



# COVID-19: Scientific Arguments, Denialism, Eugenics, and the Construction of the Antisocial Distancing Discourse in Brazil

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Since March 11, the world has been experiencing a pandemic of Sars-Cov-2, the new coronavirus, which emerged in China in late December 2019 and causes the COVID-19 disease. Pandemics are characterized by pathogen's ability of emerging or re-emerging across geographical boundaries, simultaneously affecting a large number of people around the world, due to the sustained transmission in humans. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed in real time the dissemination of different types of information about it and strategies used to contain the rate of virus contamination. Our main goal in this study is to analyze the discursive production of the Brazilian journalistic media about vertical isolation as a supposed scientific strategy, and to demonstrate how that has been used in the denialist approach adopted by the Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. The research was carried out on the Google platform, using the following descriptors: coronavirus and herd immunity; coronavirus and the Imperial College herd immunity strategy; vertical isolation; Bolsonaro and vertical isolation. Thirty-six articles were selected for a qualitative analysis besides the original article by David L. Katz (published in The New York Times), where he claims the creation of the vertical confinement strategy. All documents of the analytical *corpus* are open and free of charge. The articles were submitted to discursive analysis and the main results shows that Brazilian media highlighted Bolsonaro's proposal of vertical isolation and amplified his pandemic denial and eugenics policies. The mass media vehicles play a central role in the dissemination of information and should commit to the publication of reliable and trustworthy information, as well as to objectively situate the areas of knowledge of the specialists whose opinions are being published.

**Keywords:** novel SARS-coronavirus-2/SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19, digital media, eugenics, denialism, public health communication, journalism

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic presents itself as concerning for the majority of people across the planet. This concern is guided by a number of characteristics of Sars-Cov-2 and by the contemporary lifestyle. The virus has a high potential for dissemination in the globalized world—by mid-August 2020, more than 20.7 million people had been contaminated; part of this contingent became

seriously ill, requiring hospitalization, and nearly 780 thousand people had died<sup>1</sup>. There is still no treatment available for this disease, nor vaccines that might prevent infection. These factors, together with the lack of knowledge and the uncertainties on the evolution of the infection/disease, as well as the post-infection immunological responses, have led to great investments in scientific research in the several fields of science, while at the same time the population searches incessantly for information in order to make sense of their own experiences.

Within this context of a pandemic, mass media holds a key social role; as a source of information that is historically recognized and trustworthy, the media has been disseminating and modeling the ways in which ordinary people think about and deal with everyday events. It is important to remember that the conditions of truth and of social justification are the pillars that support the belief in journalistic discourse, which becomes trustworthy and credible as long as it manages to prove the veracity of its testimony, by means of the detailing of facts and the citation of specialized sources (Lisboa and Benetti, 2015).

It is important to note, however, that this “proof of veracity” does not make news stories “mirrors” of reality, but instead, simply one of the possible narratives about social occurrences. Transformed into information, these occurrences are shared between members of society and journalists, who in turn claim a monopoly on this knowledge (defining what is news), meaning that, more than passive observers, they are active participants in the construction of reality (Traquina, 2007). Although creative, journalistic activity is submitted to a number of “tyrannies”: of the deadlines and formats of journalistic production; of superior hierarchies (editors-in-chief, news editors, and, frequently, the owners of the platforms); the imperatives of journalism as a business; the extreme competition; and the action/pressure of different social actors searching to highlight their own matters (Traquina, 2007). Thus, newsmaking results in journalism’s capacity for producing social facts, in other words, for instituting realities, according to the repertoires and contexts that the journalist chooses to use.

We have, in addition, used journalistic discursive practices within the perspective offered by Van Der Haak et al. (2012), who state that journalism, as a public asset, should produce information and analyses that are useful for democratic societies, based on transparency, independence, the use of reliable sources, and the detailed analysis of events.

In this text we took the journalistic coverage of COVID-19 as a producer of meanings and social facts (Spink, 2004). We also used the perspective of Thompson (2014), for whom the process of news production, whichever it may be, always occurs within a socio-historical context that allows media outlets to capture and transform a certain number of everyday events into messages (symbolic forms) in detriment of an infinity of others.

We considered the context of exceptionality of the pandemic, where researchers and scientists are being obliged to accelerate

their production to a rhythm never seen before, in order to provide clinical responses to the disease and guide public policies and State actions for managing public health around the world. This implies that most of the knowledge produced about Sars-CoV-2 and the disease it causes is being permanently revised, refuted, and discarded.

The problem is that, with this frenetic production, the refuted suppositions have often already reached a level of dissemination and absorption by common sense and even by public authorities which, due to a variety of interests, makes it impossible to revert their use, remaining as valid points of view. In other words, even when these suppositions have been invalidated by science, they continue as a social fact, affecting the lives of people and the manners in which they make their decisions when faced with the epidemic. Thus, it is important for journalists and mass media companies to be vigilant regarding the possible consequences of the content they relay.

We are referring, therefore, to the decisive role played by mass media in structuring the public space. This is a sensitive debate around the world, as it involves controlling the access to the production and circulation of the information that is transformed into messages (symbolic content) by a restricted number of actors, according to private interests or that of the groups that the media represents (Thompson, 2014). This aspect is especially problematic in Brazil. The country has a historical asymmetry in the relationship between mass media and society, establishing what Kucinski (2006) call the “principle of exclusion,” violating the human right to information.

In Brazil, different from that which occurred for the most part in the liberal democracies of the global North, the mediatic market is marked by an ideological, economic, and political homogeneity that is usually pro-establishment. From the start, the media—and particularly the press—has historically reproduced with great fidelity the oligarchic model of land ownership, with a predominance in newspaper management of the “favoritism typical of the command culture of large rural properties” (Kucinski, 2006, p. 20).

The business model for national media is amplified by Brazil’s complexity. Companies are configured as oligopolies, with properties that are horizontal, vertical, and crisscrossed by different mediums (newspapers, magazines, AM and FM radio, open access and pay TV, internet provider) within the same market, whether local, regional, or national. This process was accentuated by the privatization of telecommunications during the 1990s (de Lima, 2001, 2011; Malinverni, 2016). Currently, according to the Brazilian section of the MOM (Media Ownership Monitor)/Reporters Sans Frontières, eight economic family groups control 26 of the 50 largest media vehicles in the country, according to audience and to scheduling capacity; in other words, in terms of potential to influence public opinion.

Divided into four large sectors (print, radio, TV, and online), the study, which resulted in the report “Who controls the media in Brazil,” released in late 2017, indicates a red alert for the Brazilian mediatic system due to the high concentration of audience and properties, the high geographic concentration, and the lack of transparency, besides economic, political, and

<sup>1</sup>Daily map of Johns Hopkins University and Medicine. Available at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

religious interference in the production of information<sup>2</sup>. Seven of the twelve vehicles that published the news stories analyzed in this work integrate the control group describe above. The most paradigmatic of these is the Globo group, the largest oligopoly in this sector in Brazil and Latin America, and one of the largest in the world, with more than half of the audience among the first four (36.9%). The concentration of media outlets by a small number of private groups restricts competition and, consequently, the diversity to represent the distinct interests of society. Without the possibility of contradiction, there is a predominance in the mediatic market of what many studies and analysts call “*penseé unique*” (de Lima, 2011).

Faced with such a complex dynamic—taken here in the sense proposed by Law and Mol (2002), according to whom innumerable actors, materialities, and sociabilities perform the several facets of a phenomenon—and with the up-to-the-minute scope of the pandemic, which takes place in real time, journalistic coverage is up against enormous difficulties. These range from the immediacy of translating the technical-scientific knowledge of several fields to critical evaluations on what to publish and the possible effects.

Historically, at moments of public health emergency, the population and journalists wait to receive trustworthy information from governmental organizations and political leaderships, whose actions are based on the guidance of health authorities. In Brazil, however, besides this complexity that is inherent to the pandemic, mass media must deal with other challenges. The first, as we will see in the analyses, lies in reporting two distinct official discourses on controlling COVID-19: that of the president of the Republic and his supporters; and that of the scientists in the field of health, technicians from the Ministry of Health (in the first months), and governors and mayors who are favorable to social distancing. This resulted in a politicization of the actions for disease control.

