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ARTICLES

Fake news about Covid-19, from a Habermasian perspective

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Abstract

The aim of this article was to investigate the types of misinformation disseminated by top federal government officials during the pandemic, treating fake news as forms of latent strategic action, analyzed through Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action. Based on qualitative research, the results reveal numerous strategies for the dissemination of misinformation by the Bolsonaro government regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, supported by the strength and reach that the communicative action of a state leader has among the population, especially in a scenario of scientific denialism. Finally, it should be highlighted that this study gained special relevance due to the recent passing of Professor Jürgen Habermas, whose everlasting work inspired the analyses carried out here.

Keywords: misinformation, fake news, pandemic, government, communicative action.

Fake news da Covid-19 sob o pensamento habermasiano

Resumo

O objetivo do artigo foi investigar os tipos de desinformações divulgadas pela cúpula do governo federal durante o período pandêmico, tratando as *fake news* como formas de ação estratégica latente, sob a análise da Teoria da Ação Comunicativa de Habermas. Com base em uma pesquisa qualitativa, os resultados revelam inúmeras estratégias de disseminação da desinformação pelo Governo Bolsonaro em relação à pandemia de Covid-19, sustentadas por meio da força e do alcance que a ação comunicativa de um líder de Estado possui diante da sua população, especialmente em um cenário de negacionismo científico. Por fim, ressalta-se que o presente trabalho ganhou relevância especial devido ao recente falecimento do professor Jürgen Habermas, cuja obra, que se mostra eterna, inspirou as análises aqui empreendidas.

Palavras-chave: desinformação, fake news, pandemia, governo, ação comunicativa.

Noticias falsas sobre la Covid-19 según el pensamiento habermasiano

Resumen

El objetivo del artículo fue investigar los tipos de desinformación difundidos por la cúpula del gobierno federal durante el período pandémico, abordando las noticias falsas como formas de acción estratégica latente, bajo el análisis de la Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa de Habermas. Con base en una investigación cualitativa, los resultados revelan numerosas estrategias de difusión de desinformación por parte del gobierno de Bolsonaro con relación a la pandemia de Covid-19, sustentadas en la fuerza y el alcance que posee la acción comunicativa de un líder de Estado frente a su población, especialmente en un escenario de negacionismo científico. Por último, cabe destacar que el presente trabajo cobró especial relevancia debido al reciente fallecimiento del profesor Jürgen Habermas, cuya obra, que se muestra eterna, inspiró los análisis aquí realizados.

Palabras clave: desinformación, noticias falsas, pandemia, gobierno, acción comunicativa.

Submitted on July 28, 2025 and accepted on June 08, 2026.
[Translated version]

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120250163x

INTRODUCTION

One aspect that stood out and received coverage in the national and international media, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, in March 2020, was the stance taken by then-President Jair Messias Bolsonaro, regarding the fight against the virus. The editorial of The Lancet, on May 9, 2020, titled "COVID-19 in Brazil: 'So what?'", reported the following:

> [...] maybe the greatest threat to Brazil's response to COVID-19 is its President, Jair Bolsonaro. Last week, when journalists asked him about the fast increase in cases, he replied, "So what? I'm sorry, what do you want me to do?" (The Lancet, 2020, p. 1).

In light of the virus's impact - as evidenced by the high death numbers - questions about possible irregularities and omissions by the federal government, in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, led to submitting a petition signed by 30 senators, calling for the creation of a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (*Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito* - CPI). Later, following intervention from the judicial branch, the CPI was established and became known as the "Pandemic CPI" or "COVID-19 CPI".

The CPI's final report is an important document on the consequences of the pandemic in Brazil, detailing the factors that contributed to the deaths of over 600,000 people in the country due to COVID-19, with a focus on examining how the federal government handled the pandemic (Chade, 2021). The report discusses various incidents and aspects of that period, such as disinformation (fake news), for example. In its latest version, the report called for the indictment of former President Jair Bolsonaro, among others.

In this article, we analyze the misinformation listed in the Pandemic CPI Report. According to the Code of Practice on Disinformation, produced by the European Union, disinformation refers to misleading or false information disseminated in order to obtain some economic gain or deceive a specific audience, which can cause public harm by threatening democratic values, public goods, the environment, and the safety and health of citizens (European Commission, 2022). The term "fake news", synonym for disinformation, refers to false news intended to distort facts and discredit individuals or institutions for achieving political or economic benefits (Galhardi et al., 2020). The spread of disinformation is a growing problem in polarized contexts, as it allows individuals to use false arguments to Supporting their ideologies, thus hindering the communication process and the development of understanding (Bachur, 2021).

The report by the Pandemic CPI reveals a structure for spreading fake news, mainly by actors with some connection to the federal government at that time. To examine these discursive elements, we draw on Habermas's theoretical framework on the strategic use of communication to achieve specific ends, with the purpose of showing how communicative distortions undermine the communication process and democratic institutions. Therefore, our goal was to investigate the types of misinformation disseminated by the federal government's upper echelons during the pandemic, viewing fake news as forms of latent strategic action (Habermas, 1996).

We advance our understanding by engaging in a comprehensive investigation into how the pandemic was addressed in Brazil. Previous literature has focused on comparing the ethical aspects of dealing with the forms of misinformation presented by the CPI (Bezerra et al., 2022), on checking the arguments presented in the speeches of CPI's witnesses, and on how these arguments related to the resulting behaviors (Marquesi & Aguiar, 2021). This article differs from previous research by mapping the types of fake news present during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on the classical aspects of Habermasian communicative action.

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THE RISE OF FAKE NEWS AND THE CRISIS OF REASON

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a large amount of information about the virus was generated and made available to the population, and a considerable part of this information was fake news (Maia et al., 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) – in Portuguese *Organização Mundial da Saúde* (OMS) – even referred to this period as an "infodemic", given that the COVID-19 outbreak was followed by an information overload that made it difficult to determine the accuracy and reliability of its sources, at a time when it was necessary to follow certain guidelines to control the spread of the virus. The term "infodemic" refers to a significant increase in information on a particular topic or subject, as a result of a specific fact or event. In that context, information emerges from various sources - including rumors, manipulated information, and misinformation - which spreads quickly, like a virus, on social media (Zarocostas, 2020).

The dissemination of false information on social media has the potential to mislead those who access it, and to trigger behaviors that may harm the distinct social groups of individuals (Lim et al., 2021). The literature highlights that the spread of fake news is not a new phenomenon, but has been significantly enhanced by the widespread use of social media and the format in which information was communicated through these platforms (Bachur, 2021). This is because the reach of the internet and the development of new communication technologies - such as computers, cell phones, and digital platforms – have changed the ways individuals communicate. Without necessarily knowing the source or authenticity of a news, once it is posted on social media it spreads really fast, reaching a lot of people (Galhardi et al., 2020).

