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BRAZIL

More than just a little flu

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Political context

In early 2020, President Jair Bolsonaro had completed his first year of office. His election, in October 2018, marked a rightward political shift after 14 years of government by the left-wing Workers' Party (PT). The PT had been in power since 2003 with Lula da Silva for two terms and then Dilma Rousseff elected in 2010 and reelected in 2014. In 2016, amidst corruption scandals, the Brazilian Senate impeached Rousseff for moving funds between government budgets. Rousseff denied having done anything illegal and argued that this was a common practice amongst her predecessors.¹

At the time of his election, Bolsonaro had been in permanent campaign for at least three years (Joathan & Rebouças, 2020), presenting himself as an anti-PT candidate and advocate of Christian values. Although he had worked as a federal legislator since 1991, he was also portrayed as being anti-establishment. Gaining strength due to Brazil's political turmoil, Bolsonaro, a former army captain, managed to gather support from influential actors, such as the military, the Evangelical churches, the economic elites, and politicians aligned with a neo-liberal agenda. He beat the PT candidate Fernando Haddad in the second round of the elections with 55.1% of valid votes.

The PT's original plan was to name Lula as a presidential candidate, but the Superior Electoral Court disqualified him under Brazil's Clean Slate Law. Ironically, three days after winning the election, Bolsonaro appointed Sergio Moro, the judge who helped arrest Lula for corruption charges, to his Justice Ministry. Since then, the president remains true to his confrontational style. In this context of ideological disputes, Brazil confirmed its first case of COVID-19 in February 2020. This chapter draws from quantitative and qualitative content analyses to address issues of governance and rhetoric during the coronavirus crises.

Chronology

Table 19.1 presents a summary of the dissemination of COVID-19 in Brazil and the main measures taken by the federal government between February and August 2020.

Analysis

This chapter draws from quantitative and qualitative content analyses of posts published on the Facebook pages of Brazil's Federal Government (@palacioplanalto) (n = 237) and Favela do Alemão's Crisis Committee page (@gabinetealemao) (n = 52). For both, we have collected posts published between February 26 and June 25. We chose Facebook because Brazilian users account to 120 million people (second only to YouTube in popularity).² The Planalto page represents the government's official voice, allowing citizens to follow government-led actions, projects and the president's everyday life. The @gabinetealemao page was created to report the activities of the Crisis Committee, which had been established in March by three collectives from Favela do Alemão: Coletivo Papo Reto, Voz das Comunidades and Mulheres em Ação no Alemão. We also draw from inside information from Thainã de Medeiros, one of the founders of Coletivo Papo Reto.

The Crisis Committee tapped into the collectives' networks, gathering donations and supplies from citizens and companies. The committee organised teams of volunteers to sign up residents who needed to receive assistance, such as food baskets and cleaning products. Additionally, the committee devised a communication plan, using banners, loudspeakers on cars and lampposts, WhatsApp groups and social media. The Facebook page represents a meeting point for publishing reports about the committee's activities. The aim is to inform the population on how to prevent catching the virus and how to seek help in case they become infected. We analysed the posts in relation to two main categories – frequency of communication and types of themes.

Communication frequency

Pandemic-related posts represented 71.7% of the content published on the Planalto page (170 posts) as opposed to 100% of the posts published by the Crisis Committee page (52 posts). This can be explained by the fact that an official government page needs to discuss a variety of issues. As for the Crisis Committee, the page was created to support residents during the pandemic.

Themes of communication

Ten main themes were identified, which are not mutually exclusive. These are:

- (1) Reports/accountability: health, legal and social measures carried out by the government or by the Crisis Committee to fight the pandemic. This

TABLE 19.1 Brazil chronology

<i>Date</i>	<i>Diffusion of COVID-19</i>	<i>Key official actions</i>	<i>Key communication events</i>
February	26 First case confirmed – 61-year-old man from São Paulo who had returned from Lombardia.		Health Minister (HM) Luiz Mandetta held a press briefing to explain the measures to prevent the spread of the disease.
March	29 Second case confirmed in São Paulo state. 5 8 cases. Spread to other states (Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo) confirmed. 6 13 cases.		President Bolsonaro addressed the nation on radio and television, saying ‘there was no reason to panic’ and that the Ministry of Health (MH) was working in partnership with state governments and municipalities.
	11 WHO declares a pandemic.	Movement restriction measures, such as closing schools and universities, implemented in Brasília by the governor of the Federal District. Other governors in states such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo start to impose restrictive measures (forbidding public gatherings, for example).	
	12 First death (announced by MH as March 17 but corrected three months later).		

