6,402: state killings in Colombia and the construction of fact-icons
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Introduction: numeric foundations of solidarity

In February 2021, Colombia’s Peace Court revealed that, between 2002 and 2008, the national army had murdered 6,402 innocent civilians in order to report them as enemy’s casualties, a typology of crime known as the “false positives”. Rapidly, “6,402” became an object of massive popular circulation. A common token of social mobilization and civic outrage, it spread in countless slogans, banners, walls, street performances. Opposition politicians waged the number against a government they saw as complicit with the perpetrators, and victims introduced it into the vocabulary of their struggle for justice.

I analyze how social communities canonize certain numbers by showing how “6.402” evolved from being a “mere figure” into a powerful emblem in Colombia’s political imagination. Approaching to this process from a cultural sociological perspective, I advance a new conceptualization of numbers as “fact-icons”, i.e., public objects that convey a powerful imagery of “facticity” due to their esthetic appearance, while at the same time encoding deep structures of collective meaning.

The “6,402” case points toward a broader sociological theme on the centrality of statistics in public controversies and, in particular, in the configuration of social traumas: the transformation of victim’s particular suffering into a collective suffering experienced by societies as a whole. From
pandemics and natural disasters to terrorist attacks and state-sponsored violence, many tragedies claim some form of quantification in order to be acknowledged as such by contemporary societies. Numeric references appear to be a recurrent input in processes through which societies remember, bestow significance to their collective wounds, and mobilize solidarity towards the victims of atrocities.

**Literature revision**

Sociologists have addressed the overwhelming influence of statistics in diverse realms of contemporary life: government (Hacking, 1982), academy (Espeland & Sauder, 2016), economy (Barman, 2016), self-care (Lupton, 2016), social mobilization (Bruno et al., 2014), among others (for general reviews Berman & Hirschman, 2018; Diaz-Bone & Didier, 2016; Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Mennicken & Espeland, 2019). They pinpoint how numbers are socially shaped by the interests, institutional milieu and practices of their producers, sometimes stressing the connections between quantification and specific social systems –capitalism (Scott, 2021), neoliberalism (Bruno, 2009), patriarchy (Graham, 1983), liberal democracy (Rose, 1991)–, sometimes showing that different normative orders lead to different types of statistics (Desrosières, 2014; Thévenot, 2011).

A first group of authors conceive quantification as an instrument for depicting social reality in a relatively straightforward way. Numbers are “raw” information. For example, “survey research can put a problem on the map [e.g. sexual harassment of women] by showing that it is more
widespread than previously thought” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 79), or public statistics allow “democratic accountability” by providing “accurate” evidence about the officeholders’ performance (Prewitt, 1987). In the same vein, statistics might become resources for social manipulation. Critical criminology studies underline the “dirty tricks” used by the producers of figures (e.g. inflating the numbers of crimes) to propagate a falsified image of society that fits their interests (Chambliss, 2001). The scholars organized around the Radical Statistic Group frequently recommend that the production of numbers should be more professional, independent and transparent and that the numeracy skills of public audiences should be enhanced in order to prevent statistical deceit (Evans et al., 2019). Some voices claim nonetheless that quantification is intrinsically distorting and always reproduce the worldviews of dominant groups (Graham, 1983; Scott, 2021), therefore praising for its abandonment in favor of qualitative methodologies of data gathering.

This informational view has received wide criticism from a second group of authors, more akin to constructivism, which approaches numbers not as raw data but rather as symbols, i.e., collective templates that mediate social actors’ relationships with the world. The role of statistics consists not in drawing attention to reality, but in creating such reality.

For Foucauldian scholars, quantification is a “technology of government” (Miller & Rose, 1990). The discipline of statistics introduces the very categories without which the exercise of modern government would be impossible (Hacking, 1990, 2007; Mennicken & Miller, 2012). Even if counting people does not meet the instrumental goals of government, the classifications quantification entails have an enduring, yet subjacent effect on the ways society is represented and administered (Hacking, 1982). Furthermore, the spread of a numeric rationality institutes the
disciplined political subjectivity needed in a democracy (Rose, 1991). However, when it comes to explaining the authoritative character of quantification, this perspective can only point to the technically efficient ways in which quantitative knowledge operationalizes rule (Bruno, 2009; Miller, 2001; Norman, 2014; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). For example, Merry (2016) takes for granted that a “myth of objectivity” undergirds the immense credibility of human rights indicators, but never discusses what this “myth” consists of and what makes it so compelling. Societies seem to believe in indicators because that is what the power regime requires to stabilize itself: the allure of numbers merely mirrors the allure of government. As a consequence, this position is unable to address empirical phenomena such as “statactivism” (Bruno et al., 2014), i.e. the deployment of statistics by social movements or other non or anti-governmental actors.

One final approach links the reverence of quantification to the ability of numbers in solving practical problems. Here the most influential piece (although not the earliest) is Porter’s Trust in numbers (1995). Porter reads quantification as a “technology of trust” that supplies an impersonal language for communication and that, as a consequence, became a good alternative for decision-making when professional experts and bureaucrats faced external contexts of distrust (circumstances where discretion was feared, and local forms of communication were in crisis). Both among expert communities and public officials, numbers were regarded as the paradigmatic form of “objectivity” understood as “impartiality”. Moreover,

a faith in objectivity tends to be associated with political democracy, or at least with systems in which bureaucratic actors are highly vulnerable to outsiders (…). The appeal of numbers is especially compelling to bureaucratic officials who lack the mandate of a popular election, or
divine right. Arbitrariness and bias are the most usual grounds upon which such officials are criticized. A decision made by the numbers (or by explicit rules of some other sort) has at least the appearance of being fair and impersonal. Scientific objectivity thus provides an answer to a moral demand for impartiality and fairness. Quantification is a way of making decisions without seeming to decide (Porter, 1995, p. 8).

Porter’s line of thought has been developed in different ways. For example, Thévenot’s research program focuses on how instruments of standardization (such as statistics) help solving coordination problems (Thévenot, 1984). More notably, Espeland and Sauder (2016) have argued that the appeal of quantification in contemporary societies derives from its ability to reduce the complexity of the world: “numbers make a messy and dangerous world seem easier to manage” (p. 21). By studying law schools’ rankings in the US, the authors show that figures allow non-expert audiences to make sense of settings, such as universities, that are both specialized and fiercely competitive (p. 13). At the same time, Espeland and Sauder acknowledge the cultural grounds of numeric fascination: “once quantification is associated with the virtue of discipline thinking or being free of biasing emotion, its symbolic value overwrites and sometimes supersedes its technical efficacy” (p. 24). However, when explaining why people rely on rankings, the authors underscore their pragmatic usefulness, not their cultural value. Prospective students, for example, are said to use ranking mainly to counterbalance the informational asymmetry between university insiders and outsiders (p. 50).