In addition, humanity is undergoing a long period of rational decline, in a scenario where reason loses its strength and emancipatory potential in the face of superstitions and beliefs, and becomes an instrument of power, capable of submitting the masses and guiding behaviors; hence, it is addressed from the perspective of instrumental reason, which has a logical meaning without necessarily corresponding to empirical reality. From this perspective, humans would be characterized as beings who use reason as an instrument for survival and for advancing the interests of the groups to which they belong, without relying on universal principles that would Supporting and give authority to the arguments used (Japiassu, 2016). In this context, fake news is a form of reason decline, in the sense of using argumentative reason as a tool to attain one's own interests.

The terms "fake news" and "post-truth era" have become increasingly common in recent times, a period when the speed of information circulation has grown considerably, due to the emergence of alternative media, compared to traditional forms of information creation, selection, and classification, thus removing the need for editorial, scientific, and journalistic authorities to decide which information should be released (Alves & Maciel, 2020). In short, anyone can comment on any topic, and this content spreads fast. As Baptista (2020, p. 49) points out:

> The absence of editorial filters and the cacophony of voices circulating in the digital environment have disturbed the traditional formats of journalistic storytelling. News, previously understood as brief texts containing significant information to the public, has become an infinite force in a permanent state of updating. Opportunities for participation have increased, but they imply losses in clarity, definition, and purpose. Without these qualities, the news […] has deteriorated.

Other issues mentioned in the literature on the rise of fake news refer to the characteristics that media environments have come to exhibit in terms of social interaction, where there is a constant fragmentation of the collective consciousness, which is permeated by individualistic values that hinder the communication process and, therefore, the building of consensus and the experience of democratic living (Rocha & Cavalcanti, 2019). Bachur (2021) describes this process as a form of fragmentation of the public sphere, drawing on Habermas's conception, which considers it as the gathering of individuals with their own interests, who form a political judgment focused on the public interest.

A scenario of fragmentation in the public sphere, together with the health crisis caused by the pandemic, triggered a widespread dissemination of information that was not necessarily based on cognitive or epistemic content, but was, instead, focused on defending particular interests and ideologies (Rocha & Cavalcanti, 2019). As a result, manifestations of disinformation became recurrent, as illustrated by examples such as:

> [...] flat-Earthism, scientific denialism, environmental misinformation, anti-vaccine movements, and countless conspiracy theories, more or less dangerous, that circulate on social media and attract widespread engagement, thanks to the susceptibility to big tech algorithms, thus transforming the healthy popularization of distrust in authorities, a hallmark of modern thought, into an indigestible mixture of ignorant skepticism, presumptuous and lazy, toward modern authorities - the rule of law, science, the press – in exchange for a passionate dogmatism toward postmodern-style authorities, like boastful media politicians, internet pseudo-intellectuals, and a thousand sects (Bezerra et al., 2022, pp. 328–329).

Fake news can also be interpreted as the result of a society that considers technoscience its dominant explanatory paradigm. A rationality used for productive purposes that, as Habermas stated, is transported from the systemic world to the world of life. This line of interpretation leads to the conclusion that, in modern Western society, all spheres of human life end up being ruled by the primacy of the rational. As a result, other important aspects that make up humans' driving forces would be placed in the background or, even worse, completely disregarded. This approach seems to overlook the fact that, in many cases, major discoveries in the scientific world have emerged from an open dialogue, even if unconscious, with other types of knowledge, such as religion, magic, and superstition (Japiassu, 2016; Stengers, 2018).

When rational arguments, developed within academic and scientific institutions, cease to make sense to growing segments of the population, there is space for fake news to fill a deep symbolic void, which results from a historical process in which certain subjectivities and forms of knowledge have been gradually delegitimized by the hegemonic scientific speech. To understand this process, it is useful to draw on the psychoanalytic concept of repression - the mechanism by which contents, desires, or types of knowledge are removed from the collective consciousness but remain active, potentially returning in a distorted way (Freud, 2005).

Japiassu (2016) observed that the modern scientific model has historically rejected subjectivity, identifying it with the irrational: in doing so, "[...] this 'Other' is the Hidden aspect of Science itself, what was not revealed or systematically outcast, repressed, or suppressed by it" (p. 6). In that sense, fake news would represent the revenge of what has been repressed - the return of marginalized worldviews, in often distorted and potentially destructive forms (Haraway, 2023; Japiassu, 2016; Latour, 2020; Stengers, 2023).

This dynamic is worsened by the fact that institutionalized science itself tends to view alternative forms of knowledge as threats to its authority, thus sustaining a vicious cycle. Stengers (2018, p. 16) points out that scientific knowledge "[...] needs to be positioned alongside other forms of knowledge that answer different questions", and that the real challenge is to accept the experiment of gathering different forms of knowledge, without scientific rationality serving as a protective shield against the different. When this openness does not occur, the gap between specialized language and the population's daily experience becomes deeper, creating fertile ground for simplified narratives and misinformation that, paradoxically, dialogue better with anxieties and fears not recognized by official science (Japiassu, 2016; Stengers, 2018).

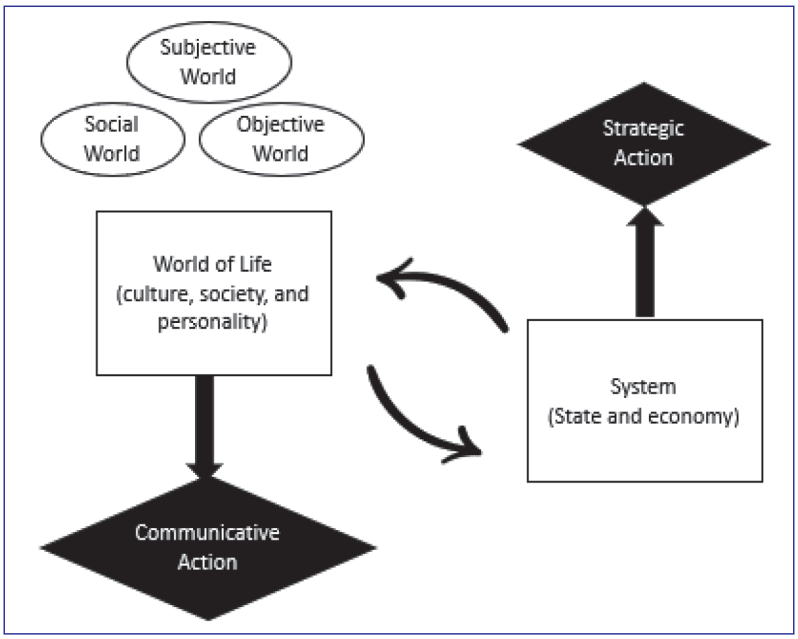
Given this scenario, it is urgent to foster new connections between different forms of knowledge - not to frame and analyze them by means of scientific rationality, but, instead, through horizontal dialogue, so that they may generate new ways of expressing our awareness of the world. An understanding based on the articulation between science, traditional knowledge, common sense, philosophy, and religion can be a path for dissolving the impulses that feed destructive beliefs and encourage authoritarianism. According to Japiassu (2016, p. 4), human beings tend to "[...] defend the members of their group rather than adhere to universal values", and to prefer arguments from authority to the authority of arguments - which strengthens the need to build bridges of communication that do not rely just on the monopoly of instrumental reason (Haraway, 2023; Japiassu, 2016; Latour, 2020; Stengers, 2023). Presenting the pragmatic view of Habermasian principles on this process provides a lens through which we can understand the details generated by fake news in the communicative process.

