

**“There Is No Other Way But the Truth”: Journalism, Misinformation and COVID-19 in  
Brazil**

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## ABSTRACT

### **“There Is No Other Way But the Truth”: Journalism, Misinformation and COVID-19 in Brazil**

Luisa Torres Marini Ferreira

Brazil has been one of the countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. In part, this is the case because of mis- and disinformation about the coronavirus circulating on social media and spread by elected officials, especially the president Jair Bolsonaro. In this scenario, journalists in Brazil have had to report on conflicting information coming from the government authorities and make sense of stories, while the virus has continued to spread, infecting and killing hundreds of thousands of people in the country.

Using in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 journalists located in Brasília, Brazil’s capital, who have covered COVID-19, this study examines the lived experiences of these journalists as well as the impacts of mis- and disinformation on their work. A thematic analysis of the interview data shows that journalists have faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 coverage, varying from work-related problems to barriers in accessing information from the government. The results also indicate the government has acted as a source of misinformation, which has increased polarization around COVID-19 and significantly impacted the coverage. Finally, although this thesis didn’t explicitly divide journalists into two groups to compare them, a noticeable trend emerged from the data: political journalists in Brasília tended to assume a strong watchdog role to hold authorities accountable, while science and health reporters tried to depoliticize the coverage, writing stories about the virus developments, precautionary measures and vaccination in order to reach as many people as possible.

This study concludes with remarks on how the main takeaways expressed in the journalist interviews can be used to formulate best practices and to foster more robust journalistic practices in Brazil and beyond.

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## INTRODUCTION

Cases of pneumonia from an unknown cause were first detected in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei Province of China in December 2019. A novel coronavirus was eventually identified, and the World Health Organization (WHO) named the infectious disease caused by the virus COVID-19, an acronym that stands for coronavirus disease 2019. The coronavirus outbreak was declared a global pandemic in March 2020, when every continent except for Antarctica was hit by the disease (WHO, 2020b). Since then, the pandemic has led to an enormous loss of human life, along with social and economic impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the most important event of 2020 and has continued to be in 2021. For journalists, it has been a fast-moving story with information changing almost every day. During this coverage, journalists have faced unprecedented challenges, varying from getting accurate information about the disease to staying safe while doing their jobs. As the virus has continued to spread worldwide, they've had to report on issues that didn't have scientific consensus yet, rely on research published without peer review and compete with the spread of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories. Many newsrooms allocated journalists with no experience in scientific reporting to cover the outbreak, which added to the challenges.

To prevent infections and slow down transmission, health authorities ask people to wash their hands frequently, avoid gatherings, practice physical distancing and stay home when feeling unwell whenever possible. Besides following public health guidelines, the WHO advises that “the best way to prevent and slow down transmission is to be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes and how it spreads” (WHO, 2020a). In this sense, journalists have played a crucial role in managing this outbreak and in promoting public health goals, as they



have had to gather and distribute accurate information, sometimes putting themselves at risk. Yet, misinformation about the virus has become a problem all over the world. Although there is much information available, the nature of the internet and social media makes it difficult for the public to discern truthful information from rumours, propaganda and false information (Ireton, 2018). Everyone with a profile on social media platforms can be a publisher, anonymous players can create and spread content with no accountability and rumours and disinformation circulate free of charge, while professional journalism requires a source of revenue to produce accurate and truthful information. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that even though rumours, conspiracy theories and fabricated information are not new concepts, “the complexity and scale of information pollution in our digitally-connected world presents an unprecedented challenge” (p. 10).

Concerned with the number of rumours and disinformation spread on social media, the director-general of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, warned the world was also fighting an “infodemic”—an overabundance of information, both online and offline, that includes “deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals” (WHO, 2020c). Rumours and misinformation are especially sensitive to emergency situations, but in a disaster, the risks of inaccuracy are amplified and can cost lives (Silverman, 2014). Intentional malicious content aimed at disrupting public order or manipulating an agenda can be more dangerous than conspiracy theories, and anti-mask and anti-vaccine movements can lead people to ignore public health guidelines. A study from the Gapminder Foundation released at the beginning of the pandemic found that people who believe in the conspiracy theory that claimed the virus was accidentally released from Chinese labs were less likely to take actions to keep themselves and

others safe (Winters et al., 2020). The WHO emphasizes that “disinformation is polarizing public debate on topics related to COVID-19; amplifying hate speech; heightening the risk of conflict, violence and human rights violations; and threatening long-term prospects for advancing democracy, human rights and social cohesion” (WHO, 2020c).

Brazil was one of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic, with the second highest number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 in the world by July 2021. A series of erratic choices, mismanagement, virus denialism and disinformation have contributed to this figure. The president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, has downplayed the outbreak, calling COVID-19 a “little flu,” and has become internationally-known for his coronavirus-denial attitude and for the bad handling of the pandemic. Bolsonaro has also blamed the media for “potentializing” the threat of the virus and has spread misinformation messages. The scientific reporting of COVID-19 in Brazil merged with the political coverage, and journalists have had to make sense of stories while the virus continues to spread in the country, putting people’s lives at risk.

This research intends to shine a light on the lived experiences of journalists who have covered the pandemic and have faced these unprecedented challenges. To achieve this goal, the study conducted interviews with 10 journalists who covered COVID-19 in Brasília, Brazil’s capital, where political instability and misinformation about the pandemic has created an environment where the infodemic has played out. This research aims to investigate how these journalists have experienced these difficulties, which strategies they have used to compete with the spread of disinformation and how they perceive their roles as journalists in the coverage. With these goals in mind, this research is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What have been the biggest challenges journalists have faced in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil?

**RQ2:** What strategies have journalists used to overcome these challenges?

**RQ3:** How has mis- and disinformation affected the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil?

**RQ4:** How do journalists perceive their roles in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil?

After the interviews, the data was transcribed and analysed following a thematic analysis approach adapted from Corbin and Strauss (2008). As Brazil has been seriously hit by the pandemic and by disinformation campaigns, the political coverage and scientific reporting around COVID-19 provided a robust data source to analyze the consequences of mis- and disinformation in the coverage of health emergencies and to journalists' perceptions of their roles in such crises. My hope with this study is to contribute to the growing literature about dis- and misinformation in Brazil. I also hope that the lessons learned from this research will serve as a guide for journalism students and educators, as it includes best practices used by journalists who covered a public health emergency on the ground, amidst political instability and the dissemination of disinformation.

