

General Elections 2024

Amplification of political speech and
disinformation during the March
2024 Portuguese general election

Executive summary and main findings



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Project co-funded by the European Commission: call DIGITAL-2023-DEPLOY-04,
European Digital Media observatory (EDMO) - National and multinational hubs
Project: **IBERIFIER Plus - 101158511**





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Political Parties

PS – Partido Socialista (Socialist Party)¹: Center-left political party currently led by Pedro Nuno Santos. Member of the group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament.

PSD Partido Social Democrata (Social Democratic Party): Center-right political party currently led by Luís Montenegro. Member of the EPP - European People's Party group in the European Parliament.

AD – Aliança Democrática (Democratic Alliance): Political coalition comprising PSD, CDS and the Monarchist People's Party that ran in the March 2024 legislative elections under the leadership of PSD and Luís Montenegro. Both PSD and CDS are members of the EPP – European People's Party group in the European Parliament

BE - Bloco de Esquerda (Left Block): Socialist left-wing political party currently led by Mariana Mortágua. Former member of The Left Group in the European Parliament. Founder and member of the European Left Alliance for the People and the Planet

PCP – Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party): Communist political party currently led by Paulo Raimundo. Member of The Left Group in the European Parliament.

Chega (Enough): Conservative and populist right-wing political party currently led by André Ventura. Member of the Patriots for Europe Group in the European Parliament.

IL - Iniciativa Liberal (Liberal Initiative): Liberal right-wing political party currently led by Rui Rocha. Member of the Renew Europe Group in the European Parliament.

PAN – Pessoas-Animais-Natureza (People Animals Nature): Ecological political party currently led by Inês Sousa Real. Member of the The Greens / EFA Group in the European Parliament.

L - Livre (Free): Ecological left-wing political party currently led by Rui Tavares. Member of the The Greens / EFA Group in the European Parliament.

¹ The English naming for the parties found in parenthesis is a direct translation of the Portuguese name for reader convenience. The terms in both languages may differ and meaning and / or political significance.

ADN – Alternativa Democrática Nacional (National Democratic Alternative): Conservative and populist right-wing political party, with no representation in parliament, currently led by Bruno Fialho. Not part of any group represented in the European Parliament.

Portuguese and International Politicians

Pedro Nuno Santos: political leader of the Socialist Party

Luís Montenegro: political leader of the Social Democratic Party who ran for AD in the 2024 legislative elections

André Ventura: political leader of Chega

Rui Rocha: political leader of Iniciativa Liberal

Mariana Mortágua: political leader of Bloco de Esquerda

Paulo Raimundo: political leader of the PCP

Inês Sousa Real: political leader of PAN

Rui Tavares: political leader of Livre

Pedro dos Santos Frazão: Vice President of the Chega party

Alexandra Reis Moreira: politician and member of the PAN party

Lula da Silva: current president of Brazil with a left-wing political stance

Jair Bolsonaro: former president of Brazil with a conservative and populist right-wing political stance

Eduardo Bolsonaro: Son of Jair Bolsonaro and Brazilian politician and federal deputy in Brazil for the Liberal Party.

Carla Zambelli: Brazilian politician and federal deputy in Brazil for the Liberal Party

Media Personalities

Diogo Faro: Portuguese comedian and presenter with a strong political left-wing stance

Camilo Lourenço: commentator on the television channel CMTV with a right-wing political stance

Fernanda Câncio: Portuguese journalist for the daily newspaper Diário de Notícias

Ana Gomes: political commentator on the SIC Notícias television channel with a Socialist Party affiliation.

Guilherme Geirinhas: Portuguese comedian with no evident political connotations or stances

Daniel Oliveira: Portuguese presenter and programming director for the SIC television channel with no obvious political connotations or stances

Sérgio Tavares: Portuguese content creator with strong political connotations and stances towards the Portuguese and Brazilian conservative right wing

TV and YouTube Shows

Alta Definição: intimate interview program on the SIC television channel presented by Daniel Oliveira

Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha: late night show airing every Sunday on the SIC channel presented by comedian Ricardo Araújo Pereira

Dois às Dez: daily morning show on the TVI channel

Bom Partido: humorous interview program on YouTube by Guilherme Geirinhas

Media

CNN Portugal: Portuguese news television channel under the CNN brand

SIC: Portuguese generalist television channel belonging to the Impresa group

Expresso: Portuguese weekly newspaper belonging to the Impresa group

Polígrafo: independent Portuguese fact-checker

Folha Nacional: Portuguese media outlet belonging to the Chega party

Comunidade Cultura e Arte: Portuguese online magazine focusing on cultural and artistic news

Other

Total interactions: sum of metrics referring to "likes"/reactions, comments and, where applicable, shares of a given publication or set of publications.

OSINT - Open-Source Intelligence: a set of tools and methodology to extract and analyze information on open-source platforms

Instituto Paraná Pesquisas: Brazilian market and opinion research company

ERC - Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social: portuguese media regulator

Famalicão: city in the north of Portugal

PSP - Polícia de Segurança Pública: Portuguese police force.

Executive summary

Executive Summary

The legislative elections in Portugal on 10 March took place within a very specific political context. They resulted from the unexpected resignation of a government with an absolute majority due to judicial investigations into corruption and influence peddling. Also, they took place amid a trend towards the growth of right-wing and far-right parties, which would be reflected in the final results.²

As far as the presence of parties and candidates on social media is concerned, the time was also ripe for expectation, given the trends detected of a decrease in the use of Facebook, traditionally the most relevant social network for political content in Portugal, and an increase in the use of other platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok.

In this context, MediaLab CIES Iscte and the Lusa news agency established a protocol to monitor and analyse the legislative elections on a weekly basis, between 1 February and 6 March, by collecting posts on Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram and TikTok. The analysis was guided by four specific parameters: reach and impact of posts by the main candidates; reach and impact of posts by political parties with parliamentary representation; reach and impact of posts by other social media users mentioning the candidates; and reach and impact of campaign cases and disinformative content identified by fact-checkers. Therefore, the focus of analysis was the reach and impact of posts relating to the elections.

This report is divided into three sections. First, we frame online political discussion on the four main online social networks analysed (Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram and TikTok). Secondly, the next section focuses on the online activity of political leaders and their parties, as well as the online discussion around them. In this section we analyse the evolution of the online activity over 5 weeks and highlight the main characteristics and dynamics detected on each social network.

² In particular with a significant increase in the vote for the Liberal Initiative and the Chega party: <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/legislativas2024/resultados/globais>

Finally, we present a proposal consisting of four amplifying dimensions of online political discussion according to the trends observed in the online activity of the candidates, around them and around irregular and sometimes disinformative cases that occurred during the electoral campaign period.

In methodological terms, the social networks analysed are Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram and TikTok. The data was collected using the CrowdTangle tools (for Facebook and Instagram), SentiOne (for Twitter/X and TikTok) and the TikTok Research API (for TikTok, naturally). In most cases (and where not stated otherwise), the data has been organised according to total interactions. The choice of total interactions as the main metric for the analyses is due to the fact that we wanted to analyse the messages that most captured the attention of the users of the social networks in question and which, therefore, may have had the greatest reach and impact.

