

ARTICLE

# VIOLENCE AGAINST JOURNALISTS ON JAIR BOLSONARO'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL:

analysis of the first 100 days of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil



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**ABSTRACT** – Social platforms are environments prioritized by populist governments around the world and spaces frequently used for exchanging information without journalistic mediation. Invalidating the press is an increasingly evident strategy by political voices: a warning sign of attacks against journalists, amplified during the covid-19 pandemic. Jair Bolsonaro is one of the more striking examples in Brazil and this article aims to understand the frequency and types of attacks on the press in videos published by the Brazilian president's YouTube channel. A hybrid methodology of content analysis and digital methods is developed for this study. The time frame covers the first 100 days of the health crisis in the country – from February 26 to June 4, 2020. The results show that the press is mentioned in 36% of the content; 40% of which represents criticism, 28% verbal attacks and 26% media discredit.

**Key words:** Jair Bolsonaro. Attacks on the press. Covid-19. Digital methods. YouTube.

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## **VIOLÊNCIA CONTRA JORNALISTAS NO CANAL DE JAIR BOLSONARO NO YOUTUBE: análise dos 100 primeiros dias de pandemia de covid-19 no Brasil**

**RESUMO** – As plataformas sociais são ambientes priorizados por governos populistas em todo o mundo e configuram espaços de troca de informação sem mediação jornalística. Invaldar a imprensa é uma estratégia de ação cada vez mais evidente de vozes políticas: um sinal de alerta de violência contra jornalistas, amplificada durante a pandemia de covid-19. Jair Bolsonaro é um dos exemplos mais contundentes no espectro brasileiro e este artigo pretende compreender a frequência e tipos de ataque à imprensa presentes nos vídeos publicados pelo canal do presidente brasileiro no YouTube. Para tal, reúne-se uma metodologia híbrida com análise de conteúdo e métodos digitais. O recorte temporal abrange os 100 primeiros dias de crise – de 26 de fevereiro a 4 de junho de 2020. Os resultados apontam que a imprensa é citada em 36% do conteúdo. Destes, 40% representam críticas, 28% ataques verbais e 26% descrcredibilização.

**Palavras-chave:** Jair Bolsonaro. Ataques à imprensa. Covid-19. Métodos digitais. YouTube.

## **VIOLENCIA CONTRA PERIODISTAS EN EL CANAL DE JAIR BOLSONARO EN YOUTUBE: análisis de los primeros 100 días de la pandemia covid-19 en Brasil**

**RESUMEN** – Las plataformas sociales son priorizadas por gobiernos populistas de todo el mundo y son frecuentemente espacios de intercambio de información sin mediación periodística. La invalidación de la prensa es una estrategia cada vez más evidente por parte de las voces políticas: una señal de alerta de violencia contra los periodistas, amplificada durante la pandemia del covid-19. Jair Bolsonaro es uno de los ejemplos más determinantes del espectro brasileño y este artículo tiene como objetivo comprender la frecuencia y los tipos de ataques a la prensa que aparecen en los vídeos publicados por el canal de YouTube del presidente brasileño. Para tal fin, se desarrolla una metodología híbrida con análisis de contenido y métodos digitales. El marco de tiempo cubre los primeros 100 días de la crisis de salud en el país – del 26 de febrero al 4 de junio de 2020. Los resultados muestran que la prensa se menciona en el 36% del contenido, en el que el 40% representa críticas, el 28% ataques verbales y 26% de descrédito mediático.

**Palabras clave:** Jair Bolsonaro. Ataques a la prensa. Covid-19. Métodos digitales. YouTube.

### **1 Introduction**

Violence against journalists has drawn a lot of attention due to the new coronavirus pandemic and an increased number of restrictions against press freedom, arrests, and threats made to journalists throughout many countries. In Brazil, organizations that represent journalism, such as the National Federation of Journalists (Fenaj), the Brazilian Press Association (ABI) and the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), have denounced the escalation of violence against journalists in the first few months of

the health crisis. Different reports and news released between April and June 2020 demonstrate that media attacks have escalated due to Covid-19 and political instability in Brazil.

The fight against disinformation and polarizing discourse presented an added challenge to journalism around the world. The issue emerged as a warning in different areas, such as the term infodemic/disinfodemic used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco, 2020) to refer to the rapid and uncontrolled dissemination of unproven or unsubstantiated information on social platforms. In Brazil, the government of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro uses negationist discourse when speaking on the effects of Covid-19 and tries to discredit media outlets and the actions they endorse to effectively fight the pandemic, such as social distancing and mass testing. During this time, there has also been a significant increase in attacks against journalists and an erosion of freedom of expression in the country.

This whole situation has placed Bolsonaro as one of the 37 world leaders on the RSF's<sup>1</sup> "predators of press freedom" list. Bolsonaro's main targets are female journalists, political analysts and the free-to-air television network TV Globo, owned by the largest media conglomerate in Brazil, Grupo Globo. Using insulting language, insults and harassment are among the most frequent ways he attacks the media. This kind of behavior can be seen as an institutionalization of attacks on journalists in the country, with the president of Brazil as the key figure.

Considering the regularity with which Jair Bolsonaro uses virtual environments and the impact that his discourse of self-validation has means it is important to look at the process of platformization (Van Dijck et al., 2018) and how it increasingly overlaps with journalism on social platforms. Large corporations on the web do not just operate a distribution channel, as was believed when journalism first started integrating with social media. It is very clear that platforms determine what the public sees, determine who will be remunerated for audience numbers, and determine which format and genre of journalism will be successful (Bell et al., 2017). The use of information as a discursive strategy to spread hate speech in these digital environments, combined with disinformation (a term known as the weaponization of information), has led to the dissemination of illogical or obstructive content, often by using the languages and structures of journalism to disseminate partial, false or

unrelated data. In the current context, these discourses increasingly come from political authorities.

Our goal is to understand how Jair Bolsonaro expresses himself on the most popular video access platform in the world, YouTube. The focus is specifically on his tone in relation to the press during the first stages of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil. The objective is to identify patterns and frequency of press mentions, as well as to observe the engagement of these videos based on the themes presented.

In this article, we first present the context related to the pandemic and violence against journalists, according to recent studies. We then present the methodological procedures and the main results.