## CHAPTER 1 - BRAZIL, COVID-19 AND THE NEWS INDUSTRY

### COVID-19 in Brazil

With a population of over 211 million people, Brazil is the world's sixth-most populous country and the largest country by area in both South America and Latin America. Even though Brazil has achieved nearly universal access to health-care services due to a public unified health system created in 1990 (*Sistema Único de Saúde* or *SUS*) (Castro et al., 2019), Brazil's death toll from COVID-19 is the second-highest in the world, behind only the United States. As of July 2021, Brazil represented 2.7% of the world's population, yet it accounts for 13% of all deaths related to COVID-19, with more than 555,000 deaths and more than 19 million cases. According to Our World in Data, Brazil's death toll in deaths per million is the second in the Americas, with 2,600 deaths per million, behind only Peru. Due to erratic choices, mismanagement and virus denialism, Brazil has become one of the countries hardest hit by the coronavirus outbreak and also a global example of how the dissemination of false information during a public health emergency can be harmful. In part, this has happened because the far-right president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, has downplayed the threat of the pandemic from the beginning, calling it just a "little flu," and has engaged in disinformation campaigns about the virus.

When the WHO announced that the COVID-19 crisis could be characterized as a pandemic, it asked governments to take the necessary procedures to minimize the impacts of the disease. Governments worldwide started implementing measures, such as travel bans, cancelling events, the closure of schools, offices, restaurants and other non-essential businesses and, in some cases, lockdowns. In Brazil, on the other hand, Bolsonaro has told people not to follow local quarantine orders, has touted the unproven drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine as a cure, and has

questioned the effectiveness of vaccines. He has not followed public health orders to avoid gatherings himself, but instead has participated in rallies with supporters, and hugged people in local supermarkets, bakeries and other public spaces. In 2021, more than one year after the pandemic was declared, Bolsonaro continues to hold large rallies and events without masks.

As Brazil is a federal system, composed of 26 states and one federal district (where Brasília is located), governors and mayors have the power to implement regional policies. Therefore, several governors and mayors imposed measures in their territories to curb the spread of COVID-19, such as closure of schools, restaurants, local business and non-essential services, but Bolsonaro criticized the actions taken by local authorities, fearing the economic effects of such measures. When the virus began spreading in the country, Bolsonaro addressed citizens on national television and told them to ignore public health guidelines, such as the quarantine and social distancing measures introduced by local mayors and governors, and asked Brazilians to go back to work. “Our lives have to go on. Jobs should be maintained. We must get back to normal,” he said on March 24, 2020 as the country reported 2,200 confirmed infections and 46 deaths. When Brazil reached 2,500 deaths and a reporter asked him for a statement, his answer was: “I’m not a gravedigger, alright?” When the country reached 5,000 deaths, he said “So what? I’m sorry, but what do you want me to do?” He has since continued to deny the severity of the virus throughout 2020 and 2021, even as cases have kept rising and Brazil surpassed half a million COVID-19 deaths in June 2021. According to Ricard and Medeiros (2020), Bolsonaro’s push against social isolation was strongly motivated by mitigating, or at least dissociating himself from, the foreseen economic effects of the pandemic. On more than one occasion, he has railed against quarantine measures in “the name of the economy” and tried to exempt himself from the responsibility for the forecasted recession. He has already shown signs that he may

adopt this tactic, stating that “many measures, whether restrictive or not, are the sole responsibility of [governors and mayors]” (Ricard & Medeiros, 2020).

But it was not just speeches minimizing the threat of the pandemic. Bolsonaro and his government also took concrete actions that undermined the country’s ability to tackle the crisis. In June 2020, when the number of cases and deaths was soaring, the Health Ministry took down the official website that had shown the daily, weekly and monthly figures on infections and deaths. When the platform came back, it only displayed the number of deaths and cases for the previous 24 hours and the number of “recovered cases.” Later, the Supreme Court ordered the government to stop concealing data. Early, in April 2020, the government created the “Scoreboard of Life” (*Placar da Vida*) on social media where it posted updates only on the number of “saved Brazilians,” people who have recovered from the disease, while ignoring the death toll. On different occasions, members of the administration, including Bolsonaro, said in interviews that the media was reporting only the number of deaths, ignoring the number of people who had recovered from the disease. Bolsonaro also has on more than one occasion asked the Supreme Court to overturn coronavirus restrictions imposed by several states. In a decision in April 2020, the Supreme Court ruled that states and municipal governments have the power to determine rules on isolation, quarantine and restriction of transport and traffic on highways due to the pandemic. Bolsonaro would later claim incorrectly that the Supreme Court didn’t allow him to take any measure because of this ruling, therefore trying to exempt himself from any responsibility for the consequences of the pandemic. The Americas director at Human Rights Watch advised that “Bolsonaro has been sabotaging the states’ and his own Health Ministry’s efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and putting the lives and health of Brazilians at grave risk. To avoid preventable deaths from this pandemic, leaders should ensure that people have

access to accurate, evidence-based information essential to protecting their health. President Bolsonaro is doing everything but that.”<sup>1</sup> In the face of the erratic response, in May 2020 the British medical journal *The Lancet* identified Bolsonaro as the greatest threat to Brazil’s ability to combat the spread of COVID-19 (Lancet, 2020).

More worrying, however, is that the president helped to promote and disseminate misinformation campaigns. From the beginning of the pandemic, he repeatedly recommended people take chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, both antimalarial medicines, despite multiple studies that showed they are not effective against COVID-19. Moreover, the federal government engaged in a campaign to promote an alleged “early treatment” for COVID-19, also known as the “Covid kit” which included a cocktail of unproven drugs to treat COVID-19, such as the antimalarial drug chloroquine, the lice medication ivermectin, the antibiotic azithromycin and a set of vitamins. After announcing he was infected with the disease, Bolsonaro took doses of hydroxychloroquine and said the drug worked on him. Last year, Facebook and Twitter deleted posts from Bolsonaro’s official account because they contained false or misleading information about the disease, including one video where he claimed that hydroxychloroquine was “working in all places” as a treatment for COVID-19. This year, YouTube removed 15 videos from Bolsonaro’s channel, where he posts weekly national addresses, for spreading misinformation about COVID-19. He has also used a flawed German study, which has been debunked by American fact-checking organization Health Feedback, to argue mask-wearing can be harmful to children (Mantas, 2021). Later, Bolsonaro also put doubts on the effectiveness of vaccines, suggesting that the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine could turn people into ‘crocodiles’ and refusing to

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch. “Brazil: Bolsonaro Sabotages Anti-Covid-19 Efforts.” Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/10/brazil-bolsonaro-sabotages-anti-covid-19-efforts>

buy the Sinovac/Coronovac vaccine, which was being developed by the Chinese laboratory Sinovac in partnership with the Brazilian Butantan Institute, financed by the government of São Paulo. Despite the anti-vaccines narratives, the federal government signed an agreement to buy both vaccines and include them in the National Immunization Program (PNI). But, Bolsonaro said he will not take any COVID-19 vaccine.

