From framing to emotion: evolving narratives in Ibero-American political mediatization (2008–2019)

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This review examines the relationship between media and politics in the Ibero-American context during the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic (2008–2019). Its primary objective is to identify the dominant research themes and prevailing methodological approaches in order to contribute to broader theoretical reflections on the evolution of political communication in the region. Based on the PRISMA-ScR framework, a sample of 32 publications was identified and selected for analysis. The findings reveal a clear predominance of qualitative studies, particularly those grounded in framing theory and discourse analysis. These works document how the rise of digital platforms, especially Twitter and Facebook, reshaped political communication by emphasizing emotionality, personalization, and media spectacle. The review also highlights the hybrid interaction between traditional and digital media, as well as the role of media narratives in shaping public opinion and institutional trust. In contrasting these findings with developments after 2019, the review identifies the growing impact of big data, algorithmic amplification, and AI-driven microtargeting as key factors reconfiguring political discourse. These dynamics expose critical research gaps and point to the need for methodological innovation and theoretical renewal.

1 Introduction

The dynamics between media and politics have become increasingly relevant in social science studies (Piñeiro-Naval and Morais, 2020; Pereyra, 2023). Since the early debates in the 1920s, media research has aimed to understand its impact on society (Oliver et al., 2019). Despite differing views on the extent of its effects, there is academic consensus that the media shape social imaginaries and behaviors by prioritizing issues and framing their interpretation (Castells, 2009; Schudson, 2002).

Between 2008 and 2019, the emergence of social networks and digital platforms transformed political communication and journalism, creating algorithmically mediated environments in which users actively co-construct discourse (McKenney, 2018). The rise of Web 2.0 enabled new forms of political mobilization through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, redefining campaign strategies and civic engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated these changes, profoundly altering the global communication landscape (Ahmed et al., 2020; Van Aelst and Blumler, 2021).

This transition from traditional to digital media marked a critical inflection point in media–politics relations, providing a key framework for understanding how technology

reshaped political narratives (Chadwick, 2017). The circulation of political discourse on these platforms intensified phenomena such as disinformation, post-truth dynamics, and algorithmic manipulation (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017), generating a media ecosystem characterized by deceptive strategies, emotional polarization, and the mass dissemination of fake news—elements that erode public trust and weaken the quality of democratic deliberation (Gaal Fong et al., 2022).

Authors such as Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), Tandoc et al. (2017), and Bienvenue (2020) have highlighted the rise of "computational propaganda," algorithmic bias, and the virality of hoaxes as key concerns in contemporary political communication. In the Ibero-American context, these issues are magnified by historical tensions between the press and political power, as well as structural weaknesses like media concentration and the instrumentalization of journalism (Maira, 2004; Hallin and Mancini, 2010). Empirical research from the region has highlighted the pervasive effects of digital disinformation and emotional microtargeting in electoral processes (García-Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2018; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2015), underscoring the need for renewed theoretical and methodological approaches.

This evolving context poses serious challenges for democratic governance and calls for a more critical and interdisciplinary state of the art in political communication research—one that incorporates studies of digital deception, platform governance, and automated influence. Simultaneously, Ibero-America underwent a structural political transformation from 2008 to 2019, marked by ideological realignments, institutional crises, and changing media logics. These processes were intensified by the 2008 financial crisis, widespread corruption scandals (such as Lava Jato), the collapse of traditional party systems, and the progressive erosion of democratic institutions.

During the decade prior to the pandemic, politics became increasingly mediated, prompting political leaders to adapt their practices to the logic of communication. This produced hybrid communication styles shaped by national contexts and leadership profiles, integrating legacy media with algorithmic digital platforms (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). Political discourse became more emotional and personalized, facilitated by microsegmentation and algorithmic filters (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). The resulting ecosystem enabled polarizing narratives, disinformation, and spectacularized content, reshaping political engagement (Chadwick and Dennis, 2017). As a result, vertical, institutional communication models coexisted—and often clashed—with horizontal, emotionally charged digital interactions (Papacharissi, 2016).

This article addresses a significant gap in the literature by offering an integrative regional perspective on the mediatization of politics in Ibero-America. It systematically examines the evolution of political communication narratives between 2008 and 2019, focusing on prevailing methodological approaches and dominant thematic trends. This analysis is guided by three research questions:

RQ1. What methodological designs were prioritized and what other characteristics emerged from the analysis?

