* and Reuters (Boadle, 2022). This is what Mortensen (2015) terms as connective witnessing whereby this case combines political participation and connective action to engage other sources that can provide further triangulation and testimony of Lula's speech. This event highlights the communicative power of Indigenous livestreaming in disseminating political messages and journalists' role in witnessing and providing testimony through their articles.

Though when conducting ethnographic fieldwork on ground in 2023, it was possible to witness a caveat that journalists across the ATL site were also watching the livestream of Lula's 2023 speech due to the press tent being positioned far from the stage. This, echo's Hunter's critical argument about

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scholarly narratives on livestreaming mirroring social media executives' conceptions of the practice bringing us closer together:

Where mobilizing resilient theories attached to existing technologies serves to confirm the story social media producers tell about the services they provide, the effort to theorize live streaming as a technology for examining – rather than eliminating – distance and separation might be uniquely poised to interrogate or even intervene into that ubiquitous narrative of beneficent empowerment and connection. (2019, p.293)

Though the livestreams brought journalists a better picture of the action they couldn't see, it doesn't eliminate their distance from Lula's speech, instead it amplifies their geographical distance and mediates their physical positionality to an event. We will return to the argument later. Herein, it's possible to shift focus to the second livestream we can place in our broad positive 'good' camp.

The second case involves a livestream of Indigenous artist and activist YHK who filmed her local food distribution program 'SOS Povo Huni Kuin' on Instagram. The livestream highlighted Bolsonaro's failure to provide adequate services in the state of Acre during the Covid-19 pandemic and displayed evidence of his defunding of government agencies like FUNAI (Indigenous affairs) and IBAMA (environmental enforcement agency) and emphasised YHK's demand for the right to a healthy environment. Previously, the Huni Kuin experienced flooding making it difficult to receive outside services (Pontes, 2022), and YHK showed a friend's house almost completely submerged by floodwater. In the video she asked for financial donations, care packages (cestas básicas), and for their voices to be heard by the outside world (Flavia Costa Netto, 2022). Platforms like Instagram and Kwai in Brazil provide evidence that some Indigenous voices are being heard. One example is Indigenous streamer Da Alieda who has over 400,000 followers on Kwai, and YHK's stream received 14,000 views, despite being

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intended as a local community narrowcast (Kissock-Mamede, 2023).

However, the method of synchronic distant witnessing can lead to challenges if livestreamed video and audio quality drops. For instance, during YHK's livestream, video disruptions caused a banner advertising the Fundação Brasileiros Pelo Brasil Program to be missed. This program, run by the Brazilian Government's Bank of Brasil, distributed food and goods to rural Brazilians (Veloso Ferreira, 2022). Initially, only the 'SOS Povo Huni Kuin' charity was mentioned, leading to the assumption that the Huni Kuin were asserting their citizenship right through communal action to highlight Bolsonaro's systematic defunding of government agencies. However, later observing the Fundação sign in the on-demand video complicated this position. This raises questions about the practice of livestream witnessing and how to accurately interpret information. Again, mirroring Peter's (2001) veracity gap surrounding memory and 'truthfulness' of witness testimony. Although internet connectivity is improving, livestreams are prone to fragment crucial information, which is problematic for documenting events like land invasions or war crimes, as seen in Ukraine on TikTok (Murgia, 2022).

In Today's 'era of witnessing' (Wieviorka, 2006) this veracity gap Peters (2001) referred to is out of the second order witnesses' control. This is because of the modern and highly mediated witnessing environment that some would argue has entered the realm of non-human witnessing (Richardson, 2024) or algorithmic witnessing (McPherson, 2022). It's no longer the case that distant researchers (as witnesses) can analyse Haimson and Tang's (2017) 'engaging streams' and state that they lack rights-based contextual information. Rather the information in the frame is now, more often than not, hidden from view and exists beyond the livestream. So, what if political actors recognise and manipulate

this technological pothole? What if they purposely create livestreams to spin a narrative and disrupt the normative parameters of evidence gathering and the flow of information?

The Bad: Bolsonaro and Anti-Indigenous Activism

To discuss the ‘bad’ cases, we turn to the livestreams Bolsonaro produced every Thursday whilst in office. The specific livestream analysed shows how streaming can be used to decimate counter narratives surrounding the right to a healthy sociopolitical environment. The video was made on the 26th of September 2019, at the height of the Amazon fires dominating the national and international news cycle before the Covid-19 pandemic replaced it (Zuquim et al., 2021). Bolsonaro broadcast the video on Facebook and YouTube because, at the time, those platforms had the largest share of his audience. Figures from 2025 show that most Brazilians receive their news from videos on social media, 64% of respondents claiming they receive their news from YouTube (Reuters, 2025), adding to the relevant to re-examine these kinds of cases.