## **2 Violence against the press during the pandemic in Brazil**

Like the former president of the United States, Donald Trump (2017-2021), Bolsonaro prioritizes social platforms as a form of communicating with his supporters. In an age of disintermediation between sources and the public (Shaw, 1997; Cardoso et al., 2020; Brio, 2018), they often hold back information from journalists, or even deny it, especially when faced with the possibility of negative public reaction. Doing this reinforces the idea that the press is unreliable, thereby presenting themselves (the presidents in this case) as the source of the “truth” about events. The disintermediation of sources is complex and multifaceted because, by appropriating virtual spaces, the source becomes a direct channel of information for the same audience that consumes journalism. Thus, depending on the appropriation, it can provide greater proximity and diversification of information for the audience (Pinto, 2000) or, as observed in populist/technopopulist cases (Pagoto & Longhi, 2021), act as the only credible option for information – a behavior that often includes accusing the press of manipulation and fake news<sup>2</sup>.

This strategy of discrediting the media has been frequently used by the aforementioned politicians since their electoral campaigns. In Brazil, Ricard and Medeiros (2020) claim that the president has become one of the main vectors of misleading content. Focusing on the coronavirus pandemic, the authors cite examples

of videos posted by Jair Bolsonaro on his different social platforms, the content of which does not contain any information backed by scientific evidence about the effects of Covid-19 and its possible treatments. These videos may have had an adverse effect on the restrictive measures adopted at the onset of the pandemic and the absence of a national plan to combat the virus, as evidenced by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) on the Covid-19 pandemic, installed by the Senate<sup>3</sup>.

In March 2020, one month after the first confirmed Covid-19 case in the country<sup>4</sup>, practically all Brazilian states began adopting restrictive measures to prevent the spread of the disease. Governors and mayors established social isolation measures and forced businesses to close to prevent the spread of the virus, following recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the former Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta. Even still, Bolsonaro did not support the temporary closure of businesses as he believed there was a greater virus out there: one of unemployment and starvation.

Ajzenman et al. (2020) analyzed thousands of geolocation data and identified a connection between Bolsonaro's discourse and ignoring social distancing. According to the study, places with larger numbers of Bolsonaro supporters also registered higher numbers of non-adherence to public health measures, while areas where support for Bolsonaro was low showed that health measures were being followed.

When analyzing bolsonarism<sup>5</sup>, Rocha and Solano (2020) determined that the president still has a loyal support base, despite the health and political crisis. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with different profiles of Bolsonaro supporters and concluded that the so-called "loyal followers" believed in Bolsonaro, and blamed the press and the Federal Supreme Court (STF)<sup>6</sup> for preventing him from doing his job properly. According to the study, there is a feeling of "confusion", of being lost when it comes to the real facts about the pandemic. This feeling is exacerbated "[...] by the mass misinformation and distrust that exists both concerning traditional media and the information that travels on social networks" (Rocha & Solano, 2020, p. 17).

According to the Brazilian National Federation of Journalists (Fenaj), the discrediting of the media, led by the president, has had an adverse effect on the population in the fight against the pandemic<sup>7</sup>. Between January and April 2020 there were 179 attacks by Bolsonaro

against journalists<sup>8</sup>. He encouraged his followers to doubt the press and to discredit news they report about the pandemic. At the end of March 2020, Reporters Without Borders published a news item denouncing Bolsonaro's attitude toward media in the country and his failure to combat the spread of the pandemic<sup>9</sup>.

Bolsonaro came to be recognized worldwide for his negationist stance. He advocated in favor of the so-called “early treatment”<sup>10</sup> for Covid-19, encouraging the use of drugs that were unproven by science and not recommended by the World Health Organization<sup>11</sup>, such as ivermectin (an antiparasitic medicine used to treat problems such as scabies, lice and roundworm) and chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine – used to treat malaria and autoimmune diseases. He also spoke against the use of masks, social isolation, and other restrictive measures adopted to contain the spread of the virus. As a result, Brazil was one of the countries with the highest daily covid-related death rates in March 2021, ranking second until December of the same year<sup>12</sup>.

This kind of behavior adopted by the political class and civil society has isolated Brazil. Machado et al. (2020) analyzed content on misinformation about Covid-19 provided by 70 fact-checking agencies from different countries. The results indicated that, in November 2020, Brazil was the only country to have a continuous flow of fake news about ivermectin and chloroquine. According to the researchers, the other countries in their analysis showed “waves of disinformation” during the first year of the pandemic.

Soares et al. (2021) analyzed posts from WhatsApp groups about the pandemic and identified that the flow of disinformation is guided by political agendas circulating in the public space. According to the authors, in addition to trying to minimize the seriousness of the pandemic, the posts were also used to discredit opponents, in addition to helping cut down any political damage to Bolsonaro's image by reinforcing the far-right discourse.

In 2020, violence against the press increased 105.77% in Brazil, with Jair Bolsonaro personally responsible for 40.89% of the cases, which translates into 152 attacks against journalists in the press or specific media outlets (Fenaj, 2021). A survey conducted by Reporters Without Borders shows that Bolsonaro's immediate circle was responsible for 580 attacks on journalists<sup>13</sup> on social platforms in 2020. The “Bolsonaro System” is composed of the president, ministers, and three of his five children, who are also politicians:

Flávio Bolsonaro (senator), Eduardo Bolsonaro (federal deputy) and Carlos Bolsonaro (Rio de Janeiro city councilor). Social media is used as the main instrument to spread hate against journalists.

In April 2020, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ, 2020) spoke to 1.308 professionals from around the world (22% of which were Brazilian) and concluded there was an increase in attacks against the press during the period. Verbal harassment by politicians, unsafe working environments for journalists conducting investigations, and restrictions against asking questions about Covid-19, not to mention the difficulty in accessing sources, were all reported to have been occurring. Considering the Brazilian scenario, working conditions were also reported to have worsened (Fenaj, 2020; Figaro, 2021).

### **3 Violence against journalists online**

Christofoletti and Torres (2018) separate the online risks for journalists into three categories: environmental, management, and interaction. This third category is the object of study in this article – online interaction: “When routines, customs, relationships and symbolic exchanges with subjects, systems and organizations allow for threats and damage” (p. 5).

Pérez et al. (2019) classify digital violence, based on online harassment, as being verbal and symbolic. Verbal harassment includes discrediting content and verbally attacking the chosen target’s relatives. Symbolic harassment is characterized by the use of violent images. Both forms of harassment leave professionals open to systematic intimidation and can lead to censorship and self-censorship, in addition to changes having to be made to professional practices to preserve personal and family integrity.

In this respect, “social networks can be a powerful weapon in the hands of populists” (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 612)<sup>14</sup>. By analyzing the role of Twitter and Facebook in the discourse of populist and non-populist deputies from three European countries, these authors concluded that the way social platforms are designed benefits this type of discourse. The disintermediation they provide allows you to talk directly to people without intermediaries or filters. The study also highlights interactivity as an important feature as it facilitates engagement and direct conversation with audiences. Lastly, the

potential for content to go viral is another contributing factor in the dissemination of political discourse on social networks.