Over a 12 month period, Brazil cycled through four health ministers. Luiz Henrique Mandetta, a physicist and politician, was fired after he criticised Bolsonaro's actions and called for unity in a television interview. Mandetta defended quarantine measures taken by the governors and mayors to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus and was gaining popularity among Brazilians because of his handling of the pandemic. The next minister, Nelson Teich, a physician with no political background, resigned after three weeks in office because he refused to endorse widespread use of chloroquine to fight the coronavirus outbreak. The third health minister, Eduardo Pazuello, an active-duty army general with no background in medicine, was the most loyal minister to Bolosnaro and issued guidelines for wider use of the unproven antimalarial drug in mild coronavirus cases, following the president's orders. After widespread criticism and political pressure, Pazuello was replaced by cardiologist Marcelo Queiroga.

More than a year into the pandemic, there is still no centralized or coordinated public health response to the outbreak in the country. Doctors Without Borders described the situation in Brazil as a "humanitarian catastrophe" and urged Brazilian authorities to acknowledge the severity of the crisis and to put in place a central COVID-19 response and coordination system to prevent more deaths (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2021). Because of all the problems mentioned, in April 2021 Brazil's Senate opened a parliamentary inquiry to investigate the Bolsonaro government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether federal or state officials were



criminally negligent or corrupt in their response to the pandemic, and if Bolsonaro sabotaged public health measures. The investigation has multiple lines of inquiry, such as understanding the delays in buying vaccines, why the government promoted ineffective treatments such as chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, and the spread of disinformation about COVID-19.

Within this context rife with mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 and mismanagement of the pandemic, journalists have had to report on conflicting information coming from the government authorities and make sense of stories, while the virus has continued to spread in the country, infecting and killing hundreds of thousands of people. Moreover, journalists became targets of Bolsonaro and his supporters. On many occasions, Bolsonaro said the coronavirus crisis was a “media trick,” and that the outbreak was “potentialized by the media.” He also blamed journalists for creating panic and reporting the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 instead of those who have recovered from the disease. During his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2020, Bolsonaro said: “As was the case in much of the world, segments of the Brazilian media have also politicized the virus by spreading panic among the population. Under the mottos ‘stay at home’ and ‘we will deal with the economy later on,’ they almost brought about social chaos to the country.”<sup>2</sup>

The work of Isabela Kalil, a Brazilian anthropologist, demonstrates how Bolsonaro used conspiracy theories to mobilize fear, create ‘enemies’ and convert these theories into official public policies. As Bolsonaro feared the economic effects of the pandemic, he tried to dissociate himself from the consequences of measures that aimed at containing the virus, such as quarantine

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<sup>2</sup> Governo Federal. Remarks by President Jair Bolsonaro at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly – September 22, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mre/en/content-centers/speeches-articles-and-interviews/president-of-the-federative-republic-of-brazil/speeches/remarks-by-president-jair-bolsonaro-at-the-general-debate-of-the-75th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-september-22-2020>

and the closure of business (Ricard & Medeiros, 2020). Therefore, Bolsonaro's discourses attacked other 'enemies' instead of the virus, such as "the media, governors, mayors and those who do not support the government's policy by labelling them 'communists', 'globalists', 'corrupt' enemies responsible for the pandemic situation and its economic effects" (Kalil et al., 2021, p. 8). In this study, Kalil and colleagues call attention to the globalization of conspiracy theories. According to Kalil et al. (2021), Trumpist conspiracy theories and accusations related to the 'Chinese virus' adapted to the Brazilian context feed on anti-communist and nationalist conceptions and gave Bolsonaro and his supporters an opportunity to frame the political debate as a war. This strategy propagates "the idea that these 'enemies' – the media, political opposition, China, the WHO – are trying to undermine the Brazilian economy through both spreading a virus and then causing overreactions to hamper economic activity" (p. 8). They continue:

When Bolsonaro asks for the full return of productivity and normality, calling the reaction to the pandemic a 'hysteria', he makes a political choice and profits from an array of fears: unemployment, hunger, criminality and death as possible effects of quarantine. That is a way of shielding his government from the pandemic's consequences as well as placing part of the population at ease by naturalising the idea that, inevitably, 'the weak would die' and the healthy and young should not worry. As a chief of state he is avoiding responsibility for political actions, in defence of a general neoliberal and authoritarian model of state and the self. (Kalil et al., 2021, pp. 12-13)

Other studies (Ricard & Medeiros, 2020; Soares et al., 2021) also show how the pandemic became politicized in Brazil. An analysis of WhatsApp political groups by Soares et al. (2021) found that COVID-19-related disinformation in Brazil was largely political and provided a pro-Bolsonaro framing of the pandemic. In the same way, the disinformation messages connected social distancing measures, health authorities, governors and mayors, Brazilian Supreme Court, and by media outlets to the "left" and to "communism," and the pandemic to a conspiracy. They conclude that "this political argument was used to frame all discourses that discredited

Bolsonaro's as created by political opposition. Thus, polarization between "us" (the good) and "them" (the evil) was one key strategy for spreading disinformation" (Soares et al., 2021).

In both cases, journalists are targets. In light of this, this research understands it is important to report how journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil have experienced these challenges, how this scenario has affected their work and which strategies they have used to overcome the difficulties. To understand journalists' experiences, first it is important to contextualize the state of the Brazilian news industry. Therefore, the next section is dedicated to outlining the news media industry in Brazil in the last few years and the effects the election of Bolsonaro and the pandemic have had on it, as well as the challenges journalists face.

### **Brazilian media landscape**

Brazil is Latin America's largest economy and also has the biggest media market in the region. However, due to a long history of socio-economic inequality, access to news in the country is still limited. The News Atlas,<sup>3</sup> a project that maps news organizations in the Brazilian territory, identified that 18% of the population (37 million people) lack access to local journalism in Brazil. These places, so-called news deserts, represent 62.6% of Brazilian municipalities. They are proportionally located mostly in north and northeast Brazil, which also corresponds to the regions with the lowest economic development rates in the county, including high unemployment and poverty rates. The news deserts are, in general, small towns with a median population of 7,100 inhabitants.

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<sup>3</sup> The News Atlas is an initiative inspired by the America's Growing News Desert project, from the Columbia Journalism Review, which mapped the presence of newspapers in the United States amid changes in the journalism business model. Available at: <https://www.atlas.jor.br/english/>

Newspapers have a record of low readership in Brazil due to the historical illiteracy rates in the country, but television plays a huge role in the Brazilian media landscape. According to the National Household Sampling Survey (*Pesquisa Nacional por Amostragem de Domicílios*) released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 96.4% of households had at least one television set in their homes in 2018 (IBGE, 2020). Data from the Brazilian Media Survey 2016, organized by the Presidency of the Republic's Social Communication Secretary (Secom) found that 63% of Brazilians use television as a primary source of information, followed by the internet, which accounts for 26%. Only 3% said they use newspapers as their main source of news (Secom, 2016).