1. Communicational context

The attention paid to political and electoral communication is very different between the four online social networks analysed in this report. These differences are mainly due to the characteristics of each network, but also to the way in which they are exploited by political campaigners and what users are looking for in them. Throughout this project it has been possible to identify characteristics that best help to describe online political discussion on each online social network.

Despite being the one with the most users in Portugal (5.95 million, according to Datareportal³, or 69% of the population according to the Digital News Report⁴) of the four social networks analysed, the attention paid to posts with political themes on Facebook does not stand out when compared to **themes related to sport**,

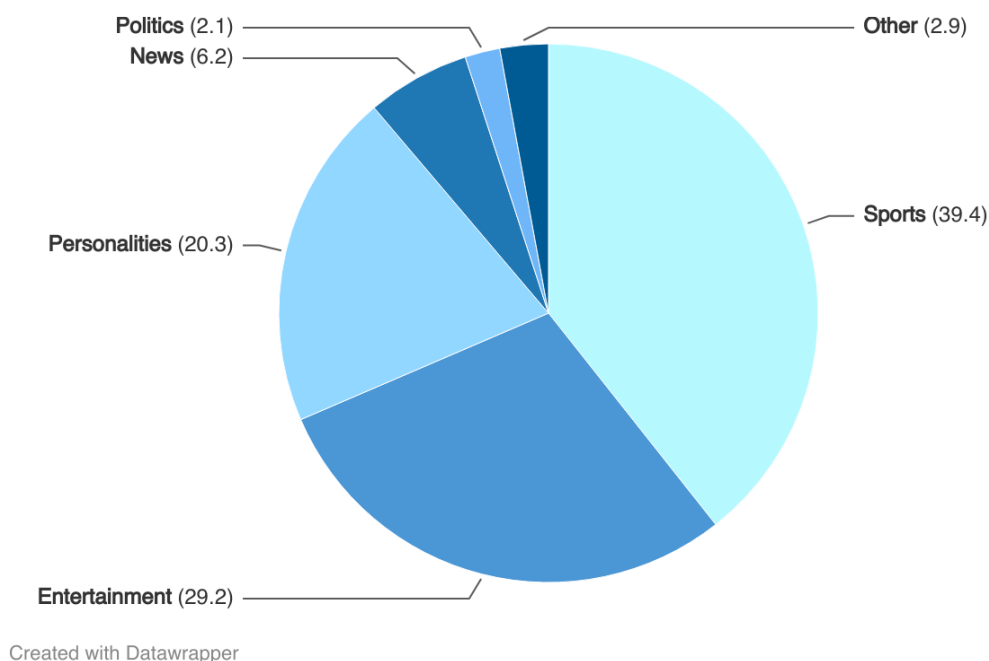
³ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-portugal>

⁴ https://obercom.pt/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/DNRPT_2023_Final_15Junho.pdf

entertainment and lifestyle, which are the ones of most interest to the Portuguese population on Facebook.

Compared to the past, this means that less attention is being paid to political (and news) content on Portugal's most important social network. The reduction in the weight of political content on Facebook in Portugal could be related to the way the algorithm works, but also to some user fatigue with political content. According to our analysis, the two things are related and may be fuelling each other.

Figure 1. Topics of the pages with the most interactions on Facebook during the two weeks of the election campaign



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

On Twitter/X, the opposite tendency exists. Despite having a smaller number of users, politics is more prominent than on Facebook. Over the 5 weeks analysed, posts with political themes frequently appear in the Top 20 posts with the most interactions in Portugal. By comparison, on Facebook this type of post very rarely appears among the posts that users pay the most attention to. While on Twitter/X political discussion is mainly led by opinion leaders, on Facebook the political posts

with the most interactions tend to belong to the Chega party. Twitter/X has thus consolidated itself as **a kind of "political and media bubble", frequented mainly by politicians, commentators and the media**. But it tends to generate fewer interactions than Facebook, which means a lower level of attention to political content from those outside the political and media "bubble". However, although they publish in abundance on this network, the media rarely make it into the ranking of posts that capture the most attention from users.

On the other hand, despite the lower number of posts, **Instagram is the social network where political content generates the most interactions**. In other words, each post has a greater potential to attract attention on Instagram than on Facebook or Twitter/X, for example. As a result, the posts with the most interactions from candidates often belong to this social network. In fact, from this point of view, this election marks an important change from previous ones, in which Facebook was usually the most important social network for political communication.

On TikTok, politics has not yet reached the same prevalence as on the other social networks analysed, but some Portuguese political actors have managed to capitalise on this platform by increasing the reach of their online communication. In this way, the characteristics of this platform can be exploited by political actors to expand their online presence.

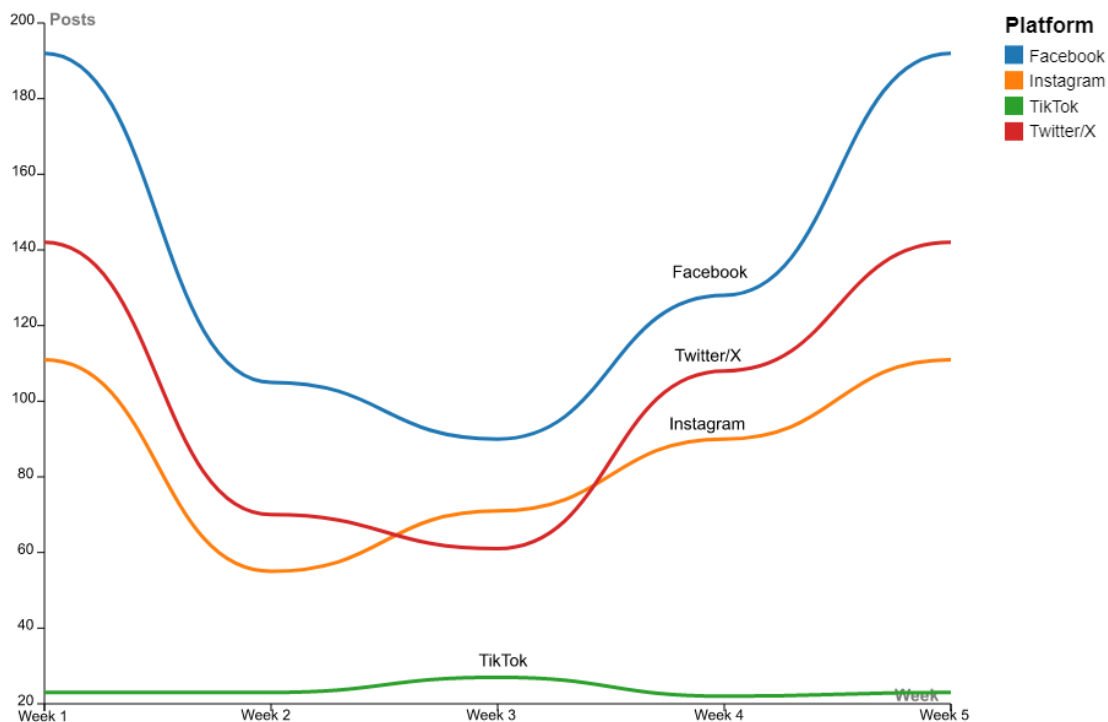
2. Evolution of social networks' metrics on candidates, parties and political discussion

Over the five weeks of the election period analysed, the online activity of the candidates for prime minister in Portugal and their political parties was monitored. In this way, it was possible to see the evolution of their activity in terms of the volume of posts and the attention (measured in interactions) collected by them. At the same time, we also analysed the posts made by other social media users in which the candidates were mentioned, to gather information on which politicians were mentioned most and in what context.