In a televised speech, Bolsonaro stated, ‘with my history as an athlete, if I were infected with the virus, I would have no reason to worry. I would feel nothing, or it would be at most just a little flu.’”

24	47 deaths. 2,271 cases.		
April	2	327 deaths. 8,066 cases.	The government launches programme that enabled the distribution of a BRL 600 (approximately USD 113) emergency monthly salary for informal workers. It also announced protection measures for formal jobs, authorising the reduction of hours and wages by employers in return for the maintenance of jobs.
	16	1,952 deaths. 30,891 cases.	Mandetta got fired over clashes with Bolsonaro. The HM spoke about social distancing, supported the temporary suspension of non-essential activities for cities and stated that the government responses should be based on scientific evidence.
May	15	14,962 deaths; 220,291 cases.	Teich resigned. He and Bolsonaro disagreed on the need for social distancing. Bolsonaro promoted the use of hydroxychloroquine, Teich refused to authorise use for patients with mild symptoms. Efforts started being led by interim replacement: Army General Eduardo Pazuello. With no medical background, unlike his predecessors, he fired specialists and named fellow military officers to top posts.

(Continued)

TABLE 19.1 (Continued)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Diffusion of COVID-19</i>	<i>Key official actions</i>	<i>Key communication events</i>
June	6 36,044 deaths. 676,494 cases.	The government stopped publishing total numbers of cases and fatalities, releasing only past 24 hours' figures. It faced criticism for two days until Supreme Court ordered publishing of data. State governors began to suspend movement restriction measures.	Bolsonaro was ironic in a press interview: 'nothing left for <i>Jornal Nacional</i> to talk about', in a reference to the evening news programme broadcast by TV Globo not being able to access COVID-19 stats.
July	7 66,868 deaths (1,312 in 24 hours). 1,674,655 cases.		Bolsonaro gave an interview to TV Brasil (state broadcaster) and two commercial TV channels to communicate that he tested positive for COVID-19.
August	8 Death toll exceeds 100,000. Number of Infected over 3,000,000. 10th consecutive week with an average of approximately 1,000 deaths per day. In mid-August, the death rate started to decrease.		Bolsonaro tweeted the media was 'spectacularising' the pandemic.

includes sending equipment and tests to hospitals and updating the number of people infected and fatalities. It does not include economic measures, such as the emergency salary, or financial rescues to states and municipalities.

Our research indicated that 75% of the posts by the Alemão page fell into this category as opposed to 64.7% of the posts published by the Planalto page. The commitment to transparency displayed by the Alemão page, a civil society initiative led entirely by volunteers, was impressive. They posted weekly short videos with the hashtag #PrestaçãoGabinete (Committee's Accountability Report), which disclosed the number and variety of items that they received as donations, and how they distributed them in different areas. In this way, the initiative represented an attempt to fill gaps left by the city, state and federal authorities. Citing Medeiros, 'the government should be doing what the Alemão Crisis Committee are doing' (interview, June 30, 2020).

- (2) Prevention/guidance: posts that inform people about what they should do to avoid catching COVID-19, as well as the symptoms of the disease.

In contrast to the Planalto page, we could see that a much higher percentage of posts by the Alemão page published health guidance and prevention information: 61.5% as opposed to 27.1% of the government page. The latter appears to be a strikingly low number because these should feature as top priorities in a context of crisis. Most of the health guidance was offered in March and April when Luiz Mandetta was still the Minister of Health. For example, in a Facebook video ad, published March 13, Mandetta spoke about the importance of being careful with hygiene habits because the 'virus has a quick transmission rate, which can cause health systems to collapse.' However, speeches that challenged the guidance provided by health bodies, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), and even the Ministry of Health itself were frequent. On March 25, for instance, Bolsonaro stated that elderly people were the only ones that needed to worry about prevention as 'the problem lies with people above 60 or people who have a health problem.'