Jacobs et al. (2020) also emphasize that it is necessary to observe the different discursive strategies adopted by the platforms according to their target audience and structure. For them, Twitter is used to intimidate or directly attack journalists through what they call “naming and shaming” – publishing the name of a person and publishing a defamatory statement about said person. It is not only a person’s professional identity that is damaged but their reputation as a human being, the individual behind the journalist. A post is considered “shaming” if it contains one or more statements that create reputational damage.

According to the authors, Facebook is used more to mobilize the audience and create a feeling of revolt by appealing to the audience’s emotional side. These types of messages seek to mobilize the audience by creating issues they feel they can identify with. One aspect of this kind of discourse is to create emotions of fear, anger, and resentment. There is also content that seeks to create feelings of nationalism by re-establishing what they call “truth” and “good habits” which they describe as being typical of “good citizens”. Jacobs et al. (2020) emphasize that Facebook helps disseminate posts that reinforce the divisive ideology of the “other versus us”. In this case, the “other” would be anyone who shares a different position. The ability to demonstrate emotions through emojis encourages this type of reaction, something very present in the content posted by Jair Bolsonaro.

When studying independent Brazilian media, Ganter and Paulino (2020) state that the virtual environment can pose several threats to the safety of professionals. Among such risks are attacks and online monitoring that compromise not only the freedom of journalists but also intimidate news sources. There are also recurrent risks such as judicial abuse and economic and ideological pressures, which can escalate into physical and mental violence. “In the current scenario, with the rise of the new right, the psychological pressure has increased [...]. This environment has also consisted of attacks designed to create reputational damage” (Ganter & Paulino, 2020, p. 11)<sup>15</sup>.

This poses a threat to press freedom, and especially to democracy, as it tries to silence the media through coordinated efforts of intimidating journalists and companies. This is followed by comments, actions by haters and online bullying as social platforms allow for individual attacks on journalists or companies due to how they are designed. For Fadnes et

al. (2020), this is one of the forms of pressure journalists from all over the world suffer, which results in self-censorship as a way to protect themselves, the organization, or their families.

Benítez (2020) illustrates these conditions by analyzing the social factors that are partly responsible for self-censorship practiced by journalists in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. From a social point of view, he considers these countries to be “unsafe democracies” as they are formal democratic regimes that coexist with high levels of economic inequality, violence, and organized crime. “These countries also face challenges in overcoming institutionalized corruption, an ineffective judicial system and high levels of impunity” (Benítez, 2020, p. 25, our translation)<sup>16</sup>. It highlights several pressures from different sources: the high concentration of media; the economic dependence on government advertising or funding from entrepreneurs linked to the business and political elite; and deregulation and lack (or non-compliance) of legislation to protect the profession. The social structure imposes constraints and socio-psychological pressures that influence the decision-making process, according to the author.

Similar risks also occur in Mexico, which is considered to be one of the most violent countries in the world for journalists. Ramírez (2015) presents the interrelationship between politics, organized crime, media concentration, and press freedom. According to this researcher, the lack of state action in apprehending criminals, investigating crimes, and protecting journalists add up to creating a vulnerable environment, especially in areas with less state presence and fewer advocates for organized civil society. This means those who work in the press are exposed to different risks that can affect their professional and personal integrity. In the Mexican state of Veracruz, Montiel (2015) observed that professionals are subject to different types of threats and harassment, by the state, by drug traffickers, and also by businesses. For this author, there is a relationship of dependence between these three groups, which is reflected in censorship, intimidation, and bribery. Added to this is “[...] naturalized structural or systemic violence, which includes low wages, unjustified layoffs, lack of job security, etc.” (Montiel, 2015, p. 422, our translation)<sup>17</sup>.

This convergence between job insecurity and violence poses risks to the professional's livelihood. This is verified through risk and pressure factors, which result in greater vulnerability. In Brazil, one can also see violence being institutionalized through the discourse of political leaders, starting with the President of the Republic.

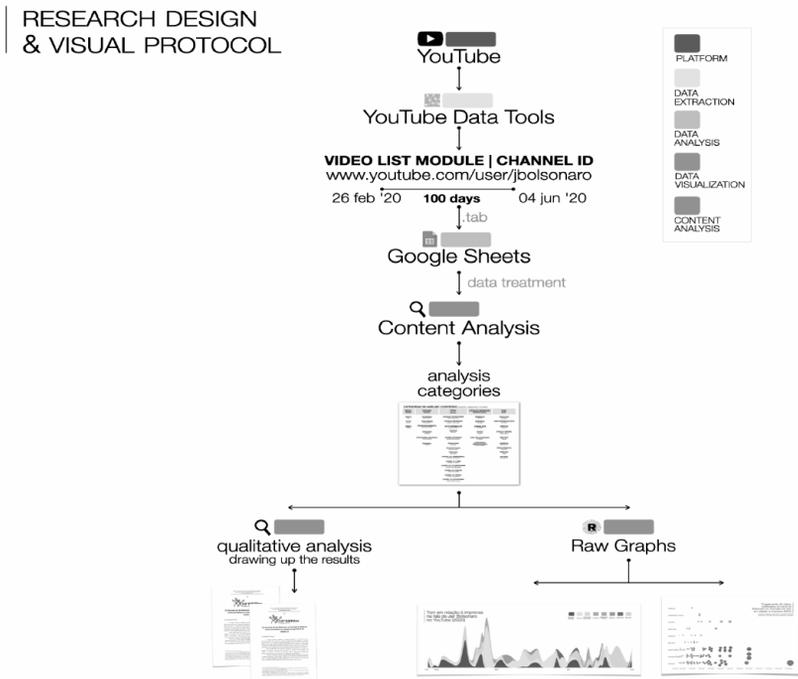
### 4 Methodology

This paper uses a hybrid methodology (figure 1) of content analysis (Bardin, 1999) and digital methods (Rogers, 2013). After a preliminary and exploratory observation of Jair Bolsonaro's<sup>18</sup> official profiles on social media, we chose to analyze his YouTube profile as it functions as a kind of repository of videos that he uses to republish on his other profiles. In addition, this platform is one of the main channels for publishing and consuming videos on a global scale; it is the platform that has the second-highest level of global engagement (Alexa, 2021).