RQ2. What have been the main objectives and findings in studies on media and politics?

RQ3. What were the main debates and topics addressed in research between 2008 and 2019?

2 Materials and methods

Based on the PRISMA-ScR framework, the review was carried out using indexed databases such as Scopus, Dialnet, and SciELO. Due to the limited sample size ($n = 32$) and the broad scope of the topic, this study adopts a literature review approach to explore the evolution of political narratives in digital environments and to consolidate existing theoretical knowledge (Manterola et al., 2023). This methodology enables the identification of key conceptual shifts, theoretical debates, and methodological trends that offer a useful overview and integration of the field (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). It should be noted that this review, focused on a specific sample of 32 studies, does not aim to capture every aspect of the broad media-politics landscape; however, it highlights representative trends that help illuminate the broader transformations underway.

Its included peer-reviewed articles published in English, Spanish, or Portuguese between 2008 and 2019, and it restricted the search to open-access sources for full-text availability. A general thematic framework was constructed using thesauri from ITESO and UNESCO, from which relevant keywords (Communication Impact, Political Communication, Media, Newsletters, and Discourse Analysis) were selected. The search was refined using Boolean operators, duplicates were manually removed, and full texts were reviewed for inclusion. The analysis combined quantitative data, extracted from article metrics, and qualitative data, obtained through inductive coding based on a structured questionnaire, allowing for comparing findings and identifying theoretical contributions (Figure 1).
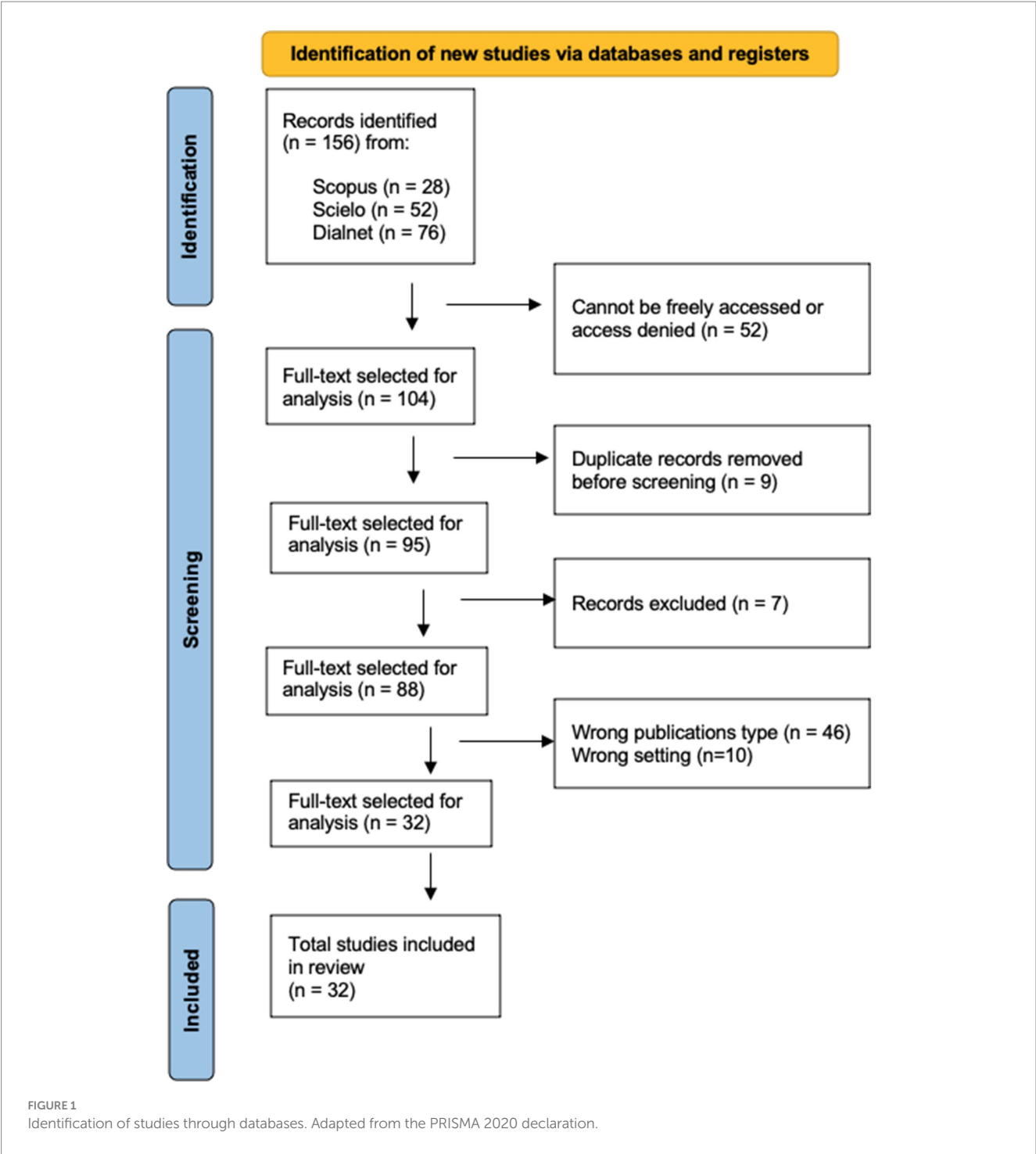
3 Results

