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Commentary

Using misinformation as a political weapon: COVID-19 and Bolsonaro in Brazil

With over 30,000 confirmed cases, Brazil is currently the country most affected by COVID-19 in Latin America, and ranked 12th worldwide (John Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). Despite all evidence, a strong rhetoric undermining risks associated to COVID-19 has been endorsed at the highest levels of the Brazilian government, making President Jair Bolsonaro the leader of the "coronavirus-denial movement" (Friedman, 2020. To support this strategy, different forms of misinformation and disinformation[2] have been leveraged to lead a dangerous crusade against scientific and evidence-based recommendations (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

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Sustaining a COVID-denialist stance through misinformation

The spread of misinformation and disinformation, including its use by the current government, has been under investigation in Brazil since 2019 by a dedicated Parliamentary Commission (*Comissão Parlamentar Mista de Inquérito - CPMI*) created by the National Congress. According to several testimonies collected within the scope of the investigation, it was identified that a structure linked to the office of the Presidency, nicknamed the "Office of Hatred," coordinates the spread of disinformation, including defamatory messages against opponents of the President, such as prominent figures from the government (Agência Estado, 2020b; Barbiéri et al., 2019).

In the context of the coronavirus crisis, the Commission is currently conducting a specific investigation into the online profiles spreading misinformation related to the pandemic and has identified a surge of misinformation around three major themes. The first theme is around pseudo-scientific information about symptoms, risks and cures. The second is regarding prevention and control measures adopted by other countries and recommended by international organizations, and their supposed 'catastrophic' collateral effects. The third theme focuses on attacking (or promoting) decision-makers or public figures

[1] *A publication of the Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy, at Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.*
[2] Respectively defined as, "information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true" and "information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false," both defined as different types existing on the "spectrum of 'information disorder.'"

in order to delegitimize those supporting social isolation measures (including state governors that have implemented quarantine, media outlets, health specialists, and even the Secretary of Health Luiz Henrique Mandetta, with whom Bolsonaro had public disagreements), and on praising those who publicly support a 'return to normality' (certain government officials and businessmen).

Overall, the messages have a common intention: to minimize the severity of the disease, discredit the social isolation measures intended to mitigate the course of the disease's spread and increase the distrust of public data, as explained by Congresswoman Natália Bonavides, a member of Parliamentary Commission:

> Among the fake news about the disease and the way countries and institutions are dealing with it, we identified topics such as the indication of vaccines or home remedies that would be the cure or the recipe for not contracting the virus; the statement that substances such as chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine would already have proven effectiveness; claims that there is no difference in deaths between countries that have adopted isolation or not; false news of looting or shortages due to isolation measures; about how deaths from other causes are being accounted for by coronavirus; among many others.[3]

In addition, the Brazilian news agency Lupa, which is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), compiled a collection of messages that falsely attribute "positive actions" to public figures that support the government, in order to enhance their credibility (Equipe Lupa, 2020). One message showed (false) donations to fight the coronavirus by a prominent millionaire businessman (who defends the end of isolation). Another claims that General Augusto Heleno, head of the Institutional Security Office of the Presidency, was cured by the medication hydroxychloroquine, of which President Bolsonaro is a vehement advocate.

To date, the Commission has not yet released evidence to conclude that the so-called Office of Hatred, or members of the Brazilian government, are directly coordinating the spread of misinformation about COVID-19. Part of the government, in particular the President himself and his close support groups, have however sustained their denialist stance by conveying misinformation, particularly regarding the symptoms, risks, and cures of the virus, and instigating risky behavior.

Since mid-March, Bolsonaro has urged Brazilians to "return to normality" in several occasions, ignoring growing empirical evidence about the positive effects of social distancing to flatten the infection curve. He has repeatedly adopted a provocative stance, seeking to minimize the risks posed by the virus. He has engaged in risky behavior such as breaching his quarantine order after having had contact with an infected person, pro-actively seeking opportunities to greet and hug supporters, or taking walks around the city to talk to the population or get coffee (Agência Estado, 2020a; Mazui, 2020; Fellet, 2020). At the institutional level, the Communication Secretariat of the Presidency even launched the campaign "Brazil Cannot Stop," which was featured in official government channels for nearly an entire day (see below). The campaign preached the end of social isolation and the reopening of businesses. Based on no scientific data or evidence, and in contradiction to the recommendations of the Brazilian Department of Health led by Luiz Henrique Mandetta, the campaign was almost immediately suspended by the Federal Court of Rio de Janeiro and subsequently deleted. After that, the head of the Communication Secretariat, Fábio Wajngarten (who contracted COVID-19 on a trip to the United States), denied the campaign's existence. Even so, the opposition parties filed a lawsuit with the Attorney General's Office to investigate the use of official government channels for the dissemination of a campaign against World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations. According to analysts, Bolsonaro's push against social isolation is strongly motivated by mitigating, or at least dissociating himself from, the foreseen economic effects of the pandemic, as explored further ahead. His stance has increased tensions within his own government, to

[3] Natália Bonavides, Federal Congresswoman. Testimony granted to the authors on April 8, 2020.

the extent of triggering, on April 16, the dismissal of Secretary of Health Luiz Henrique Mandetta, who refused to adopt a denialist approach.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the campaign #BrazilCannotStop featured on government official social media channels on March 27, 2020.