HABERMAS AND THE THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

Habermas's theory is rooted in Critical Theory and his view of rationality, emphasizing that rationality, in modern society, is doomed to a process of losing meaning and freedom of action and thought. From his perspective, this decline of rationality is linked to a focus on strategic and instrumental actions, due to the few spaces dedicated to communication. With the rise of modernity, humanity began to discuss three distinct world meanings: the world of science, where truth is based on facts; the world of morality, based on the social rules and norms of each group; and the world of arts, where subjectivity, feelings, perceptions, and emotions prevail (Fiedler, 2006).

In Theory of Communicative Action (TCA), Habermas (2012a) argued that social change would stem from people's ability to communicate and reach consensus, while respecting differences and reinterpreting the meanings embedded in social reality. He identified two dimensions that would divide social interaction: (1) the system world, not guided by language or discussion, but defined by forms of organization strategically oriented toward achieving specific ends, driven by power (politics) and money (economics); and (2) the world of life, where communication takes place and relationships are spontaneous, not based on interests or the pursuit of specific goals, which would be further divided into the objective world (characterized by the truth of propositions), the subjective world (defined by the ability to understand and formulate symbolic expressions), and the social world (based on moral norms that would guide action). Figure 1 shows the relationship between the conceptual aspects and the main actions anticipated by Habermas.

Figure 1
Conceptual aspects and the relationship between the world of life and the system world, according to Habermas



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

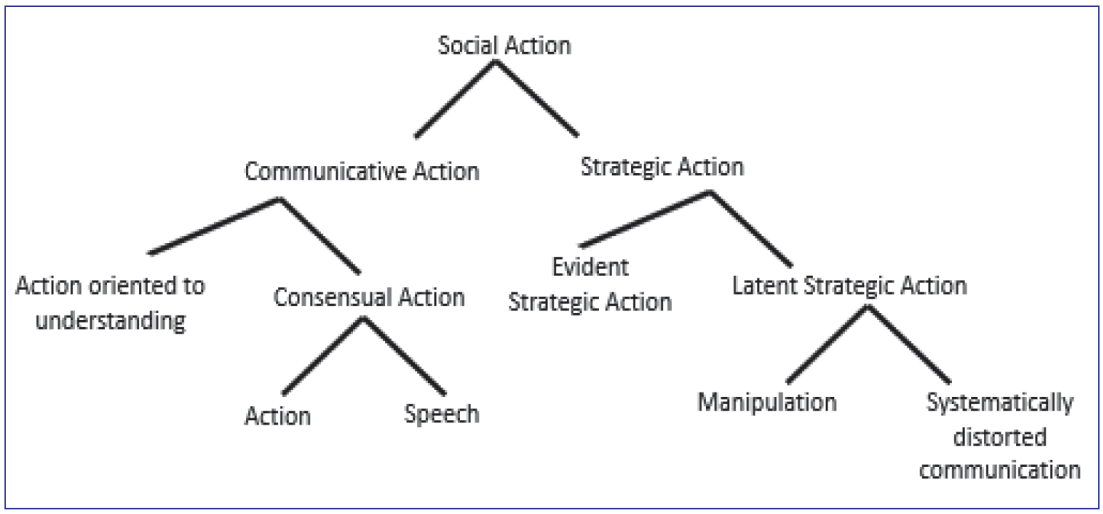
In communicative action, individuals would be guided by a universalist perspective, free from selfishness, where language serves as the means to achieve consensus. Communicative action is judged by criteria of truth, correctness, and sincerity (Habermas, 2012a, 2012b), and would occur mainly in the context of the world of life relationships, while in the system, relationships would be based mostly on teleological action, due to the constant quest for reaching certain goals (Fiedler, 2006).

A HABERMAS-INSPIRED LOOK AT FAKE NEWS

Based on these fundamental dimensions of TCA, certain Habermas's theoretical perspectives can be useful for examining fake news, especially the aspects he identified as hindering the process of understanding in communication. The author presents universal pragmatics, which focuses on understanding and creating conditions that enable the process of understanding to occur, where communicative action can develop. He starts by assuming that, even in competitive contexts driven by strategic action, there is an inherent attempt to generate understanding (Habermas, 1996).

Specifically, pragmatics refers to how language is used in certain contexts. Based on that, we notice that it is used for both communicative and strategic purposes, depending on how speeches are built and directed; for communication to occur, there must be individuals who understand each other (Gomes, 2014). Therefore, by examining the use of speeches, we can identify certain types of social actions and the approaches they take, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Forms of Social Action, according to Habermas



Source: Adapted from Habermas (1996, p. 10).

From this theoretical perspective, the main types of social action would be communicative and strategic actions. For the former to take place, there must be at least two agents with linguistic abilities, who use valid reasoning that enables mutual understanding. It is also necessary for the speech to have validity claim, which can be identified through universal pragmatics in the form of certain indicators, in the analysis of contexts where mutual understanding exists (Habermas, 1996).

Strategic action, on the other hand, is based on an instrumental approach for achieving specific goals. The actors involved may adopt a clear perspective of strategic action, in a context where one agent is responsible for rationalizing the process and others serve as the means to achieve a given goal, in the search for success. From the perspective of latent strategic action, the guidelines for understanding and decision-making would occur indirectly, through a manipulative dimension or a systematically distorted form of communication (Habermas, 1996).