Other surveys show similar results, but the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020) revealed changing habits. According to the report, in 2020, for the first time since the survey started, social media surpassed television in terms of media consumption for news in Brazil. In 2013, 75% of participants said their main source of information was TV, whereas 47% used social media. In 2020, the number of participants who chose TV dropped to 66%, while 67% answered they searched for news on social media. The report also highlights that print readership has been cut in half since 2013, and the COVID-19 crisis was likely to hit the sector even harder (Newman et al., 2020). In general, the number of people with access to the internet in Brazil has increased in the last few years, as survey results released by IBGE showed that the number of households with access to the internet rose to 74.9% in 2017, and to 79.1% in 2018 (IBGE, 2020).

It is true that people are getting more information online, but there are still barriers. Data from the Reuters survey are from more urban areas, where the predominance of the internet connection is higher. In many municipalities, radio stations and small community newspapers are

still the only news organizations available. The News Atlas also found that radio broadcasting is the most common form of news media in Brazil, representing 35.2% of all journalistic organizations in the country. On the other hand, in bigger cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte, about two thirds of news organizations are online.

### *Geographic and ownership concentration*

Despite being a continental country, Brazil's media and news industry is concentrated in the southeast region of the country, especially in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's biggest cities. São Paulo is the country's economic center, as it is the hub of financial activity, and hosts the most important decision-making operations of major companies. Rio de Janeiro is Brazil's second largest city and also an important economic center, as it is headquarters to Brazilian oil, mining, and the media conglomerate Grupo Globo. Brasília, the country's capital, is located in the center-west region and is the country's political center. As they are considered the political and economic centers of Brazil, the happenings in these three cities are highly represented in national news coverage.

Still, the geographic concentration of news media may be a cause for concern, as it has an impact on diversity and the plurality of opinion from other regions. A project launched by the German section of the international organization Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF), the "Media Ownership Monitor" (MOM)<sup>4</sup> mapped the Brazilian landscape and found that 19 out of 26 (73%) media groups analyzed are based in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region. The

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<sup>4</sup> The "Media Ownership Monitor" (MOM) mapped the Brazilian landscape, analysing 50 outlets in four segments (TV, radio, printed media and online), owned by a total of 26 communication groups. Available at: <https://brazil.mom-rsf.org/en/>

report also found that 62% of the media outlets are located in São Paulo, 12% in Rio the Janeiro, 10% in Porto Alegre (South), 6%, in Belo Horizonte (Southeast) and 4% in Brasília.

More troubling, however, is the media ownership, which is still dominated by family-owned companies. National, regional and local newspapers can belong to a single conglomerate and regional TV and radio stations are usually part of a bigger network. Grupo Globo, for example, is the country's biggest media conglomerate and leading broadcaster, running TV and radio outlets, newspapers and cable pay channels. The group runs the Rede Globo television station, the market leader in the country, which people can access for free, via antenna. But they also own more than 30 channels on cable TV, the country's largest online news portal (globo.com), two radio networks (Globo AM/FM and CBN), the newspapers *O Globo*, *Extra*, *Valor Econômico* and numerous magazines. They are still very popular because of their soap operas, which dominate prime time on free TV and are exported to other countries. Soccer matches and reality TV shows also attract large audiences. According to a campaign launched by the group, they reached as many as 100 million Brazilians daily in 2017 across all of their platforms.<sup>5</sup>

But Globo is not the only big conglomerate in Brazil. SBT (*Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão*), headed by Silvio Santos, is the second largest television network in the country and the main competitor of Globo (Alves, 2003). Grupo Record, which belongs to the same leader as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*), owns important TV channels (RecordTV and RecordNews), print media (Correio do Povo) and online outlets (R7 portal). According to the "Media Ownership Monitor" (MOM), the group also runs the Rede Aleluia radio network and produces the free newspaper *Folha Universal*. The MOM also found

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://redeglobo.globo.com/novidades/noticia/globo-celebra-alcance-de-mais-de-100-milhoes-de-pessoas-por-dia.ghtml>

that six out of the 50 surveyed news outlets are owned by religious leaders. The “Media Ownership Monitor” (MOM) from RSF identified the association of religious interests and media influence as a threat to freedom of the press and plurality of opinion in the Brazilian media system (Frontières, 2017). In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014) classify independence as a key principle of journalism: “Independence from faction suggests there is a way to produce journalism without either denying the influence of personal experience or being hostage to it. The key is whether one maintains allegiance to the core journalistic principles that build toward truthfulness and informing the public” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, Chapter 5). The association with certain groups—be they political, economic or religious—could undermine these goals.

### *Newspapers*

In print media, the major newspapers in the country, both in terms of circulation and revenue, are *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo*. They belong to different media groups and circulate nationally, but are concentrated in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In Brasília, Brazil’s political capital, the most important local newspaper is *O Correio Braziliense*, named after the first Brazilian independent newspaper. The Brazilian press was born officially in 1808, the year in which the Portuguese Royal Family landed in Brazil to escape the attacks of Napoleon Bonaparte’s French troops and established the capital of its kingdom in the colony. The *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro*, however, reported only on administrative issues regarding Portugal and the Royal Family. The first independent newspaper to circulate in Brazil was founded by Hipólito José da Costa, also in 1808, while he was in exile in London, because he was persecuted by the Portuguese for his political views (Bahia, 2009). Costa is considered by many the first Brazilian journalist, and his publication, the *Correio Braziliense*, brought to the

reader his critical view of the Brazilian political, economic and social situation. Among other things, he defended freedom of opinion, the abolition of slavery and the independence of Brazil—which occurred in 1822. According to Alves (2003), a political emphasis has been present in Brazilian newspapers ever since, but in the second half of the 20th century, the Brazilian press started to follow the U.S. model of nonpartisan journalism. In the following years, Brazil adopted the commercial broadcast concessions given by the government and displayed a very similar style of newspapers and magazines (Alves, 2003).

In the 1950s, the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Diário Carioca* introduced Western concepts such as the lede and the inverted pyramid to Brazilian journalism. Later, *Jornal do Brasil* adopted the format and it became the role model for the rest of the so-called quality press in Brazil for decades (Alves, 2003).

*Folha de S.Paulo*, which is owned by the Frias family, was later responsible for another change in the style of the Brazilian press. In 1984, when Brazil was transitioning from the military dictatorship to a democracy, Otávio Frias Filho implemented the Folha Project (*Projeto Folha*), a series of changes in its editorial lines to incorporate marketing strategies, such as planning and organization, in the newspaper that would be considered one of the milestones of the Brazilian press. According to Alves (2003), *Projeto Folha* was a process of modernization, and the newspaper became the largest in circulation in the country, replacing *Jornal do Brasil* as the role model that influenced the rest of the newspaper industry.