In general terms, this literature offers various perspectives for interpreting the social authority of numbers, with a big convergent point: quantitative authority stems from what statistics do. In other
words, numbers are veneered items by virtue of the concrete operations they perform on social reality: depicting reality, governing people, reducing the complexity of the world, providing an impersonal channel for communication, etc. In this way, analysts portray the generalized presence of numbers in public life as part of a technicalization of politics. The problem with this standpoint is that it overlooks an essential dimension of statistical power, i.e., what numbers mean: the array of images, myths, and collective representations that are sometimes attached to them. Failing to grasp the full meaningfulness of statistics hinders us from adequately accounting for how quantification affects public life. The widespread circulation of numbers does not only indicate that politics is becoming more technical, but also that politics is increasingly based on feelings, beliefs and moral expectations about “technicality”. Rendering a number as “technical” is as much a consequence of its own technical efficacy as it is a cultural process. Only after we know what statistics mean we will be able to really understand what they do or fail to do.

Examining this realm of meaning in all its depth requires a departure from two of the methodological decisions traditionally found in the studies about quantification. First, as de Santos (2009) showed more than ten years ago, this literature tends to emphasize how numbers are produced, but not how they are disseminated and discussed by audiences. It is necessary, he admonished, to further explore the “public life of statistics”. Second, this literature frequently chooses broad statistical systems as its unit of analysis (censuses, school rankings, human rights indicators, etc.), but this comes at the cost of missing the fine-grained processes through which concrete numbers achieve their allure. In fact, even within the same census or the same series of human rights indicators, figures receive variable amounts of attention and exert variable amounts
of influence. This type of outcome can only be explained by implementing a more micro analytical scope, e.g., by studying the trajectory of specific figures that gained salience before the public eye.

**Theoretical approach**

Instead of purely technical objects, we can conceptualize statistics as icons. Icons are material objects that embody collective meanings. Following Alexander, they are composed of two parts: esthetic surface and moral depth. The former refers to the sensuous experience (visual, tactile, or sonorous) delivered by the icon. The latter to the cultural discourses contained by it, i.e., following Durkheim, the ways a social community organizes its sacred and profane values (Durkheim, 2001). However, the two dimensions are closely intertwined, to the point that social actors relate to them as if they were inseparable (Alexander, 2008, 2010). Esthetic form does not only eloquently express moral qualities but is confounded with them. For example, the Berlin Wall was a material symbol of the Iron Curtain, but it also was considered to be the Iron Curtain itself (Bartmański, 2012, p. 48). Icons condense the moral fiber of society into tangible things, making collective representations immediately accessible through esthetic contact.

In such an aesthetic and sensuous compression of meaning, a certain symbolic subtlety is surely lost, but something of great pragmatic import is definitely gained. Iconic compression allows meanings “portability,” assuring their citational quality (…). The semiotic durability of the icon distinguishes it vis-à-vis other cultural elements of social life (Bartmański & Alexander, 2012, p. 2).
One first step in understanding numbers as icons comes from de Santos’ idea of “fact-totems” (de Santos, 2009). The “fact-totem” is defined as a “statistic with high media and public visibility that becomes articulated with central identity narratives of a collectivity” (p. 467). De Santos shows how a seemingly wearisome indicator of economic risk in Argentina transformed into a powerful collective representation of the nation, yielding strong emotional identification among regular citizens (see also Tognato, 2014). Of course, the meanings of statistics can relate to veneered symbols of the social community as well as to symbols of “evil”. In a Durkheimian tradition, evil refers to a domain of “negative transcendence” (Giesen, 2004) or “impure sacred” (Kurakin, 2013), which instead of collective identification awakes profound repulsion, fear and sometimes even massive moral outrage (Alexander, 2012). This meaningful reference to “evil” can be of particular importance in the case of numbers that attempt to quantify social tragedies: death tolls, poverty rates, air pollution indexes, etc.

Drawing on Porter, de Santos also recognizes that statistics are “symbols of objectivity and impersonality”. Yet, this “factual” component of the “fact-totem” concept deserves further development. Instead of actual bits of reality, facts are representations constructed as such. Every factual statement about the world, whether in the social sciences (Reed & Alexander, 2009) or in the mass media (Jacobs, 1996; Luengo, 2012; Schudson, 1989), is an interpretation that harnesses a symbolic template and implicitly allocates moral worth. Social actors, however, tend to naturalize the idea that facts are “information” untouched by judgment, therefore making invisible their representational quality. This belief is particularly important in democratic contexts, where

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1 “Visible social facts – the actions we see, the events we record, the data we compile – are not things but signs (...) Fact-signs seem objective and realistic, but they actually are built up from our imagination” (Alexander, 2011, p. 88).
mass media are in charge of filtering which facts are relevant for society and making them publicly available. In this way an anchor for broader political conversations is provided: facts are the primary material around which routine polarization unfolds (Alexander, 2006, pp. 80–85; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020). Even if sometimes the status of facts as “real” is fiercely challenged -e.g. during the climate change debate (Smith & Howe, 2015)-, often everyday democratic struggle is a conflict over the moral assessment of facts and not about the facticity of facts.

Jonathan Potter (1996) showed that the process of fact-construction involved several rhetorical stages: a concealment of interest (the appearance that there is nothing at stake for the speaker when emitting a factual claim), a neutral “footing” (the enunciation of the speaker as a third-party reporter), a performance of epistemological entitlement (the reference to an authoritative source for fact-claiming, for example by invoking a witness or an expert identity), and finally the deployment of an “empiricist” narrative mode (a rhetorical style where the speaker’s voice is impersonal and the reported seems to attain its own independent agency). This “empiricist” discourse can be paired with the “realist” genre we find in sociological writing (Reed, 2008), journalism (Park, 1941), literature (Barthes, 1969), photography or cinema (Bazin, 1960)\(^2\). It can also be paired with what Smith calls “low mimesis” discourse, a genre characterized by emotional detachment and moral dryness that serves to narrate everyday political events as mundane affairs (Smith, 2005, pp. 23–25).