An initial 156 articles were identified, of which 52 were excluded for not being open access, 9 for being duplicates, and 7 for being in languages other than English, Portuguese, or Spanish, leaving a total of 88 articles. Fifty-six were subsequently discarded for being irrelevant to the topic and inconsistent with the research objectives and questions, resulting in a final selection of 32 articles for analysis.

The data obtained from the analysis of the 32 original articles in this review are shown below.

RQ1. What methodological designs were prioritized in the research and what other characteristics emerged from the analysis?

The research reveals a predominance of qualitative and inductive approaches, with content analysis, discourse analysis, and, to a lesser extent, critical discourse analysis as the most frequently used methods. These approaches aim not only to examine the surface structure of political messages, but also to uncover the power relations embedded in media narratives. Framing theory emerges as the dominant conceptual framework, applied both in interpretive and mixed-method designs to identify the semantic devices that shape public perceptions of actors, conflicts, and political events.

Despite the rapid digitalization of the media landscape during the 2008–2019 period, the incorporation of computational tools remains limited. ATLAS.ti is the only software cited with any regularity. This suggests a certain methodological conservatism, favoring in-depth qualitative analysis over automated large-scale data processing. Most studies still focus on traditional media (television, newspapers,

FIGURE 1
Identification of studies through databases. Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 declaration.

websites), although a growing interest in digital platforms is evident—particularly Twitter (now X)—which has become a key arena for political discourse and symbolic contestation (Marín-Dueñas et al., 2019).

> *RQ2.* What have been the main objectives of the research and the highlights of the media and politics research?

The reviewed literature shows a range of objectives, yet three major analytical directions emerge: (1) exploring how political leadership adapts its communication to digital environments (Donofrio and Rubio Moraga, 2019; González and Cambra, 2018; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2015), (2) examining the role of media in shaping public opinion and institutional trust (Palau-Sampio et al., 2017; Richmond and Brossi, 2018; Luengo and Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013), and (3) analyzing the interactions between traditional and digital media in moments of political crisis (Marín-Dueñas et al., 2019; Castillo-Díaz and Castillo-Esparcia, 2018; Azpíroz, 2013). A recurring theme is the shift in political communication toward emotionally driven and spectacularized strategies, particularly on

platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, where immediacy and affect often outweigh argumentation and evidence (Donofrio and Rubio Moraga, 2019).

Another key finding is the structural tension between anti-establishment leaderships and mainstream media, especially in countries like Mexico and Argentina. In these contexts, the presidency is often framed as embattled, facing media conglomerates portrayed as political adversaries. Across cases, the studies suggest that media narratives not only reflect power but actively contest, disrupt, or legitimize it. The media thus appear as political actors, rather than mere observers, engaged in ongoing struggles over symbolic authority and public legitimacy.

> *RQ3.* What have been the main debates and topics of the research analyzed in the period 2008–2019?

The main debates cover a broad range of topics, mainly focusing on the media's influence on imaginaries, behaviors, and socio-political dynamics. These studies address five key thematic areas:

3.1 Media analysis reveals its growing influence on politics, where spectacle often takes precedence over public debate, fueling political distrust

The critical study of media and its influence on political life has become an increasingly important area of research, particularly in Latin America, where scholars have explored how media shape political cognition through ideological and critical lenses (Melero López, 2022; Gregorio-Chaviano et al., 2023). The media, as amplifiers of discourses, configure social imaginaries aligned with hegemonic power logics (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2015; Triviño, 2015; Smerling, 2011). Coinciding with Western countries, the media tends toward the market and the liberal economy, prioritizing spectacle and commodification over public debate, which causes greater distrust in politics and promotes neoliberal policies toward a minimal State (Del Cid and Desmoctt, 2011). In addition, some media adopt explicit electoral alignments, compromising journalistic independence and positioning themselves as political actors, thereby reinforcing or challenging existing institutional political orders (Fair, 2014).