2.1. Posts by candidates

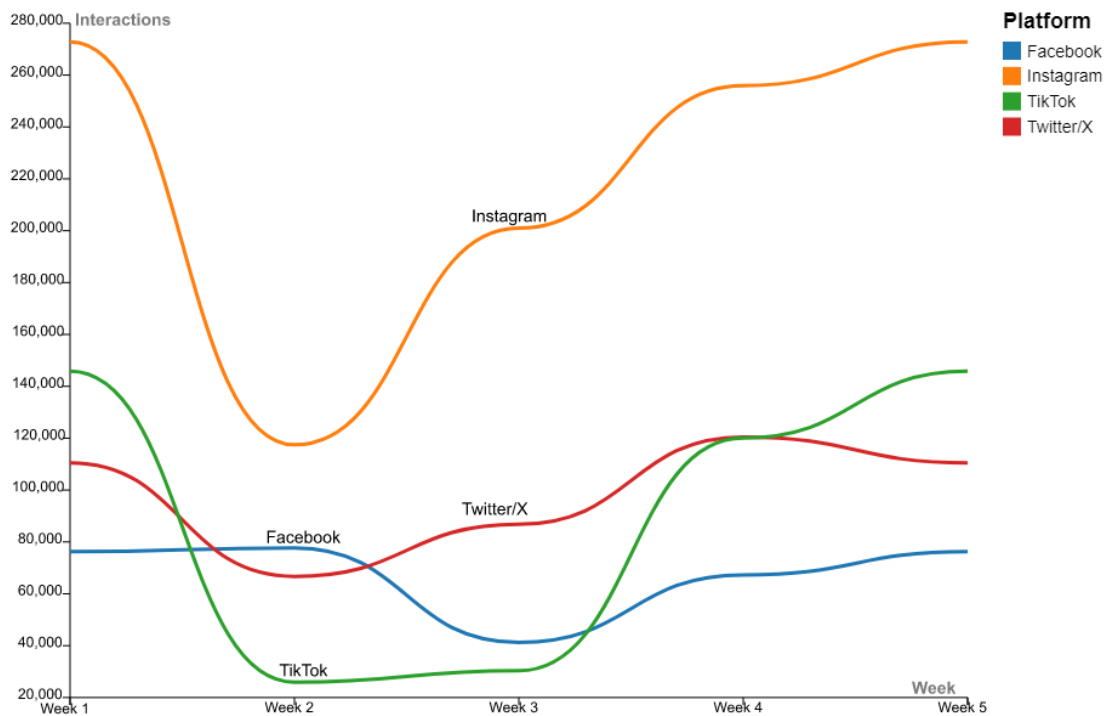
In general, we can conclude that between the beginning of February and the beginning of March, **the online activity of the political candidates increased gradually over the weeks**. This increase was reflected in the growth of both posts and interactions. It's worth noting that the first week analysed (1 to 7 February 2024) had roughly the same levels of posts and interactions as the last week analysed. There is a sharp drop in the volume of posts in the second week, which corresponds to the start of the airing of debates on TV. After the two weeks of debates, the volume of posts by the candidates increases again until election day. However, interactions tend to increase from the third week analysed onwards. We can therefore conclude that during the period of television debates, the candidates concentrated their communication on television and as soon as the debates ended, they resumed their voluminous online communicative activity.

Figure 2. Evolution of the number of posts by candidates on the 4 social networks over 5 weeks



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

Figure 3. Evolution of the number of interactions with the candidates' posts on the 4 social networks over 5 weeks



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

Despite being the second least used online social network after TikTok, **Instagram was the platform that generated the highest number of total interactions for the candidates' posts**. On average, each of the candidates' posts on Instagram generated five times more attention than their posts on Facebook. In other words, in this election Instagram was the main ally of most candidates in terms of disseminating their political message. This trend differs from that observed in the last legislative elections, in which political discourse showed little relevance on Instagram, and establishes this network as an important observation point for political communication in the near future.

On the other hand, **Facebook was the social network most used by the candidates**. However, this activity did not necessarily mean more interactions than on the other online social networks, and in terms of interaction numbers, Facebook was surpassed by Twitter/X and Instagram. Thus, Twitter/X, despite not being the candidates' main online communication choice, tends to get more attention (measured in interactions) than their main online communication channel, Facebook.

It's worth highlighting **André Ventura's** online activity. As a candidate, he **tends to generate the most interactions on Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram and Tik Tok**. He was also the only candidate who was able to capitalise on Tik Tok. Apart from Ventura, this social network was only used by Pedro Nuno Santos and Inês Sousa Real. However, the Chega leader showed a distinct performance, with a substantial growth in interactions over the last two weeks, going from 30,000 total interactions to over 100,000 interactions in the space of a week, thus collecting more interactions on Tik Tok alone than all the candidates on Facebook and Twitter/X.

In other words, contrary to what had happened in previous elections in Portugal (where Facebook was the most important social network), the two most recent online social networks - **Instagram and TikTok - seem to be playing a more prominent role in the distribution of political communication**, especially Instagram.

In terms of content, it is important to note that **participation in television programmes or interviews and television debates** were the most frequent themes of the candidates' most successful posts on all four online social networks analysed.

2.2. Posts by political parties

Similar to what was observed in the candidates' online activity, **Chega was the party that tended to garner the most interactions on Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok and YouTube**. It adopted similar strategies on Facebook and Instagram, often using screenshots of news stories and sharing polls or studies indicating voter support for the party. On Tik Tok, on the other hand, Chega adopted a different strategy, with many videos of André Ventura, the campaign and moments from the TV debates.