Brazil has a Unified Health System (Sistema Único de Saúde—SUS) that guarantees universal health access to all within the national territory; the System is well-structured and organized in a decentralized manner. Since the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, it is up to the federal government to establish guidelines and coordinate healthcare actions, allocating a budget for the states and municipalities, who manage resources and actions according to local/regional needs. This system counts on a structure of sanitary surveillance and consolidated data registration that allows the monitoring of healthcare actions throughout the country. The pandemic, however, hit Brazil at a point when SUS has been weakened, since, as stated by Menezes et al. (2019), from 2016 a policy of defunding healthcare has been implemented, by means of the approval of a constitutional amendment that froze the federal budget in this sector for the next 20 years, with readjustment calculations based only on inflation. This policy of deconstructing SUS

has intensified during the Bolsonaro government, with already-perceptible effects upon the population’s health: “For example, the loss of 8.5 thousand Cuban doctors from the More Doctors Program, who were treating around 30 million Brazilians, in 2.9 thousand municipalities and indigenous villages” (Menezes et al., 2019, p. 67).

Despite this process of scrapping, from January to May the technical team of the Ministry of Health, responsible for managing SUS, carried out assertive actions relating to the pandemic, creating decrees, establishing benchmarks for action, and guiding the population. The president of the Republic, however, who refuses to acknowledge the severity of the pandemic, has been producing and divulging, from the start, counterinformation that contradicts the ministerial discourse. Within this context, on April 16, Bolsonaro dismissed the minister of Health, doctor and politician, and nominated a new leader for the department, an oncologist and business entrepreneur who works in the private sector. With a more technical profile, he remained only 28 days in office, and resigned due to disagreeing with the president’s position regarding use of chloroquine to combat COVID-19. Therefore, since May 15, the position of minister of Health has been occupied in an interim manner by a general without any health background, who nominated other members of the military, equally without specialized training, to key roles in the Ministry of Health, furthering the dismantling of SUS<sup>3</sup>.

Brazilian journalism gave plenty of space for this polarization between the president and his supporters and the Ministry of Health, during the first months of the pandemic, as well as to the national and international scientific community on the subject of measures of social distancing. The analysis of articles indicated that the journalistic coverage often considered both discourses as equivalent, even knowing that the president and his supporters had no scientific backing—on the contrary, they often based themselves on false news and unfounded calculations.

For Gelbspan (1998, p. 57–58), in discussing journalistic coverage of global warning:

The professional canon of journalistic fairness requires reporters who write about a controversy to present competing points of view. When the issue is of a political or social nature, fairness – presenting the most compelling arguments of both sides with equal weight – is a fundamental check on biased reporting. But this canon causes problems when it is applied to issues of science. It seems to demand that journalists present competing points of views on a scientific question as though they had equal scientific weight, when actually they do not.

In this sense, it is crucial that journalists covering themes that involve science know how to translate the concepts and recognize strong evidence so as not to fall into the mistake that Pitts (2018) designates “*both-sideism*.” Rosen (2010), discussing this journalistic strategy, states that it is often adopted in order to seek an “objectivity,” by means of

<sup>2</sup>Carried out in partnership between the RSF and the Intervezes collective, MOM-Brasil was the 11th study throughout the world and also the largest—up until 2017, the number of vehicles investigated had reached at the most 40. Available at: <http://brazil.mom-rsf.org/br/>.

<sup>3</sup>Available at: <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-06-25/nem-o-pior-ministro-da-saude-fez-o-que-exercito-esta-fazendo-desmontando-a-engrenagem-do-sus.html>.

which the journalist would speak from a supposed position of neutrality (a view from nowhere), and could not therefore be accused of favoring one position. For Sousa (2002), this position is a tributary of two ideological forces that modulate news: that of objectivity and that of professionalism. The first explains the descriptive and factual orientation of news, with its mimetic ambition regarding reality that becomes explicit, and the systematic identification of sources of information in news statements; the second is based on the belief that the production routine and professional experience are sufficient tools for journalistic exemption. Supported by deontological codes constructed throughout history, the journalist acts as a “professional authority,” imbued with the right and the obligation to mediate and simplify information on daily happenings (Traquina, 2007). In other words, under the jargon “interests of society,” the press acts within a discursive safe conduct that “authorizes” the prescription of standards and practices, while at the same time serving as an “argumentative shield” that protects and exempts journalists and owners of communication vehicles from the consequences of their discursive practices (Malinverni et al., 2012). This strategy, however, impedes a deeper analysis and the production of precise information based on the truth.

Another challenge that journalists face is the increasingly precarious nature of work in newsrooms, and a lack of specialization in the area of health (Malinverni and Cuenca, 2017), both of which have become more of an issue over the past decade with the financial crisis that has impacted media companies, especially print journalism, due to the rise of virtual media (Castilho, 2015), affecting directly the quality of the news. Vukasovich and Vukasovich (2016) indicate, additionally, that globalization and the incessant pressures of newsmaking are two more elements that greatly impact the quality of journalistic coverage.

## METHODOLOGY

In this work we carried out the discursive analysis of journalistic coverage following two key thematic lines: herd immunity and vertical isolation. Using Google search, we researched news articles on the Sars-CoV-2 epidemic in Brazil using four descriptors: 1—Herd immunity and coronavirus; 2—Herd immunity and Imperial College; 3—Vertical isolation; and 4—Bolsonaro and vertical isolation. Criteria for inclusion: the first three pages of results presented by Google; articles published by print media and mass news sites with high visitation numbers and open access links. Criteria for exclusion: blogs with no connection to mass media or governmental and non-governmental organizations; low repercussion media, videos and links that can be exclusively accessed by subscribers; texts reproduced *ipsis litteris* on other sites.

The time period set for article selection was March 16 to April 30, 2020, starting 5 days before the date on which the Ministry of Health confirmed community transmission of the disease in the country (March 20) and a public health emergency was declared by most state and municipal governments.

In the first phase of systemization, 101 texts were located; of these, after application of the above criteria, 36 were selected for analysis: 8 articles under descriptor 1; 8 under descriptor 2; 11 under descriptor 3; and 9 under descriptor 4. All texts were copied into Word to be later read in full and analyzed. The texts were published on 12 websites, linked to nine media groups: UOL, Folha de S.Paulo and Bol/UOL (Grupo Folha); O Globo (Organizações Globo); Saúde Estadão (Grupo Estado); Saúde Abril and Veja (Grupo Abril); Gazeta do Acre (independent); IstoÉ Dinheiro (Editora Três); BBC News Brasil (a subsidiary of BBC, controlled by the British government); El País Brasil (from the Spanish group PRISA); and CNN Brasil (a subsidiary of the American CNN). The four first, as already mentioned, are among the organizations that control almost 60% of the national audience. Historically, they operate under the *establishment* logic, with episodic demonstrations of divergences that lend an appearance of plurality. Rarely do they explicitly support a candidate or political party, although the journalistic coverage is always more favorable to agendas that adopt a center or right-wing positioning within the political spectrum. This perspective, shared by IstoÉ Dinheiro and CNN Brasil, has been in effect in the country since mid-March of 2020. The Gazeta do Acre is the only independent vehicle; in other words, that is not connected to a multimedia conglomerate. It was founded by two reporters who worked at an alternative newspaper which, in the 1970s, challenged the censorship imposed by the military regime and reported the daily violence committed by the large landowners against the small-scale rubber tree tappers—among them Acre environmentalist Chico Mendes, murdered by local ranchers in 1988. El País Brasil and BBC News Brasil follow the more liberal line of journalistic coverage set by their parent companies. These characteristics may explain why these three vehicles were the only ones to adopt a more critical approach to Bolsonaro’s discourse, as will be discussed.

We adopted the theoretical perspective of discursive practices (Spink, 2004), focusing on the language in use, a social practice analyzed in the intersection between performative aspects of language (when, in which conditions, with what intention, in which manner) and the conditions of production (understood in this case both as social and interactional context, and in the Foucauldian sense of historical constructions).