The ability of manipulation in the context of the internet and social media is one of the defining characteristics of these forms of communication, so that professions have emerged with a focus on influencing behavior, like YouTubers and digital influencers. Depending on their engagement, in terms of the number of people they reach on digital platforms, these agents may influence opinions, consumer decisions, and behaviors (Cavalcante, 2019). During the pandemic, actors with these characteristics played significant roles in sharing certain information about the virus.

Other Habermasian categories relevant to the analysis of fake news are related to potential communicative distortions, which manifest themselves in the validity claims of universal pragmatics. These distortions refer to deviations in communication that undermine dialogue and prevent communicative action, thus strengthening instrumental rationality (Inocêncio & Favoreto, 2022). Some of these validity claims include intelligibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity. Table 1 provides a conceptual overview of what is understood about each of the aspects related to validity claims.

Table 1
Validity claims of communicative action

Validity claim	Description	Examples of questions for identification in communication
Intelligibility	This refers to the effort to convey the message in an understandable way to the recipient.	Are there any incomprehensible phrases or words in the message? Are there unnecessary details, syntactic or semantic errors, or the use of jargons?
Truth	What is being communicated refers to a factual truth, based on facts or objects in the objective world.	Are the statements made in the message Supportinged by evidence? Is any relevant information omitted?
Legitimacy	Communication must be appropriate in light of the normative context and the social values recognized in a given context.	Does the message conveyed align with the standards and values it claims to advocate?
Sincerity	The speaker must be sincere, expressing their intentions in a way that allows the listener to trust what is said.	Are there statements that use metaphors or connotative words to refer to the content of the message being transmitted? Do metaphors and connotative words enhance or hinder understanding?

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Inocêncio & Favoreto (2022).

Fake news, by its very nature, does not meet one of the assumptions listed by Habermas (1996), regarding the validity claim, namely the question of truth. However, at times, it may exhibit characteristics of other forms of validity, depending on the fallacious structure used. This is because fallacies – which are characteristic of fake news – present themselves as arguments that initially seem valid but, upon closer examination, reveal apparent flaws (Almeida, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve this article's goal, we used a qualitative approach. The main source of information was the CPI Pandemic Report, specifically Chapter 9, "Disinformation during the pandemic (Fake news)" (Senado Federal, 2021). This research was descriptive, as we sought to describe and interpret fake news from a Habermasian perspective, focusing on the ways it was used by the former president, his family members, and Supportingers. To analyze this information, we initially carried out a documentary analysis of that report, considering its specific attributes.

Later, we used content analysis to organize written information, in order to group the content according to predefined categories (Rodrigues & Leopardi, 1999). To carry out this method, we followed the steps outlined by Bardin (2011): pre-analysis, exploration of the material, and processing of results. During the pre-analysis stage, we conducted a preliminary skimming reading of the information contained in Chapter 9 of the Pandemic CPI Report, to select the key information that would comprise the final textual *corpus* for the analysis. The main criterion for selecting this *corpus* was the temporal and textual presentation made by the senators in describing the fake news disseminated by individuals associated with the government, during the pandemic.

During the data exploration stage, we conducted a more in-depth reading of the final *corpus* compiled in the previous stage. To guide this reading, we followed the analytical categories outlined in the theoretical framework of Habermas's theory. Finally, we processed the results through the interpretation and discussion of the report findings, drawing on existing literature on fake news. From these results, we created Figure 4, which summarizes the key insights from our analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Presentation and context of the Pandemic CPI

The Pandemic CPI Report presents several cases of false statements and dissemination of misleading information by President Jair Bolsonaro, members of his family, or his Supportingers. The goal was to show how this information was spread, who were the main actors, and which platforms were used for that purpose.

The authors of the report begin Chapter 9 by highlighting the importance of access to accurate information during the pandemic, noting that, based on correct information, citizens could make better decisions and adjust their behavior properly. The report's assumption was that "accurate information saves lives", and the reason for its preparation stemmed from the fact that the spread of misleading information led to behaviors that hindered efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic – thus showing the need for an investigation to further examine the details and identify those potentially responsible (Senado Federal, 2021).

The CPI held several sessions and received extensive media coverage during its term. The investigation found that public media agencies failed to act against misinformation, and there was evidence that these agencies actively participated in the creation and dissemination of false information. Hence, four conclusions were drawn from the CPI's investigation:

> (i) the federal government's omission in raising public awareness about the pandemic; (ii) the active involvement of the President of the Republic, his sons, and top echelon of the government in creating and disseminating false information; (iii) the use of government structure to spread president's statements; and (iv) Supporting to communicators who spread false news and information about COVID-19 (Senado Federal, 2021, p. 664).

In addition, it became clear that there was an organization dedicated to spreading false information that Supportinged certain ideas advocated by the then-President. The groups Supportinging the President were divided into three categories: political, production and dissemination of fake news, and financial. For each category, we present the key actors and the type of false information they disseminated during that period, along with their respective roles in that scenario. According to Habermas (1996), this organization was an example of strategic action, with a goal to be achieved by communication, spread across various channels, comprising different actors who Supportinged the President's ideas on how to handle the pandemic.

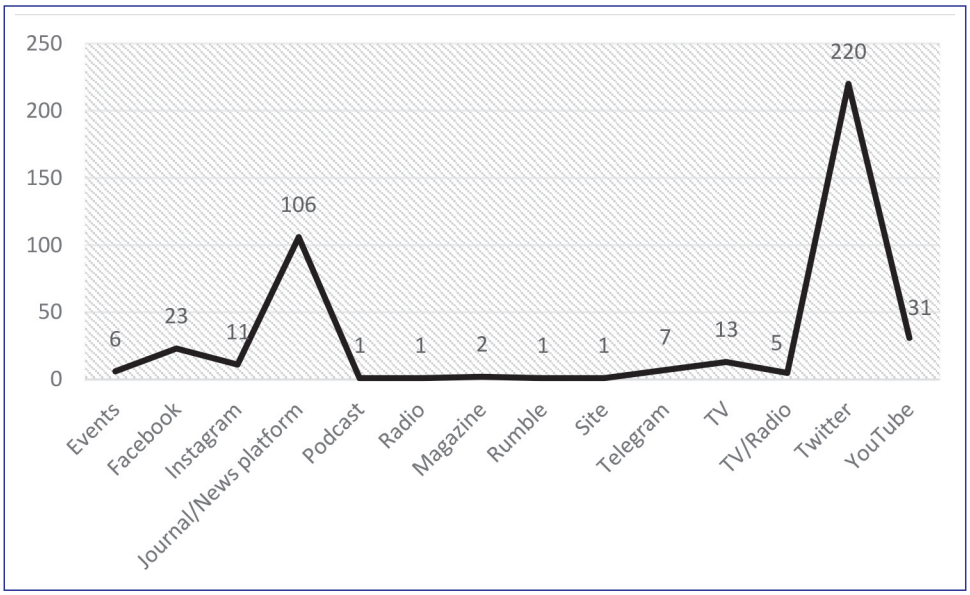
The examples of fake news listed in the report often have complex structures; they are not merely groundless information disseminated separately. This information, although untrue, had attributes of validity claim in terms of intelligibility and legitimacy (Habermas, 1996), since it often drew on international scientific studies or other ways to enhance the appearance of authenticity. This content, whether textual or audiovisual, was designed to generate engagement and political or economic benefits, and was spread through various channels, including television, magazines, websites, and, above all, social media (Senado Federal, 2021).