*O Globo*, the leading newspaper in Rio de Janeiro, was founded in 1925 by Irineu Marinho, but he died 21 days after the newspaper's first publication. His son, Roberto Marinho inherited the publication and became its new president in 1931. Years later, Marinho expanded the network



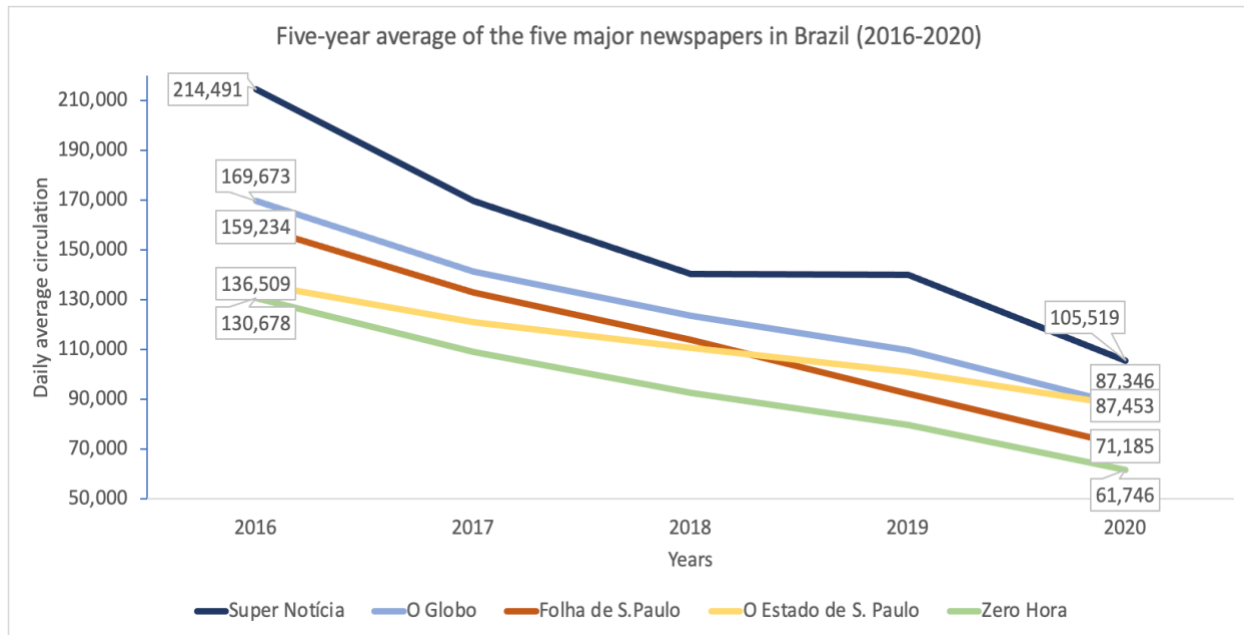
into radio stations and in 1965 he launched TV Globo, which would become part of the country's larger media conglomerates.

Besides *Folha*, the other traditional newspaper from São Paulo is *O Estado de S. Paulo*, or *Estadão*, which has been controlled by the Mesquita family since the 19th century. Júlio Mesquita was the newspaper's first editor, and its current owners are the fourth generation of the family in charge of the business.

*Folha*, *O Globo* and *Estadão*, are considered high quality dailies in the country, but the circulation of print newspapers has significantly dropped in the last few years, following a global trend. The Communication Verifier Institute (*Instituto Verificador de Comunicação - IVC*), a non-profit entity responsible for multiplatform media auditing in Brazil, collected data about the circulation of Brazilian newspapers between 2016 and 2020. According to IVC documents obtained for this research, from 2016 to 2020, there was a decrease of 50% in the circulation of the 10 major print newspapers in the country.

In 2016, the daily average circulation of these 10 newspapers was 1.3 million, but the figure plunged to 661,663 in 2020. Traditional newspapers that used to have more than one million copies of their print edition circulating daily now have trouble reaching 100,000.

**Figure 1 - CIRCULATION OF THE FIVE MAJOR NEWSPAPERS IN BRAZIL**

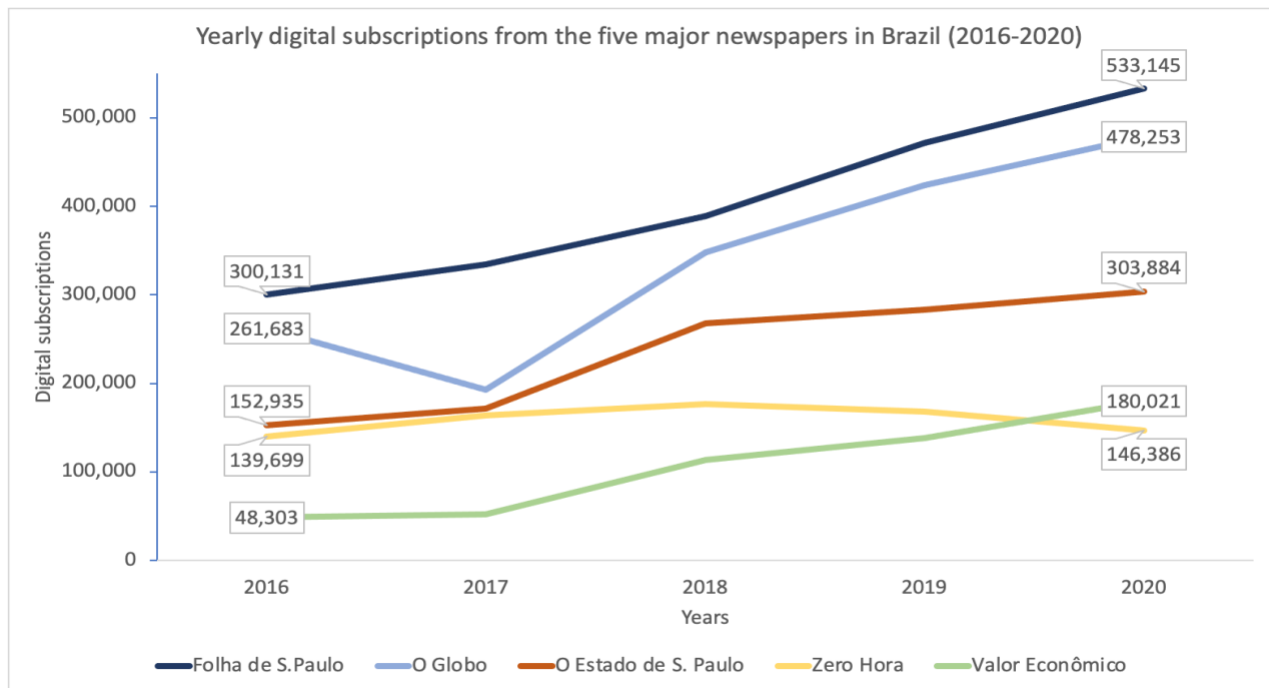


*Five-year average circulation of the five major newspapers in Brazil. Information provided by Instituto Verificador de Comunicação - IVC*

On the bright side, digital subscriptions are rising, although they are not sufficient to compensate for the loss in revenue. *Folha de S. Paulo*, which alone used to have more than one million copies circulating in the country daily, is the leader in digital subscriptions: 533,145 in 2020, 78% more than it had in 2016.