The livestream featured his sign language interpreter and Indigenous conservative activist Ysani Kalapalo. Ysani is an outlier within the Indigenous community peddling Bolsonaro’s libertarian development narrative in the video (Bolsonaro and Kalapalo, 2019). She became known in the press after she travelled with Bolsonaro to the United Nations, where the former president downplayed the effects of the fires in his speech (Philips, 2019). When Ysani appeared in the video she had 744k followers on YouTube, 138k on Instagram, 1.3k followers on Facebook, and 3k followers on Twitter (Now X). Though Thompson (2013) would hold that there’s a ‘fallacy of internalism’ in interpreting how

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audiences' respond to and understanding the media, it still shows Ysani's content is resonating with a wide public. Thus, mirroring Holston's (2008) entanglement of insurgent citizenships both expanding and eroding democracy. In this way, we might conceptualise Ysani's reach and anti-democratic sentiment, as not forming an 'alignment of witnesses' (Feldman and Laub, 1993) understood as connecting first and second order witnesses (Mortensen, 2015), but as an 'alignment of spectators'. If we take the practice of witnessing as tied with reflection then we can see spectatorship and reaction as the antithesis (Kissock-Mamede, 2025), Ysani's discourse sat on the side of reaction rather than reflection. Hence, the speculation about the audience as an alignment of spectators.

What these spectators saw within the first 20 seconds of the livestream, was Bolsonaro asking Ysani to introduce herself. She does so in the Indigenous language Carib and Bolsonaro asks his interpreter, 'did you understand?', in which she responds 'no'. Prompting him to gloat saying that he understood, but what probably happened was that he understood her name in Carib and the interpreter just responded 'no' because she didn't know how to translate it to sign language. Bolsonaro then perpetuates the myth of Brazil being a racial democracy by condescendingly tapping both women on the head and asserting that they're both 'Brazilian' women. He prompts Ysani to say that Brazil's Indigenous people want 'progress'. Ysani defines 'progress' as 'the country' moving forward. It's this idea of progress moving 'forward' that runs counter to some Indigenous epistemologies where, conceptually, time can be seen as circular rather than linear (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022). When Ysani states 'the country' (Brazil), this again runs counter to some discourse disseminated by Indigenous activists, where some assert that their communities and culture existed before Brazil as a nation, which some use to justify autonomous land and environmental management models.

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Indigenous peoples' reason for fighting for autonomous territorial and environmental manageable models is justified when witnessing the next topic in the video. Bolsonaro says that he spoke to Donald Trump about the 'richness of Indigenous lands', presumably for acquiring investments for extractive purposes. Prompting Ysani to argue that 'white people don't understand 21st century Indigenous communities. However, Bolsonaro wasn't interested, he was concerned in something happening behind the camera. Once he catches up, he interjects on Ysani's behalf stating that her parents were Indigenous, but she was brought up in 'white culture' and all she wants to do is advance technology and healthcare. Asserting that 'white culture' is the 'best' way to achieve this.

Other than attacking International NGOs, Leonardo DiCaprio and foreign governments, the rest of the broadcast centres around the Amazon rainforest being Brazil's biggest asset and liability. Ysani and Bolsonaro, contradict earlier points about Trump and investments, stating that '*gringos*' seek to exploit the Brazilian Amazon, which is an age-old national security troupe since the military dictatorship in Brazil (Ramos, 1998; Miki, 2018). They reminded their audience how European countries destroyed their forests and were in no place to critique Brazil's lack of forestry management, as Amazon fires raged on. This was coupled with Ysani's false claims that Indigenous people start fires when they burn the forest to plant food and then it's just easier to blame 'white people', at which point Bolsonaro laughs. It's this kind of case Frosh and Pinchevski (p. 37, 2008) cautioned us to concerning how witnessing has "an epistemological gap [...] fraught with difficulty" and how "Witnessing presupposes a discrepancy between the ignorance of one person and the knowledge of another". This is expanded on by Kisson-Mamede (2025) concerning how the epistemological rift in witnessing is between that of the witness who reflects becomes empathetic but uncomfortable in their nuanced knowledges and the

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spectator who reactions and structures further violence by not wishing to be uncomfortable in their worldview. Though Bolsonaro has a point about Eurocentric hypocrisy surrounding their environmental discourse, the rift is seen when he states that famous Indigenous activist Raoni couldn't speak for every Indigenous person. However, if like Ysani you agree with Bolsonaro, presumably you can indeed speak for every Indigenous person. Bolsonaro doesn't address this uncomfortable truth.