3.2 Both international media and social networks increasingly act as political actors, shaping public opinion and even influencing foreign political systems

Since the early twentieth century, traditional media such as national television, radio, and print dominated news distribution worldwide. However, with the rapid global spread of mobile internet and smart devices, digital platforms have become the primary source of news. This technological shift has not only transformed how information is consumed but also how it is used: media now actively contribute to shaping public opinion and, in some cases, interfere in the political systems of other countries by promoting international political discourses (Dießelmann and Hetzer, 2015).

3.3 In the digital sphere, electoral advertising prioritizes emotionally driven marketing over rational discourse

Political advertising in the media emphasizes emotionally driven marketing strategies and candidate image over substantive debate or addressing the needs of vulnerable social groups (Donofrio and Rubio Moraga, 2019). The campaigns prioritize image-focused strategies, using emotional mobilization, conflict, and spectacle to amplify their messages. Candidates often distance themselves from traditional political figures, highlighting their business achievements and delivering messages designed for spectacle, even when based on absurd or unachievable promises. Digital technologies have strengthened these strategies by enabling more precise segmentation and identification of target audiences, simplifying interests in ways that—when strategically planned—can have a significant impact. Additionally, individuals who are more exposed to political information tend to be more likely to engage in political participation than those who show little interest in such content (Cunha, 2015; Cho, 2011).

3.4 Framing theory has emerged as a key methodological tool for analyzing discourse, uncovering hidden power dynamics

Most studies highlight a strong relationship between framing theory and methodologies such as content analysis, discourse analysis, and particularly critical discourse analysis, which has become a key approach for uncovering patterns of discrimination and power abuse by political actors (Cerbino et al., 2017); Castillo and Peña, 2017; Luengo and Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013). Political discourse frequently relies on framing to construct narratives and communicate perspectives to the public, with framing theory applied through diverse methodologies—quantitative, qualitative, or mixed—to identify mechanisms and variables that shape these narratives (Califano, 2013; Azpíroz, 2013). In this sense, *framing* theory also invites us to overcome the difficulties of disciplinary boundaries (Gregorio-Chaviano et al., 2023); overall, there is a clear methodological trend favoring qualitative approaches, especially discourse and content analysis, as essential tools for examining the interplay between media and politics (Dylko and Mccluskey, 2012; Porto Fuentes et al., 2018).

3.5 The digital and hybrid transformation of media facilitates the exchange of political ideas but also contributes to the spread of misinformation and violent rhetoric, with potential effects on social mobilization

The use of other communicative elements such as image, audio, and text grants the media new discursive possibilities that enhance their impact, especially in a context of progressively decreasing technological costs, which expands their use and consumption by citizens (Justel-Vázquez et al., 2018). However, this very transformation has also facilitated the proliferation of fake news, violent language, and disinformation, particularly through digital media and social networks

that bypass traditional verification processes (Marín-Dueñas et al., 2019). The anonymity offered by these platforms can further intensify radicalization, hate speech, and polarization. As a result, these dynamics can distort public opinion, fuel conflicts, and trigger social mobilizations based on false or discriminatory narratives, thus undermining democratic debate, social cohesion, and political stability (Castelo, 2014; Dießelmann and Hetzer, 2015).

Taken together, the findings of this review reveal a field in transition, where qualitative research has documented the growing influence of digital media on political narratives, alongside the increasing impact of polarization, disinformation, and affective mobilization. These dynamics point to a reconfiguration of the public sphere and the emergence of new discursive regimes that challenge traditional norms of political communication. The following Discussion situates these findings within the context of post-2019 developments, exploring their broader implications for political legitimacy, media trust, and democratic resilience in the digital age.