President Bolsonaro's recurring statements about COVID-19 have become one of the main vectors of misleading content. For example, through his periodic social media live-streamed videos as well as official government channels, Bolsonaro has promoted erroneous information about the effects and cures of the virus, based on unknown data or inconclusive scientific evidence. The President has made statements such as: "90% of people infected [by COVID-19] will not feel any symptoms,"[4] "if I contracted COVID-19, because of my athletic background, I wouldn't feel anything or at most the symptoms of a gentle flu,"[5] or suggesting that "armored glass protects against the virus entering a space."[6] Moreover, Bolsonaro is invoking a false certainty to promote the potential efficacy of the medication Reuquinol (hydroxychloroquine, hydroxychloroquine sulfate), urging to "apply it promptly" in severe coronavirus cases and stimulating a crusade against doctors and specialists, who are still cautious about its use for COVID-19 treatment. In fact, a study by Prof. Didier Raoult, largely associated with the excitement about the drug, has been criticized by the scientific community as "…riddled with enough methodological flaws to render its findings unreliable or misleading" (Piller, 2020, para. 9). The WHO is currently conducting trials for the most promising treatments, including hydroxychloroquine, but no results have been released

[4] "Noventa por cento de nós, não teremos qualquer manifestação caso se contamine." (Official Statement from President Jair Bolsonaro, March 24, 2020), "Não vou minimizar a gripe, sem bem dizem aí os infectologistas que para 90% da população essa gripe não é quase nada." (Weekly Live with President Jair Bolsonaro, 26/03/2020)

[5] "No meu caso particular, pelo meu histórico de atleta, caso fosse contaminado pelo vírus, não precisaria me preocupar, nada sentiria, ou seria, quando muito, acometido de uma gripezinha ou resfriadinho." (Official Statement from President Jair Bolsonaro, March 24, 2020)

[6] "Fechar casa lotérica, pelo amor de Deus. Fechar casa lotérica. Inclusive o cara tá na casa lotérica, tem um vidro blindado, quer dizer, não vai passar o vírus ali. O vidro é blindado, não vai passar." (Weekly Live with President Jair Bolsonaro, 26/03/2020)

yet (Kupferschmidt & Cohen, 2020). These, among other statements, have triggered reactions from international stakeholders. On March 31, the WHO publicly denied Bolsonaro's statement according to which the WHO Director-General would have argued that "informal workers had to continue working." A few days earlier, Twitter deleted two tweets from Bolsonaro's official account as part of its recent policy against COVID-19 related misinformation (Coronavirus: World leaders' posts deleted over fake news, 2020). The tweets were related to an improvised city tour, in which the President defended the use of hydroxychloroquine and the end of social isolation.

Figure 2. Screenshot of President Jair Bolsonaro's weekly live, on March 26, 2020, featured on his social media channels.

Bolsonarist public authorities follow the President's rhetoric, such as his three children (Eduardo Bolsonaro, Federal Congressman; Flávio Bolsonaro, Senator; Carlos Bolsonaro, Councilor in Rio de Janeiro), former Secretary of Citizenship Osmar Terra; current Secretary of Environment, Ricardo Salles; current Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Ernesto Araújo, among others. On their social networks, there are posts of distorted or decontextualized information that lead to mistaken conclusions, and/or manipulated content (manipulated videos, graphics, etc.). In March, Twitter also deleted posts from the Secretary of Environment and Senator Flávio Bolsonaro. According to the Brazilian news agency Lupa, mentioned above, over one hundred examples of false information (ranging from misleading to fabricated content) circulating on social networks were identified, and several of those were relayed by government members mentioned above.

National populism, dis- and misinformation: The case of Bolsonaro

Both Bolsonaro's campaign for office and his mandate as president since January 2019 have been marked by the recurring use of different forms of dis- and misinformation. As a campaign strategy, Bolsonaro bet on the "anti-system" rhetoric, attacking the supposed political "establishment" and invoking different types of dis- and misinformation before and during the campaign (Macedo, 2018). Exploring the fears and prejudices of the average voters, a pervasive social media operation involving misleading, manipulated, and fabricated content was set in motion, which leveraged to its advantage a context of rejection of traditional parties and discredit towards democratic institutions (Avelar, 2019).