The *corpus* of fake news considered in this analysis is diverse, and characterized by extensive intertextuality; it does not exist in isolation, but as a network of speeches that refer to one another, revisiting, reinterpreting, and distorting statements and topics, with a bias that served the interests of the active political group. By interpreting this phenomenon based on Habermas (1996), we observe a broad set of declarations that exhibit features of action oriented toward a strategic dimension, with clearly political purposes, leaving in the background an approach grounded in truth and in the population's understanding of the pandemic crisis scenario.

Communicative distortions in the fake news listed in the Pandemic CPI

Chapter 9 of the Pandemic CPI Report lists 428 pieces of fake news, each described by the report's authors with the date of publication, a description of the misinformation, and a screen capture of the content taken from the social media platform where it was posted. The fake news items listed were published between January 25, 2020, and September 22, 2021, on several communication platforms like Facebook, Instagram, newspapers/news platforms, podcasts, radio stations, magazines, Rumble, websites, Telegram, TV stations, Twitter, and YouTube. In addition, the list also includes statements by some prominent actors at certain events. As shown in Figure 3, the primary communication platform used was Twitter.

Figure 3
Media used to spread fake news



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The fact that Twitter, as a social network, is used as the primary means of spreading fake news provides an alleged aspect of intelligibility, in light of the validity claim of the communicative action (Inocêncio & Favoreto, 2022), by the Bolsonaro administration and its followers/Supportingers. This is because fast communication on social media - sometimes conveyed visually or using colloquial language - can be more "accessible" and, therefore, more "intelligible" to large crowds (Finardi et al., 2013), compared to news reported by official media channels, such as newspapers and specialized journals. The fake news items were analyzed and classified according to the content of the descriptions provided by the authors of the Pandemic CPI Report. For this analysis, we considered 13 categories, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Categories of analysis considered in the study, by frequency

Category of analysis	Description	Number of fake news
Advocacy for drugs with unproven effectiveness against COVID-19 (early treatment)	Presentation of arguments favorable to the use of early treatment without proven effectiveness against Covid-19, such as drugs like hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin.	134
Criticism of the vaccine and compulsory application	Questioning about the effectiveness of vaccines and mandatory vaccination.	87
Criticism of lockdowns and business closures	Disclosing information contrary to the measures of social isolation.	57
Argumentative Fallacies	The use of news taken out of context, "expert" opinions, or distorted data to Supporting an argument.	47
Attack on the use of masks	Criticism of the mandatory nature and effectiveness of mask use.	29
Rumors and fantasies	Sharing misleading information and conspiracy theories.	23
Attack to China	News related to China as the source of the virus, criticism of the Chinese government, and of the vaccine.	21
Attack to information disclosed by traditional media (like Globo Network)	Criticism of information disseminated through traditional media channels.	17
Criticism of the Covid-19 death count	Questions regarding the count of deaths caused by COVID-19.	16
Herd immunity	Defending natural or herd immunity against COVID-19.	13
Omission of liability and mitigation of the pandemic effects	Mitigation of the pandemic's effects and the assertion that it was not a problem for the federal government (blaming the o Supremo Tribunal Federal- STF).	12
Attack on experts in the field	Criticism of information and guidelines released by the World Health Organization (WHO).	10
Other	Criticism directed at teachers who did not feel safe returning to work and at holding the CPI.	2

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

According to Table 2, the most common arguments regarding fake news refer to advocating for early treatment methods and criticizing vaccines and social distancing. These are relevant and summarize the Bolsonaro administration's attitude during the pandemic, particularly because they are recurring statements made by the president in his speeches and live appearances, which, in turn, were echoed by other actors, namely his Supportingers, through various media channels.

The category with the highest number of fake news was "Advocacy for drugs with unproven effectiveness against COVID-19 (early treatment)", which included actions and statements made in Supporting of the use of hydroxychloroquine and other medications. Many publications claimed that hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine were effective against the virus, and to give visibility to that claim, interviews were conducted with doctors and public figures, like Nise Yamaguchi and Paulo Zanotto, Supportingers of these treatments, in an attempt to influence public opinion. False news was shared, based on alleged scientific studies that showed that hydroxychloroquine was effective for treating COVID-19, along with accusations that research against its use was false. In addition, there were campaigns to encourage early treatment, such as "COVID-19 does have a treatment".

The second most frequent category was "Criticism of the vaccine and compulsory application". The fake news in this category featured statements and actions by public figures who criticized and doubted the effectiveness and safety of coronavirus vaccines, and fostered a scenario of mistrust regarding mandatory immunization. These criticisms were diverse and came from many sources, such as doctors, influencers, politicians, and alternative media. The content of these posts referred to:

criticism of the vaccines' effectiveness and safety; false and groundless reports about potential side effects, highlighting deaths allegedly linked to vaccination; criticism of mandatory vaccination, by defending the individual's right to choose whether or not to receive it; and the dissemination of conspiracy theories regarding vaccines, such as claims that they were a means of mass extermination, that they would change human DNA, or were even used to control population. In addition, many posts presented early treatment measures, such as hydroxychloroquine, as a more effective alternative to vaccines.

The third category was "Criticism of lockdowns and business closures". In general, the posts included in this group criticized isolation and social distancing, arguing that these measures would be disastrous and that the Brazilian people wanted to work. In this regard, President Bolsonaro and his Supportingers made statements to downplay the effects of the pandemic and to blame isolation for the collapse of the country's economy. Several fake news focused on discussing the ineffectiveness of the lockdown, attempting to convey the idea that it would cause more harm than good, like an increase in contamination and the emergence of new variants of the virus, often based on flawed studies. Beyond this issue, there were numerous posts that instigated the population to disregard isolation measures, and public figures and influencers organized protests against the lockdown and other measures recommended by WHO and experts, advocating for isolation.