The time frame of our analysis covers the period from February 26th — the date on which the first case of Covid-19 was officially registered in Brazil —, according to the Ministry of Health — to June 4th, encompassing key events from the first 100 days of the crisis in the country.

**Figure 1**

*Layout of the methodological steps in this study*



To appropriate the content disseminated on a social platform, it is important to understand the concepts of these environments. Digital methods (Rogers, 2013), for instance, offer an approach to understanding how digital native metrics and objects can be used simultaneously as an object and an investigation tool. An important notion is the grammatization (Gerlitz & Rieder, 2018; Omena et al., 2020) of social media, which corresponds to all traceable actions and collective forms of activity imposed and rearranged by these environments from software such as application programming interfaces (APIs). Likes, comments, dislikes, shares, and views are part of the platform's specific nature, which add it to the culture of use.

Apart from the technical specifics, it is also important to understand that digital methods are often simplified; a moderate definition describes them as a “[...] quali-quantitative research practice that re-imagines the nature, mechanisms, and data native to web platforms” (Omena, 2019, p. 6). In this sense, our interest is not only centered on the development of technical functions and native objects, but also on how these elements are appropriated to design standard behaviors on social platforms.

For this, we performed data extraction using the YouTube Data Tools software<sup>19</sup> (Rieder, 2015) which collects data via the YouTube API (V3). We applied Channel Info modules that provide basic information from a channel on the platform using the identifier code (id) and Videolist — which extracts a list of all the videos published on a channel also via id, and includes data such as video URL, title, description, date and time of publication, duration, view counts, likes, dislikes, favorites, comments, and more. The output files are in .tab and can be edited in programs like Excel or Google Sheets.

Considering the nature of the published content, it is essential to observe the visual and aesthetic aspects of the videos. For this article, we were able to identify and define the most recurrent structures and patterns associated with the video producer, such as audiovisuals captured and edited by third parties, namely supporters and influential figures in the digital universe of Jair Bolsonaro. These productions often use bright colors, particularly the patriotic shades of green and yellow, and large lettering with slang phrases as a way to attract the audience's attention — especially since audiences often watch videos without any audio as the text on the screen tells them what the content will be. In this sense, it is easy to identify amateur filming, framing, and editing

that, although might discredit official information, uses “simple aesthetics” (Sontag, 2003; Silva, 2013) to give the impression that leaders are just ordinary citizens too. On the other hand, official videos from the Federal Government, such as those by the Special Secretariat for Social Communication of the Presidency of the Republic, or even statements broadcast on national television, are examples with better quality audios, smooth transitions, subtitles, and visualization of the government's branding.

Even though this helps to understand the communication strategy and interpret the data, the central focus of this article is content analysis. This is characterized by what is written in captions, descriptions, and titles, or what is said in the videos (Rubin & Babbie, 2016).

An exploratory analysis of the videos was conducted first, observing the titles and descriptions of the posts to be analyzed. This stage involved carrying out the so-called “active reading” (Bardin, 1999), in which general characteristics are perceived and preliminary thematic units are outlined. We found that some of the titles exhibited violence against journalists in the form of aggression or mockery. During this stage, we also paid attention to the issuer of the videos, and we found that their origin is not always from content or speeches made by Bolsonaro. We identified a strategy of third-party content being republished to validate positions. During this process, we were also able to catalog the main topics the president communicated on this channel. Then, the initial classification process was carried out, in which the origin, topic and citation to the press were verified. The general objective was to understand what was said, where the content came from, and if the press was mentioned. We then defined the three initial thematic units, which we subdivided into categories of analysis.

After this first classification phase, the analysis categories were refined and the need to better delimit how the press was mentioned was observed. We were also able to better elaborate the type of mention about the press, in which different forms of violations were observed: from criticism and discrediting to verbal attacks and encouraging physical aggression by republishing the content of journalists being attacked. We used this to finalize the content analysis protocol. A new analysis of the videos was carried out, but this time we reclassified the mentions of the press and confirmed the initial categorization.

After the final content analysis protocol, we classified the posts into four Thematic Units: source of content, topic of publication, mention of the press, and tone of reference in videos published on Bolsonaro’s YouTube channel (table 1). Each unit is made up of different categories of analysis, which are the indicators observed in each analyzed group (figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Protocol of content analysis developed for this study*

**▶ ANALYSIS CATEGORIES | CONTENT**

SOURCE	THEME	MENTION PRESS	TONE
GOVERNMENT	ATTACK OPPONENTS	GENERIC	DISREGARD
THIRD-PARTIES	ATTACK ON THE PRESS	COMPANY	DISCREDIT
PRONOUNCEMENT	SELF PROMOTION	JOURNALIST	CRITICISM
UNOFFICIAL	DEFENSE	SUPPORT	VERBAL ATTACK
CROSS-POSTING	GOVERNMENT ACTIONS	UNRELATED	NEUTRAL
ORIGINAL	IDEOLOGY	CONTENT RESHARE	HARASSMENT
	DISINFORMATION		PREJUDICE
	INTERACTION		THREAT
	COVID-19   LITTLE FLU		PHYSICAL AGGRESSION
	COVID-19   WHO		COMPLIMENT
	COVID-19   CHLOROQUINE		
	COVID-19   DATA		
	COVID-19   GENERAL		
	COVID-19   ECONOMY		

**4.1 Description of thematic units and categories of analysis developed**

**4.1.1 Source**

This unit aims to identify the source of the videos published on the president’s official account. It is divided into six categories of analysis:

- Government: these are videos produced by the Brazilian Federal Government’s Communication Secretariat or by ministries and federal secretariats, regardless of whether Bolsonaro participated or not. They appear with the official identity of the public bodies that produced them.

- Third-Party: these are videos made by people other than Jair Bolsonaro, his direct staff, or the federal government. This category includes supporters, ministers, or politicians (not involved with official production), journalists, influencers, businessmen, etc.

- Statement: these are official videos from the federal government containing statements made by the president to the people. They are broadcast on national radio and television channels (on the same day and time). This is how the president directly communicates with citizens on important dates (such as Labor Day) or events that are of significance to the country (such as decisions on the Covid-19 pandemic).

- Unofficial: these are videos that appear to have a more amateur quality to them, sometimes containing blurred images, bad camera angles or poor quality in general; however, they are made by the president's entourage and staff. Bolsonaro is always depicted as the main actor.

- Cross-posting: this is content that was initially published on the official profiles of Bolsonaro's other social media platforms.

- Original: these are videos made exclusively for YouTube and are not published on any other media form.

#### 4.1.2 Topic

Seeks to understand the main topic of each published video. In some cases, there is more than one topic. The categories of analysis were based on the most recurrent topics during the exploratory analysis.