Bolsonaro formulated his argument by reading out newspaper headlines thematic of him being aggressive and isolated on the world stage and then portrayed himself as the victim. He adopted this victim livestream strategy to circumvent journalistic questioning about his rights violations whilst speaking to his core supporters. It's been shown that populist and demagogue discourse will tactically frame themselves as the victim (Johnson, 2017), so by this 'if' logic they could be the ones to 'bear witness'. This allowed Bolsonaro to relinquish any empathetic discourse towards the minority groups he's talking about within the context of the stream. Moreover, the same logic allows his supporters in the comments to perpetuate further violence, because they don't need to critically reflect upon his statements if they're also allowed to see themselves as 'victims' of the international media, foreign governments, or Leonardo DeCaprio. This is thematic of witnessing being a practice that's both participatory and reflexive (Mortnesen, 2015). Though his supporters are participating at a mediated distance, their comments didn't display timely reflexivity which scholars would argue requires a level of 'proper distance', in a cognitive rather than geographical sense (Silverstone, 2004).

Bolsonaro terminated the livestream by asking Ysani for some final thoughts, to which she responded by saying she likes people who speak the 'truth'. Therefore, it's this 'abstract truth' that Ysani's and Bolsonaro's spectators are disseminating on other platforms in real-time (Kissock, 2020a).

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Herein, policymakers appear to be tied up in knots when policing real-time content and technologies. However, technology companies have long implemented ‘realtimeness’ into their algorithmic sorting for the purposes of advertising (Lupinacci, 2022) but have yet to emulate this for livestream factchecking. This is of the uttermost importance considering the far-right mass shooting attacks that have been livestreamed in Germany, New Zealand, and the United States in previous years (Cuthbertson, 2019; Nassauer and M. Legewie, 2022). Lest we forget, “Online real-time witnessing pushes users to demand agency” (Martini, p. 45, 2018) but, as we see in the current online moderation debate in Brazil, there’s a goldilocks zone, where individual rights are not infringed upon, and the delicate balance isn’t disturbed (Newman, Ross Arguedas, Robertson, Kleis Nielsen, & Fletcher, 2025). If so, future legal precedent can be set, and conservatives may reactively perform a version of victimhood due to any miscalculations surrounding policies (Bebout, 2019). If this should present itself, before long, demagogues like Bolsonaro decide to create their own applications making the digital media environment ugly. So how should we bear witness to this ugly digital space?

The Ugly: Discussing the Messy Digital Scaffolding

Digital marketplaces don’t know how to police individuals creating their own streaming apps, enter Bolsonaro.TV. The app was created in February 2021 to drive traffic directly to Bolsonaro’s supporters and potentially mine information from them. The creator appeared to be associated with Bolsonaro’s son Carlos (who’s accused of running his father’s social media accounts as a fake news operation). When the creator made the app, he was Carlos’s lawyer and ran a firearms company from

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their home address. Furthermore, the application's laissez-faire approach to user data (Bolsonaro.TV, 2022) violated Brazilian General Data Protection Law terms. However, it appears that Google and Apple's digital marketplaces will only investigate cases where a 'major' or 'serious' violation has occurred (Ribeiro, 2022). Bolsonaro.tv also seemingly circumvented the Horário Eleitoral legislation in Brazil that sets out how much a political candidate can campaign and how much airtime they can use for the funds in their campaign (Jornalismo TV Cultura, 2022). However, this law surrounding live streaming hasn't been updated since 2010 (Gov.br, 2010), with only nominal amendments in 2013 (Gov.br, 1997), which is outdated when thinking of the ubiquity of video and disinformation.

The Brazilian PDT political party flagged the application to the supreme court to investigate, considering it could be used to disseminate disinformation within an echo chamber (PDT, 2022). Though it's a large silo, within the year it had over 100 thousand downloads (Ribeiro, 2022). We can understand these streams as witnessing through a type of mediated 'narrow' or 'brand' casting rather than 'broad'casting. Previously, Martini (2018) argued a similar point that platforms like YouTube, hold the keys to 'regimes of visibility' because they control the parameters concerning the viewer experiences on their platforms, and this is what Bolsonaro.TV wished to replicate. Furthermore, social media narrowcasting has been linked to the fragmentation and narrativisation of memory in countries experiencing contested political contexts (Khlevnyuk, 2019).