In the "Argumentative Fallacies" category, we found fake news that used an argumentative structure, to give the appearance of authenticity, as it spread disinformation by misinterpreting data related to the pandemic. This occurred with fake news regarding vaccination statistics, optimistic predictions about the end of the pandemic, and false correlations between treatments and the virus's mortality rates. Therefore, there was an argumentative attempt, using alleged scientific documents and news on the situation in other countries, seeking to transmit an idea of a lower impact of the pandemic and to encourage early treatment with medications such as ivermectin and chloroquine. Sharing this type of content strengthened the spread of false information that potentially influenced public perception on the severity of the pandemic and the ways to fight it. In short, the communication strategy employed used information taken out of context, opinions from so-called "experts", or data manipulation, in order to Supporting a particular point of view.

The category "Attack on the use of masks" consists of posts by politicians and influencers who questioned the effectiveness of masks in preventing coronavirus transmission, arguing that there was no scientific evidence to Supporting their usefulness. Several interviews on media channels like CNN and Jovem Pan were used to question their utility, and anti-mask campaigns were launched, considering the mandatory use of masks as authoritarian measures that violated people's rights. President Bolsonaro himself and other public figures made statements that discredited the use of masks, without considering the opinions of health experts who recommended their use to contain the spread of the virus. In addition, many critics of mask-wearing advocated for early treatment with medications without scientific evidence that proved their effectiveness.

The "Rumors and Fantasies" category includes the spread of hearsay and conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. Among them, some stand out, such as: victims' coffins were being buried empty; the virus had been created in a laboratory and was a biological weapon; and the pandemic was a conspiracy by the elite to control the masses. There were also arguments aimed at minimizing the severity of the pandemic, treating it as collective hysteria, and attacks on certain public figures, like the governor of São Paulo at the time, João Dória. These actions took the form of videos, lectures, and social media posts.

The "Attack on China" category includes a set of fake news related to posts and statements that portrayed the new coronavirus as a "Chinese plague" or a "Chinese virus". An analysis of their content revealed that these were social media posts by public figures who referred to China as responsible for creating the coronavirus on purpose. In addition, these posts criticized the Coronavac vaccine, developed by China, referring to it negatively as "Vachina," while questioning partnerships established for its purchase, and simultaneously advocating for alleged alternative treatments, such as hydroxychloroquine as a substitute for the Chinese vaccine. Other issues that arose relate to conspiracy theories used to Supporting these arguments, such as the idea that the lockdown was part of a Chinese plan and that the virus was a biological weapon, as well as claims that WHO and China were responsible for intentionally spreading the virus and hiding the cure – which, in this case, would be chloroquine.

To Supporting the false information on China, there is a cluster of news and videos that seek to blame that country for the emergence of the virus, such as a video shared on September 17, 2020, of a Fox News interview, where a Chinese doctor claimed that the virus had been intentionally created, or the sharing of news, on July 22, 2021, which reported that China was not conducting in-depth investigations on the origin of the virus. Therefore, it is evident that fallacies were used, through statements by experts or by citing news from newspapers or other media sources, to give the impression of authenticity to the arguments presented (Habermas, 1996).

The category "Attacks on information disclosed by traditional media (like *Rede Globo*)" includes public statements regarding the COVID-19 pandemic that consisted of criticisms to the press, misinformation, and political opinions. In this regard, there was an attempt to create a parallel narrative about the reality of the pandemic by attacking the press, by questioning the accuracy of the information being disclosed and blaming it for causing panic among the population. In short, a narrative was built suggesting that the press was manipulating information about the pandemic to cause fear. To Supporting this argument, posts were made that sustained Bolsonaro's positions, with articles from websites and newspapers defending the president's approach in dealing with the pandemic, specifically regarding criticism of preventive measures and advocacy for early treatment.

The class "Criticism of the COVID-19 death count" consists of public figures' statements that questioned and underestimated the number of COVID-19 deaths in Brazil. There were interviews where top government officials claimed that death numbers in certain locations were being increased, in an attempt to secure additional funding, and that the Ministry of Health should review these figures. Later, the government's announcement that it would no longer report the cumulative death count caused a strong reaction, leaving a temporary gap in the data. This category includes posts that show the government top officials' effort to minimize the severity of the pandemic by questioning the data released on COVID-19 deaths.

The "Herd Immunity" category, in turn, includes statements from various public figures who defended herd immunity, through infection and vertical isolation, as a strategy for dealing with the pandemic. Eduardo Bolsonaro (federal representative and president's son) was a prominent figure in this regard, participating in interviews and events that discussed this strategy. In publications related to this topic, there are posts and interviews that minimized the virus's lethality, letters against restrictive measures, denials of the possibility of viral mutations, and predictions that the pandemic would be over in a few weeks. There are even declarations from public figures who defended the infection of children and teenagers as a strategy to fight the virus. In essence, this collection of fake news includes actions and statements that promoted herd immunity and reduced the severity of COVID-19.

Another recurring topic in the pandemic management was the narrative that its consequences were not a federal government's problem, which falls under the category "Omission of liability and mitigation of the pandemic effects". In this narrative, through statements and social media posts, there was an attempt to reduce the federal government's role, emphasizing that it was prevented from taking more active measures to fight the pandemic because of alleged restrictions imposed by the Federal Supreme Court (STF). Hence, a narrative was built, blaming state governors and city mayors for the ongoing situation.

The category "Attack on experts in the field" consists of fake news aimed mainly at criticizing WHO and the guidance provided by experts who advocated for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, pro-government newspaper columnists and digital influencers Supportinged a narrative contrary to WHO guidelines and in defense of Bolsonaro's policies, especially by opposing to isolation measures and Supportinging early treatment.

Finally, in the "Other" category, there are fallacies related to criticism of teachers who opposed the return to in-person classes, at a time when it was not yet advisable to do so, due to the high levels of virus transmission, as well as criticism to the establishment of the Pandemic CPI. Specifically, regarding the CPI, the report highlights a piece of information from June 12, 2021, where Ricardo Barros, government leader in the House of Representatives, "on *Rádio Bandeirantes*, defended early treatment, criticized horizontal isolation, and stated that the CPI report was already complete before the investigation began" (Senado Federal, 2021, p. 745).

When relating this set of categories with the discussion of TCA, it becomes clear that the basis of the search for mutual understanding lies in the possibility of rational dialogue, which is fundamental to the building of society, regarding aspects like public debate, the quest for consensus, and democratic deliberation. As previously mentioned, fake news represents a form of strategic action, because it is used in communication to manipulate and influence a specific audience in order to achieve various interests, whether political or financial (Galhardi et al., 2020).