- Opposition attack: directly attacks a politician or any person who opposes Jair Bolsonaro or his government.

- Press attack: the core message is in opposition to the press, a media company, a specific journalist, or content published by the media.

- Self-promoting: they portray the president as a model person, a model politician, and a "good citizen", or simply sing the praises of his government and its actions.

- Defense: content that supports the president and his government and tries to promote Bolsonaro's image. They appear mainly during periods of crisis in the government or corruption cases involving the president's family members.

- Government Actions: they seek to promote a positive

image of Bolsonaro, describing his accomplishments in the federal government or the consequences of his actions.

- Ideology: this is in respect to the ideological slogans used by Bolsonaro and his supporters, such as “fight against communism”, “freedom of expression”, and “traditional family”.

- Disinformation: content that takes science-based information or information released by the press and uses it out of context, attempting to mislead the public with unsubstantiated data.

- Interaction: videos focusing on Bolsonaro’s relationship with his followers.

- Covid-19: content that addresses the new coronavirus pandemic. Due to a large number of videos on this topic, we divided them into six subcategories: Mild flu – content that compares the pandemic to mild flu and its effects on public health; WHO – directly linked to decisions or statements made by the World Health Organization decisions or its spokespersons; Chloroquine – publishing and encouraging the use of unproven drugs which are currently proven to be ineffective; Data – official information and statistics on the pandemic, often used out of context; Economy – encouraging ‘normality’ and economic recovery, disapproves of social distancing and lockdown actions; General – general topics not included in any of the other subdivisions.

### 4.1.3 Press quotes

This unit seeks to understand which entity or individual the press mentioned. This is the result of refining the exploratory analysis to identify only the presence or absence of content related to the press.

- Generic: considers journalism, the press, or journalists in general as an institution or professional category.

- Press: is directed toward a specific organization that is named publicly.

- Journalist: directed toward a specific individual whose name is made public.

- Support: videos or statements that commend journalists or media companies, names are always made public. Created to more easily distinguish between positive and negative mentions.

- Unrelated: does not make any mention of the press, journalism or any journalist.

- Republished content: clipping or prints of press content.

#### 4.1.4 Tone

We observed how the press or journalists are treated in the videos that quote the press. We observed the tone of speech, whether it was normal, altered, yelling, and we also observed the physical reaction of the individual who had quoted the press.

- Disregard: this is a form of disrespecting the press or journalist by blatantly ignoring a question or person.

- Discredit: seeks to discredit information published by the press or a journalistic or professional company in the hopes of reducing public trust, usually accomplished by questioning the professional credibility of the media outlet or the content published.

- Criticize: directly criticizes a person or institution, drawing attention to mistakes made using negative or derogatory statements.

- Verbal attack: direct verbal aggression, often accompanied by a change of tone in voice, aggressive gestures, and irritable or stupid attitudes.

- Neutral: general comments or reproduced news content with no comments or evaluation of the content.

- Harassment: attempts to use authority and power to intimidate or instill fear.

- Bias: biased statements made against specific people or groups such as women, indigenous people or homosexuals.

- Threats: direct threats against a journalist or news organization. They can be physical aggression, press freedom or financial sustainability.

- Physical aggression: videos showing physical attacks, or attempted physical attacks, on journalists while reporting on the scene.

- Praise: journalists or media organizations regarded by Bolsonaro and his followers as quality, cited by name.

After all the videos had been categorized, percentages were calculated, individual spreadsheets were prepared and then data was applied to the Raw Graphs web-based visualization tool<sup>20</sup>.

### 5. Discussion of results

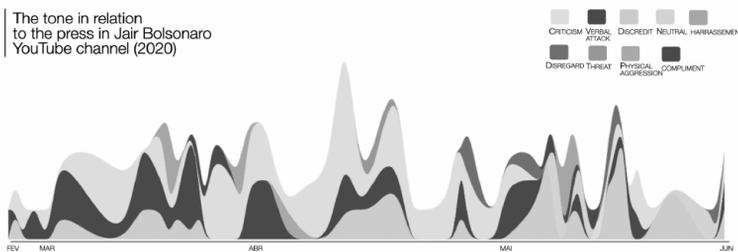
Between February 26 and June 4, 2020, the most prominent topic was general information on the new coronavirus pandemic,

reaching 42% of the total. This was followed by the defense (9%) and specific attacks on the press (7%). Out of the 257 videos published and available from the first 100 days after the first confirmed case of Covid-19 in the country, 36% mention the press in various ways. This means that more than half (64%) of the content posted by Bolsonaro on YouTube is not directly related to the media or journalism. However, of this 36% that do refer to the press, 40% represent direct criticism, 28% represent verbal attacks, and 26% represent discredit (figure 3).

The tones directed toward the press, mainly by the president himself, were classified into ten categories: eight negative, one neutral, and one positive. Criticism (40%), Verbal attack (28%) and Discredit (26%) had the highest percentages of press mentions<sup>21</sup>. Threat (1%), Physical aggression (1%), Disregard (5%), Harassment (5%), Praise (5%) and Neutral (8%) all registered smaller percentages. No videos with explicit bias were identified.

**Figure 3**

*Tone of Jair Bolsonaro videos when speaking about the press*



The first 100 days showed Jair Bolsonaro using a consistent tone in videos released on his channel. Of note, however, is that there was an increase in the three main government narratives concerning the press (criticizing, attacking and discrediting) from the end of March 2020 to the beginning of May 2020. This time frame coincides with the increasing political and health crisis after the departure of former Health Minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, on April 16<sup>22</sup>. A few days later, the sudden departure of former Public Security Minister Sergio Moro<sup>23</sup>, on April 24, added further aggression toward journalists and media companies. Despite being related to cases of corruption and political crisis, these events were immersed in the pressure of the press over measures taken by the federal government and the contradictory behavior of Jair Bolsonaro regarding

the escalating numbers of Covid-19-related infections and deaths in the world. This video response to explicit and implicit attacks is evidence of a systematic negation of the pandemic combined with devaluing the work of the press, carried out through different forms of intimidation or violence against journalists (Unesco, 2020).

Direct statements issued by President Jair Bolsonaro are shown as examples of criticism (figure 4). It is notable that the president, on several occasions, would arrive at the Alvorada Palace<sup>24</sup> to speak with supporters and feel the need to authorize and encourage criticism of the press, sometimes using profanity to do so while supporters cheered and applauded in approval from the “fenced area” — a makeshift area fenced off by railings which keep the president and his staff separate from Bolsonaro supporters while he issues public statements. Another set of railings is used to separate the journalists from the Bolsonaro supporters. These journalists were harassed by the public and by Bolsonaro, but in different ways. All daily interactions, sometimes followed by “impromptu” press conferences, were recorded by the president’s staff on cell phones, then posted on YouTube, reproduced on other official profiles belonging to the president, and then shared by thousands of people.