In general, if we consider digital subscriptions, the figure is less grim. In December 2016, the total number of digital subscriptions for the 10 major Brazilian newspapers was 1,237,963, and it has risen to 1,918,083 in 2020, a 55% increase.

**Figure 2 - DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTIONS OF THE FIVE MAJOR NEWSPAPERS IN BRAZIL**



*Yearly digital subscriptions from the five major newspapers in Brazil. Instituto Verificador de Comunicação - IVC*

Yet, looking closely at the numbers, each newspaper tells a different story. The three most traditional Brazilian newspapers (*Folha*, *Estadão* and *O Globo*) saw an increase of 84% in the number of digital subscribers between 2016 and 2020, whereas the other seven papers on the list saw an increase of only 15% in the same period. This happens because larger companies tend to have more money to invest in technologies and are better equipped to deal with crises.

Unlike many outlets in the United States, where larger news organizations are often publicly-traded companies (and listed on the stock market), in Brazil, the companies are private and therefore there's no way of accessing their financial results. But the decline of the newspapers' circulation is one indicator of the difficulties the news industry has been facing since the arrival

of the internet, and now exacerbated because of the economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another indicator is the number of layoffs in recent years. Tracking layoffs in Brazil is not an easy task. There is no national database about it and the National Federation of Journalists (Fenaj) and local unions do not keep records of this data. Moreover, media companies usually don't announce layoffs and many professionals work as "regular freelancers"— meaning they are not proper employees and, therefore, don't receive labor benefits, but they still work full-time inside newsrooms as service providers. In an attempt to collect the data, a project by the data journalism agency Volt Data Lab<sup>6</sup> found that, between 2012 and 2018, there were at least 2,327 layoffs of journalists in Brazilian newsrooms. Considering all the media companies in the country, the number rose to 7,817 during the same period. These results may not provide an exact figure, as Volt Data Lab's research is based entirely on news articles published about layoffs—this number could be a lot higher. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, some media companies and newspapers announced wage cuts and reduction in the hours worked due to the loss in advertising revenue.

### *WhatsApp*

As previously mentioned, Brazilians are changing habits in media consumption and social media, especially the messaging app WhatsApp, are gaining space. It is not possible to talk about the news media industry in Brazil today without understanding the use of WhatsApp in the country and what role it plays in people's lives. WhatsApp is a messaging app purchased by Facebook in

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<sup>6</sup> A *Conta dos Passaralhos* tracks layoffs of journalists within media companies in Brazil. The project compiles data from publications that report on the media, by close readership of niche bulletins and from alerts received about specific search terms. Available at: <https://passaralhos.voltdata.info/about.html>

2014 for \$19 billion, the company's largest acquisition, over 20 times larger than Facebook's Instagram acquisition.<sup>7</sup> The app is very popular in Brazil because it allows people to chat, send text and voice messages, share images, videos, memes, and make voice and video calls, using the user's internet connection and therefore avoiding fees. Many mobile phone networks in Brazil allow unlimited WhatsApp access to users, so even people who cannot afford an internet plan can use it. As a consequence, Brazil is WhatsApp's second-largest market, behind India. The company has over 120 million individual users in Brazil, accounting for more than half of the country's population.

People in Brazil use WhatsApp for almost everything, from chatting with family and friends to a working tool. Journalists use the app to talk to sources and to their bosses. Because of its popularity in the Brazilian market, the app is used by advertising agencies to promote cosmetics, foods, and many other products, as well as by political campaigns as a way to reach as many people as possible. The app also serves as a sales channel for business, for setting up doctors' appointments and for ordering and delivering food. However, the app has gained more attention from scholars since it played a crucial role in the spread of misinformation during the 2018 Brazilian election (Tardáguila, Benevenuto, & Ortellado, 2018). A study by the Federal University of Minas Gerais, the University of São Paulo and Brazil's leading fact-checking platform *Agência Lupa* analyzed the 50 most-widely shared images from a sample of more than 100,000 images circulating in 347 open WhatsApp groups focused on Brazilian politics. From the 50 most widely shared images, only four were considered fully truthful, while eight were considered completely false, 16 were real pictures but used out of their original context or related

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<sup>7</sup> Deutsch, A. (2021). WhatsApp: The Best Facebook Purchase Ever? *Investopedia*  
By ALISON L. DEUTSCH <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/032515/whatsapp-best-facebook-purchase-ever.asp>

to distorted data and four were unsubstantiated claims, not based on a trustworthy public source (Tardáguila, Benevenuto, & Ortellado, 2018). Evangelista & Bruno (2019), who studied micro-targeting communication strategies in the 2018 election, point to the problems involved in the use of WhatsApp in an election campaign: “the invisibility of the actors that produce, monitor, distribute and/or direct the contents viewed and/or shared by most users. The current architecture of the platform does not allow, once appropriated for purposes of election campaigns and micro-targeting, users to notice or become aware that they are being monitored and managed” (Evangelista & Bruno, 2019).

While on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, it is possible to remove content when it violates their policies, the messages in WhatsApp are harder to monitor because of its private, encrypted architecture. WhatsApp is cheaper than the traditional Short Message Service (SMS) communication, allows users to create groups, and provides features for viral messages spreading, which allows political campaigns to reach more voters (Resende et al., 2019). These features explain in part why WhatsApp has become an important platform to spread false information without accountability. In 2018, after the dissemination of false information on WhatsApp provoked lynchings in India, the company restricted the number of times that a message could be forwarded to 20 times globally and five times in India. Today, the limit has been updated to five worldwide (Tardáguila, Benevenuto & Ortellado, 2018; Resende et al., 2019). But this was not sufficient to prevent the huge amount of disinformation circulating during the 2018 election in Brazil.

In a book about her experience covering mis- and disinformation in Brazil, Patrícia Campos Mello, an award-winning journalist, compares the tactics used to disseminate false stories during the 2018 election with the Russian model for propaganda known as “the firehose of falsehood,”

which is characterized by high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Studying the features of this strategy, Paul & Matthews (2016) found that messages coming from groups to which the recipient belongs are more likely to be perceived as credible; the same is true when the source is perceived as similar to the recipient. “If a propaganda channel is (or purports to be) from a group the recipient identifies with, it is more likely to be persuasive” (Paul & Matthews, 2016, p. 3). These elements make WhatsApp a “frighteningly efficient” tool for the dissemination of political propaganda—or disinformation (Campos Mello, 2020a). Indeed, a survey conducted by the University of São Paulo’s Monitor of Political Debate in the Digital Media found that family groups were responsible for 51% of the dissemination of fake news on WhatsApp in Brazil (Gagnani, 2018).

