

‘Democracy on the line’: Brazil’s election and the Bolsonaro disinformation ecosystem | Columbia Journalism Review

By Jem Bartholomew

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Brazilians will return to voting booths on October 30 to decide a heated presidential race, with polls showing that the right-wing president, Jair Bolsonaro, who has directed the country’s slide toward authoritarianism over his four-year tenure, is expected to be voted out.

The first round of voting, on October 2, saw neither presidential candidate—incumbent Bolsonaro or left-wing challenger Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil’s president from 2003 to 2010—reach 50 percent of the vote.

Patrícia Campos Mello, a reporter-at-large and columnist at *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper and Tow research fellow, has had a front-row seat for Brazil’s tumultuous past four years.

Her reporting on WhatsApp, stretching back to 2014, revealed in 2018 that Bolsonaro was benefiting from the illegal exploitation of mass messaging to promote disinformation to voters, with WhatsApp in 2019 admitting to irregular use of its platform.

Campos Mello’s investigative reporting made her the target of direct attacks from Bolsonaro, who fabricated sexist allegations that she “tried to seduce” sources to aid her reporting, with misogyny being a key theme in the president’s persistent attacks on journalists. Campos Mello sued Bolsonaro and was awarded \$3,800 in compensation earlier this year.

Having focused most recently on disinformation and covid in Brazil, Campos Mello has reported from fifty countries, covering wars in Syria and Afghanistan, Ebola in Sierra Leone, and the 9/11 attacks in New York. Her work has won a slew of awards, including the 2019 International Press Freedom Award from the

Committee to Protect Journalists. Campos Mello's reporting, at its best, is like an arrow flying steady and true to puncture the false, inflated narratives of the powerful.

I spoke to Campos Mello via video from her bustling newsroom in São Paulo, three days after Brazil's first day of voting. We talked about democracy, disinformation, electronic voting machines, and coping with relentless attacks. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

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