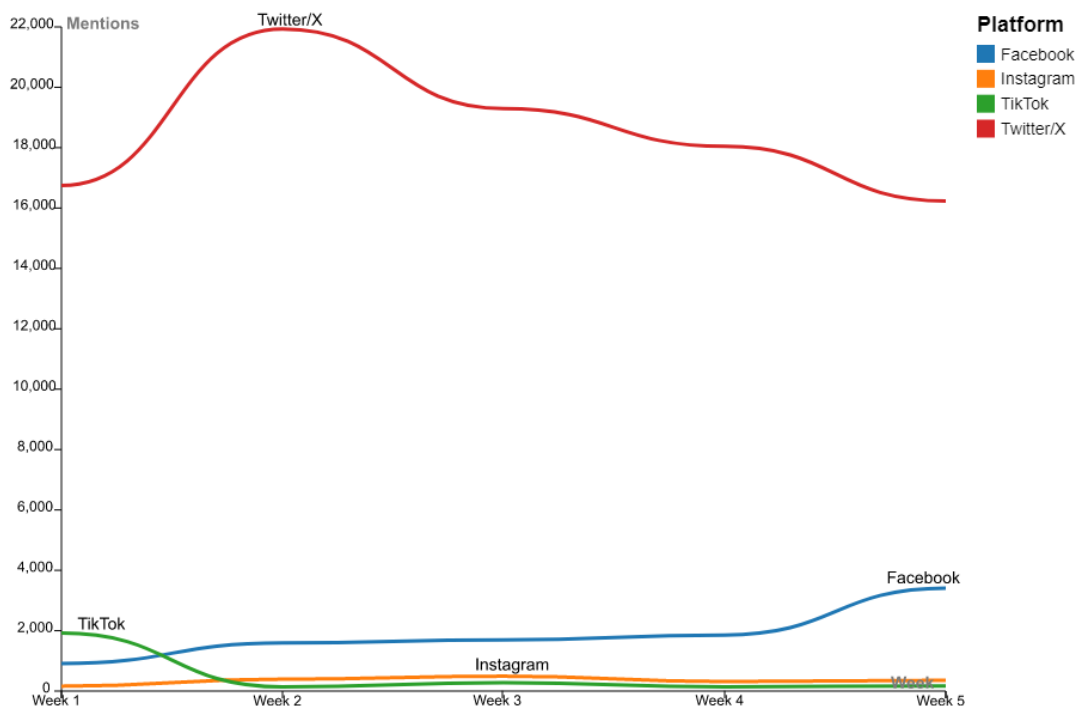
The parties with the highest metrics on Instagram were Chega and Iniciativa Liberal. On TikTok, Bloco de Esquerda was the party that received the most attention, along with Chega. Even so, the posts with the most interactions from Bloco de Esquerda are mostly excerpts from the debate between Mariana Mortágua and André Ventura. The Bloco leader's participation in comedy programmes such as "Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha" and "Bom Partido" also garnered high levels of attention (measured in interactions) on the Bloco account.

As with the candidates, although most parties publish more content on Facebook than on other social networks, it's actually Instagram that gives them the most interactions. In general terms, the Chega party is the one that achieves higher averages of interactions per post than the other parties. At the next level we find the Bloco de Esquerda and the Iniciativa Liberal on Instagram.

2.3. Discussion around candidates

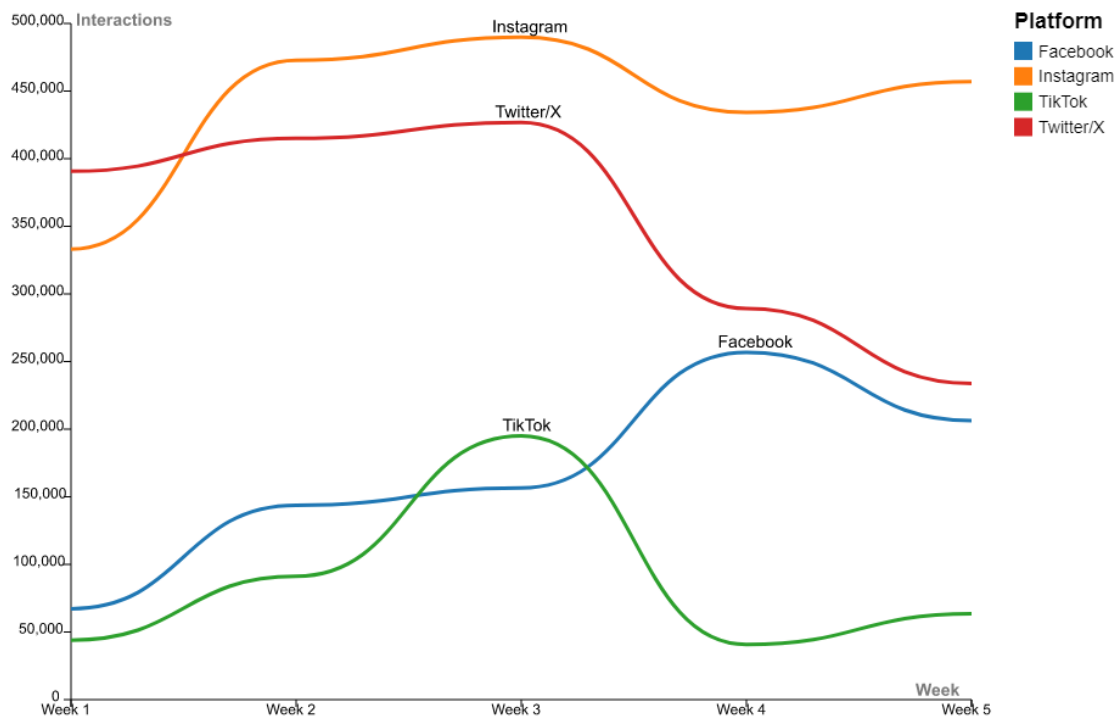
Throughout the analysis period (5 weeks, between 1 February and 6 March), **the Twitter/X social network was by far the one with the most posts mentioning the candidates**, confirming it as the political discussion platform par excellence. This is the social network where politically interested and involved users discuss the political content of the election.

Figure 4. Evolution of the number of posts mentioning the candidates on the 4 social networks over 5 weeks



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

Figure 5. Evolution of the number of interactions on posts mentioning the candidates, on the 4 social networks, over 5 weeks



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

In the discussion around candidates, the role of **the Chega party and André Ventura's pages and accounts stands out**, as they **often garner the most interactions by mentioning candidates**. However, the accounts of other parties such as Bloco de Esquerda or Iniciativa Liberal also occasionally appeared on the list of posts with the most interactions about candidates. This highlights the importance of the amplifying capacity of party machines in online political discussion. On the other hand, partly fuelled by this, posts where André Ventura was mentioned tended to generate significantly more interactions than those where other candidates were mentioned.

In quantitative terms, it was the media that made the most posts about the candidates. On all social networks except **TikTok**, the pages of the Portuguese media predominated in the rankings of the most interactions garnered by mentioning the candidates' names, mainly as a result of the large number of posts made about them. And, as in the case of other social media users, it was on **Instagram** that **media** posts about the candidates generated the most interactions.

Within the media pages, **Polígrafo was the page that published the most about the candidates, along with the CNN Portugal, SIC and Expresso accounts.** The difference in Polígrafo's activity between the first and second week indicates that this may have been due to the **start of the TV debates**, which were the source of many fact-checks during the Portuguese electoral period. On the other hand, Polígrafo's relevance on Twitter/X stands out, a very "politicised" social network where the work of a fact-checker plays the role of mobilising and stimulating debate. This can be seen in the data analysed.

In addition to news and party content, during the debate period the most viral post about certain candidates often contained an image from the **TV debates, which** are a frequent source of **political discussion, especially on Twitter/X.**

Outside of the strictly party-political field, our analysis also allows us to identify some actors who appear frequently - and recurrently - with content about the candidates that generates a lot of attention on social media. Comedian and activist Diogo Faro, for example, appears 4 times on two different networks - Instagram and Twitter/X; and the account "Selada de Frutas" appears 3 times on two networks. On Facebook, for example, Camilo Lourenço has been in the Top 20 every week analysed and on Instagram, the "Comunidade Cultura e Arte" account stands out. On Twitter/X, the "PS a ser PS" accounts (4 times in the top) and the accounts of commentators Fernanda Cândia and Ana Gomes (3 appearances each) influenced the discussion. On TikTok, outside of politics and the media, no account stands out and diversity prevails.