As a result, WhatsApp continues to be seen as the main channel for spreading false information in Brazil, while Facebook is seen as more responsible in other parts of the world, according to the 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2020). As will be further explored in Chapters 4 and 5, journalists interviewed for this study shared concerns about the amount of disinformation they see circulating on WhatsApp.

### **The newspapers have “survived” Bolsonaro**

As illustrated in this chapter, the news industry faces numerous challenges in light of the radical changes triggered by information and communication technologies. In Brazil, these challenges have been aggravated since Jair Bolsonaro took office at the beginning of 2019. Since then, he has actively tried to undermine the credibility of the press.

In the 2018 presidential election, far-right candidate Bolsonaro promised to wipe out corruption and violent crime in Brazil. Following Donald Trump's example, his campaign also aggressively targeted the media as an "enemy" and his rhetoric continued and was aggravated after his inauguration. Since he was elected to office, Bolsonaro, along with his sons and supporters, were also suspected of being involved in disinformation campaigns. A Parliamentary Commission (CPMI) formed in 2019 by Brazil's House of Representatives is investigating whether there is an orchestrated scheme for the mass dissemination of false information and defamatory messages against opponents of Bolsonaro that may be linked to one of the president's sons, the Rio de Janeiro city councilor Carlos Bolsonaro. According to testimonies, including from Jair Bolsonaro's former allies, this structure, unofficially called the "Office of Hatred," operates inside the presidential palace and is responsible for the "communication strategy" of the president through his social media channels (Ricard & Medeiros, 2020).

Even if it is not possible to tell whether Bolsonaro and his family are directly involved in the dissemination of "fake news," they consistently attack professional journalists as a way to protect themselves from criticism. As mentioned earlier, Bolsonaro's attitude towards the press was aggravated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as journalists are targeted as enemies who "create chaos" and report only "the tragedy." The government's posture towards the media encourages other people to attack journalists and discredit the press. Verbal attacks on journalists from Bolsonaro supporters have caused various media companies—such as television broadcasters Globo and Band, the radio station CBN, the websites G1 and Metr p les and a trio of leading newspapers *Valor Econ mico*, *O Globo* and *Folha de S.Paulo*—to stop covering Pal cio da Alvorada, the official residence of the President of Brazil. The decision was made after supporters of the president called reporters "scum, rats, extortionists, rogues, communists and



crooks” outside of his residence. There have also been cases of physical violence against journalists by Bolsonaro supporters. On May 3, 2020, a photographer from *O Estado de S.Paulo* was assaulted by demonstrators while he was taking pictures of the president during a pro-Bolsonaro rally in Brasília. The photographer was pushed from a small ladder and when he fell, he was punched and kicked by the protestors.<sup>8</sup>

Bolsonaro himself has told journalists to “shut up” in press conferences and threatened a boycott of the country’s largest newspaper, *Folha de S. Paulo*. When asked by a reporter from *O Globo* about payments into his wife’s bank account by a former police officer, Bolsonaro replied: “I feel like punching you in your mouth.”

Patrícia Campos Mello, the award-winning journalist who was victim of one of the worst disinformation campaigns in Brazil, wrote in an op-ed for the *New York Times*:

“The press, along with the courts and Congress, is one of the last barriers containing the president. But I’m not sure for how much longer we will be able to resist Mr. Bolsonaro and his followers. The increasingly aggressive rhetoric and actions on the part of the president, his children, and allies serve as a green light for pro-Bolsonaro militias to progress from insults to injury.” (Campos Mello, 2020b)

Between the first and second round of the presidential campaign, Campos Mello wrote an article for *Folha de S.Paulo* reporting that Bolsonaro’s supporters and business people were using non-declared money from companies to spread millions of fake messages and defamatory content about his opponent via WhatsApp. After the publication, she received a series of attacks and threats by Bolsonaro’s supporters on social media and she had her WhatsApp hacked.

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<sup>8</sup> Estarque, M. (2020). “On World Press Freedom Day, journalists are attacked in Brazil during pro-Bolsonaro demonstration.” May 4, 2020. LatAm Journalism Review. Knight Center. Retrieved from: <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/on-world-press-freedom-day-journalists-are-attacked-in-brazil-during-pro-bolsonaro-demonstration/>

Activists and human rights groups are worried about the situation in Brazil. Freedom House warns that high levels of harassment and violence against journalists, coupled with impunity, continue to threaten independent journalists and civil society activists in Brazil (Freedom House, 2020). Between 2019 and 2020, Bolsonaro's attitude resulted in an increase of 105% in the number of attacks against journalists in Brazil, according to the National Federation of Journalists (Fenaj). In 2020 alone, there were 428 reported cases of violence against journalists, more than double the 208 cases recorded in 2019. Bolsonaro alone was responsible for 175 verbal attacks on journalists in 2020 (Fenaj, 2021).

Despite the president's attempt to undermine the news industry, *Poder360*, an online news outlet, figured that the media have "survived" Bolsonaro's era (Yahya, 2021). While Brazilian news outlets did not experience a sharp increase in subscriptions following Bolsonaro's attacks—a phenomenon known as the "Trump bump" in the United States, where traditional news media saw a rise in subscriptions after attacks made by Donald Trump—the country's three major newspapers (*Folha*, *Estadão* and *O Globo*), saw an increase of 8.4% in the total number of subscribers (digital and print combined) between 2018 and 2020, according to the data provided by the Communication Verifier Institute (IVC).

The media is trying to resist Bolsonaro. When the president took down a government website in an attempt to suppress information about the spread of the coronavirus in the country, Brazil's leading news organizations, including the newspapers *Folha de S.Paulo*, *Estadão* and *O Globo* and the online portals G1 and UOL, joined forces to release the daily figures on the disease. These media outlets worked together to collect the information from health departments in Brazil's 26 states and the Brasilia federal district. Later, the consortium would also create a campaign to encourage people to get vaccinated.

Some believe that the COVID-19 pandemic may give the struggling news industry a slight sign of hope. Campos Mello wrote in her book *A máquina do ódio* (The Hatred Machine):

“The ‘infodemic’ also represents a risk to public health, as people need accurate guidelines to protect themselves and help to curb the spread of the disease. [...] The epidemic highlighted the importance of professional journalists who produce truthful and accurate information. At a time when accurate information can save lives, people begin to distrust their aunts in WhatsApp and Twitter’s nutters, government officials included therein.” (Campos Mello, 2020a)

After a period of decline, the press’ credibility has begun to recover. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 found that trust in news improved slightly in Brazil, to 51%, after a significant contraction in 2019 amid an atmosphere of political polarization following Bolsonaro’s election in 2018 (Newman et al., 2020). A survey from the Datafolha institute showed that in April 2020, 83% of people in Brazil trusted information about the coronavirus from TV broadcasts, 79% trusted print newspapers, 72% trusted online outlets, and 64% trusted radio shows. Only 30% trusted information related to the pandemic shared on Facebook; one month earlier it was 37%, and 28% on WhatsApp, from 36% in the previous month (Datafolha, 2020).