In this approach, the notion of interpretative repertoires of Wetherell and Potter (1988, p. 172) is central:

Repertoires could be seen as building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena. Any particular repertoire is constructed out of a restricted range of terms used in a specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. Commonly these terms are derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will often be signaled by certain tropes or figures of speech.

The circulation dynamic of the interpretative repertoires, within the flow of production of meanings, updates contents and processes present in the history of a society.

In this analysis we looked for these standards in the journalistic coverage of the two studied themes, making clear



the content of the discussions and marking out the meanings they produce, as well as situating the contexts for production of the articles. Therefore, throughout the text, we introduce episodes and events that contextualize the analysis and help us to understand the scenario for news production, since, as stated by Rosen et al. (1997, p.3), “[...] *the journalism itself, the art of telling our collective story, is never independent of the country and culture in which the story is told.*”

## STRATEGIES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING AND HERD IMMUNITY IN BRAZIL

The strategies of social distancing and of herd immunity were already circulating in Brazilian media before the official declaration of sustained transmission of Sars-CoV-2 in the country. We carried out this study associating the descriptor “Herd immunity” to coronavirus and to Imperial College. Next, we introduce the main results of the discursive analysis, discussing the meanings produced by the articles found with these descriptors.

The first article with the descriptor herd immunity (“What is ‘group immunity,’ the polemical strategy of the United Kingdom to combat coronavirus?”<sup>4</sup>) dates from March 16, and was published by two large Brazilian news sites; its central theme is the debate surrounding the measures adopted by the United Kingdom. The article discusses the criticism suffered by the British government that, contrary to countries such as Italy, Spain, and France, had decided not to adopt a strategy of social suppression, betting on the free circulation of the virus in order to consequently lead the population toward herd immunity (a mitigation strategy). According to this text, the mitigation measure would help preserve the economy, since all activities would remain operational. The key criticism stemmed from the scientific community, for whom mitigation would lead to an uncontrolled growth in the number of people contaminated by Sars-CoV-2, with an inevitable rise in infections and the overburdening of the National Health Service (NHS) due to hospitalization demands for severe cases. This debate permeated the 16 articles analyzed under the descriptor “Herd immunity,” progressively incorporating references to reports from the Imperial College.

All the articles analyzed, when discussing herd immunity, made reference at some point to the United Kingdom and/or its prime minister and team. The United States and its president were also cited in six articles. Thus, we can say that the debate on social distancing, in Brazil, was closely connected to the measures and pronouncements of British and North American political authorities. Despite herd immunity having been considered and discussed in other cities/countries in Europe, the perspective that dominated the Brazilian news was that of the UK and the USA.

In addition to the positioning of political authorities, the scientific reports of the Imperial College were also widely

commented on by the Brazilian media, and for this reason it was included as a descriptor. This institution appears often as being responsible for publishing studies that made the UK and the USA give up on the mitigation strategy. The majority of articles published between March 17 and April 24 refer directly to a specific report by the Imperial College, made public on March 16, which presents calculations regarding the lethality of the disease and the number of sick people according to each behavioral strategy adopted by the two countries. Only one article, from March 26, cites the report that makes estimates regarding the possible effects of the different non-pharmacological strategies in Brazil.

It is interesting to observe that, among the group of articles discussing herd immunity there are explanations on what this strategy entails. But most of these (5 articles) promote a simplification of this strategy, which can be explained by observing the authorship of the analyzed texts: only in three were the authors specialists. The first of these, mentioned above and produced by BBC News Brasil, is signed by a foreign journalist, a specialist in scientific communication. The second—“Coronavirus: must almost everyone catch it to end the pandemic?”<sup>5</sup>, from March 25, published in the health section of the website of *Veja* magazine—was written by two Brazilian researchers from the field of microbiology who acted as scientific disseminators. In this article there is a clear effort to translate expert knowledge for ordinary non-specialized readers, in a clear and simple manner, focusing on the reasons that herd immunity could not be legitimized by science to guide public policies against Sars-CoV-2. The third article—“Who is immune to coronavirus?”<sup>6</sup>, published on April 14 by the newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo* and available on the UOL website—was written by Marc Lipsitch, a professor of Epidemiology at Harvard University’s School of Public Health. Published originally in the *New York Times*, it is a direct translation. In these three articles, there is a greater care in explaining herd immunity, based on scientific knowledge.

Another factor that could explain the simplifications and superficial approaches adopted by the Brazilian media for the theme of herd immunity relates to the sources consulted and used in the articles. Historically, the production of news articles in the field of health includes consultation with known specialists who can expound on the theme with authority, productivity, and credibility, conferring legitimacy and reliability to the information presented (Tuchman, 1983; Traquina, 2007). However, with regard to the debate on herd immunity, the analyzed articles make little use of consulting epidemiologists, the most appropriate specialists when it comes to this theme. Among the medical sources, the articles prioritized the opinions of virologists, infectious disease specialists, and immunologists; only four epidemiologists were consulted—two Brazilians, one from North America, and one from India. This may have

<sup>4</sup>“What is ‘group immunity,’ the polemical strategy of the United Kingdom to combat coronavirus.” Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/bbc/2020/03/16/o-que-e-a-imunidade-de-grupo-a-polemica-estrategia-do-reino-unido-para-combater-coronavirus.htm>.

<sup>5</sup>“Coronavirus: must almost everyone catch it to end the pandemic?” Available at: <https://saude.abril.com.br/blog/cientistas-explicam/coronavirus-quase-todo-mundo-tem-que-pegar-para-a-pandemia-passar/>.

<sup>6</sup>“Who is immune to coronavirus?” Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/equilibriosaude/2020/04/quem-e-imune-ao-coronavirus.shtml>.

contributed toward the polarization of measures of social distancing, as the guidelines suggested by epidemiology would explain with more clarity the catastrophic effects of the epidemic on the healthcare system and, consequently, on people's lives, if natural herd immunity were to be adopted in the country.

The articles that cite the reports of the Imperial College approach the theme in a manner that presents, together with projections of mathematical models that favor suppression, the arguments contrary to this measure, as well as the "harmful" effects of broad and unrestricted social distancing on the economy.

The concept of herd immunity has a longstanding and legitimate scientific basis, which postulates that the infection of a percentage of the population is enough to block transmission of a virus, and therefore can contain or even eradicate it within a certain territory. Since this debate began, the World Health Organization (WHO) and scientists all over the world have explained that this concept applies to immunization by means of vaccinations, and that investing in natural herd immunity against COVID-19 would overburden the healthcare systems, causing hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths.

The positioning of some government leaders in favor of this strategy appears to be oriented by Malthusian theories, according to which some populations, such as the elderly, can be considered as weak and surplus (Mezzadra, 2020). In this manner, they could become "naturally" extinct by pandemics, such as the case of COVID-19. Hannah et al. (2020) observe that, by defending herd immunity, governors assume that the biopolitical interests of capital take precedence over the biopolitical interests of life. One of the articles of the *corpus* emphasizes that matters of economy were decisive in the debate on herd immunity. The text "Specialists recommend herd immunity for poor countries"<sup>7</sup>—produced by Bloomberg, a news agency of the financial sector, and published in the finance section of UOL on April 22—, presents herd immunity as the only alternative for poor, young countries such as India. The journalist presents arguments from an Indian epidemiologist as well as researchers from the Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy and Princeton University in defense of this strategy:

*[...] allow the virus to circulate in a controlled manner throughout the next seven months would provide immunity to 60% of the country's population by November, and thus, contain the disease. Mortality could be limited while the virus propagates, in comparison to European countries, such as Italy, since 93.5% of the Indian population is under 65 years, it is said, although they have not divulged projections on the number of dead.*

The article is overly brief, but points out that this is a risky strategy, concluding that at the moment not much was known regarding immunity to coronavirus.