Furthermore, in the last week before the polls, **participation in interviews was also the focus of the posts with the most interactions about the candidates.** Even more than the political programmes themselves, it was participation in entertainment programmes or more intimate interviews, such as "Alta Definição", "Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha", "Dois às Dez" and even Guilherme Geirinhas' YouTube programme "Bom Partido", that generated the most interactions for the candidates. But what we have observed for candidates and politicians is also true for other social media users: Instagram accounts provide organisations and individuals posting about politics on the web with a more efficient platform than others for capturing users' attention. This is true for all social media users.

3. Four amplifying dimensions and irregular cases of the campaign

By combining all the data sources used - what was published by the candidates, what was published by the parties and what was published by other social media users about the candidates - it was possible to trace various dimensions that contribute to some content being amplified more than others on social media, and in particular content about some candidates over others. In this sense, we have identified four dimensions that can help explain why - and how - some candidates attracted more attention on social media than others: the communicative dimension, related to media coverage; the political dimension, related to support from the party machine; the international dimension, related to inputs from outside Portugal; and the commercial dimension, related to online advertising. All these dimensions were observable in the data collected on social networks, which help to explain the attention paid to each candidate during the campaign.

3.1. Communicational dimension: the role of television, the media and interviews

During the pre-election and election period, we noted certain communication trends that had an effect on amplifying political discussion online. These trends include: (1) the effect of the media, (2) the effect of TV debates, (3) the effect of candidate interviews.

3.1.1. News media

In the coverage of the pre-election and election periods, **the media were the ones who most frequently published content about the candidates**. Consequently, despite the fact that they hardly featured in the posts with the most interactions, they ended up being the accounts that garnered the most total interactions in the online discussion around the candidates. Even so, in the week before the polls, most of the most viral posts about the candidates belonged to media organisations.

It is true that an analysis of the average interactions of social media posts shows **that each of these posts captures little attention from users** (expressed in interactions). But the sheer number of posts made by the *media* during this period makes them an important source of attention for political content in general and for the candidates in particular.

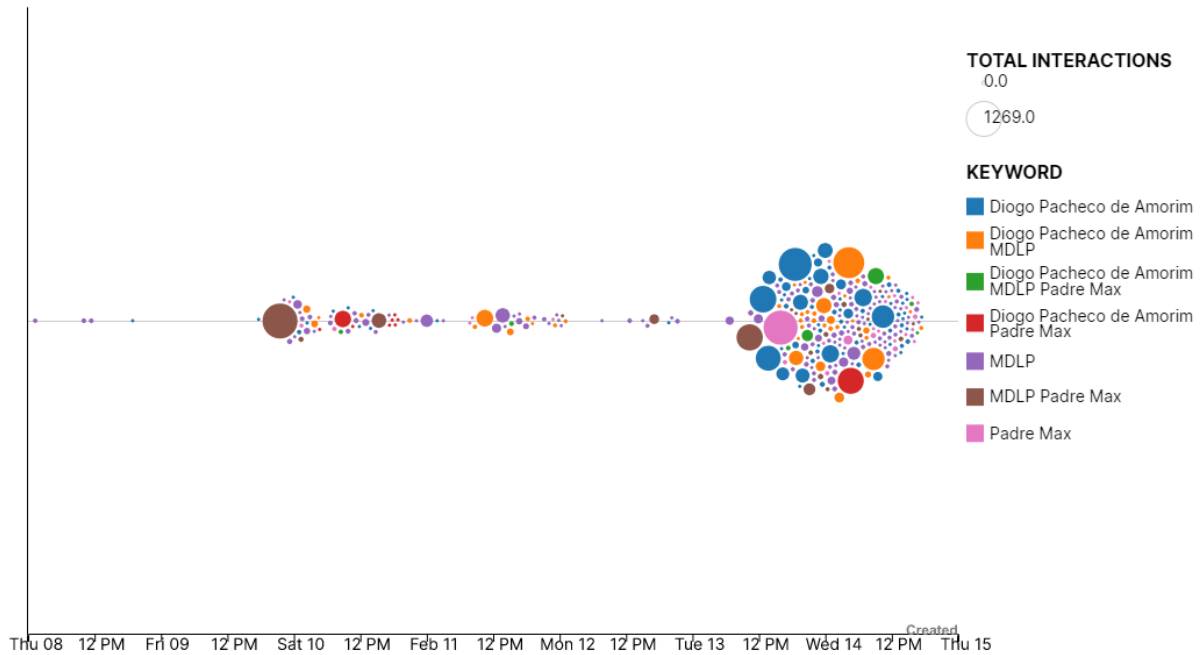
All the media appear to be fuelling the debate about the candidates on social media, but in our data collection, **CNN Portugal, SIC and Expresso stood out**. We also highlight **Polígrafo** which, as the main national fact-checker, had a major impact on the discussion about the election on all social networks, especially on Twitter/X.

3.1.2. Television debates

Television played an important role in the online political discussion through the debates that took place. Analysing the data collected, we can identify both live and deferred effects.

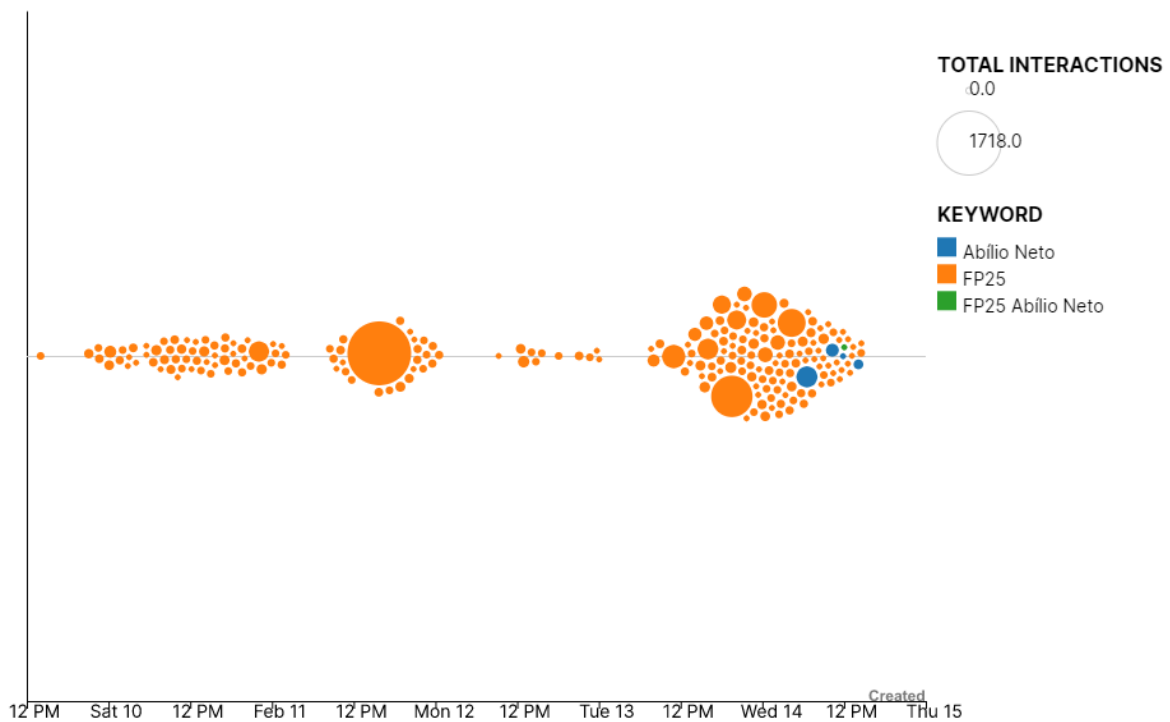
On the one hand, television debates served to fuel political discussion even while the debate was taking place, and this effect was detected above all on Twitter/X, due to the communicative characteristics of this platform. A clear example of this was the debate between Mariana Mortágua and André Ventura, in which accusations were exchanged about the existence of former terrorists on their respective party lists. By monitoring the temporal evolution of references to terrorist groups and names uttered in the debate, it was possible to observe a sudden increase in posts during the period of the debate, which took place on 13 February.