4 Discussion

Focusing on the 2008–2019 period allows for establishing an empirical and theoretical baseline to understand the transformations in political communication—just before the radical acceleration driven by the 2020 pandemic and the rise of technologies such as generative artificial intelligence. As shown in this review, the period marks a historical threshold where the media system began to overflow traditional institutional frameworks and operate as a hybrid, emotionalized, and increasingly contested space (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Although most studies continued to focus on traditional media (television, print, websites), clear signs of structural change were emerging: the rise of digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and online opinion forums as new arenas of symbolic struggle.

This shift coincided with major political and social events, including Barack Obama's 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, the Arab Spring in 2011, the Brexit referendum in 2016, the Colombian Peace Accord plebiscite in 2016, that highlighted the central role of social networks in shaping political discourse and public mobilization (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Meanwhile, political communication began evolving into hybrid formats, combining traditional and digital media with emerging platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Telegram—where short-form audiovisual content and hypersegmented narratives now dominate (Lovera and Cardinale, 2023).

Across the reviewed literature, a consistent pattern emerges in how Ibero-American political leaders crafted their communication strategies to align with distinct configurations of symbolic power, shaped by the structural transformations of the region between 2008 and 2019. This period was marked by deep ideological polarization, institutional fragility, and growing civic disaffection (Fair, 2014; Luengo and Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013) which provided fertile ground for competing mediatized leadership models. Figures such as Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, and Evo Morales promoted confrontational styles grounded in narratives of "the people" versus "the elite," reinforced by the systematic appropriation of state-owned media and emotionally charged direct communication with citizens (Cerbino et al., 2017; Castelo, 2014).

By contrast, leaders like Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Juan Manuel Santos embraced more institutional and technocratic discourses, leveraging both national and international media ecosystems to frame their legitimacy in polarized environments

(Dießelmann and Hetzer, 2015). These divergent strategies underscore the extent to which the media ceased to be passive transmitters and instead became arenas of symbolic dispute, where political actors actively negotiated visibility, credibility, and control (Donofrio and Rubio Moraga, 2019; Richmond and Brossi, 2018).

A paradigmatic case is Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential campaign in Brazil, which signaled a turning point in the strategic use of social media for affective mobilization, algorithmic segmentation, and large-scale disinformation (Caballero Álvarez, 2015; González and Cambra, 2018). Rather than representing an isolated case, Bolsonaro's rise illustrates a broader regional trend in which political actors adopted digitally mediated narratives to exploit public discontent, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and reconfigure the symbolic battlefield of legitimacy. These developments unfolded alongside broader structural disruptions—such as the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the Lava Jato corruption scandal, and the weakening of party systems—which further exacerbated distrust in institutions and amplified the mediatization of political leadership (Triviño, 2015; Luengo and Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013; Cunha, 2015).

From 2020 onward, previously identified trends such as the spectacularization of discourse, emotionalization of politics, and audience fragmentation have intensified due to the widespread deployment of algorithms, artificial intelligence, and personalized digital platforms (Caballero Álvarez, 2015; Sandoval Vargas and Castillo Zárate, 2020). In this evolving ecosystem, the political use of data-driven strategies—particularly microsegmentation and algorithmic amplification—has transformed communication practices into mechanisms of behavioral influence and symbolic governance. What once were emotionally charged discourses crafted by political actors are now increasingly optimized, predicted, and distributed through automated systems capable of targeting electoral niches and eliciting emotional responses at scale (García-Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2018; Gaal Fong et al., 2022). Tools such as big data, machine learning, automated content generation, and neuro-designed interfaces are reshaping political communication in Ibero-America at an unprecedented level (Cajamarca Altamirano, 2023; Raj and Saini, 2023; Lazzeretti et al., 2023).

However, this technological intensification raises critical concerns. By fostering ideological echo chambers and deepening the digital divide, algorithmic personalization risks reinforcing inequality and weakening democratic deliberation—especially in regions where institutional trust remains fragile (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Ienca, 2023). Ultimately, these developments point to a paradigmatic shift: the mediatization of politics is no longer only discursive, but increasingly computational, requiring theoretical and methodological frameworks capable of analyzing how symbolic power is exercised through code.