The possibility of using the strategy of herd immunity to minimize the effects of the pandemic on the economy was discussed hypothetically in many of the articles analyzed, but not

indicated as a viable solution. For instance, the texts that mention this discussion in the United Kingdom clarify that the British government refuted that they were seeking herd immunity. This proposal would be morally unacceptable, since the known lethality data indicates that this strategy would imply acceptance and recognition that at least 1% of the population could die, in addition to a high number of hospitalizations, leading to a collapse of the healthcare services.

In the 16 articles analyzed with descriptors 1 and 2, only one has a critical approach and presents the Imperial College projections for Brazil. The article is "Coronavirus pandemic: the best scenario is disastrous"<sup>8</sup>, published on March 30 on the website of the *Gazeta do Acre*, a local newspaper of the state of Acre, at the extreme north of the country. The text presents the calculations for the newspaper's hometown, the state capital Rio Branco, informing the amount of people who would get sick and die if suppression were not adopted. The other articles touched generically upon the theme, without taking the trouble to inform about the effects of different measures within the local contexts of Brazilian cities with their inequalities.

Among the articles of this *corpus*, the only argument in favor of herd immunity that had no economic framing was that of a supposed prevention of a second wave of the disease, since in the countries that adopted restrictive measures only a small portion of the population would have had contact with the virus, and thus the virus would once again strike these populations.

Before we continue the discussion, it is important to present the facts for the Brazilian context. From March 11, some state governors and mayors began to declare non-pharmacological measures to deal with the pandemic, following recommendations from the Ministry of Health and creating scientific committees. Throughout that entire month, several states and municipalities suspended classes at all educational levels, prohibiting events and religious services, and closing commerce and non-essential services, maintaining only healthcare, pharmacies, and grocery stores, in addition to bars, restaurants, and bakeries, although these last could only serve customers by delivery. These measures met with strong resistance from entrepreneurs and politicians, especially the president of the Republic and his social and political support base.

In this manner, from mid-March and throughout the month of April, the media began to include in discussions of the pandemic the financial damage that social distancing measures could provoke, and the effects on people's daily lives. In this context, the news began to construct a narrative around the concept of "two sides"; one favorable to the strategy of seeking herd immunity, and the other, to social distancing. As previously discussed, his false equivalency between scientifically based arguments and fragile arguments supported by hypotheses is damaging to the coverage of scientific themes (Gelbspan, 1998).

With regard to herd immunity, this approach was present in many of the articles analyzed, with only two of the news stories breaking this logic. The first, titled "Epidemiologist opposes

<sup>7</sup>"Specialists recommend herd immunity for poor countries." Available at: <https://economia.uol.com.br/noticias/bloomberg/2020/04/22/especialistas-recomendam-imunidade-de-rebanho-para-paises-pobres.htm>.

<sup>8</sup>"Coronavirus pandemic: the best scenario is disastrous." Available at: <https://agazetadoacre.com/2020/03/pandemia-de-coronavirus-o-melhor-cenario-e-desastroso/>.

Osmar Terra and sees Brazil as far from the end of the epidemic<sup>9</sup>; from April 14, published on the UOL website, the journalist presents the arguments of an epidemiologist to deconstruct the reasoning presented by congressman Osmar Terra<sup>10</sup>, an advisor to Bolsonaro and part of his support base. As the central character in the text, and in opposition to Osmar Terra, the epidemiologist, who is also the rector of a federal university, demonstrates with data and scientific evidence that the country was far from reaching herd immunity, and points out the political polarization of the debate on social distancing:

*The discussion about social distancing in all the media is based on ideology and not science. There is a group of people who think we must relax and who voted on the same candidate [Bolsonaro], and the other people, who voted against, are in favor of distancing.*

The epidemiologist's perception on the role of the media in this polarization is precise. Osmar Terra is a member of Congress who, despite a degree in medicine and an appointment as Health Secretary, is not a specialist in this theme. It is worth noting that, according to the evaluation carried out by the website Radar aos Fatos, which checks and verifies *fake news*, he was the parliamentary member who most divulged false news on COVID-19<sup>11</sup>. More than that, the fact that there was a link to the video in which the congressman reproduces false news signals that the news site UOL itself contributed toward disseminating an opinion that, based on antiscientific visions, not only encourages the political polarization of the epidemic scenario, but also confuses the population. This polarization indicates a narrative framing typical of political coverage, in which reality is taken as "[...] a field in conflict, a bipolar world of successive hostilities" (Motta, 2007, p. 10), feeding the confrontation with successive affirmations that belie the sources, in a dramatic game based on the notion of contradiction. In the case of this coverage, the narrative option for the "two opposite sides" of the phenomenon makes no sense, as by giving equal weight and space to the scientific evidence and positioning of the majority of national and international scientists, and the opinions of a small group of denialist politicians with an anti-science agenda, the media breaks their social commitment of informing the population correctly about phenomena and events that impact daily life, such as the case of the COVID-19 epidemic.

The second article for the descriptor "herd immunity"—the previously mentioned "Coronavirus pandemic: the best scenario is disastrous" of the *Gazeta do Acre*—was the only one among the 16 news stories analyzed to critically situate the attacks of

Bolsonaro and his supporters upon suppression measures. The text, with authorship stated simply as "Newsroom," classifies Bolsonaro's statements as unfounded and absurd:

*At this moment, the majority of countries, the Ministry of Health of Brazil, governors and mayors from all around the country, based on directives given by the WHO, are trying to adopt the measure of suppression to control the epidemic in Brazil.*

*However, president Bolsonaro and a small group of his counselors and advisors (which includes his children) are the only dissonant voices and are actively advocating the adoption of the mitigation strategy to control dissemination of the virus in Brazil.*

*This is a noisy minority, incidentally. Thanks to the control that the president and his children have over their thousands of fanatic followers, the social networks are inundated with the most absurd campaigns in favor of this option of control.*

## FROM "VERTICAL INTERDICTION" TO "VERTICAL ISOLATION," THE USE OF SCIENTISTS' OPINIONS FOR DENIALISM

The analysis demonstrated that the use of the terminology "vertical isolation" was imposed by President Bolsonaro himself and naturalized by the media. On March 24, in a pronouncement on the radio and TV network<sup>12</sup>, he urged the population to abandon the social distancing measures that had been recommended by the Ministry of Health and which, as previously mentioned, had been adopted by several governors and mayors. His proposal: keep in confinement only the so-called risk groups. In Brazil, this would be the elderly population over 60 years of age and those with chronic diseases, besides symptomatic cases. In his speech, which shocked the national and international scientific community and those Brazilians who had adhered to social distancing—at least 50% of the population, in several regions, at the start of community transmission—, Bolsonaro stated that COVID-19 was just "a little flu," a "little cold" that was inoffensive to the majority of the young and the healthy who, like him, had an "athletic history"<sup>13</sup>. The following morning (25), when asked by a reporter how the country would protect these vulnerable groups, he answered: "[...] there is horizontal isolation, that they're doing here, and there's the vertical. It's the vertical [for groups at risk]"<sup>14</sup>.

The term vertical isolation resonated intensely in newspapers and news sites, and, after March 25, it was in the title of the 20 articles analyzed for descriptors 3 and 4 ("Vertical" isolation" and "Bolsonaro and vertical isolation"). When explaining the concept proposed by Bolsonaro, three texts cited the hypotheses of David L. Katz, a doctor who specialized in diet and nutrition<sup>15</sup>, which were published in an article in *The New York Times*, on March 20, 2020, with one text also bringing up an article by epidemiologist John Ioannidis, statistician, and co-director of the Stanford Prevention Research Center, published on March

<sup>9</sup>"Epidemiologist opposes Osmar Terra and sees Brazil as far from the end of the epidemic." Available at: <https://www.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/2020/04/14/brasil-esta-longo-do-final-da-epidemia-e-de-imunizacao-diz-epidemiologista.htm>.

<sup>10</sup>Doctor, former Health Secretary of Rio Grande do Sul and former minister for presidents Michel Temer (who took over the presidency of the Republic in 2016, after the parliamentary coup against president Dilma Rousseff) and for Bolsonaro himself, Terra had participated, the day before, in a debate on the epidemic promoted by UOL, one of the largest news sites in the country. Available at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2020/04/13/governistas-criticam-isolamento-e-minimizam-briga-bolsonaro-x-mandetta.htm>.