In a study of the COVID-19 crisis in Hong Kong, Sheen et al. (2020) demonstrate that information from non-official government sources can enhance the credibility of official government messages. In Brazil's case, the messages stemming from the government were often contradictory: the Minister warned people to be careful whilst Bolsonaro said risks were little. Hence life-saving civil society initiatives were left in the dark. Referring to the frequent appeals for favela residents to stay home, Medeiros described how difficult this was, given people's precarious living circumstances. Positive prevention examples by powerful figures became even more important. Yet, our research revealed the opposite scenario. Bolsonaro's frequent public appearances in bakeries and public rallies combined with his anti-social-distancing declarations might have worsened a situation that was already critical.

- (3) Economic impact and aid: measures for retaining private sector jobs, the distribution of the BRL 600 emergency salary, the injecting of financial resources into states and municipalities.

Considerable efforts were directed to communicating the government's handing out of an emergency salary to informal workers or families that have a monthly income of half the minimum salary per person (BRL 552) or BRL 3,135 per family. In press conferences, such as the one held on April 3, Pedro Guimarães, the president of Caixa Econômica, one of Brazil's major public banks, provided details on how people could receive the funds. This is consistent with the government's rhetoric that it was mostly concerned with COVID-19's economic impact. Indeed, this category corresponded to 57.6% of their Facebook posts. In comparison, the Crisis Committee published no content that fell into this category, as this was a programme entirely managed by the federal government and they had no funds to assist favela residents nor was it their responsibility.

- (4) Denial of the dangers or trivialisation of the disease: posts that advocate for a return to normal life and free movement, opposing social distancing measures, minimising risks, or spreading scientifically unfounded information.

Videos and posts that featured Bolsonaro himself often minimised the risks of COVID-19. For the Planalto page, this category corresponded to 23.5% of the posts. In a televised speech on March 24, the president famously said that 'COVID-19 was at most just a little flu.'³ Bolsonaro's encouragement of people to break quarantine measures also translated into public gestures and actions, such as joining pro-government rallies, and not wearing face masks (or wearing them incorrectly). Such denialism might have further aggravated the health crisis, particularly for Brazilians who live in the favelas where social distancing becomes almost impossible due to a combination of overcrowded spaces and poverty. Additionally, going out to work to earn a living represents an extreme necessity for many residents. Yet, despite all these challenges, Alemão's page made significant efforts to tell residents to stay home as much as possible and it published no posts within the trivialisation category.

- (5) Attacks on the media: critiques of media coverage of the COVID-19 crisis, accusing it of fear-mongering and creating hysteria.

The government's trivialisation of the pandemic was often coupled with attacks on various media outlets and journalists. The category corresponded to 12.4% for the Planalto page. This complemented Bolsonaro's denial discourses by claiming the health dangers posed by the pandemic were an exaggeration or a media creation. By discrediting media reports, the president positioned himself as someone who was being unfairly targeted in an unfriendly media environment. He was

particularly vocal against the Globo Network, and the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, amongst others. In contrast, Alemão's page had no occurrences of posts attacking the media.

- (6) Conflict with different spheres of power, such as the Supreme Court, the states and municipalities: posts that criticise measures taken by these institutions, as well as the work of health ministers.

La et al. (2020) provide useful insights on the importance of cooperation between governments, civil society, the scientific community and private individuals. They shed light on how Vietnam's political readiness to combat the pandemic since its earliest days was key to the country's successful response to the crisis. In Brazil, our content analysis unveiled a fragmented scenario. The stances taken by different actors have been contradictory, even within the government itself. Timing is one revealing element here. Whilst Mandetta held a press conference on February 26, the same day that Brazil confirmed its first COVID-19 case, Bolsonaro waited until March 6 to address the nation on TV. Unlike his first two Health Ministers, Bolsonaro made speeches discrediting the information made available by the WHO. He was also the protagonist of public rows with the Supreme Court, state governors and city mayors. This confirms Rodrigues and Azevedo's findings (2020) on how the pandemic generated a crisis in Brazil's federative units. The fact that there was no clarity in terms of the different roles that must be played by the national, state and city governments worsened this scenario.