The analysis revealed the structural and argumentative characteristics of the fake news disseminated by government top officials during the pandemic. They used various means of communication, oral and written, along with a structure designed to present the information as credible, by citing sources to Supporting their arguments, including experts' statements and scientific studies with misleading interpretations, among other methods.

Habermas (2012a) developed the idea that speeches would be valid if they met criteria of truth, correctness, and sincerity. Fake news, in this context, does not present the relevant aspects of these definitions, since it does not aim to achieve the truth, is not ethical or responsible in its communication (correctness), and is disseminated with the intent to deceive, thus lacking the characteristics of sincerity. Therefore, within a democratic framework, fake news, like that disseminated during the pandemic, hinders the development of an informed public opinion (Emmendoerfer et al., 2022), creating a scenario of mistrust and polarization; in a public health emergency, the effects are potentially even more harmful.

As for the claims of validity in communicative action – intelligibility, truth, legitimacy, and sincerity (Habermas, 1996; Inocêncio & Favoreto, 2022), an analysis of the fake news identified by the Pandemic CPI suggests that it was systematically distorted. Although intelligibility was often preserved – precisely to facilitate the circulation, acceptance, and sharing of the messages – the claims of truth, legitimacy, and sincerity proved to be largely compromised. Table 3 presents an analysis of the elements of the validity claims of communicative action, based on the broader categories of analysis that we created, based on the findings of the Pandemic CPI.

Table 3
Analysis of validity claims of communicative action regarding fake news on Covid-19 pandemic

Validity claim	Macro-category of analysis "Attack to China"
Intelligibility	The claim of intelligibility seems to have been partially preserved, as the messages were phrased in a simple, emotional way that was easily understood by the general public. Expressions like "Chinese virus", "Chinese plague", and "Chinese vaccine" produced direct and accessible communication. However, this clarity was often combined with a strong ideological and metaphorical load, using offensive language and generalizations that artificially oversimplified a complex scientific phenomenon. Therefore, although understandable, these statements reduced the complexity of the healthcare and political debate.
Truth	The claim of truth was largely violated in this category. Allegations about the deliberate creation of the virus in a laboratory, Chinese conspiracies, intentional manipulation of the pandemic, or the lack of scientific evidence for Chinese vaccines were not Supportinged by recognized scientific evidence. In addition, numerous messages disregarded scientific consensus and information produced by international organizations, replacing checkable data with ideological assumptions, speculation, and conspiracy theories.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy was also compromised, as the statements often encouraged xenophobia, international hostility, and the stigmatization of the Chinese population. The repeated use of terms such as "Chinese plague" violates normative standards associated with respect, international cooperation, and human rights. Furthermore, the communication failed to observe democratic principles of rational debate, by turning a global health crisis into a tool for ideological dispute.
Sincerity	The sincerity of these statements is highly suspect. In many cases, the senders appeared to be using "anti-China" narratives, not to raise public awareness, but to shift political responsibility, reinforce ideological identities, and mobilize political Supporting. The repetition of unproven accusations, even after successive scientific refutations, suggests a potential strategic orientation in their communication, incompatible with a sincere search for mutual understanding.

(Continue)

Validity claim	Macro-category of analysis "Criticism of social distancing measures and lockdowns"
Intelligibility	The messages were highly intelligible, using simple language and strong emotional appeal. Phrases such as "people want to work", "lockdown destroys the economy", or "disastrous measures" facilitated widespread circulation and understanding. However, complex epidemiological issues were oversimplified, creating false dichotomies between the economy and public health.
Truth	The claim of truth is partially or completely compromised in several examples. Many publications denied scientific evidence on the effectiveness of social distancing, minimized the severity of the pandemic, or claimed that restrictive measures would be useless. In several cases, the arguments disregarded scientific studies, public health recommendations, and national and international epidemiological data.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy appears to be under strain because these speeches often delegitimized governors, mayors, scientific institutions, and international organizations responsible for implementing public health policies. By classifying public health measures as "dictatorial", "disastrous", or "useless", some of these messages sought to weaken institutional consensus built in the context of a public health emergency.
Sincerity	Sincerity is questionable when communication appears to prioritize specific political and economic interests, at the expense of collective health protection. The insistence in denying scientific evidence, even in the face of rising death rates and hospital overcrowding, suggests a potential strategic use of communication to keep political capital and ideological alignment.
Validity claim	Macro-category of analysis "Advocacy for 'early treatment' and of 'hydroxychloroquine'"
Intelligibility	The messages were highly intelligible, generally written in an affirmative and simple style, transmitting a sense of security and immediate solution. The simplicity of the speech favored broad social acceptance, especially in a context of collective fear.
Truth	The claim of truth was deeply compromised, as these speeches often asserted therapeutic effectiveness without strong scientific Supporting. Many messages ignored clinical studies, statements from medical institutions, and systematic reviews that indicated a lack of efficacy of medications for the treatment of COVID-19. Furthermore, the advertising of "cures" or "guaranteed treatments" replaced scientific evidence with isolated, anecdotal, or politicized reports.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy was affected because the promotion of drugs without proven effectiveness conflicted with scientific protocols and ethical principles of public health. By encouraging unproven treatments, part of the communication contributed to health misinformation and a potential erosion of trust in medical and scientific institutions.
Sincerity	Sincerity was questioned in light of the insistence on advocating for early treatment, even after successive contrary scientific evidence. In many cases, the communication appeared to serve for preserving political narratives and sustaining previously established government statements.
Validity claim	Macro-category of analysis "Misinformation about vaccines"
Intelligibility	Usually, the messages were objective and emotionally appealing. The use of expressions such as "Chinese vaccine", or claims about hidden risks had a strong communicative impact. However, oversimplification reduced complex scientific debates to political slogans.
Truth	The claim of truth was largely broken. Several messages spread unproven information about vaccine risks, lack of effectiveness, or hidden agendas related to vaccines. These narratives often ignored clinical trials, regulatory approvals, and scientific evidence produced by national and international institutions.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy was compromised as communication weakened public immunization campaigns and hindered collective actions of public health protection. In addition, the systematic vaccine mistrust undermined socially shared values related to public health, collective solidarity, and social responsibility.
Sincerity	Sincerity became problematic when false or distorted information continued to be disseminated, even after technical and scientific explanations. This suggests that the purpose of the communication was not necessarily to foster rational understanding, but rather to generate political mobilization, fear, or institutional distrust.