<sup>11</sup>Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/05/deputados-divulgam-fake-news-sobre-coronavirus-para-ecoa-discurso-de-bolsonaro.shtml>.

<sup>12</sup>Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fy9dqEsjkVk>.

<sup>13</sup>Link to the pronouncement.

<sup>14</sup>After 7m14s. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=vp3A\\_8vywC0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=vp3A_8vywC0).

<sup>15</sup>The president of the True Health Initiative and director-founder of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center.



17, on the StatNews website. Both were critics of the social suppression measures proposed and adopted in some Asian and European countries.

The analysis also suggested that the terminology “vertical isolation” which circulated in the national media was a translation of the arguments proposed by Katz, which were in turn anchored on the debate about herd immunity and the initial mitigation strategies adopted by the UK and USA to deal with the pandemic. Although quickly rejected by the scientific community, “isolation” as a synonym to distancing continued to resonate in Brazilian newspapers and news sites and is still used today in this sense.

Katz’s article (“Is our fight against coronavirus worse than the disease?”) was published 5 days before Bolsonaro’s interview. In it, Katz employs classic concepts of epidemiology to make a misleading analysis, based on a still-fragile foundation of data about the pandemic, as we will see in the following analysis. Centered on repertoires from epidemiology, he frames social distancing as a potentially harmful “war” strategy, with socioeconomic consequences and effects upon the healthcare systems that could be worse than the disease. From the very start, with the title, Katz makes use of militaristic metaphors—a longstanding and recurring discursive strategy in all dimensions of the dissemination of science and medicine (Wenner, 2007)—in order to build his thesis for reducing the costs of the “war” against the new coronavirus.

He supports his arguments by interpreting data from South Korea, which indicated that 99% of COVID-19 cases were light, while the lethality of the disease basically affected those who were more vulnerable. Still employing war metaphors, Katz concludes that the most advisable approach would be a “surgical strike,” naming this a “vertical interdiction,” which would consist in forbidding circulation only for those who are most vulnerable and exposing the majority of the population to the virus, thus attaining herd immunity. In the text, even though the social impact of distancing is mentioned, it is clear that the specialist is preoccupied with the financial aspect:

I am deeply concerned that the social, economic and public health consequences of this near total meltdown of normal life — schools and businesses closed, gatherings banned — will be long lasting and calamitous, possibly more severe than the direct toll of the virus itself. The stock market will bounce back in time, but many businesses never will. The unemployment, impoverishment and despair likely to result will be public health scourges of the first order (Katz, 2020).

Likewise, the arguments made by Ioannidis—in the article “We know enough now to act decisively against COVID-19. Social distancing is a good place to start”—focused on the economic effects of distancing measures:

If that is the true rate, locking down the world with potentially tremendous social and financial consequences may be totally irrational. It’s like an elephant being attacked by a house cat. Frustrated and trying to avoid the cat, the elephant accidentally jumps off a cliff and dies (Ioannidis, 2020).

The hypotheses of Ioannidis and, mainly, Katz gather elements that are of great use to the interests of the denialists, in the sense used by Hoofnagle and Hoofnagle (2007) and referenced by Diethelm and McKee (2009), for whom the denialist discourse is constructed around rhetorical arguments,

[...] to give the appearance of argument or legitimate debate, when in actuality there is none. These false arguments are used when one has few or no facts to support one’s viewpoint against a scientific consensus or against overwhelming evidence to the contrary. They are effective in distracting from actual useful debate using emotionally appealing, but ultimately empty and illogical assertions (Hoofnagle and Hoofnagle, 2007).

The denial is constructed with basis on five discursive tactics which, together or separately, produce pseudoscientific discourse (Hoofnagle and Hoofnagle, 2007; Diethelm and McKee, 2009). Three of these bring to light the manner in which the arguments of the two American specialists help sustain the denialism of President Bolsonaro and his supporters: (1) selectivity in choosing out-of-context scientific data in order to suggest error; (2) the use of specialists whose opinions are inconsistent with the knowledge established by scientific canon; and (3) resorting to isolated articles that challenge the dominant consensus as a means of discrediting the entire field.

In Brazil, the hypotheses of Ioannidis and, above all, Katz were presented by the media as an explanation for the vertical isolation proposed by Bolsonaro. The news stories also included criticism of this strategy by Brazilian and international specialists. This is what can be surmised from the article “What is the vertical isolation that Bolsonaro wants and why do specialists fear it will cause more deaths<sup>16</sup>” published on the BBC News Brasil website, on March 25. In this news piece, the arguments of the two American specialists are rejected by the scientific community, due to their hypothetical nature, based on fragile data and a partial analysis that does not include the response capacity of the healthcare system; in this case, American healthcare. One of the opposing sources presented in the article is Harry Crane, a statistics professor from Rutgers University, who considered that their mistake was:

[...] to allow themselves to be affected by the desire to negate a situation that can cause despair. “Under severe uncertainty, it’s natural instinct and common sense to hope for the best, but prepare for the worst”, wrote Crane, in response to the article by Ioannidis. This is because the mortality rate does not depend only on the clinical picture that the virus itself can produce, but also the capacity for response of societies for treating the sick.

The text makes it clear that, while the hypotheses of the two specialists were refuted by their peers, they were rapidly embraced by neoliberal politicians and economists, becoming “[...] music for the ears of the governmental economy teams who were trying to finish public accounting in midst of the

<sup>16</sup>“What is the vertical isolation that Bolsonaro wants and why do specialists fear it will cause more deaths?” Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-52043112>.



perspective of recession” (BBC News Brasil, 2020). The journalist who authored the text supports this statement by citing part of an editorial from *The Wall Street Journal*, published in the wake of the Ioannidis article:

*“America urgently needs a pandemic strategy that is more economically and socially sustainable than the current national lockdown”, summarized the editorial from The Wall Street Journal, known for expressing the thoughts of the American economic elite, a week ago.*

In the same article, the journalist affirms that the conclusions of Katz and Ioannidis acquired a following in the team of the Brazilian minister of Economy, “[...] in search of a gentler solution for the public health crisis.”

But it was, above all, the political support base of denialist leaders that took on the hypotheses of the two specialists and began using them to contest social distancing measures. In the news piece “Why is vertical isolation seen with skepticism<sup>17</sup>?” produced by the agency Conteúdo Estadão and published on five news sites, on March 30, there is a clear use of these specialist arguments in the discourse against distancing:

*Defended by President Jair Bolsonaro, the so-called “vertical isolation” of the population is a minority theory among scientists and is viewed with skepticism by the medical community. It consists on separating those who are in the risk group from being exposed to the virus, such as those older than 60 and those with chronic diseases (UOL, March 30).*

Although the title of the article points to skepticism, the body of text brings a plurality of opinions, under the dichotomy of pros-cons and advantages-disadvantages of this strategy, including the discussion on herd immunity as a strategy and the reasons it was discarded in the United Kingdom. The most interesting point brought up in the article is a comparison of the supporters of Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. After informing that the American president had recommended extreme distancing, following the publication of the Imperial College study on March 16, the article adds that Trump went back to defending a quick return to activities in the United States, projecting a flexibilization in 10 days, which did not end up taking place but still had repercussions among Bolsonaro supporters:

*Excerpts of the video with this speech from the American [Trump] were disseminated by supporters of Bolsonaro in Brazil, as a supposed sign that the Americans would relax their measures. After being criticized, Trump pulled back and said that the date to reopen the country was just a suggestion, but that the end of social isolation would not take place without backing from scientists. The day before yesterday, Trump affirmed that he is thinking of establishing an official quarantine for states such as New York (which has the majority of cases), New Jersey and Connecticut.*

<sup>17</sup>“Why is vertical isolation seen with skepticism?” Available at: <https://saude.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,por-que-isolamento-vertical-e-visto-com-ceticismo,70003252797>.