**Figure 4**

*Three most recurrent categories of narratives used by Bolsonaro*

**ILLUSTRATIVE CASES OF THE MOST FREQUENT TONE IN JAIR BOLSONARO'S SPEECH ON YOUTUBE**  
Data collected between 26.02 and 04.06.2020

TONE	QUOTE <i>translated</i>	VIDEO TITLE <i>translated</i>	FRAME
CRITICISM	6'35"   "Obviously we have a moment, a crisis, a small crisis, right? In my view, it's much more of a fantasy, the issue of the coronavirus, which is not all that the mainstream media is propagating or spreading around the world.	President Bolsonaro speaks at the International Conference in Miami.	
VERBAL ATTACK	3'48"   "Headline in today's Folha de São Paulo: 'New president of the PF assumes and accedes to Bolsonaro's request'. What a scoundrel press: Folha de São Paulo! Scoundrel! is a compliment for Folha de São Paulo! (...) So a scoundrel headline, liar, and you media, most of you, be ashamed of yourselves! Most of you only publish rubbish!	President Bolsonaro brings some truths at the Alvorada (05/05/2020). 9AM	
DISCREDIT	41'24"   "The press invented the Hate Office, many idiots believed it, there are idiots who still believe it today. Why do I want a Hate Office? Give me an article that is offensive to anyone and that has helped the government and was a lie!	Weekly Live with President Jair Bolsonaro - 04/06/2020	

In addition to statements made by the current president, the titles of the videos are also highly critical of the press. Some examples are: “The press says they are on the streets because they need to work, but what about the people?”; “Freedom of expression only applies to the ‘mainstream’ media and the left”; “Show this video to those who are hypnotized by the media, by political correctness...”; “President Bolsonaro: I don’t watch Globo”; “How far will Globo go?”; “This is what the media should be talking about, but friends of the virus don’t rest”; “Globo tries to pit Dr. Nelson Teich against President Bolsonaro and gets what it deserves”. The mention of the press is already included in the title, and the tone of the argument is already visible in the way they are written.

38% of the videos that directly quote the press came from third parties such as bloggers, influencers, supporters, statements from the public, and more. Although it is not the focus of this study, the visual images from this type of content are quite similar — cell phone recordings, exaggerated contrasts, low image quality, editing with abrupt cuts — and they seem to be intentionally made to be amateur, like a strategy to get closer to the everyday citizen and reinforce the president’s speech of simplicity.

On the other hand, the Unofficial videos also represent 38% of the videos that directly quote the press. In general, they are images taken by cell phones which include a brief conversation between the president, his supporters, and the press, usually at the entrance to the Alvorada Palace in Brasília. The videos have no identifiable authorship but appear to have been recorded by members of the president’s entourage, although without any official government communication standards (figure 5).

**Figure 5***Screenshots from third-party videos<sup>25</sup>*

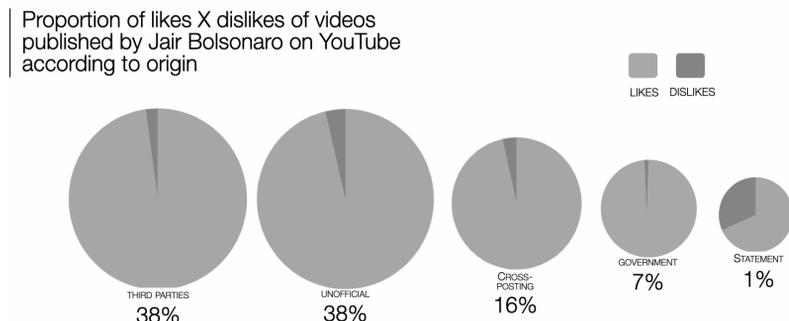
Source: YouTube (2020).

When looking at interaction with content that mentions the press, we observed an interesting relationship. Some metrics associated with content posted on YouTube — likes, dislikes, comments, favorites — act as a kind of thermometer to gauge the approval and disapproval of the posted content. We observed that even though there is only one video published that mentions the press, the official statement proportionally gathers the highest rejection rate, in this case, represented by the number of dislikes the video received (figure 6).

The logic we take from this is that the followers on Jair Bolsonaro's official channel are mostly fans and supporters; however, publications that reach outside social platforms and are broadcast nationally, such as the president's statements, generate a more intense negative response as they are disseminated more equally throughout the entire Brazilian population. It is worth mentioning, however, that watching the videos does not incur any cost, but reacting and responding to them is only possible if you register or sign in to YouTube, which is certainly partial data, but it demonstrates involvement from those who reacted to the content.

**Figure 6**

*Proportion of published content in terms of likes versus dislikes*

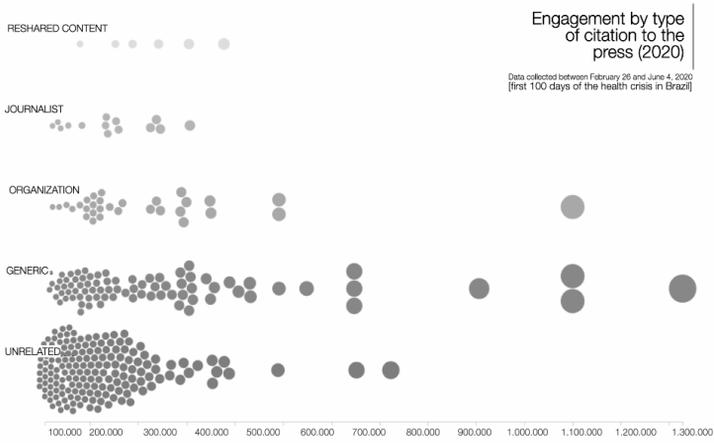


Another interesting parameter occurs when we consider the video categories that mention the press concerning engagement on the platform. We consider engagement here as the sum of the main available and quantifiable YouTube grammars: the total number of views, likes, dislikes<sup>26</sup>, favorites and comments made on each video. In the visual representation (figure 7) the X-axis represents the engagement value scale, which varies between 105.540 to 1.327.906, while each circle represents a video and its size proportional to the number of likes. It is important to note that when we compare other videos not related to the press which were published on Jair Bolsonaro’s channel, the sum of these metrics is considerably smaller, ranging between 6.676 and 723.318, while the maximum engagement exceeded one million interactions.