The idea of “fact-totem”, or “fact-icon”, implies that the whole process of fact construction can be not only rhetorically achieved but also esthetically encrypted. Some objects gain a “factual” status

\(^2\) About photography and cinema, Bazin claims that for the first time in the history of arts “an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man” (Bazin, 1960, p. 7).
by their resemblance to an archetype of objectivity, be it a well-known image of technical rationality, journalistic independence, judicious legality, or so on. Therefore, an item turns into a fact-icon when, apart from acquiring a (i) huge public visibility and (ii) an emotional and moral significance allotted by a community (moral depth), has an (iii) esthetic surface that encodes its “factuality”. The iconic surface of statistics is extraordinarily minimal – it only consists on the visual shape of a number–, yet it is enough to esthetically point toward broader representations of mathematical/scientific rigor and in this way accomplish a factual envelope³.

Facts are symbolic representations of “real” occurrences (and not reality itself) that provide a basis for routine interpretative battles in contexts of democratic deliberation. However, when a fact attains iconic endowments, becoming a fact-icon, its circulation tends to transcend the confines of political immediacy. Instead of ephemeral disputes in the everyday public sphere, fact-icons enjoy a much longer attention span in the media and connect to deep narratives entrenched in the collective imagination. Sometimes their influence is so intense that they dramatically energize, weaken or reshape those narratives. For example, the “six million” number of Jew victims during the Nazi genocide was much more than a passing informative headline: it grew into a consequential fact-icon that penetrated the popular consciousness of the post-war period and, for decades, has been an inescapable reference in most historical and fictional representation of the Holocaust. Arguably, the “six million” figure contributed to cement the Holocaust as a fundamental trauma in the history of contemporary Western countries (Alexander, 2003).

³ In contrast to de Santos, who equalizes fact-totems with statistics, I propose that figures are only one example of a fact-icon with a scientific/mathematical referent of “factuality” (just as charts and diagrams), and that there exist other types of fact-icon with completely different “factuality” referents, whether journalistic (photographs, videotapes, audio recordings), legal (rulings, court evidence), etc.
Methodology

I reconstructed the ways in which “6.402” was discussed, mobilized, represented and contested in the Colombian public sphere, in an attempt to identify the key steps in the process of numeric ‘iconization’. The best way to grapple the dynamics of public sphere is through direct observation of its messages and interactions. Therefore, I conducted a content analysis methodology, using a “structural-hermeneutics” (Alexander & Smith, 2003) approach, which attempts to isolate the “thick” cultural structures underlying particular actions and utterances (codes, narratives, in which public discourses are embedded).

To facilitate the tracking of data, I limited my observations to press and digital versions of traditionally press media outlets, as well as social media. I focused on the two most widely read newspapers (El Espectador and El Tiempo) and the most traditional political magazine in the country (Semana). I retrieved both “factual” (news) and “non-factual” (editorials, opinion columns and caricatures) articles that explicitly referred to the “false positives” case from February 18th, 2021, day in which the JEP report was released, to August 31st, 2021. I relied on the Google search engine to retrieve all the material published in the official pages of these three media outlets, using three keywords: “false positives”, “extrajudicial executions” and “6.402”. In total, I collected 377 media pieces (158 from El Espectador, 120 from El Tiempo, and 99 from Semana).

In addition, I used social media to access how different audiences (including the “regular” citizen) talked about the number, and how do they rework traditional media accounts. Unlike hegemonic media, social media is much more open to the circulation of non-dominant and non-professional worldviews. I decided to use Twitter because it is regarded as the most political social media in
the Colombian context. I collected all the tweets mentioning the keywords “false positives” and “6402” from May 18th to August 31th, 2021, using the R package rTweet. After deleting duplicates and limiting to messages in Spanish, I obtained a total of 113,269 tweets. From that universe, I only considered for my analysis the most “influential” messages, using >50 retweets as a proxy for “influence”. The subset for influential tweets was n=1,430. For the period February 18th to May 16th, I only gathered the 50 most “influential” tweets of each day containing the two chosen keywords. I conducted this process manually, using Twitter’s own search engine⁴.

Context

For over six decades, Colombia experienced an armed conflict between the state forces and various revolutionary Marxist guerrillas, most notably the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia FARC. Between 1958 and 2012, the conflict produced 220,000 casualties -81.5% of which were civilian-, 25,000 disappeared and around 5 million forcibly displaced persons (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016). The conflict formally ended in 2016, after a peace negotiation advanced by the national government, under the administration of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), and the FARC. As a result of the negotiations, the state created the Justicia Especial para la Paz JEP, a special Peace Court with the mandate of processing war-related crimes within a transitional justice framework.

During the armed confrontation, Colombian army engaged in an illegal practice popularly known as the “false positives”, that is, the killing of innocent civilians (mostly poor youngsters, both from

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⁴ The discrepancy in methods of data gathering is due to the fact that my research process started in May 2021, and Twitter imposes a restriction for systematically retrieving tweets up to the last few days.
rural and urban contexts) in order to publicly report them as enemy’s casualties. While there have been reports on false positives since the 1980’s, this criminal behavior only became truly massive during the administration of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010). According to the JEP, 78% of all the cases from 1978 to 2016 concentrated in the 2000-2008 subperiod. In absolute terms: from 2002 to 2008, the army executed 6,402 false positives (JEP, 2021, February 12).

Media widely reported the first false positives denounces in 2008, and the case soon escalated into a national public scandal. The government reacted by showing a combination of neglect, downplaying and feeble institutional correctives. Even though the scandal has been in public circulation for more than ten years, perpetrators remain mostly unpunished, at least in the 76% of instances (Semana, 2021, February 21a), and few high rank officials have been prosecuted for their participation on these actions, let alone condemned. Many denouncers, within and outside the army, have been met with extreme forms of harassment or threatened. Widely glorified as an anti-subversive strongman, Uribe continues to be one of the most popular politicians in the country. As an illustration, current president of Colombia, Iván Duque, won the last presidential elections, celebrated in 2018, largely due to the support he received from Uribe.

Findings

The iconization of “6,402” went through three different phases: technical production, media divulgation and public circulation. This section observes the whole trajectory, but paying especial attention to circulation. After outlining what each phase entailed in general terms, I analyze the
process of meaning-making associated to the number, and then I examine how audiences refashioned “6,402” into an object of massive esthetic representation. Meaning-making and esthetic representation were the most salient dimensions of the figure’s public circulation, and the critical stages where it transformed from a mere statistic into a socially influential icon.