This text makes it clear how the denialist discourse of Trump and Bolsonaro align and, at the same time, how the largely connected environments of the social networks serve as feedback for both of their support bases. However, by indicating a new retreat by Trump, the text also demonstrates that his denialism was more vulnerable to scientific and medical arguments in favor of social distancing. The impression that we get is that Trump oscillates, either denying the scientific reading of the severity of the pandemic in his discourse and actions, or accepting information from scientists, different in this way from Bolsonaro, who has been unwavering in his denialist positioning from the start of the epidemic in Brazil.

## MEDIA ADHESION AND NATURALIZATION OF “VERTICAL ISOLATION”

In the 20 articles analyzed for descriptor 3 (Vertical isolation), vertical isolation appears as a specific type of social distancing, allowing us to infer the media’s unrestricted adherence to the terminology, central to the sum of information circulated in both *corpora*. Instrumental, 10 of the 11 titles for descriptor 3 were constructed around the notions of functioning/operation of this model, seeking to explain vertical isolation with its advantages, disadvantages, and risks<sup>18</sup>.

We raised several hypotheses on what may have contributed to this: the generalist nature and increasingly precarious state of Brazilian mass journalism and the absence of epidemiologists as sources for news stories, already discussed in this work; the didacticism employed in the framing of texts, announced even in the titles.

This pedagogic concern brings to light the efforts made by journalists to translate to readers, who are always assumed to be laypeople, the technical-scientific jargon employed in the news. This didacticism—which legitimizes journalists as “[...] the place of ‘being able to show’, of ‘being able to say’ and ‘being able to analyze’ (...) as a place of mediation and of revelation of truth” (Vizeu, 2009, p. 77)—may have contributed in particular toward the production of the meaning of “vertical isolation” as a scientifically validated consensus strategy that “mirrors” a supposed epidemiological reality, aseptic and neutral.

It is necessary, therefore, to problematize the media’s naturalization of “vertical isolation” to express measures of social distancing (quarantine, *cordon sanitaire*, lockdown). In first place, the terminology confuses two distinct models of

<sup>18</sup>The titles of the articles (descriptor 3): What is vertical isolation against coronavirus; What is the vertical isolation that Bolsonaro wants and why do specialists fear it will cause more deaths?; Does vertical isolation work? Reality has already answered that question, says doctor; What is vertical isolation and why it may not work; What is vertical isolation [and why this may not be a good idea]?; What is vertical isolation (and why this is not a good idea)? Horizontal vs. vertical isolation: know the pros and cons of the strategies to contain coronavirus; Health alerts to rash transition, but sees vertical isolation as possible in little-affected locations; and, What are the risks of adopting only vertical isolation, proposed by Bolsonaro; What is the vertical isolation that Bolsonaro wants and why do specialists fear it will cause more deaths?; Specialists: Brazil’s characteristics do not permit vertical isolation; Health alerts to rash transition, but sees vertical isolation as possible in little-affected locations; Turkey endures drastic consequences of vertical isolation.

attention to epidemics. In the field of health, including Brazil, the established scientific consensus uses the term isolation to designate the care given to an infected and symptomatic patient, and is therefore a model for individual attention, belonging to the field of clinical medicine; distancing, on the other hand, implies collective/population care, affiliated to epidemiology.

The use of “social isolation” in the place of social distancing is also a semantic error as it is based on a false synonymy. In the Portuguese language, “isolate” means to separate, segregate, and confine a person from all others in their social circle—in Brazilian dictionaries, among examples of isolate, we find medical activity aimed at treating patients with contagious diseases. On the other hand, distancing is the act or effect of separating people/groups, centered on a notion of physical space and not segregation.

By using one term in place of another, naturalizing a theoretical hypothesis that is still under discussion and therefore not validated by the scientific community, the media legitimized the term social isolation as common sense. And this may have contributed to the construction of a derogatory meaning for the strategy of social distancing, amplifying the resistance of the Brazilian population toward this measure.

## VERTICAL ISOLATION, DENIALISM, AND EUGENICS

The denialist discourse throughout the world is not just aligned to anti-science, but also resonates as a more or less homogeneous mark of eugenics. In Brazil, this is no different. The social and scientific movement for improving the human race that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and was widely experimented with by the German Nazi regime during World War II (1939–1945), arrived in the country in 1918, with the creation of the Eugenics Society of São Paulo. Intellectuals from several areas notably from medicine and the public health services, gathered around this movement, and the triad of sanitation, hygiene, and eugenics supported a broad and generalized project for civilizational progress (Maciel, 1999), with medical knowledge playing a central role.

Racial regeneration would occur by means of three types of eugenics: positive, negative, and preventive. This last, also called prophylactic hygiene by Brazilian eugenicists, was mixed with principles of rural and urban sanitation, the suppression of social vices such as alcoholism, control of immigration and of matrimony, and the compulsory sterilization of “degenerates.” In the 1930s, the main activist in Brazilian eugenics, Renato Kehl, openly assumed his favorable position to some of the measures adopted by the German eugenics movement (Kobayashi et al., 2009).

Thus, the world eugenics ideology met the Brazilian positivist-hygienist movement, forming a new and active field, of hygienist-physicians, the protagonists and disseminators of the eugenics elements that would mark the actions of Brazilian public health for the next decades, and which still linger today in many practices, especially in the field of social care. This scientific rationality led to the implementation of “[...] projects of eugenic nature that intended to eliminate disease, separate madness

and poverty” (Schwarcz, 1993, p. 34), focusing mainly on immigrants, Black people, and the poor (Diwan, 2007). Acting in an intensive manner, the hygienist doctors undertook “[...] what they imagined to be a national regenerative mission, exerting functions, carrying out tasks, occupying positions that were strange to medicine,” and disseminating the certainty “[...] of being able to end the blemishes of the nation, collaborating with Brazil’s administrative and social entirety” (Mota, 2003, p. 21).

From the start of the community transmission of Sars-CoV-2 in Brazil it is possible to observe this memory of eugenics in Bolsonaro’s denialism, especially in his defense of vertical isolation. As governors and mayors began to officially order social distancing, the president’s position became more and more radical. This is what can be surmised from the article “Bolsonaro once again minimizes COVID-19 and says that Health is studying vertical isolation<sup>19</sup>,” published on the financial news site IstoÉ Dinheiro on March 26. In this piece, the president once again says that “*some governors and mayors erred in the dose*” of containment measures, demanding the reopening of all sectors of the economy:

*“And do a stay-at-home campaign. Don’t let grandpa leave the house, leave him in a corner. When you get home have a shower, wash your hands, wipe your ears with sanitizer gel. That’s it”, he declared.*

In the excerpt, Bolsonaro dehumanizes the elderly, the main target for his strategy of vertical isolation, turning their existence into objects in face of the epidemic. In his ambition to maintain the capitalist order, the president treats this subject (the elderly) as objects without free will who must be segregated in a “corner,” removing “their individual, malleable, unique characteristics” and transforming them “into empty husks, representations of themselves who, apparently, are no longer covered by the State of right” (Souza, 2017, p. 70).

In the same article, when commenting on the critical situations in other countries and on the perspectives of how the disease would manifest in Brazil, Bolsonaro yet again invests in a rhetoric of dehumanization:

*“I don’t think it’s going to reach that point, even because Brazilians should be studied, they don’t catch anything. You see the guy leaping into sewage, coming out, diving in and nothing happens”.*

This speech speaks directly of the more vulnerable social classes in Brazil that, due to conditions of extreme poverty, are subject to extremely precarious production relations. In this manner, it is possible to identify in the president’s discourse a correlation between men and rats, who are immune to sewers. This perspective, in turn, bears a resemblance to the metaphor of the crab man, created by doctor and geographer Josué de Castro to designate a new species of Brazilians: those excluded from the production processes and who took their subsistence from the mangrove swamps of Recife, mixing them up with the crabs they

<sup>19</sup>Bolsonaro once again minimizes COVID-19 and says that Health is studying vertical isolation. Available at: <https://www.istoedinheiro.com.br/bolsonaro-volta-a-minimizar-COVID-19-e-diz-que-saude-estuda-isolamento-vertical/>.

fed upon<sup>20</sup>. Later, in the 1990s, following on the heels of the crab men, the *gabiru* men emerged. This hyperbole was used to designate country folk who lost their lands to large-scale farming and ended up in urban shantytowns, carrying with them an old acquaintance, hunger (Portella et al., 1992; de Melo Filho, 2003). From the Tupi *wa'wiru*, *gabiru* means that which devours supplies, lives off trash, begs for hand-outs, causes repugnance, attacks and steals (Portella et al., 1992).