We observed that generic criticisms from the public, which treat the “media” as an abstract entity and are not specifically directed at any professional or organization, tend to be on the more positive side. Another category that also suggests being well received by YouTube users is videos that specifically cite a news company. Folha de S.Paulo, Rede Globo, O Globo and O Estado de São Paulo, all leading national newspapers, are companies which are cited the most, usually in the form of verbal attacks, criticism, discrediting, or harassment. The content referring to journalists and republished articles or reports, even if recontextualized, has the least engagement among users.

**Figure 7**

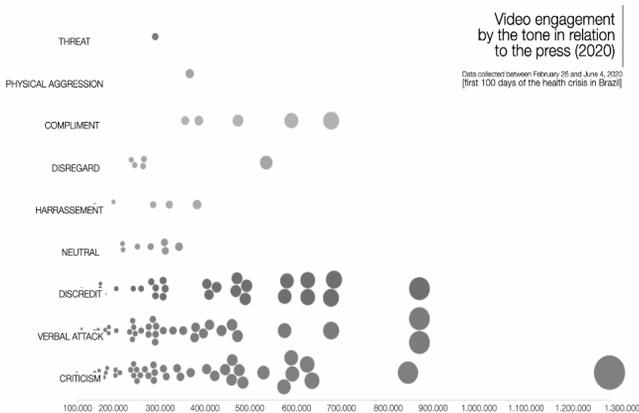
*Video engagement by type of citation of media*



This categorization helps to understand what kind of mention is made of journalism and journalists (figure 8). The data also clearly reflects the tone initially found in the evaluation over the first 100 days of the crisis. Posts of criticism, verbal attacks, and discrediting exceed those of the other categories, both in terms of frequency and engagement.

**Figure 8**

*Engagement considering the tone of the videos concerning the press*



## 6 Final considerations

This study consists of an initial reading into how President Jair Bolsonaro uses YouTube and how it was used to speak about the press in the first months of the pandemic in Brazil. By combining hybrid methods, we were able to carry out a series of readings that facilitated the understanding and verified certain behaviors associated with violence against journalists and the discrediting of the press.

The analysis carried out in this article shows a clear connection between violence against press professionals — exacerbated by the new coronavirus pandemic — and the content published on Jair Bolsonaro's YouTube channel. Out of all the topics on his social platform profile that refer to the press, the majority of them do so with direct criticism. With this information we identified consistent and regularly repeated narratives in his speeches. In an environment with no journalistic mediation like YouTube, most of the videos published on the president's channel tend to present their own version of the facts, trying to prove journalism wrong or claim that the Bolsonaro family is being harassed and persecuted.

The content analysis allowed us to observe a type of discursive strategy often used for events outside the online environment. Attacks against the press, the opposition, or the protective measures established for Covid-19 were published on YouTube, shared by other official government profiles, and endorsed by videos from third parties or the government itself. We observed that criticism and attacks on the media or specific journalists were used to reinforce the idea that the president of the Republic was acting as the spokesperson for the people; the only politician who is reliable and speaks the truth (reminiscent of biblical passages and videos about Jesus, the Messiah). On the other hand, any and all actions that counter or contradict this ideal are considered oppositional, and as a result, any question or content that raises doubts about the president's competence or honesty is subject to attacks and criticism. In this way, attacks on the press were also a way to validate negationist positions associated with the pandemic.

Thus, journalists and media companies considered to be "supporters" were treated differently than those considered to be "opponents". The supporters' content was republished or cited in statements to reinforce the president's or the government's positions, waving their ideological flags in protest against social isolation

measures and criticizing social minorities or political opponents. This group's content was praised and any journalists who also supported these positions were met with positive comments that commended the quality and competence of their work. Meanwhile, any media outlet that was in opposition to these ideas was treated with disrespect, was insulted, and often ignored.

The content analysis discovered a kind of “exchange of favors” that took place where media outlets that Bolsonaro and his supporters deemed credible would also be awarded exclusive and multiple interviews with the president. Those professionals who began to question government decisions or cases of corruption were no longer used as a source of information and praise, and in some cases, they also became the target of attacks.

This hostility directed toward those who “interfere” was evident in videos where political supporters and the general public interacted. In many cases, Bolsonaro supporters praised the news coverage from the media outlets and professionals that the president recommended, while hurling offenses and criticisms toward those he considered his opposition – “those who play for the other team”, “they want evil in Brazil”.

This led us to think about the relationships between the platform metrics and the shared content. Audiovisual content that explicitly criticizes, attacks or discredits the press attracts greater engagement. This result supports other studies that affirm that Bolsonaro's loyal supporters believe that any difficulty the president may encounter while governing is attributed to what they view as media boycotts (Rocha & Solano, 2020).

Another interesting fact is that the videos that generically criticize the press, as an abstract institution that is unbiased in its view of the president and his government, registered the highest numbers of interactions. As for the content that attacks media companies, Bolsonaro supporters always target the same ones, often using terms such as “garbage” or “fake news” when referring to them. This recurring behavior increased through the dissemination of content on the platform suggests that the press is unreliable or even unworthy of respect.

Hostility towards journalists appears in different ways. There are videos of the president harassing reporters, repeatedly telling them that he knows they are going to suffer a 15% reduction to their salaries due to the pandemic, which was met with laughter

and applause from his supporters. At no time does Jair Bolsonaro express disapproval of his supporters' reactions, quite the contrary, he joins in and mocks the reporters. Even though we cannot identify a relationship of cause and consequence since journalistic work in the current context faces a number of challenges, it is interesting to observe that the increased pressure placed on the media and journalists, including the reports of verbal attacks issued by politicians, are visible in the posted YouTube content.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the unofficial or amateur aesthetic that also has a large effect on this space. What we were able to infer is that this practice is related to the informal and "familiar" style that the president has been trying to emulate since the 2018 election campaign.

Despite this study being focused on an online environment, Jair Bolsonaro's official YouTube profile shows the influence he has on his support base and how his discourse resonates with other politicians and followers who interact on his page. The president's constant attempts to discredit the press, to make journalists a category or group that must be fought and ignored, and to build the idea that only he speaks the truth is a behavior similar to other populist politicians who attack the press and use it as a discursive weapon to protect themselves from criticism and then use the information to best benefit themselves. It is a kind of social control through the intimidation of opposing voices, the objective of which is to control public discourse.