Figure 6. Trend of mentions on Twitter/X of the terms used by Mariana Mortágua



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

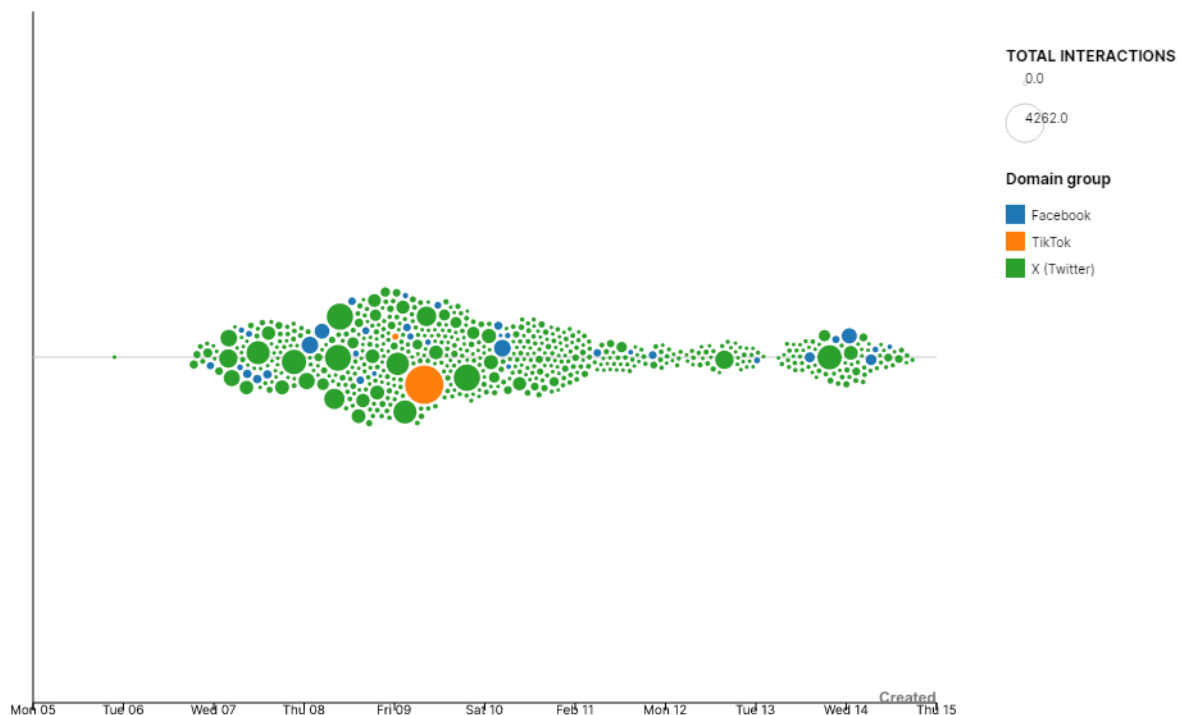
Figure 7. Trend of mentions on Twitter/X of the terms used by André Ventura



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

Another case in which this effect could be seen was the case of Mariana Mortágua's grandmother. The Bloco de Esquerda leader mentioned a personal situation with her grandmother, who had received a letter informing her of a rent increase. At that moment (6 February), it was possible to observe an increase in online activity in posts that mentioned Mariana Mortágua's grandmother. A week later, the topic returned to the forefront of instant online political discussion when she spoke in another debate against André Ventura (13 February).

Figure 8. Evolution of Twitter/X, Facebook and Tik Tok posts referring to Mariana Mortágua's grandmother



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

In this sense, the broadcasting of television debates has amplifying effects on certain narratives almost instantaneously. On the other hand, the effects of TV debates on online political discussion do not stop at the moment of the debate. The publication of excerpts or adverts for the debates by the candidates in their online communication and the publication of images of the debates by Twitter/X users tended to be content with high attention retention (measured in interactions).

3.1.3. Interviews with candidates

Finally, the candidates' participation in more light-hearted or entertaining interviews had an amplifying effect on the attention paid to the candidates. In the week of 15 to 21 February, the post by Daniel Oliveira, presenter of the SIC programme "Alta Definição", about the guest of the week, Pedro Nuno Santos, was the 16th post with the most interactions on Facebook in Portugal, a social network where political topics do not tend to be successful. In addition, posts by candidates or parties aimed at taking part in programmes such as TVI's "Dois à 10", SIC's "Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha" or "Bom Partido", from Guilherme Geirinhas' YouTube channel, often achieved high levels of interaction.

Table 1. Examples of posts on the presence of candidates in interview programmes



Daniel Oliveira, on Facebook, about the interview with Pedro Nuno Santos.

12.571 Reactions
8.882 Comments
363 Shares
[Link for publication](#)



Pedro Nuno Santos, in a joint Instagram post with TVI, on his emotions during an interview on Cristina Ferreira's "Dois à 10" programme.

3.686 likes
493 comments
4,184 interactions
[Link for publication](#)



Inês Sousa Real, on Instagram, in a joint publication with TVI's "Dois à 10", about her presence on the programme.

1.270 likes
22 comments
1.292 interactions
[Link for publication](#)



Partido Chega, on **Instagram**, about **André Ventura's** appearance on TVI's **"Dois à 10"** programme. It was the third post with the most interactions between portuguese parties in week 3.

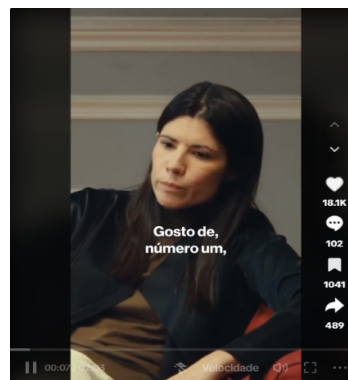
14.308 Likes
407 Comments

[Link for publication](#)



partido_pan e alexandreismoreira, on **Instagram**, about her participation in **"Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha"**.