Besides touching upon this social imaginary of the excluded Brazilian, the speech is evidence of a reading in which the population can be left to their own luck, without needing the actions of a protective State since they are, by their animalistic nature, survivors.

In addition to the theoretical fragility of Bolsonaro's proposal, the news stories analyzed also demonstrate that the strategy was unfeasible due to Brazil's socioeconomic inequalities. In the article "Vertical isolation proposed by Bolsonaro may accelerate contagion by coronavirus and compromise health systems<sup>21</sup>," published on March 25 on the El País Brasil website, health specialists and medical authorities alert to the risks of accelerated contagion in Brazil and a rapidly compromised healthcare system:

*"The theoretical idea of vertical isolation is that you can allow young people to circulate. They would become infected and could become immune. But we don't know how this works with COVID-19 and we can't guarantee the exclusive isolation of a specific group", alerts the doctor Valdes Bollela, professor at the School of Medicine of USP Ribeirão Preto [São Paulo University of Ribeirão Preto]. (...) You think you can separate all the people [in the risk groups] who are young from those who are over 60? (...) People with HIV, diabetes and the elderly who count on their families? I can't imagine that in real life. In a theoretical idea, it's possible. In practice, it's a trap (...) In Brazil, a lot of people depend exactly on the care of their children".*

On the isolation of the elderly, in an article published on March 25 on the CNN Brasil website, along with the previously mentioned press conference video, titled "Bolsonaro vai propor isolamento vertical para conter coronavírus<sup>22</sup>," other related opinions are mentioned:

*[...] each family must be responsible for their relatives. "The people need to stop pushing things onto the public powers", he stated. (...) He stressed that the president of the United States, Donald Trump, follows a "similar line" as to measures to contain the disease, referencing yesterday's speech by the North-American in which he intends to end quarantine in the USA "by Easter".*

<sup>20</sup>The notion of the crab men emerged from the main works of Josué de Castro: *Geografia da fome* (1948), *Geopolítica da fome* (1951), *Documentário do Nordeste* (1957), *Fatores de localização da cidade do Recife* (1957), and *Homens e caranguejos* (1967), the last an autobiographical romance.

<sup>21</sup>"Vertical isolation proposed by Bolsonaro may accelerate contagion by coronavirus and compromise health systems." Available at: <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-03-25/isolamento-vertical-proposto-por-bolsonaro-pode-acelerar-contagios-por-coronavirus-e-comprometer-sistema-de-saude.html>.

<sup>22</sup>"Bolsonaro will propose vertical isolation to contain coronavirus." Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/2020/03/25/bolsonaro-nao-estou-preocupado-com-a-minha-popularidade>.

In these excerpts, it is possible to observe Bolsonaro's contempt for the excluding social characteristics in Brazil, where extreme social inequality would make it impossible to completely isolate the elderly and those with comorbidities from their relatives. Additionally, this also indicates his positioning on two aspects: the first, in prioritizing the economy—what really matters is to keep people working and generating income and taxes; the second, in making the State exempt from the consequences of its omission regarding the risks that the elderly face, in other words, that their life or death is not a problem of the public powers but of their families. Bolsonaro also uses the reference to the president of the United States in order to legitimize and strengthen his arguments and transmit the idea that there is a consensus between them regarding the pandemic, reinforcing the thesis that vertical isolation would be a viable strategy, since it was adopted by a developed country.

The article is short and uses a neutral tone, but it refers to a number of links, informing us, among other things, that Bolsonaro was the target of protests by Brazilians who were maintaining social distancing and of criticism by politicians:

*The speech [referring to the press conference video posted at the start of the article and already mentioned in this analysis] — during which there were records of pot-banging protests in several of the country's capitals — gave rise to criticism by health secretaries, authorities and politicians (CNN Brasil, March 25).*

The website brings visibility to the president's speeches without the concern of reflecting upon them or of pointing out their damaging effects upon the population's health.

In the article "Bolsonaro defende isolamento vertical e sugere que país pode 'sair da normalidade democrática<sup>23</sup>,'" produced by international news agency Ansa and published on the website of the *O Globo* newspaper (March 25), the president also makes what can be considered his first threat of democratic rupture, using the argument that measures of social distancing would provoke an economic crisis of enormous proportions, which could lead to social convulsions.

*"[...] what happened in Chile [street movement that left its mark upon the Chilean scenario for months] will be small change next to what could happen in Brazil. We will all pay a price that will take years to pay, that is, if Brazil might not yet leave the democratic normality that you all defend so much, no one knows what can happen in Brazil" (...) "The chaos makes it so the left can seize the moment to come to power."*

By treating a scientifically legitimized event—the existence of an epidemic with planetary proportions—as an "excuse" of the Brazilian left to take his power, Bolsonaro brings up a fourth element that is characteristic of denialism: the identification of conspiracies among the consensuses of science. For conspiracy theorists, the validation of science is not a result of an evidence-based consensus among scientists, but of the involvement of these

<sup>23</sup>"Bolsonaro defends vertical isolation and suggests the country may 'depart from democratic normality.'" Available at: <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/bolsonaro-defende-isolamento-vertical-sugere-que-pais-pode-sair-da-normalidade-democratica-24327038>.



scientists in a complex and secret conspiracy (Hoofnagle and Hoofnagle, 2007). In this sense, the process of peer revision “[...] is seen as a tool by which the conspirators suppress dissent, rather than as a means of weeding out papers and grant applications unsupported by evidence or lacking logical thought” (Diethelm and McKee, 2009).

## “SO WHAT?”: CONSIDERATIONS ON A EUGENICS DISCOURSE

Denialism has different motivations—economic, political, personal, ideological, or religious—, but has as a common point the rejection of any thesis incompatible with the fundamental beliefs of those who hold them. As the analyses demonstrate, a first dimension of the denialism of Jair Bolsonaro on the Sars-Cov-2 epidemic is based on the idea that the effects of an economic crisis would be worse than the severe consequences of the disease itself on people’s lives. As seen in this work, this discourse aligns with that of other denialist world leaders, such as President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson—although, different from the Brazilian president, these leaders have oscillated throughout the pandemic between accepting scientific arguments in favor of the population’s health and prioritizing the economy.

In terms of the economic argument, however, a second dimension emerges in Bolsonaro’s discourse: that of eugenics. Under the terminology of vertical isolation, naturalized and legitimized by the media, the Brazilian president turns the most vulnerable segment of the population into objects, establishing a moral compass according to which, faced with the needs of maintaining the relations of capitalist production, some lives are worth less than others, and that this would be enough to justify the sacrifice.

It is important to point out that this discursive posture is not casual or chaotic. There is a method here that, moreover, helped to elect Bolsonaro<sup>24</sup>, known for his racist, misogynistic, sexist, and xenophobic statements. In 2017, during the electoral campaign for presidency, the then parliamentary member promised to end all demarcation of land for Indigenous Peoples<sup>25</sup>: “You can be certain that, if I get there (...) There will not be a centimeter marked off for indigenous reservations or for *quilombola*<sup>26</sup> lands.”

At the same event, he made disparaging and fat-shaming comments: “I went to a quilombo. The lightest Afro-descendent there weighed seven arrobas (arroba is a measurement used to weigh cattle; one arroba is equivalent to 15 kg). They do nothing. I think he was of no use even to serve for breeding.” Ironically,

this speech, which drew laughter from the audience, was given at Hebraica in Rio de Janeiro, one of the most traditional Jewish associations in the country.