Birth of the figure and initial media uptake

The 6,402 false positives figure first appeared in JEP’s “Auto # 33”, a legal proceeding from February 12th, 2021, whose purpose was the definition of a methodology to investigate the false positives cases. In this 38-pages document, the JEP explained that it reached the number after conducting a “deduplication” method, applied upon three independent databases5 (JEP, 2021, February 12). The presentation of the number followed all the rhetorical stages Jonathan Porter identified with the fact-building process: “6,402” first appeared in an emotionless and sober discourse, accounted by an impersonal, “objective” voice, etc. Interestingly, the figure was not a prominent element in the document. It was only mentioned two times, on pages 6 and 9. Six days later, however, this seemingly passing figure became a formidable focus of attention across the nation. On February 18th, the JEP published a press release on its official Twitter account that brought the figure from the 6th page ostracism to the forefront. The press brief opened with: “The JEP establishes that at least 6,402 people were illegitimately killed to be presented as combat casualties in all national territory between 2002 and 2008” (JEP, 2021, February 18). Almost immediately, every media outlet, national and regional, replicated this hint, in many cases anteceding the news with a “breaking” alert.

5 One from the Prosecutor’s Office’s, one from the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, and one from the Colombia-Europe-U.S. Human Rights Observatory.
If the JEP performed the technical production of the number, mass media outlets performed its divulgation. My aim here is not to analyze why this last phase happened (why journalists coded the number as newsworthy), but to reconstruct how “6,402” was first introduced into the Colombian public sphere. Overall, I identify two key media operations: first, journalists made the figure the main protagonist of their plot; and second, they reproduced the same factual rhetoric deployed in the original JEP’s document.

News headlines focused on the number and, moreover, inserted it into a new narrative plot. Media portrayed “6,402” as being in a confrontational dispute with a prior false positives figure, produced in 2018 by the Prosecutor’s Office and divulgated by the media in 2019, which estimated a total of 2,248 victims between 1988 and 2014 (El Espectador, 2019, May 25). Semana proclaimed: “the JEP says there were 6,402 false positives in Colombia and not 2,248, as reported” (Semana, 2021, February 18b). Similarly, El Tiempo asserted: “False positives would be the triple than the reported by the Prosecutor’s Office: JEP” (El Tiempo, 2021, February 18a).

The contradistinction between JEP’s and Prosecutor’s Office’s calculations was a media narrative creation. JEP’s original report presented the Prosecutor’s Office’s estimate as a generative statistical input, not as a foil. Furthermore, the making of “2,248” as a counterpart of “6,402” actually construed “2,248” as a publicly relevant figure. When first published in 2019, “2,248” enjoyed a minor media impact and journalists refrained from placing it as a prominent character in their plot. Back then, El Espectador’s headline did not even mentioned the figure6, and few

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6 The headline was: “The crude Prosecutor’s Office’s report on false positives” (El Espectador, 2019, May 25)
political actors emitted pronouncements about it. Yet, from February of 2021 henceforth, several pro-governmental spokesmen started to publicly embrace “2,248” as the only admissible false positives figure. The minister of Defense declared, for example, his respect for “the figure around 2,400, obtained by judicious analysis of the Prosecutors Office” and attacked JEP’s number pointing that “figures are being inflated without any legal process, disregarding the serious work of entities that do have dedicated to it” (El Tiempo, 2021, March 28).

Media also stressed how the publication of “6,402” shocked the nation to its core. El Tiempo remarked: “the country is painfully surprised [by the figure]” (El Tiempo, 2021, February 18b), and a day later affirmed that the number “resuscitated the horror of the false positives” (El Tiempo, 2021, February 19a). El Espectador’s editorial claimed that “the systematization and contrast effort advanced by the JEP has a devastating symbolic force” and that the number was a “bucket of cold water for all those who wish to adopt denialism as a strategy of historical memory” (El Espectador, 2021, February 22). Journalists narrated the birth of the figure as if the false positives phenomenon had just been unveiled or (re)discovered, and thus transformed it into a morally significant event, a moment of collective mourning. The sole publication of the number had to elicit intense emotional responses. Politicians and other personalities had a duty of displaying remorse and compassion for the victims, and failing to do so showed offensive disregard for the false positives’ victims. Several commentators reproached, for example, how General Zapateiro, commander of the Army, “had space to express condolences in name of the institution for the death of Pablo

7 These responses were met, in turn, with indignation: “The axis of the defense in the case of “false positives” is: “there were not 6,402 innocents murdered, there were only 2,248”. What an infamy!” (Galán, 2021, February 22).
Escobar’s hitman, but before this he only offers hispid silence or perhaps insults”\(^8\) (Gutiérrez, 2021, February 25).

**From number to fact**

Media approached “6,402” as a fact from the outset. The three outlets I analyzed first reported the release of the number in the same fashion: “The Peace Court *revealed* that from 2002 to 2008 6,402 people were victims of this phenomenon” (El Espectador, 2021, February 18a); “The jurisdiction *revealed* the ominous figure” (El Tiempo, 2021, February 18a); “JEP *reveals* that there were 6,402 victims of false positives between 2002 and 2008” (Semana, 2021, February 18b; all three emphases are mine). The “revelation” metaphor eloquently illustrates various of the features Jonathan Potter links to the rhetorical process of fact construction.

First, this metaphor frames the “6,402” figure not as an artifact construed by someone at a particular time-space, but as an already existing reality that had not yet been noticed and, as such, as fundamentally disinterested. Instead of a motivated viewpoint, the number was a pristine reflection of the world, something hidden from sight that had been uncovered. Secondly, the use of the “revelation” metaphor was also a form of “neutral footing”: the production of “6,402” was performed by a third party, not by themselves. Also, by presenting the divulgation of the 6,402 number as a “revelation”, the media operated at the level of epistemological entitlement. Treating the JEP as an authority capable of making such “revelations” meant that it was conferred a

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\(^8\) The author is contrasting two different events: one, when Zapateiro declared, after Pablo Escobar’s most famous hitman died out of natural causes in 2020: “we largely regret Popeye's departure, we are human beings” (Semana, 2020, February 6); and two, when Zapateiro tweeted, implicitly alluding to the JEP’s report, “we will not be defeated by poisonous snakes” (Semana, 2021, February 19).
legitimate status as a “fact” producer, instead of as a source of mere “statements” or “opinions”. The JEP was not voicing a stance; it was speaking the “truth”. As El Tiempo stated in its editorial: “In the face of JEP’s revelations, we only have to wait for truth to come with the highest rigor” (El Tiempo, 2021, February 21a). Or in El Espectador’s words: “the figure of at least 6,402 (...) is a significant step forward in the quest for truth” (El Espectador, 2021, 22 February). Competent state officials, and in particular those from the justice system, are expected to rely on exhaustively scrutinized evidence, and thus are thought of as being above the messiness of political tussles. In an interview with El Tiempo, the president of the JEP embodied this exact framework:

the JEP does not exist as an instrument of revenge but as an instrument of justice. And to make justice we have to be based on truth, which we obtain from what we can prove in trial. The JEP only gives credit to what is duly proven (El Tiempo, 2021, February 21b)