The application targeted Bolsonaro supporters, seen through the multitude of comments on Google's Play store reviews section written by his fans. On the other side of the coin, livestream narrowcasting applications for documenting human rights abuses may also fall into this ugly category, if placed in front of individuals with a predisposition for seeking out violent content. However,

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Bolsonaro.TV functioned as a downstream CDN or RSS feed, and to quote from the Bolsonaro.TV website “interact with viewers in real time”. Thus, creating an ugly paradigm because there’s limited room for witness reflection. In short, the governance mechanisms of these platforms can only react as spectatorship, and the political stance is decided by proxy and virtue of an anti-democratic actor like Bolsonaro. The Brazilian magazine (Piauí, 2022) exposed this ugly space by examining 181 livestreams where Bolsonaro sowed doubt about the legitimacy of Brazilian voting machines to undermine democracy. As Holston (2008) observes, democracy and citizenship both expand and erode simultaneously.

As witnessing is about contextualisation towards the creation of knowledges (Ropers-Huilman, 1999), we can investigate how these livestreams create meanings and anti-knowledges that manifest in offline everyday politics. Political deputies such as Nikolas Ferreira, who was the most voted for politician in 2023, capitalised on this ‘ugly’ socio-digital environment. Ferreira famously livestreamed his entire campaign on TikTok and built up his followers much like another deputy from the same Brazilian state of Minas Gerais Célia Xakriabá. Xakriabá, an Indigenous federal deputy, also livestreamed her campaign across TikTok and Instagram and converted her online followers into real world voters. Semiotically the state of Minas Gerais can be imagined as the geo-demographical physical embodiment of the ‘ugly’ digital marketplaces and networks for us to bear witness to. This example emprises the dialectical postulation that space is created by democratic actors and at the same time others seek to capitalise upon these agents and close the newly opened space (Holston, 2008).

Since taking office, Ferreira has brought about controversy regarding trans-gender and Indigenous rights by speaking out against proposals for protecting those rights, which is consistent with

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his livestreams during September and October 2022 during his political campaign. Previously, he was fined thirty thousand Brazilian Reais by a congressional committee for peddling disinformation about Lula's government diverting funds from hospitals in a video he posted online. This is at least a step in the correct direction in terms of video evidence providing contextual testimony to rights abuses, though in this scenario it was disinformation, and the jury found that Ferreira's remarks went beyond his limits of freedom of speech (Rocha, 2023). However, the damage was done, and it's troubling to consider he has over 17 million followers on Meta alone (Reuters, 2025). Herein the Brazilian Supreme court is attempting to implement stringent policies on 'free speech', but is focusing on the social media platforms rather than the digital marketplaces that host them.

Unfortunately, it's common for populist politicians and bad actors' in Latin America to create or repurpose broadcast networks to speak directly to followers to influence offline behaviour, for example Hugo Chavez's tv show *Alo Presidente* (Stoneman, 2008), and Bolsonaro's livestreams (Kissock, 2020a). Now, populist political candidates create their own streaming applications or have others create them on their behalf. This was the case with Bolsonaro.TV and appears to be the case for Tarcísio de Freitas, the 2026 right wing presidential candidate who has an app made by a company called M.B.M Computers. This company also has applications on the Google Play Store dedicated to evangelical priests (M.B.M Computers, 2025). Therefore, if Frosh and Pitcheshivei (p.152, 2008) conceptualise witnessing as controlling narratives of trauma or vindication towards a 'perceived' victim, populist's can control and spin these same narratives for their own politicisation. In short, these applications allow populists to directly control the narrative and the form for how the content is delivered to users and is thus witnessed.

A familiar example is Donald Trump's Truth Social app that was eventually banned from the Play store and sports multiple conspiracy theorists (Clayton, 2022). In response to the ban, Trump framed himself as the victim. There are also social media applications like BitChute and Odysee that host far right extremists hiding behind the facade of supporting real-time freedom of speech. Another issue is Apple and Google dodging blame, claiming they're better understood along the lines of internet service providers rather than content moderators, which seems to be a shared opinion with the wider business sector (Helou, 2022). This is how Rumble stayed on these marketplaces because it moderates itself just enough to fly under the radar, whilst attracting racists and conspiracy theorists. This speaks back to Hunter's (2019) caution of whether social media executives want to 'bring us closer together', when actors like Trump are now also the social media executives with their populism wishing to push us apart. Again, analogous to the democratic elasticity reading of Holston (2008), and why it's ill-advised to normatively understand them as the victims they believe themselves to be.