## NOTES

- 1 Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/pt/portraits/predator>
- 2 We chose not to further explore the discussion of "fake news" in this article. Labeling news false, or fake, involves an incongruity of meanings since the principle of journalism is to report the facts assertively. The concept of "fake news" has been classified into different categories, for example, satire or parody, fabricated content or fabricated news, false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, photo manipulation, Advertising and Public Relations, and political propaganda (Wardle, 2017; Tandoc Jr., Wei Lim & Ling, 2018).

- 3 The CPI is an investigation conducted by the Senate, provided for under article 58 of the Federal Constitution. At the Covid-19 CPI, between April 27 and November 5, 2021, senators investigated the federal government's actions regarding their handling of the pandemic, especially the low oxygen levels in the Amazon which has resulted in dozens of deaths. Irregularities in contracts and omissions committed by public officials were also verified. The final report claimed Jair Bolsonaro was responsible for at least nine crimes and proposed indicting 78 people. Retrieved from <https://static.poder360.com.br/2021/10/relatorio-final-renan-calheiros-cpi.pdf>
- 4 On February 26, 2020, a 61-year-old man who had returned from Italy was the first confirmed case in the country. Retrieved from [www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/saude-e-vigilancia-sanitaria/2020/02/brasil-confirma-primeiro-caso-do-novo-coronavirus](http://www.gov.br/pt-br/noticias/saude-e-vigilancia-sanitaria/2020/02/brasil-confirma-primeiro-caso-do-novo-coronavirus)
- 5 We agree with Rocha and Solano's (2020) definition of Bolsonarism: "(...) support for the figure of Jair Bolsonaro based on an anti-system populist discourse" (p. 02).
- 6 In May 2020, the Attorney General Office filed a lawsuit against the Federal Supreme Court requesting the suspension of restrictive measures adopted by Brazilian states. The request was denied by Minister Luís Roberto Barroso. Since then, this decision has been used as an argument by Bolsonaro and his supporters for federal inaction in the fight against the pandemic.
- 7 Retrieved from <http://fenaj.org.br/ao-jogar-apoiadores-contrajornalistas-bolsonaro-prejudica-combate-ao-coronavirus>
- 8 Retrieved from <https://fenaj.org.br/presidente-e-o-maior-responsavel-por-ataques-a-liberdade-de-imprensa-no-pais>
- 9 "Brazil's president attacks media instead of combatting coronavirus". Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/news/brazils-president-attacks-media-instead-combatting-coronavirus>
- 10 The president claims that he used these drugs and encouraged the population to take them in order to maintain the "normality" of their lives. The Ministry of Health even issued technical guidelines for the use of these treatments during Eduardo Pazuello's administration. In January 2021, the National Health Council (CNS) requested the withdrawal of this type of treatment.

- Retrieved from <http://conselho.saude.gov.br/ultimas-noticias-cns/1570-cns-pede-que-ministerio-da-saude- retire-publicacoes-sobre-tratamento-precoce-para-Covid-19>
- 11 Retrieved from [www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-advises-that-ivermectin-only-be-used-to-treat-Covid-19-within-clinical-trials](http://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-advises-that-ivermectin-only-be-used-to-treat-Covid-19-within-clinical-trials)
  - 12 In March 2021, the director-general of the World Health Organization, Tedros Ghebreyesus, declared that Brazil could become a global threat. Retrieved from [www.g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2021/03/12/oms-alerta-mais-uma-vez-situacao-da-pandemia-no-brasil-grande-preocupacao-com-a-letalidade-e-transmissao-do-virus.ghtml](http://www.g1.globo.com/bemestar/coronavirus/noticia/2021/03/12/oms-alerta-mais-uma-vez-situacao-da-pandemia-no-brasil-grande-preocupacao-com-a-letalidade-e-transmissao-do-virus.ghtml)
  - 13 Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/pt/relacoes/um-ano-sombrio-para-liberdade-de-imprensa-no-brasil-580-ataques-contra-midia-em-2020>
  - 14 “[...] social media can be a powerful weapon in the hands of populists” (Jacobs et al., 2020, p. 612).
  - 15 “In the current environment, with the rise of the new right, psychological pressure has increased [...]. This environment has also consisted of attacks designed to create reputational damage” (Ganter & Paulino, 2020, p. 11).
  - 16 “These countries also face critical challenges to overcome institutionalized corruption, an ineffective judicial system and high levels of impunity” (Benítez, 2020, p. 25).
  - 17 “[...] la violencia estructural o sistémica ya naturalizada, que incluye bajos salarios, despidos injustificados, falta de seguridad laboral, etcétera” (Montiel, 2015, p. 422).
  - 18 Jair Bolsonaro’s channel is not verified by YouTube ([www.youtube.com/user/jbolsonaro](http://www.youtube.com/user/jbolsonaro)). However, its address is published on all his official profiles and highlighted on his official website: [www.bolsonaro.com.br](http://www.bolsonaro.com.br)
  - 19 Retrieved from <https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/index.php>
  - 20 Retrieved from [app.rawgraphs.io](http://app.rawgraphs.io)

- 21 The total exceeds 100% because several videos registered more than one tone toward the press.
- 22 The first year of the pandemic was marked by political and technical impasses that resulted in new health ministers being appointed. Orthopedist Luiz Henrique Mandetta (2019 to April 2020) left office after he disagreed with Bolsonaro over isolation measures, testing, and the use of masks. Oncologist Nelson Teich (April to May 2020) resigned after refusing to adopt the “early treatment” protocol. Eduardo Pazuello (May 2020 to March 2021), an Army general who supports Bolsonaro, released the protocol for the use of chloroquine and left after the high mortality rate and slow vaccination. He is under investigation by the Federal Supreme Court for failing to manage the oxygen crisis in the state of Amazonas. Marcelo Queiroga, a cardiologist, took Pazuello's position in May 2021 and left in December of the same year.
- 23 Sérgio Moro was Minister of Justice between 2019 and April 2020. He left office after claiming Jair Bolsonaro had interfered with the Federal Police. Before taking over as minister, he was the judge who sat for Operation Car Wash, where Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was found guilty of corruption which resulted in the loss of his political rights, in September 2018. Lula was the main political opponent to Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections. In 2021, the STF considered Moro's conviction of Lula biased, and the case against Lula has ruled a mistrial.
- 24 Official residence of the president of Brazil, located in Brasília (DF).
- 25 On-screen text translation: “Get tuned into the drama and manipulation of the Globo network”, “[Fernando] Haddad Fake News” and “The fall of [Sérgio] Moro”.
- 26 We consider engagement to represent the total number of interactions with particular content, regardless of whether that interaction is positive or negative.

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