Media treated the JEP, a high-profile Court, as a trustworthy “official” source, as institutionally designed to “say the last word” on the matter. Several quantifications of “false positives” victims publicly circulated in Colombia since the scandal started in 2008. Before JEP’s report, NGOs and political activists typically used 10,000, and in some instances 5,763. However, media outlets rarely referenced such numbers, and in any case did not regard them as “factual” but as “versions”, likely because they had not been produced by “official” sources⁹. The most salient “official” source delivering a figure in the past had been the Prosecutor’s Office. As we said before, when reporting

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the release of the 6,402 figure, media outlets continually contrasted it with 2,248, pinpointing the power of “officiality” as a facticity maker.

Much of the pushback the figure received tackled JEP’S entitlement or JEP’s impartiality. Several government spokesmen attacked the Court’s “official” credentials, declaring that the construction of the number had not been rigorous enough. President Iván Duque expressed: “justice always is grandiose when it comes with objective truth, uncontroversial, in rulings and providences, not in microphones” (El Espectador, 2021, February 24). High Commissioner of Peace talked about the number as based on unverified data (Semana, 2021, February 24). Former president Uribe, in turn, accused the JEP of calculating the 6,402 based on “biased” sources, i.e., “NGO’s that are declared ideological enemies of my government” (2021, February 19c). When such remark was confronted on Twitter by José Miguel Vivanco, Human Rights Watch’s director for the Americas division, Uribe publicly affirmed that Vivanco was a militant of the FARC (Semana, 2021, February 21b).

Due to its exposure to criticism, official seriousness and gravity were not a one-event accomplishment, but they had to be subsequently sustained. Three weeks after the release of the report, JEP’s Twitter account broadcasted a meme (Figure 1) that sparked a wave of public controversy and threatened to jeopardize the institution’s entitlement. Semana published four different articles showing how this affair shed doubts about JEP’s trustworthiness (Semana, 2021, March 3a, b, c, d). For its part, El Espectador attempted to save the JEP’s face (Goffman, 1955) by portraying the episode as a “public communication” mismanagement, interviewing an “expert” in political communication who explained that the JEP “didn’t foreseen the impact nor protected
the institutional brand” (El Espectador, 2021, March 11). Hours after, the president of the JEP announced the removal of the meme from JEP’s Twitter account.

![Figure 1 – Meme published by the JEP’s Twitter account. Taken from El Espectador (2021, March 11). Translation: Frame 1: are you going to sleep? // Frame 2: yes, now shut up. // Frame 3: 6,402 false positives in Colombia // Frame 4: ...](image)

Media also manufactured an “empiricist” or “realist” genre in their texts. Journalists chose an impersonal voice to account for the release of the number, for example by minimizing the use of any expressive language, and by implementing a flat narration: the rhetoric of no-rhetoric (Restrepo, 2004). Several resources concurred in this endeavor: the use of abundant quotations from JEP’s report, passive voice, and the predominance of additive connectors (“and”) instead of contrasting (“however”) or causal (“thus”) ones. All in all, media presented their initial accounts as “low-mimesis” (Smith, 2005, pp. 23–25) reports, with little subjective intervention on their part. Even when they employed adjectives -for example, by referring to the figure as “bloodcurdling” (El Tiempo, 2021, February 18a)-, these were presented as purely descriptive.
Fact-building work was an essential part of media divulgation of the figure. It was consequential, furthermore, because it fixated “6,402” into the public baseline commonsense. In doing so, journalists equipped the figure with an immense authoritative power, not because public facts bring unilateral consensus, but because in this way they offer ample room to frame its detractors as “irrational” deniers of reality. For example, a commentator deemed all criticisms of “6,402” as indications of a new “post-truth era”:

There was always dirty propaganda, fraud and fanaticism in Colombia and everywhere, but now they do not even care about facts (...). Our president asked the UN’s Human Rights Counsel for the end of indifference towards the “atrocious crimes” of Venezuela’s regime, but very little referred to the 6,402 extrajudicial executions uncovered by the transitional justice, because his deal is to entrench, live and insist in the country of the no: in this country there is no JEP, there is no state violence nor war (Silva, 2021, February 25).

Statistics meet popular culture

Media divulgation was followed by the last and longest phase in the figure’s lifespan: public circulation among audiences. In general terms, this process made evident the influence of facts as galvanizers of collective sentiments of certainty. The main false positives victims’ organization, MAFAPO, referred to the “6,402” figure as “forceful evidence” (El Espectador, 2021, February 19a), former president Santos claimed that “the truth about the conflict is being known” (El

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MAFAPO is the acronym for Madres de Falsos Positivos (Mothers of false positives), an association created in 2010 that groups the mothers and other family members of 19 victims of false positives.
Espectador, 2021, February 19b), while a commentator suggested that JEP’s report performed a “rigorous research that does not leave room for doubts” (Gómez, 2021, February 21).

Moreover, the circulation of the number actually \textit{amplified} its authoritative power. Most of the time, actors (commentators, caricaturists, activists, and regular citizens) invoked “6,402” without explicit references to what the figure quantified, gradually transforming it into a stand-alone symbol, somewhat independent from its technical purpose. Detached from its ostensive referent, but also from its context of production and rhetorical justification, the facticity of “6,402” started to be embodied into the compressed visuals of the sequence six-four-zero-two. The process of dissemination made the esthetic appeal of the number particularly salient, further bolstering in this way a suspension-of-disbelief effect.

![Figure 2 – Performance in Bogotá’s central square. Source: Botarte, 2021, August 30.](image)

This happened, I argue, because audiences implicitly connected the number, via esthetic resemblance, with broader images of rationality, scientific, and mathematical exactness. Tellingly, days after the publication of the figure, the president of the JEP compared, in an interview with El
Espectador, the work of the Peace Court with Baruch Spinoza’s job as a polisher of optical glasses: “Just as his philosophy allowed for a better vision of human existence, our work as polishers will allow to better comprehend the criminal dynamics during the Colombian conflict” (El Espectador, 2021, February 20). By virtue of such implicit connections, the number accrued a “surplus of truth”, a dimension of popular facticity on top of that construed by the media.