On the positive side, Indigenous applications also exist but must compete in this cluttered ugly space. Instead, this research found that the discourse amongst the creators', centres around whether data should be open to document and learn about Indigenous culture and environmental crimes, or closed because of data colonialism and bad actors. This led to frameworks like GIDA's CARE Principles for Indigenous data governance (Mayoral Banas, 2022). However, it's still an ugly environment which could potentially lead to infighting surrounding the openness of data. Is it a force for good that everyone can have data and like the Indigenous epistemologies of the Quechua and Yanomami that knowledge is sharing (Kopenawa and Albert, 2013; Navarro, 2024), or is the data the handmaiden of modern neo-colonialism that can be leveraged against those who have created the CARE program as one

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example? When we contextualise bearing witness on social media in real-time, the conversation trends around Blackbox algorithms, and leaves out the responsibilities of digital marketplaces, social sharing APIs, and actor operations. Furthermore, we miss how this influences what's witnessed and create violent synchronic digital environments. Therefore, instead of us occupying the onto-epistemological position of the witness, we instead enter that of the spectator, because it doesn't require any form of testimony as a knowledge exchange, just a gaze at the symbolic violences that taking place online that enter our physical space (Kissock-Mamede, 2025).

It's important to understand the idea of seeing these spaces through the paradigm of bearing witness because simply put, environmental violations in Brazil are fuelled by political rhetoric cascading from the top office. When people associated with that office and government more broadly sell real-time applications on digital marketplaces, it creates a tense environment where violent environmental crimes can occur. These applications should be treated as evidence to such crimes, much like the Alex Jones/Sandy hook school shooting case in the United States, because witnessing online environments affects our behaviour offline. We know that individualistic affordance coupled with technology creates both good and bad actors, but sometimes we forget to scrutinise the digital marketplaces that sustain the ugliness by allowing counter-democratic behaviour to proliferate. We should also remember that the synchronicity of livestreaming is problematic as it leaves little room for a witness to reflect, which is arguably what witnessing should be if we wish to provide testimony and strive towards a healthy social environment. Our best defence for the alienating ugly space is to bear witness to it by recognising, through triangulations and critical examination of its digital power structure, that we can strike a balance between the good and the bad cases.

Conclusion

This paper sets out that we need to bear witness (through the witnessing framework) to the form of the content where digital witnessing happens. Furthermore, it establishes that if we don't, the form mutates into an 'ugly' space such as Bolsonaro.TV. The article examined how Jair Bolsonaro, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and Indigenous activists in Brazil used political livestreaming to discuss Indigenous rights and the environment. It argued that there are good and bad examples of political livestream affordances that become synthesised in an ugly digital environment, which goes beyond social media platforms to encompass the applications and digital marketplaces that host them. Furthermore, the article tracked how witnessing online can influence behaviours offline, that subsequently expand and shrink democracy and citizenship in an elastic fashion. It argued that if we don't hold actors in the ugly space equally accountable for hosting applications that can maliciously harm democratic society, we are susceptible to harm ourselves by letting the democratic elasticity stretch in an anti-democratic direction. Collective witnessing should remind us that we are the market and collectively can affect which positives should be witnessed.

This considered, it should be the responsibility of governments and digital marketplaces to set guardrails and self-regulate to disincentivise malicious actors from creating applications like Bolsonaro.TV. Digital marketplaces must implement due diligence by understanding their function in the chain of mal use concerning populist mis and disinformation campaigns. Yet, there's limited cross-pollination between the human rights witnessing scholarship and the literature on video and

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populism which opens an avenue for future research. As the cases analysed in this paper show, there's enough of a witnessing framework concerning livestreams that can inform our understandings of how populist actors proliferate on these platforms, create apps, and how digital marketplaces are indifferent to their behaviour. Although it's difficult for digital marketplaces to moderate what's witnessed on the applications they host, especially if the content is live and ephemeral, what this paper highlighted is that they aren't actually policing themselves. Unfortunately, it falls to us as citizens to bear witness to their inaction and lobby through the means of our testimony to hold them accountable.

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