(Continue)

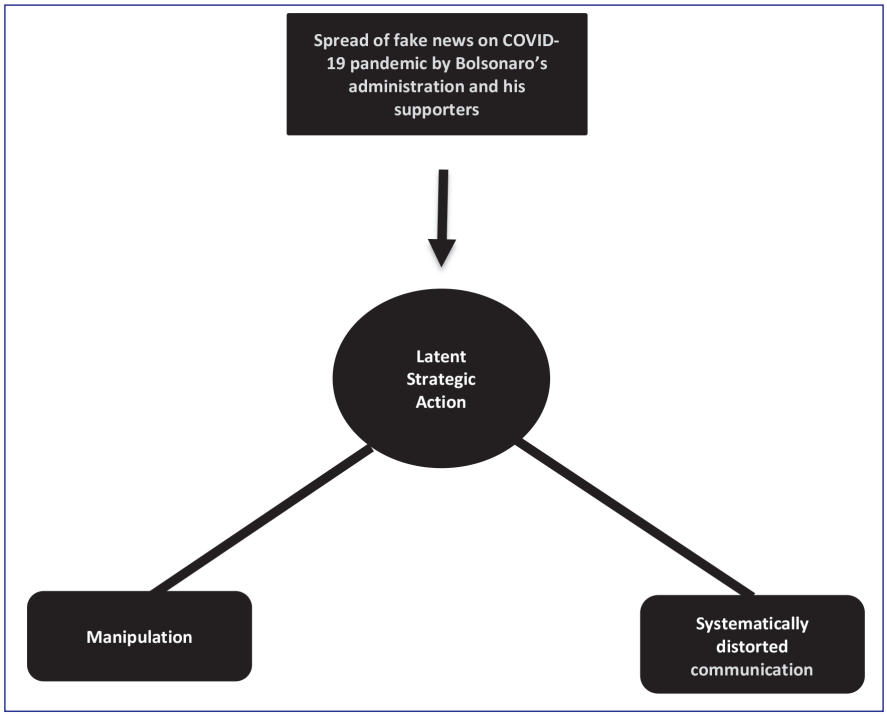
Validity claim	Macro-category of analysis "Denial of the severity of the pandemic"
Intelligibility	The speeches were highly intelligible due to the use of short, direct, and emotionally compelling phrases. Simplified expressions such as "minor flu", "hysteria", or "exaggeration" facilitated the social circulation of the messages.
Truth	The claim of truth was directly violated when statements denied epidemiological data, minimized deaths, or questioned statistics without consistent evidence. In many cases, there was a selective omission of relevant information and a rejection of widely established scientific consensus.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy was compromised because such speeches weakened public health policies and discouraged preventive collective behavior. Furthermore, minimizing deaths can be interpreted as incompatible with democratic values associated with the protection of life and human dignity.
Sincerity	Sincerity is questioned, given the persistence of denialist speeches, even after the widespread dissemination of empirical evidence on mortality, hospital system collapse, and the social impacts of the pandemic. This suggests a potential prevalence of strategic rationality at the expense of communicative rationality.

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

From a Habermasian perspective, the constant violation of the elements of claim validity of communicative action, especially truth, legitimacy, and sincerity, indicates a shift from communicative rationality toward forms of strategic action oriented not to mutual understanding, but to political dispute, ideological mobilization, and manipulation of public opinion. In this context, disinformation functions not only as an isolated factual error, but as a mechanism for the colonization of the world of life by political and ideological interests.

Given this scenario of fake news dissemination during Bolsonaro administration, we emphasize that it did not serve to foster a democratic debate about the pandemic. On the contrary, this spread was strategically orchestrated to convey false information to society, which served the interests of just one segment of the population - the government itself and its Supportingers. In this regard, fake news of that period represents a form of latent strategic action, aimed at manipulating the population through systematically distorted forms of communication, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Spread of fake news on Covid-19 pandemic by Bolsonaro's administration as a latent strategic action



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Therefore, the spread of fake news by Bolsonaro government and Supportingers lacks the elements of truth and sincerity required to claim validity for the communicative act (Habermas, 1996; Inocêncio & Favoreto, 2022); at the same time, it is disguised as intelligibility through the massive use of communication on social media in particular, exploiting the legitimacy conferred to the leader of a democratic state. This discussion also relates to the decline of reason, since human beings are perceived as relying more on the defense claim of their group's interests, without necessarily guiding themselves by universal values of freedom and truth, but following a path of arguments of authority rather than the authority of their own arguments (Japiassu, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to investigate the types of misinformation disseminated by top officials of the federal government during the pandemic, treating fake news as forms of latent strategic action (Habermas, 1996). The article advances knowledge by focusing on a comprehensive investigation process regarding the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, as conducted by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Pandemic (Pandemic CPI). A key contribution is the theoretical classification of fake news from a Habermasian perspective, contributing to the existing literature on the subject and serving as a basis for future studies that analyze the implications of fake news for general democratic dynamics.

In essence, the findings reveal numerous strategies employed by the federal government to spread disinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, driven mainly by the influence and reach of a state leader's communicative action over the population, especially in a context of scientific denialism. The categorization of the set of fake news disseminated during the pandemic shows a scenario where various types of misinformation, spread by influential individuals, hindered a correct understanding of the severity of the health crisis at that time, and how to deal with it, thereby affecting the formation of public opinion. The argumentative strategies included fallacious information about early treatment methods, establishing mistrust of vaccines, guidance from experts and traditional media, the need for social distancing, use of masks, death counts, and the spread of conspiracy theories.

A limitation of this article, despite its exploratory and innovative nature, is that data collection and analysis were carried out by using a single data source. Therefore, it is essential that future research considers as units of analysis the actors involved in the Pandemic CPI process, in addition to the general population, in order to understand how fake news about the pandemic, spread by actors linked to Bolsonaro administration, reached and affected people's way of life.

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José Roberto Abreu de Carvalho Junior: Conceptualization (Supporting); Supervision (Supporting); Validation (Supporting); Visualization (Supporting); Writing - original draft (Supporting); Writing - review and editing (Supporting).

Valter Cardoso da Silva: Conceptualization (Supporting); Writing - original draft (Supporting); Writing - review & editing (Supporting).

RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY

All data used in the research are publicly available in the Report of the Pandemic CPI, at the following electronic address: https://legis.senado.leg.br/comissoes/mnas?codcol=2441&tp=4

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest of any kind.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE

No artificial intelligence tools were used.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) – funding code 001 - and the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo (IFES) for their funding.

FUNDING

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001, and was also funded by the Instituto Federal do Espírito Santo (IFES).

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