1.270 likes
22 comments



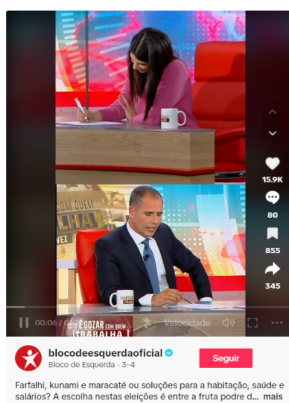
Bloco de Esquerda, on **TikTok**, about **Mariana Mortágua's** interview on Guilherme Geirinhas' **"Bom Partido"** programme. It was the post with the most interactions on TikTok of all the parties in week 4.

18.131 Likes
102 Comments
489 Shares
266.690 Views
[Link for publication](#)



Rui Rocha, on **Twitter/X** about his appearance on the **"Bom Partido"** programme on Guilherme Geirinhas' YouTube channel

2.000 Likes
22 Comments
261 Shares
236.800 views
[Link for publication](#)



Bloco de Esquerda, **TikTok**, **Mariana Mortágua's** appearance on SIC show, **"Isto É Gozar Com Quem Trabalha"**. It was the second post with the most interactions on TikTok in week 4.

15.939 Likes
80 Comments
345 Shares
257.739 Views
[Link for publication](#)

Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

Although the debates between the candidates at the beginning of the period under analysis provided ample material for debate on social media, especially on Twitter/X, the presence of the candidates on more entertaining and less political programmes ended up having a greater impact in terms of the number of interactions - synonymous with attention - generated about the candidates. In addition, these interactions took place predominantly on social networks where the penetration of political topics is lower than on Twitter/X

3.2. Political dimension: the role of political actors

A significant part of the impact of political issues on social media during the election period depends on the ability of political actors to influence the dissemination of these issues. What analysing this period of campaigning and pre-campaigning shows is that these political actors have served as amplifiers of certain narratives or campaign cases. This is particularly noticeable in the case of the **Chega party and André Ventura, who very effectively mobilised the reach of their accounts and pages to shape the narrative.**

Three of the campaign cases that were analysed showed the influence that André Ventura and his party have in amplifying their narratives online through their accounts. These were the disinformative case of the shootings in Famalicão, the case of the polls and the case of the allegations of electoral fraud.

3.2.1. Case: Shootings in Famalicão

On the afternoon of 21 February 2024, a Chega parade was allegedly fired upon in an area of Famalicão. About four hours later, a statement from the PSP (Portuguese police) clarified that the alleged shots were actually rumblings from a motorbike. Those four hours were enough for the original, misleading narrative to circulate on Facebook and Twitter/X with much more reach than its subsequent correction. This reach was mainly due to the posts of the Chega party structure, especially on the pages of André Ventura and the party itself.

Table 2. Examples of posts by the Chega party and André Ventura on the case of the "shootings" in Famalicão



This video on the Chega party's Facebook page reached 3013 interactions, out of a total of 4.796 that were generated around the case on this social network.



This post on Twitter/X by André Ventura received 5028 interactions, out of a total of 8.548 generated around the case on this social network.

Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

In this case, the posts made after the denial of the gunfire thesis ended up having fewer interactions - synonymous with attention - than the posts that preceded that denial, as illustrated above. Most of the interactions on these posts prior to the denial were generated from the Chega party and André Ventura's accounts.

3.2.2. Case: Polls

On 22 February, Folha Nacional published the results of a poll commissioned by the Instituto Paraná Pesquisas. Although this organisation is not accredited by the ERC to publish poll results in the media, the results are not false. But the way in which they were publicised on social media may have conveyed the wrong idea, namely with the claim of a "technical tie" between three parties.

Figure 9. Post about the survey in the online newspaper "Folha Nacional"



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

The dissemination of this news was fuelled above all by the Chega party structure on online social media. On Facebook, more than half of the posts belong to pages of Chega party activists or leaders (27 posts out of a total of 47) and posts by André Ventura (2.546 interactions) and the Chega party (8.368 interactions) garnered 88% of the total interactions on this social network.

On Twitter/X, the sharing of the screenshot of the Folha Nacional newspaper article was mainly done by members of the Chega party, who garnered half of the interactions collected on Facebook. The Chega party, André Ventura and Pedro dos Santos Frazão's posts stand out, accounting for 87% of the interactions.

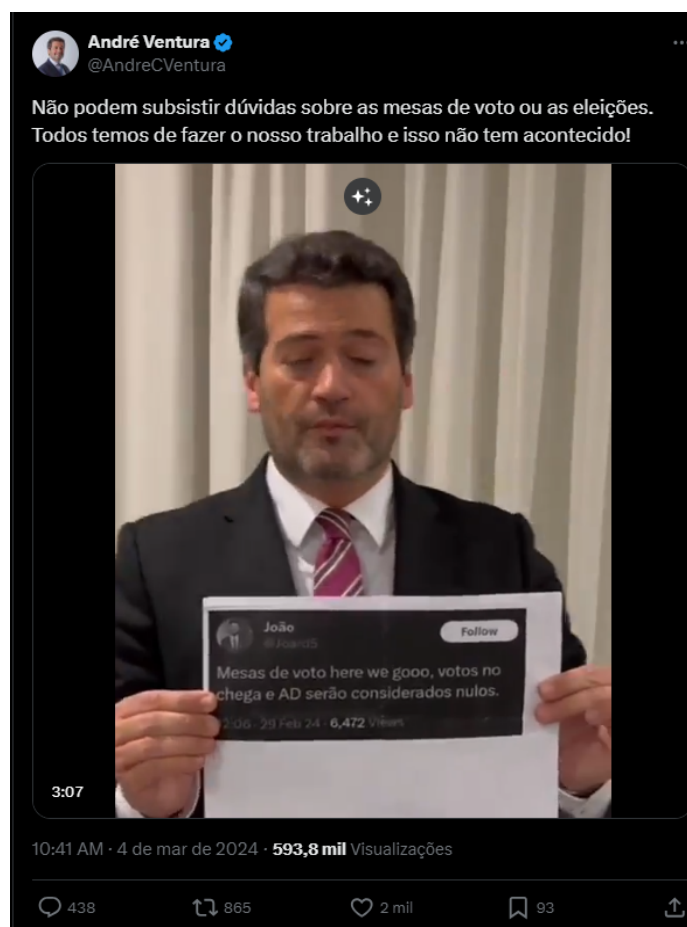
On Instagram, the joint post by André Ventura and the Chega party was responsible for 94% of the interactions.

3.2.3. Case: Allegations of electoral fraud

On 29 February at 12:06 pm, a Bloco de Esquerda militant posted on Twitter/X that he was going to be present at polling stations and he was preparing to tamper with the ballot papers containing the Chega votes. The situation immediately provoked a

reaction from Twitter/X users who either denounced or devalued the statement shared by the Bloco de Esquerda activist. Four days after the original post, André Ventura shared a video condemning what had happened, which garnered 3.888 interactions, 700 more than the total number of interactions of the 20 previous posts that condemned the attack and 7.000 more than the total of the 10 that devalued what had happened.