These evolving media dynamics must be situated within the global imperative to safeguard democratic governance in the digital age—an objective explicitly underscored by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Rather than invoking these frameworks abstractly, it is crucial to interpret them as political commitments to maintaining the autonomy of symbolic production in an era increasingly shaped by opaque technological infrastructures (Mulholland, 2019). The emphasis on free, pluralistic, and independent media reflects not only a normative ideal but a recognition that the power to structure visibility, discourse, and legitimacy—what Bourdieu (1998) termed symbolic power—is now entangled with algorithmic design and platform logic. This convergence demands urgent regulatory frameworks capable of preventing information

monopolies and algorithmic capture, particularly during electoral processes where emotional microsegmentation and personalized political messaging can distort deliberative rationality and undermine democratic equality (Ananny and Crawford, 2018).

These findings suggest that the mediatization of politics in Ibero-America has entered a new phase—one in which traditional media logics coexist with, and are increasingly subordinated to, computational infrastructures that redefine the conditions of political visibility, affect, and legitimacy. This shift implies a reconfiguration of symbolic power, no longer exercised solely through editorial decisions or narrative framing, but through algorithmic operations that filter, predict, and modulate public discourse in real time (Bourdieu, 1998; Edgerly and Thorson, 2020). In this emerging context of algorithmic mediatization, platforms do not merely transmit political messages—they actively shape them through data and behavioral profiling. As (van Dijck and Poell, 2013) point out, platforms govern information flows by design, embedding political communication within algorithmic architectures. Consequently, framing theory must be expanded to consider its technical mediation, where content is not only rhetorically constructed but also configured by predictive models and automated distribution. This transformation calls for a renewed critical agenda—one that integrates computational analysis with the epistemological tools of political communication and places democratic accountability at the core of media and technology governance (Tufekci, 2017; Ananny and Crawford, 2018).

5 Conclusion

The period from 2008 to 2019 marks a pivotal inflection point for understanding political communication in Ibero-America, serving as both empirical and conceptual groundwork for diagnosing the structural effects of digitalization on discourse. Predominantly qualitative literature rooted in discourse and framing theory shows how media systems overflowed institutional boundaries, producing hybrid regimes characterized by emotionalized leadership, media spectacle, and the strategic use of platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In this scenario, mediatization became a formative force shaping what is sayable, visible, and legitimate. These transformations were deeply linked to broader political shifts, including progressive leaderships, institutional crises, party decline, and new digital activism. By decade's end, politics had grown emotional, polarized, and deinstitutionalized, with media acting as key agents in struggles for power and legitimacy.

Compared to post-2020 developments, the dynamics of the previous decade not only intensified but evolved into qualitatively distinct phenomena. The rise of big data, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic amplification reshaped the digital public sphere. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram decentralized communication flows, expanding access to visibility while increasing manipulation, polarization, and disinformation. Practices such as emotional microtargeting, automated content generation, and predictive distribution have made political communication a highly technical and datafied field, where framing also functions as a computational process (Karmasin, 2025; Edgerly and Thorson, 2020). This technological shift has driven a convergence between qualitative and computational methods—such as text mining, network analysis, and sentiment analysis—yet it also raises epistemological risks, including technocratic reductionism, algorithmic opacity, and

semantic decontextualization, which may undermine the critical and democratic goals of political communication research.

In line with the above, it is necessary to advance toward a comprehensive model that integrates critical discourse analysis with real-time machine learning techniques, enabling a joint examination of semantic complexity and algorithmic influence in political communication. This approach combines interpretive methods with computational tools such as topic modeling and network analysis to trace both meaning-making processes and large-scale diffusion patterns. As recent studies have noted (Edgerly and Thorson, 2020; Lopezosa, 2023), this hybridization enhances analytical capacity without sacrificing theoretical reflexivity, offering a valuable framework for investigating how digital infrastructures shape symbolic power and political visibility today.

In response to these challenges, three key imperatives emerge. First, the field must move toward methodological innovation by articulating the interpretive depth of qualitative analysis with the scalability of data-driven tools through hybrid designs that do not abandon theoretical reflexivity (Lopezosa, 2023). Second, it is urgent to democratize the governance of digital infrastructures by strengthening regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency, pluralism, and public accountability in algorithmic communication (Gillespie, 2018). Third, it is essential to expand digital literacy and ethical awareness in contexts where emotional manipulation and algorithmic distortion threaten the very conditions of deliberative democracy—especially in regions marked by structural inequalities and fragile institutions (Ajaegbu and Ajaegbu, 2024). Ultimately, in an era where political legitimacy is increasingly produced through predictive systems rather than public consensus, articulating critical theory and data science becomes a necessary foundation for renewing the democratic vocation of political communication in the digital age.

Author contributions

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