By the same token, the number was esthetically associated with the abstraction and impersonality of scientific reason, which also fostered feelings of uneasiness and suspicion. The seeming aseptic aspect of the number raised some skeptic attitudes among its audiences. After all, “6,402” pointed towards a delicate and sacred topic (the deaths of innocent victims) while appearing to be devoid of affective engagement. Because iconic numbers have a “hot” depth (as we will see) wrapped in a “cold” surface, they tend to foster such emotional ambivalence. “6,402 is not a figure, it is 6,402 murdered people (…), 6,402 terror stories, 6,402 families, 6,402 cries of bewilderment and plea, 6,402 is a national tragedy in our long history of horror” (de Bedout, 2021, February 2). “To accept that this is a discussion that must be reduced to numbers is indolent and outrageous” (Calvás, 2021, February 22). “[Victims of false positives] are not numbers, they are lives” (Pacifista, 2021, February 19).

The number and everyday politics

After becoming a media fact, “6,402” was not an icon yet. To become an icon, the figure still needed to attain a lasting public visibility and a well rooted place into the broader political imagination of its audiences. In this process, the role of professional journalists as fact-producers
was crucial, but not enough. Other actors (victims, politicians, opinion leaders, grassroots activists, NGOs…) had to step into the scene to infuse the esthetic surface of the figure with deeply held moral meanings and emotional value. Figures can be argued upon, but their actual suasion does not always derive from their uses in rational deliberation.

We can divide the meanings associated to “6,402” in two layers: a first, more superficial layer, refers to interpretations of the number contingent to ongoing political discussion, while the second layer refers to interpretations of the number connected to less contingent, more latent and durable cultural structures: encompassing myths and symbols of the nation.

The first layer of meanings revolved around a polemic that circulated regularly within Colombian political landscape: how widespread had been the false positives? Had they constituted a generalized phenomenon or rather a set of scattered occurrences? Typifying the phenomenon in one way or another was not only an intellectual endeavor. It carried the problem of who was morally responsible for the murders, whether a crew of individual soldiers acting on their own will (interpretation raised by Uribe and his supporters) or a larger, recognizable collective force (Uribe’s political movement, the Colombian state, the army, society as a whole, etc.). For example, according to MAFAPO, the 6,402 figure was a “forceful evidence that these murders were systematic and generalized”, therefore “the proof that Seguridad Democrática\(^\text{11}\) was a criminal policy” (El Espectador, 2021, February 19a). This interpretation, in turn, aimed at polluting both Uribe’s and Colombia’s army reputations as anti-subversive heroes: “Today the walls say you killed 6,402 INNOCENT youngsters and made them appear as guerrilla members. LYING

\(^{11}\) Seguridad Democrática is the name of the governmental policy during Uribe’s administration.
MURDEREDS. YOU NEVER WON THE WAR. YOU FABRICATED A LIE” (Peralta, 2021 April 4). The figure “makes evident the evident impossibility of presenting real casualties and reinforces the idea that only a peace negotiation could have deescalated the complex armed conflict with the FARC” (García de la Torre, 2021, February 21).

The interpretation of false positives as a “generalized” or “systematic” phenomenon was not born with the number 6,402. Already in 2010, when the country ‘only’ knew 1,800 denounces of false positives, UN’s Human Rights Council was admonishing that those were not “isolated cases” (Salazar, 2010, May 27). What changed now is that the “systematicity of the false positives” framework became intertwined with the “6,402” figure, thus it could be much more compellingly depicted as fact-driven, i.e., as not politically motivated.

Mythical backdrop of quantification

Considering how common it is for facts to end up embedded in everyday interpretative battles within the political sphere, the first layer of meanings cannot explain why JEP’s number became iconic. Indeed, the process of iconization depended more on how thick its second layer of meanings was, i.e., on how successfully the figure entrenched in broader cultural structures shared by the community. The connection between the number and deep sentiments of national identity is well illustrated by the following fact. From May 17 to August 31, only in three days the number of tweets mentioning “6,402” surpassed 700: in June 12 (when former president Santos appeared before the Truth Commission), in July 4 (Uribe’s birthday) and in July 20, Colombia’s National Independence Day. On that day, a Twitter user traced a parallel between the red in Colombia’s flag and the “blood of 6,402 false positives” (Gómez, 2021, July 20).
“6,402” connected with two preexisting cultural structures at the core of Colombian political imagination: the “useless democracy” and “violence as fatalism” narratives. Both were narratives of moral decline and existential hazard that specifically attempted to define the contours of “evil”, and how to face that “evil” as a national community.

The “useless democracy” narrative sees Colombia’s political history as a long succession of authoritarian-disguised-as-democratic governments, administered by a group of elites that only rule on their behalf and do not hesitate in deploying brute violence every time they feel threatened. Uribe’s administration, and particularly the false positives scandal, embody one crucial milestone of this long succession, but are not considered to be an extraordinary deviation from the canon:

I cannot say that (…) the inability to align with the victims and against the perpetrators, even with respect to the worst crimes [i.e., false positives], is a monopoly of a single political clan. It is profoundly enthroned in our public life. The exceptionality of uribismo consists of expressing with clarity (…) something that was already there (Gutiérrez, 2021, February 25).

It is ridiculous to see pro-Uribe journalists and Santos’ defenders blaming each other for the false positives. That’s how rancid our governing elites are. They killed more than 10 thousand poor youngsters but only care about who ends up less blood tainted. Bastards! (Rincón, 2021, February 21).
The “useless democracy” trope works as a counter-narrative. It frequently defines itself by opposition to a common understanding among intellectual and political elites, according to which Colombia stands out among its Latin American pairs as the “oldest democracy” in the subcontinent. Such a version praises the country for its centuries long, uninterrupted democratic tradition - with bullet-proof institutional stability, periodic elections and power alternation, civil control of the Executive, free press, and independent Courts-, in contrast to its neighbors, rendered as much Fraser and prone to the rise of dictatorships and military coup d’états12.