The conflicts demonstrated a serious lack of leadership in Brazil. On average, 23.5% of the Planalto page posts had content that fell into the category of 'conflict.' One emblematic example happened on April 11. During a press conference, journalists asked Health Minister Teich about the reopening of nail salons, barber shops and gyms announced by Bolsonaro. He replied, 'Was this today? This wasn't us, this is... the president's responsibility... the decision about which activities are deemed essential is made by the Ministry of Economy.' Again, this revealed the high level of internal disagreements and lack of coordination between the various ministries and the President. In contrast to this chaotic scenario, Alemão's Committee displayed horizontal and clear dynamics of leadership. Its leaders, Raull Santiago, Rene Silva and Camila Santos featured in several videos and each represented one of the committee's founding initiatives.

- (7) Treatments and drugs: information on research about and/or recommendations to use drugs to treat COVID-19.

Our empirical evidence provided a variety of examples of dubious science in government communication. This was epitomised by the president's enthusiasm for hydroxychloroquine (video published on May 14, amongst others), even

though several studies questioned or denied its efficiency. The category corresponded to 20.6% or 35 posts for the Planalto page, as opposed (once again) to zero posts published by the Alemão Crisis Committee page. Gollust et al. (2020) highlighting conflicting science are frequent elements of US President Trump's communication argue, 'These have contributed toward divergent responses by media sources, partisan leaders, and the public alike, leading to different attitudes and beliefs as well as varying protective actions taken by members of the public' (2020: 1).

- (8) Offers of condolences: posts that express condolences to the victims and their families and that manifest appreciation for health workers.

Another noteworthy aspect was the low percentage of posts in this category for both the Planalto and the Alemão pages – 9.4% and 0%, respectively. One exceptional example took place when Bolsonaro said in a video he was sorry for the first COVID-19 death in the State of Goiás (on March 26). Here, we can also draw parallels with attitudes of indifference by leaders in other parts of the world. Analysing the British context, for instance, Tomkins (2020: 331) reflects on the implications of the prime minister Boris Johnson's absences for his leadership: in times of crisis, 'leaders who appear not to care risk triggering powerful anxieties about betrayal and abandonment.' Such a sense of abandonment appeared as a recurrent theme in the content published by @gabinetealemao. Medeiros summarises this by saying that 'the State never helps the people, and what is worse, instead of helping, they get in our way.' Indeed, the Brazilian state has a history of neglecting its favela populations, manifesting their presence only through the policing of these areas.

- (9) Public safety: messages that address the relationship between COVID-19 and its impact on issues such as the increase in domestic violence and police brutality in the favelas.

This category corresponded to 6.5% and 13.5% of the posts published on the Planalto and the Alemão page, respectively. The fact that favela residents are frequent victims of police violence and human rights violations (Medrado et al., 2020) might explain why the theme appeared twice as much in the favela page. The issues are complex and were neither lessened nor exacerbated by COVID-19.

- (10) Other: posts that did not fit into any of the previous categories.

This category fits 34.1% of posts from Planalto and 34.6% for Alemão posts. The high number is explained by the wide variety of topics addressed in both pages, such as when Bolsonaro and government officials prayed to God asking for the end of the pandemic, or thanked companies that made donations, or when the

Crisis Committee publicised cultural attractions online to encourage residents to stay at home.

Conclusion

Our study indicated that Brazil developed a confusing and inefficient response to the pandemic. The government invested in rhetoric minimising the health risks and maximising the negative impacts on the country's economy. This is exemplified in Bolsonaro's words and actions with frequent speeches against social distancing, and public appearances that disrespect health authority recommendations. Our content analysis of the Planalto page confirmed these points. Whilst the category of providing accountability reports featured in 64.7% of the posts, the category of 'economic impact and aid' came in at a close second, appearing in 57.6% of the posts.

Moreover, the presence of conflicting attitudes and contradictory messages was striking. This created a sense of confusion and abandonment, worsened by the government's low emphasis on communicating solidarity with the millions of Brazilians who are falling ill and the thousands who have lost their lives. This points to the need for future studies to investigate the role that Bolsonaro's permanent campaign centring on economic regeneration and his reelection plans for 2022 may have played in choosing the denial discourses he adopted. As of the time of writing, approximately 130,000 lives have been lost and the economic impact on the population has been harsh. This might hinder Bolsonaro from using an economic revamping as (literally) his trump card. Time will tell.

Notes

- 1 See www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-36028117
- 2 See <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-brazil>
- 3 See www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-52040205

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