In the wake of the rise of right-wing populism that, in the last years, has benefitted other leaders around the world, Bolsonaro was elected for his antisystem rhetoric, exploiting the fears and prejudices of ordinary voters, undermining the credibility of traditional political parties and democratic institutions, and normalizing discriminatory discourse, thanks to the reach of his social media, which he and his group manage with mastery, and with advisory help from Steve Bannon, former vice-president of Cambridge Analytica (Ricard and Medeiros, 2020). When he took over the presidency of the Republic, in January 2019, he not only radicalized this rhetoric but also, in many cases, transformed it into State policy—in the first days of his government, he ended social and environmental protection structures and programs; under Bolsonaro, for example, the recognition of quilombos fell to the lowest levels in history<sup>27</sup>.

On March 18, in an interview to Fox News<sup>28</sup> during an official visit to the United States, Bolsonaro attacked immigrants by defending Trump’s plans to build a wall on the border between the USA and Mexico: “The majority of immigrants do not have good intentions and do not want to do good for Americans.” It is worth remembering that there are over a million Brazilians living in the USA. In this manner, the alignment of Bolsonaro’s migratory policies with those of the American president—who in December 2019 called Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries “shitholes”—indicates “a racist slant, since not by chance most immigrants are Black or Indigenous people, from countries with a non-white populational majority. There is a logic that is eugenic, racist, and ethnic in nature,” states Dennis Oliveira in the same article—a journalism professor from the University of São Paulo (USP) and an activist in the Rede Quilombação network.

As the Brazilian health crisis grew in severity, Bolsonaro’s eugenics slant became more explicit, until it reached an emblematic declaration: “So what? I’m sorry. What do you want me to do? I’m a Messiah, but I don’t do miracles<sup>29</sup>.” Spoken to a group of reporters and supporters in front of the Alvorada Palace, the presidential residence in Brasília, on the night of April 28, when Brazil hit 5,017 official deaths, the phrase was followed by a disturbing statement on the severity of COVID-19 among the elderly: “I regret the situation we are going through with the virus. We sympathize with the families who have lost their loved ones, who were mostly elderly. But such is life. Tomorrow it will be me [to die].”

## CONCLUSION

The numbers for the epidemic in Brazil indicate that the eugenics project is succeeding, since on June 5, CNN informed that 40%

<sup>24</sup> After retiring as a captain of the Brazilian Army at the age of 33, Bolsonaro has been a professional politician for over 30 years. Before becoming president, he was on the Rio de Janeiro city council and, later, was a federal congressman for 27 years. During that period, he presented only two draft bills.

<sup>25</sup> Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/brasil/bolsonaro-e-acusado-de-racismo-por-frase-em-palestra-na-hebraica/>.

<sup>26</sup> Quilombo are settlements first established by escaped slaves in Brazil. Quilombolas are the descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves who escaped from slave plantations that existed in Brazil until abolition in 1888. Since 2003 the Decreto 4.887/2003 recognized Quilombo communities and their claims to the land they inhabited, but only 219 of the 2,926 Quilombos have land titles.

<sup>27</sup> Available at: <https://www.bol.uol.com.br/noticias/2020/06/23/sob-bolsonaro-reconhecimento-de-quilombolas-cai-ao-menor-patamar-da-historia.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Available at: <https://ponte.org/eugenia-2-0-a-politica-migratoria-de-bolsonaro/>.

<sup>29</sup> Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/e-dai-nao-faco-milagres-diz-bolsonaro-sobre-mortes-por-COVID-19/>.



more Black than white people die from COVID-19 in Brazil<sup>30</sup>. Although the country did not officially adopt the vertical isolation policy proposed by Bolsonaro, because the Supreme Court decreed that states and municipalities had the autonomy to adopt social distancing measures, Bolsonaro's government continued to boycott the actions of governors and mayors to contain dissemination of the virus. This boycott could be observed in the presidential decrees that increased the list of activities considered essential, in the delays and inefficiency in implementing financial aid to those who were left without income, in the absence of effective programs to subsidize small businesses, and, of course, in Bolsonaro's speeches, which resonated throughout the country both by means of mass media and social networks<sup>31</sup>.

Up until the conclusion of this article, the Ministry of Health was still under the interim command of a general who, like Bolsonaro, also adopted a denialist stance. On May 20, under this administration, the ministry published a protocol<sup>32</sup> with guidelines for prescribing chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine for light, moderate, and severe cases of COVID-19. Although there is no strong scientific evidence on the effectiveness of this medication, the Bolsonaro administration maintains its use as a standard for care in SUS. Since the start of June<sup>33</sup>, the government has been changing the manner and time for divulging the epidemiological reports that update infection cases and deaths by the disease, while also announcing the adoption of a new methodology for sharing the data which will invalidate comparisons with the previous numbers and, consequently, affect monitoring of the evolution of COVID-19 in the country. One of the aims of this strategy is to reduce the visibility of the number of deaths and misinform the population. Following the same direction, the Department of Social Communication created a "life scoreboard," a report disseminated exclusively on the presidency's social networks that highlights the number of recovery cases while omitting the deaths.

In addition to these actions, the president's denialist speeches that are spread both by mass media and social networks have a direct effect upon the behavior of the population regarding social distancing, as demonstrated by Ajzenman et al. (2020).

In this scenario, our study demonstrates that the Brazilian mass media is still fixed upon the notion that it is necessary to present both sides of an event, giving each equal weight, even

when one has assumed a denialist position toward the science. This positioning, justified normally by the pursuit of neutrality in news coverage, allows for the spreading of false premises posing as science and strengthens the denialist and eugenic project of Bolsonaro. This occurs because, as stated by Happer and Philo (2013), the media holds a central role in spreading information and in the process of focusing attention on a specific subject, as well as in defining a public agenda.

Another aspect identified in the study relates to the characteristics of the method adopted by Bolsonaro since the elections, which have endured during this past year-and-a-half of his mandate: the discursive verbiage, often grotesque and always of populist appeal, which the Brazilian media appears to have become a hostage of. And, by amplifying the president's speeches, the media symbolically places him at the center of the coordination of control measures for the epidemic in Brazil, a role he has never undertaken. In this sense, we agree with Rosen (2020) and Smith (2020), who identified the same phenomenon in the media coverage of coronavirus in the United States, pointing to the need of removing President Trump as a protagonist in news about the theme.

Under the guise of conclusion, it is important to highlight an action which indicates that the Brazilian press has gradually taken on a more critical posture. In June, faced with the proposal from the Ministry of Health for presenting incomplete data on COVID-19, the six largest newspapers and news sites in the country united in order to compile and systematize daily the data from the State Departments of Health<sup>34</sup>, ensuring a higher reliability and transparency of the numbers, thus acting as overseers for the public powers and guaranteeing the dissemination of correct information. However, in a health crisis with the magnitude of the present one, much more is necessary than merely making numbers visible. Newspapers and news sites have a key role, since the information they produce and circulate guide collective and individual behaviors (Stevens and Hornik, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial that journalists take on a critical posture, knowing how to identify the multiple faces of denialism and making clear the damaging effects of eugenics policies upon the health of the population.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. All the articles/data used in the research are listed in the footnotes and are open access.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CM and JB contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results, and to the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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<sup>30</sup> Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/saude/2020/06/05/negros-morrem-40-mais-que-brancos-por-coronavirus-no-brasil>.

<sup>31</sup> Available at: [https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/entry/mortes-COVID-19-25-junho\\_br\\_5ef4b64cc5b66c3126832ef9](https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/entry/mortes-COVID-19-25-junho_br_5ef4b64cc5b66c3126832ef9).

<sup>32</sup> Available at: <https://www.saude.gov.br/images/pdf/2020/May/20/orientacoes-manuseio-medicamentoso-covid19.pdf>.

<sup>33</sup> To read further, see: [https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/entry/mortes-COVID-19-25-junho\\_br\\_5ef4b64cc5b66c3126832ef9](https://www.huffpostbrasil.com/entry/mortes-COVID-19-25-junho_br_5ef4b64cc5b66c3126832ef9).

<sup>34</sup> Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/equilibriosaude/2020/06/congressistas-e-entidades-elogiam-consorcio-de-imprensa-para-coletar-dados-da-COVID-19.shtml>.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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