Colombia prides of being the oldest and most stable democracy in the continent, and in strict terms, that is the case (...). [However], in what kind of democracy there are 6,402 homicides of citizens to make them appear as legal casualties of the public force?” (Bustamante, 2021, May 13)

Colombian democratic institutions are seen as formalistic and ultimately hollow. “I do not trust democracy “indexes”. Colombia, country of false positives (...), appears as an “Imperfect Democracy”; only steps behind Uruguay’s exemplar democracy” (Alifa, 2021, May 21). “Colombia needs (...) TRUE DEMOCRACY. NOT URIBISMO, which only knows how to murder youngsters, execute innocents, state crimes, crimes against humanity, war crimes. So far 6,402 and counting” (Antonio, 2021, July 17). Uribe, on his part, is represented as the head of a

12 The “oldest democracy” narrative is more than an analytic account: it evokes and worships an immemorial past that is supposed to guide the fate of the community and make national identity both distinctive and a source of pride. For decades, political elites have employed this narrative to brand the country in the international arena. The official webpage of the national tourism agency includes an article discussing “why it is said that Colombia has the oldest democracy in Latin America”. “Such is one of the statements”, the article continues, “that prides Colombians, in spite of the polemic it fosters” (Colombia CO, n.d.).
tyrannic power and typically teamed up with Latin American dictators. One common trope was to compare 6,402 with the number of victims of several despotic regimes, prominently the military dictatorship in Chile: the false positives figure doubled the number of victims under Pinochet (see Figure 3). “In Argentina the dictators alleged ‘mistakes and excesses’ for the 30 thousand disappeared. Pinochet’s dictatorship alleged ‘mistakes and excesses’. Colombia’s democracy too much resembled the dictatorships in the region” (Pachón, 2121, February 21). “Between a dictatorship that kills 10,000 Haitians and a democracy that executes 6,402 false positives a family bond is created, one that is difficult to hide” (de la Torre, 2021, March 15). Even though false positives victims were not political cases stricto sensu, this narrative tended to implicitly equate them with murdered political opponents. A Twitter user traced a genealogy that connected the false positives with the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 and with the mass killing of leftist party Unión Patriótica’s militants in the eighties (Martell, 2021, May 6). Also, when HRW denounced that 31 deaths had occurred during the 2021 national strike against the pro-UrIBE government, Mafapo’s Twitter account replied: “31 + 6402 and will keep going up” (Mafapo, 2021, May 6).
The “violence as fatalism” framework sees Colombia’s history as immemorially traversed by violence, as trapped in an endless loop of lethal aggressions and brutality (from a variety of sources: civil war, urban crime, narcotrafficking, etc.). In the background of public conscience, it lurks the idea that violence is part of Colombian’s “nature”. For example, in a 2021 interview with a psychiatrist, a renowned journalist asked without irony: “is it true that in the Colombian DNA you find the violence gen?” (Orozco, 2021, August 7).

The problem is not so much reduced to the behavior of anti-democratic elites; instead, it is a matter of societal bankruptcy. False positives constitute, again, a protuberant milestone of such a narrative. Due to this tragedy, “we represent one of the most aberrant cases worldwide of War degradation” (de Zubiría, 2021, April 13). With the figure 6,402, the false positives were consecrated as a transcendental horror not only for the nation, but for universal humankind:
“Almost 7,000 youngsters massacred is a holocaust that will be never erased from human memory” (Arbeláez, 2021, June 15).

Some commentators connected the “6,402” figure with a “circularity of violence” theme. “The possibility of repetition is latent” (Vanegas, 2021, April 26). “This is not (...) the first time we are before the possibility of reactivation of violence. Precisely that, the ‘eternal retour’, is the most concerning” (García Villegas, 2021, March 5). Others highlighted how the country was so submersed in violence that had already accept it as an inexorable part of its landscape. “6.402 is a number that would be a monumental scandal in a country that would not be ill13 of violence” (Morales, 2021, February 25). “The youngsters found a society anesthetized by the death. 6,402 executions of civilians (...), 904 social leaders killed since 2016, 276 former combatants (also since 2016), 2,387 cases of police violence and 51 murdered in 20 days of protest” (Guzmán, 2021, May 20). 6,402 is a “figure that does not surprise, but terrorizes. The impunity does not astonish us anymore, because we have get used to it” (Pombo, 2021, March 22).

If in the “useless democracy” narrative Uribe was portrayed as the paramount Colombian dictator, in the “violence as fatalism” saga he is depicted as a bloodthirsty thug (see Figure 4). A Twitter user talked about “Uganda’s slaughterer, Bosnia’s slaughterer, the Balkans’ slaughterer, and now Colombia’s slaughterer #6402” (Ortiz, 2021, February 23). “There are 6,402 reasons to mobilize, say the Colombian people to the international community and to the GENOCIDAL Uribe responsible for the false positives” (Chalecos Amarillos, 2021, April 28). “Álvaro Uribe forced his son to take his own vomit14, and then he was the president of the 6,402 coldblooded murders. In a

13 Note the biological metaphor.
14 The author is referencing a childhood anecdote publicly told by Uribe’s eldest son.
decent country this psychopath would be sharing prison with [children’s serial killer and pederast]
Luis Alfredo Garavito” (Klein, 2021, April 24)

Figure 4 - Tutanmatón. Taken from Matador, 2021, March 15. In this caricature, Uribe is dressed as a murderous Egyptian pharaoh who lived in 6,402 b.f. His crown features a skull. His name has a similar sounding as Tutankhamun, but it translates “you so thug”.

“Esthetistics” or the beauty of horrifying numbers

An important lesson from the 6,402 case is that numbers do not gain influence simply because they are useful tools for strategy-oriented actors. Previous false positives figures (10,000, 5,763, 2,248) were just as politically instrumental as 6,402, yet none of them acquired a fact-icon status. They tended to enjoy a minor presence in the media and a much narrower dissemination. This happened partly because they failed to connect to broader cultural structures, and partly because their circulation was not compelling enough (in esthetic terms) as to keep alive and refurbish the emotional effervescence attached to the figure. Figures gain authoritative power insofar as they are staged in esthetically poignant fashions before the public eye.
We discussed how numbers convey a strong imagery of “facticity” due to their resemblance to symbols of mathematical and scientific exactness. It is possible that some particular features of “6,402” further contributed to its image of accuracy, for example the circumstance that it was not a rounded number. As a commentator stated:

50 years ago, the symbolic number that marked the great massacre of the army was “more than 3,000”. The great massacre of the army is now a surgical number: 6,402 (…). Exact figures have an especial power. Their precision gives credibility and a hypnotic quality (Villa, 2021, February 25).

At first glance, there does not seem to be more to add about the sensuous allure of numbers. Their visual aspect is utterly flat, after all. However, in spite of (and perhaps because of) their minimal esthetic surface, we will see that numbers have a huge plasticity and can be displayed through countless channels.