Figure 10. Twitter/X post by André Ventura on the allegations of electoral fraud



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

3.3. International dimension: the role of Brazilian political actors

Another trend observed was the crossing of the Portuguese and Brazilian political spheres. When these universes crossed paths, the themes they focused on gained prominence in Portuguese online political discussion.

During the debate between André Ventura and Rui Tavares, the former mentioned Lula da Silva, president of Brazil, in one of his arguments, accusing him of being corrupt.

Figure 11. Twitter/X posts by Carla Zambelli and Eduardo Bolsonaro in support of André Ventura



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

This intervention was amplified in the online political discussion through the sharing of the televised moment on Chega's TikTok page, which became one of the most viral posts on all parties' TikTok that week. In addition, the same intervention gained

prominence in the Portuguese political discussion online through the interventions, on Twitter/X and Facebook, of Eduardo Bolsonaro and Carla Zambelli, who praised André Ventura's stance. It is noteworthy that these authors, with just one post, achieved as many interactions about the candidates as several media accounts.

On Facebook, Carla Zambelli collected 13.137 interactions and Eduardo Bolsonaro totalled 7.433 interactions. On Twitter/X, both collected around 13.000 interactions each. Thus, with only one post mentioning André Ventura, the Brazilian political actors managed to feature in the accounts that garnered the most attention (measured in interactions) in the discussion around the candidates for prime minister.

Figure 12. Examples of posts in defence of Sérgio Tavares



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

The following week, Sérgio Tavares, a Portuguese content creator, travelled to Brazil to cover the demonstrations called by Jair Bolsonaro and was detained at the airport, leading to accusations that his detention was an attack on freedom of speech. Once again, the Portuguese and Brazilian political spheres crossed paths.

Several of the posts with the most interactions that week on Twitter/X referred to Sérgio Tavares and his arrest. Furthermore, among the political forces in Portugal, it was the ADN party that attracted attention on Twitter/X and managed to be the party

account with the post with the most interactions. Another post, from a Brazilian citizen, gained even more interactions praising ADN's official statement condemning the arrest of Sérgio Tavares.

Finally, this dimension can also be seen in the forementioned analysed case of the unaccredited survey by Paraná Pesquisas, a Brazilian company that allegedly did polling work on the Portuguese electorate as a gift from Jair Bolsonaro to André Ventura.

3.4. Commercial dimension: the role and funding of illegal advertising

During the election campaign it was also possible to identify two cases of irregular political advertising on YouTube and one on Facebook. It should be noted that, on the one hand, political advertising is not permitted in Portugal during political campaign and pre-campaign periods and, on the other hand, in at least one of the cases there appears to be an international source of funding. Both situations therefore prompted an investigation using OSINT methods, which made it possible to identify the source of the funding for one of the cases and an investment estimate for the other.

Figure 13. Screenshots of the disinformative adverts broadcast via the Google/YouTube network (I)



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

The first political advert identified was a disinformative YouTube advert. By decontextualising newspaper covers, the advertisement associated the current and former leaders of the Socialist Party with corruption. Google's ad library identified the company that financed the advert: Nekoplay LLC. The organisation is based in the US state of Delaware, known for being a tax haven on American soil.

Figure 13. Screenshots of the disinformative adverts broadcast via the Google/YouTube network (II)



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

The name of the channel that hosted the unlisted video was "Bolsonaristas em Portugal" (Bolsonarists in Portugal), thus referring to the international dimension already identified in political communication during the legislative elections. Through further journalistic research⁵, it was possible to ascertain that the company Nekoplay LLC is owned by a company from Argentina that was flagged up during the journalistic investigation known as the Panama Papers. Our investigation also identified other adverts financed by the same company in Panama, Romania and Singapore.

⁵ <https://expresso.pt/politica/2024-03-18-Anuncios-proibidos-ligam-o-Chega-a-publicitarios-subversivos-de-Javier-Milei-na-Argentina-85e0cc56>

The second political advert identified on YouTube was an advert with a more sophisticated level of production and which criticised the Social Democratic Party. It was, however, not possible to identify the advertising company. Nonetheless, the name of the channel hosting the video was "Jovens por Portugal" and the unlisted video had more than 135.000 views.

Figure 14. Screenshot of one of the "sponsored posts" published on Facebook and Instagram



Source: MediaLab CIES Iscte & OberCom - Observatório da Comunicação.

The third irregular publicity identified took place on Facebook, in the form of sponsored posts on the "Notícias Internacionais" (International News) page. All the sponsored posts targeted Luís Montenegro, leader of the PSD party, and Pedro Passos Coelho, former leader of PSD at the time of the Troika's intervention in Portugal. From Meta's ad transparency centre, it was possible to obtain the reach metrics for each sponsored

post. In total, the posts reached around 2 million accounts, with only one of the posts reaching more than a million different accounts.

Based on a simulation, it was possible to estimate the amount invested in this illegal advertising operation: 12.000 euros over three days of sponsorship. From this amount invested, the advertisers could have reached around 22% of the Portuguese electorate in the middle of the election campaign.

Conclusion – Regarding the amplification of online political speech and disinformation during electoral processes

The March 2024 legislative elections in Portugal marked a significant change in terms of the use of online social networks by political actors: while Facebook was previously the predominant social network, both in terms of general use and in terms of political content, **this election marked the rise of Instagram as the most relevant social network for disseminating the message of political actors in general.** It's true that Facebook and Twitter/X are still the networks most used by political actors, but Instagram is the one that gives them the most reach and impact. TikTok is still little used by Portuguese political actors, but it also has a potential reach and impact that could lead to more intensive use in the future. Twitter/X is the social network with the greatest penetration of political topics and the one most liked by politicians and people interested in politics. But it also seems to have little reach and impact outside of this "media and political bubble"

Regarding the political parties and actors analysed, our results confirm **the Chega party and André Ventura as those who best manage to mobilise social networks to spread their message.** This varies slightly from network to network, but it is nonetheless evident in all of them. It is true that, in both cases, the number of followers explains part of this performance, but the interaction rates and the average interaction of posts, which are much higher than those of the competition, seem to be the fundamental reasons for this success.

In a context of information saturation on social media, both informative and disinformative messages need amplification to become truly prevalent and relevant. In many cases this does not happen, and political messages - informative or disinformative - get lost in the amalgam of content circulating online. What our analysis concludes is that **it is often the political actors themselves who amplify the messages that suit them, even in cases where they may be disinformative.** And in those cases, they can become relevant.

Finally, this analysis also highlights **the weight that entertainment programmes or comedy accounts can have on the visibility of candidates on social networks.** In our analysis of the communicative context, we realised that - with the exception of Twitter/X - political content is far from being the favourite content of social media users, given the relative attention they pay to it. What seems to emerge from the data collected is that it is precisely the content relating to politicians that escapes the traditional channels (and formats) that best captures attention on social media, namely entertaining interviews or humorous content.



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