His election mirrors the process of rise of right-wing populist leaders who came to power in other countries during the past decade (Da Empoli, 2019). Bolsonaro successfully mobilized part of society against an "enemy" to be beaten (primarily the "left" or "communists," among others), normalizing discriminatory discourses, while leveraging the capillarity of social media. Several candidates in the 2018 presidential race used mass messaging services on WhatsApp (one of the most popular communication apps in Brazil) offered by the company Yacows for their campaigns (Rodrigues & Gomes, 2020). Bolsonaro's campaign particularly stood out among the candidates because of its massive and orchestrated use of disinformation, and the fact that it was financed by private companies (which is currently prohibited in Brazil[7]), as shown in several investigations published by the national and international media (Mello, 2018; Nemer, 2018). As the Folha de São Paulo newspaper has reported, the content was spread both from outside the country, as well as from Brazilian telemarketing companies. The collaboration of Steve Bannon, former vice president of Cambridge Analytica, is a strong indication that Bolsonaro's campaign has acquired databases for the distribution of messages to targeted micro-segments of the electorate (Amadeu da Silveira, 2018).

Since the beginning of his term, Bolsonaro has remained an agent of information disorder, leveraging his massive audience and making recurring use of bots (Kalil & Santini, 2020). He also uses what Giuliano Da Empoli calls "saturation of the public debate" with controversial and false statements. During this period, anti-scientific theories that had no relevance in Brazil (for example, flat earth theories or negationism of climate change) have acquired strong advocates on the national level and paved the way for the dangerous equivalence between opinion and science (Profissão Repórter, 2019). According to Da Empoli (2019), "behind the apparent absurdity of fake news and conspiracy theories, a very solid logic is hidden. From the point of view of populist leaders, alternative truths are not simply propaganda tools. Contrary to true information, they are a formidable vector of cohesion." That is, for national populists, the accuracy of individual facts does not matter as much as the message as a whole, which is tailored to speak to the feelings and sensations of the population. As a result, the defects and vices of populist leaders become instead positive qualities in the eyes of their followers and "the tensions they produce at the international level illustrate their independence, and the fake news that pervade their propaganda are the mark of their freedom of spirit" (Da Empoli, 2019). Thus, their refusal to accept and play by contemporary democratic and social standards is seen as an act of courage and a rupture with the "system" instead of simple populist pyrotechnics. This stance, however, keeps the far-right leader dependent on a vicious circle where controversies need to be constantly fueled to keep his audience properly mobilized. This is what we have seen since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil.

Coronavirus denialism: A risky bet towards responsibility exemption?

But why would Bolsonaro be so committed to minimizing the seriousness of the epidemic? The answer seems to go beyond pure and simple denialism. Projections by financial institutions such as Bank of America foresee a 3.5% drop in Brazilian GDP in 2020 (Tuon, 2020). The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Brazil's trade relations (which is dependent on commodity exports and relies on China as its main trading partner) could lead to the amplification of the social crisis that has been dragging on since 2014, when the country entered a cycle of recession and subsequent stagnation that pushed 30 million people back to poverty. According to political analysts, this is the main reason behind Bolsonaro's desperate attempts to minimize the urgency and severity of the pandemic (Roque, 2020). By keeping the

[7] Because the use of databases for mass messaging financed by businessmen, Jair Bolsonaro's campaign is investigated in the Superior Electoral Court. If convicted, Bolsonaro and his deputy, retired general Hamilton Mourão, could have his victory overturned.

economy running, Bolsonaro could potentially lessen the economic impacts of social isolation or exempt himself from the responsibility for the recession that looms on the horizon.

In his latest official statement (April 8, 2020), Bolsonaro has already shown signs that he may adopt this tactic, stating that "many measures, whether restrictive or not, are the sole responsibility of [governors and mayors]" (Planalto, 2020). Meanwhile, the number of cases and deaths in Brazil continues to grow exponentially, and the government's conflicting measures and statements continue to put thousands of lives at risk, particularly those of the most vulnerable (Carvalho et al., 2020).

The stance Bolsonaro has adopted is obstructing the possibility of a nation-wide coordinated response and hindering the efforts led by the national Department of Health and (now former) Secretary Luiz Henrique Mandetta, as well as state and municipal authorities. Today, Bolsonaro is one of the only heads of state to continue denying the risks associated with COVID-19 (Jair Bolsonaro isolates himself, in the wrong way, 2020).

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