6,402 rapidly became an object of massive representation. Social movements incorporated it into their protest slogans by employing linguistic games such as metonymy, for example in “6,402 reasons to mobilize” (Figure 5). Public exhibitions of the figure did not necessarily aim at “spreading the news” as much as at awakening emotions. It stopped being a measure of the false positives phenomenon and became a way of enacting it in the public stage. The number had something more that informational eloquence; it had its own expressiveness.
Social movements sought to connect the figure with emblematic monuments (Figures 6 and 7) as well as to introduce it into the everyday urban landscape (Figure 8). The minimal esthetic surface of the number amplified its technical reproducibility; thus, anyone with little skills and resources could produce a public representation of the icon (Figure 9). Of course, some actors made higher investments to stage the number in stylized fashions, as exemplified by the street performances in Figures 10 and 11 or the quasi-catholic ceremony with a flower offering in Figure 12. Furthermore, various representations of the number put it into dialogue with other already established icons related to the false positives case: Uribe’s face (Figure 13), skulls (Figure 14), coffee\footnote{The coffee connects to a famous 2008 Uribe’s declaration with regard to the early false positives denounces: “[The victims] mustn’t have been harvesting coffee. They had criminal motives”. In a video-caricature by Mheo (2021, February 21b), we first see a skull, among a pile of skulls, asking: “and the political responsible?”. Then, Uribe passes in front of the pile riding a horse, calmly drinking a cup of coffee. Then, the skull on the top of the pile, with a “6,402” written in the front, responds the question: “must be drinking coffee”.}, pairs of boots on the wrong foot\footnote{The origin the wrong foot boots as an icon associated to the false positives scandal goes back to 2008: the first juries investigating the case famously found that many victims wore boots on the wrong foot (left} (Figure 15), etc.

\footnotetext[15]{The coffee connects to a famous 2008 Uribe’s declaration with regard to the early false positives denounces: “[The victims] mustn’t have been harvesting coffee. They had criminal motives”. In a video-caricature by Mheo (2021, February 21b), we first see a skull, among a pile of skulls, asking: “and the political responsible?”. Then, Uribe passes in front of the pile riding a horse, calmly drinking a cup of coffee. Then, the skull on the top of the pile, with a “6,402” written in the front, responds the question: “must be drinking coffee”.

\footnotetext[16]{The origin the wrong foot boots as an icon associated to the false positives scandal goes back to 2008: the first juries investigating the case famously found that many victims wore boots on the wrong foot (left}
boot on the right foot and vice versa). Such a detail strongly suggested that the victims had not died in combat, but were staged to look as if (Semana, 2010, July 16).
Figure 8 - Intervention in a bus stop in Bogotá. Source: Mafapo, 2021, June 10

Figure 9 - Graffiti in Bogotá, 2021. Translation: “6,402 We do not forget”. Author's personal archive
Activists paint 6,402 silhouettes on the floor, each one numbered from 1 to 6,402. The intervention extended for several kilometers in the streets of Bogotá and passed next to various symbolic places, among others the city’s central square, the Central Cemetery, and the JEP (Mafapo, 2021, June 4).

Figure 10 – Performance in the making. Activists paint 6,402 silhouettes on the floor, each one numbered from 1 to 6,402. The intervention extended for several kilometers in the streets of Bogotá and passed next to various symbolic places, among others the city’s central square, the Central Cemetery, and the JEP (Mafapo, 2021, June 4).

Figure 11 – Flower offering. Source: Mafapo, 2021, July 13
Figure 12 – “6.402 en la impunidad”, caricature by Gova (2021, March 14)

Figure 13 – Graffiti in Bogotá, June 2021. Author’s personal archive.
Mathematical intertextuality

Although promoters of “6,402” selected many different forms of representation, the visual shape of the number remained a key factor for its diffusion. A recurrent practice was to build a plot by exploiting the resemblance of “6,402” with other mathematical objects (figures, arithmetic operations, concepts of number theory, etc.). This form of mathematical intertextuality sometimes came across as committed to statistical rigor, but it was actually esthetic in nature. From a technical point of view, the relationships between “6,402” and other mathematical objects were often spurious. From the point of view of the iconization process, though, mathematical intertextuality could be very consequential in expanding the esthetic appeal of “6,402”.

“6,402” was assiduously contrasted with already iconic figures. One Twitter user indicated how Uribe suffered from “numberphobia”, listing three numbers negatively associated with the former
president: “first the #82 (narcotrafficker), then the #1087985 (prisoner) and now the #6,402 (false positives)”\(^{17}\) (Tweet, 2021, February 21). We explored above how the figure was also paired with other iconic statistics (Figure 2 features a contrast between “6,402” and a number from a famous dictatorial regime). The resource was so common that even adversaries of the figure employed it. Uribe’s supporters opposed JEP’s (illegitimate) figure to the (legitimate) Prosecutor’s Office’s one, and in some cases compared it to non-false positives figures: “Why the left in this country does not say something or protest for the 7’900,102 FARC’s victims, the same way they do with an untrue figure as the 6,402?” (Forero, 2021, April 1).

“6,402” was also assiduously related to non-iconic mathematical objects. A well-known mathematician eloquently demonstrated why, strictly according to the technical definition within number theory, “6,402” was a “mean number” (Mantilla, 2021, March 16). On Uribe’s birthday, thousands of Twitter messages associated former president’s number of lived years with the false positives figure: “Uribe on his birthday doesn’t count 69 candles, but 6,402 deaths” (Ximena, 2021, July 4). A famous historian decided to “follow the logical chain of figures”, claiming that if compared to the total number of deaths in combat presented as members of illegal armed groups in the period 2002-2010, “we reach the monstrous conclusion that the false positives represented one out of two deaths reported” (Sánchez, 2021, February 24). Similarly, another Twitter user reformulated the figure into measures of time more akin to everyday life, in an attempt to further

\(^{17}\) About the origin of “82” and “1087985”: in 1991, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) wrote a document listing 104 Colombians that were directly or indirectly connected to Pablo’s Escobar criminal cartel. Uribe was included as the number “82” in that list. In 2004 the DIA declassified the document (Ackerman, 2016, March 16). On the other hand, in 2020 Colombia’s Supreme Court of Justice ordered the preventive house arrest of Uribe for a case of witness tampering. During his short time detained, he was assigned the number “1087985” (Semana, 2020, August 12).
express the horror encapsulated by it: “6,402 citizens in 2,190 days. That is, 1,067 poor people killed every year, 90 per month and at least 3 per day” (Voluntad, 2021, February 18).

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