Undoubtedly, the news industry has taken a big hit and it is too early to know if the trend seen during the pandemic will be sufficient to regain public trust in journalism. With this in mind, this research aims to understand and report on journalists’ experiences during the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, which strategies they have used to compete with the spread of disinformation, and how they perceive their roles. To achieve these goals, I conducted in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 journalists who have worked on the coverage in Brasília during the outbreak, and then carried out a thematic analysis adapted from a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). But, before diving into the interview data, it is

important to further understand what mis- and disinformation is in the journalistic context and as framed by a health crisis like COVID-19. The next section presents a literature review about journalists' roles during health crises and a discussion about mis- and disinformation in a modern context.

## CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Journalists' roles and shifts in health coverage**

Journalists are associated with a set of values that include the disinterested pursuit of truth, loyalty to citizens and independence from institutions (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). These notions relate to the democratic role associated with journalism, as demonstrated by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014): “the primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (p. 17). Different from other professions, journalists don't have standardized codes of conduct or methods of work. Precisely because of the democratic role attached to a free press, journalists usually claim autonomy to conduct their own method of reporting and verification of information (Shapiro et al., 2013). Researchers (e.g., Deuze, 2005; Hanitzsch 2007; Hanitzsch, 2011), however, have identified that, despite differences across newsrooms, professional newswriters share an “occupational ideology [...] which functions to self-legitimize their position in society” (Deuze, 2005, p. 446).

Among those, Deuze (2005) identified that journalists: (1) provide a public service; (2) are impartial, neutral, objective, fair and credible; (3) must be autonomous, free and independent in their work; (4) have a sense of immediacy, actuality and speed; and (5) have a sense of ethics, validity and legitimacy. Hanitzsch (2007), in an attempt to identify a “dominant interpretation of journalism's social function and identity” (p. 370), arrives at three essential elements of journalism culture: (1) institutional roles, which consist of its functional contribution to society; (2) epistemologies that raise the question of whether or not the news can provide an objective account of the truth; and (3) ethical ideologies, regarding how journalists respond to ethical problems, such as unconventional and potentially harmful practices of reporting (badgering

informants, paying for information), or whether a universal code of ethics in journalism should be considered. These three constituents further divide into seven principal dimensions: (1) interventionism, (2) power distance, (3) market orientation, (4) objectivism, (5) empiricism, (6) relativism, and (7) idealism. The perception of being a ‘detached watchdog,’ i.e., to hold government and powerful elites to account, in turn, dominates the journalistic field in Western societies (Hanitzsch, 2011).

As part of a study of political journalism on the internet, Guazina (2013) found that Brazilian blogger-journalists who define themselves as “progressives” share the same professional values as their colleagues who work in traditional commercial media in Brazil. These values are commitment to the facts, defense of democracy, diversity of opinion, permanent monitoring of powers, and honesty (Guazina, 2013, p. 79).

Specific contexts, such as disasters and health coverage, bring shifts in journalistic roles or demand additional, situation-specific approaches (Klemm et al., 2017). Schwitzer et al. (2005) argue that, more than getting accurate information, journalists have a special responsibility in covering health news and must be concerned about the consequences of the stories they publish. For example, they have to be aware of and investigate possible conflicts of interests between researchers and private companies, public institutions, patient advocacy groups and their sponsors or other organizations. If they fail to do so, they risk becoming mere “unwitting mouthpieces for incomplete, biased, and imbalanced news and information” (Schwitzer et al., 2005).

Klemm et al. (2017) highlight that science and health coverage is usually characterized by scientific innovations, in which there is ample time to research and produce stories, but health

crisis coverage requires an immediate response. In such crises, it is more difficult for journalists to obtain accurate information in a short time, which in turn requires that journalists work together with authorities to deliver vital information to the public (Veil, 2012). In an analysis of the coverage of the H1N1 flu by Brazil's *Jornal Nacional*, the TV news program with the highest audience in the country, da Silva Medeiros and Massarani (2010) found that official sources such as government authorities and organizations were the main source of information regarding the 2009 pandemic, while only a small amount of news included scientists and specialists as interviewees or as information sources. "The scientific knowledge was scarcely explored, even though it would have contributed to a better understanding by the public of the cause, the evolution, the virulence, and the virus potential to cause a severe pandemic, among other characteristics. Scientists were hardly present as sources or voices" (da Silva Medeiros & Massarani, 2010, p. 6). Authorities are expected to speak in situations of disasters and crises, but journalists should gather multiple, independent opinions from scientists and specialists as they can provide a bigger picture and more perspectives for the coverage. Silverman (2014) argues that journalists should also use social media and work with people on the ground who are first to experience the emergency to help verify the conflicting information circulating during a disaster. Health journalists act as mediators between the public and scientists and health experts, as they help in translating complex issues and scientific knowledge about diseases to society at large. But, health communication also serves to motivate people to make informed day-to-day choices and decisions about their health and overall quality of life (Sharma et. al., 2020). This role has been evident during the COVID-19 crisis, as journalists have had to advise the public on the changing mask-wearing protocols, and social distancing and self-isolation rules. As a result,

health journalists have also assumed an educational role (Schwitzer et al., 2005) during COVID-19.

In a study that outlined journalists' role perceptions when covering public health crises, Klemm et al. (2017) found that during those outbreaks, especially outbreaks of novel or re-emerging infectious diseases, journalists tend to assume a *public mobilizer* role, especially to reinforce "self-protective behaviours" as well as to "mobilize social responsibility" (p. 1229).

Interestingly, they also found that journalists tend to assume a more 'cooperative' attitude towards authorities during health emergencies, rather than the classic 'watchdog' role, which "appears logical given that as *public mobilizers*, journalists' goals are more naturally aligned with the goals of health authorities than in the reporting of other issues (e.g. an economic crisis)" (Klemm et al., 2017 p. 1232).

As the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, however, failing to act as a 'watchdog' can somehow be worrisome. In a global survey conducted by International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, journalists identified politicians and elected officials (46%), government representatives (25%) and state-orchestrated networks (23%) as top sources of COVID-19 disinformation. The findings indicate "a serious lack of trust in political and governmental actors as the pandemic took hold" (Posetti et al., 2020, p. 5), which in turn suggests that journalists should both hold authorities accountable while working in partnership with authorities to deliver a clear message.

However, expanding access to information amid the pandemic has been a challenge in many countries, as governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to delay Access-to-Information (ATI) requests or, in some cases, actively limit access to information. In Canada, a report from



the *Winnipeg Free Press* found that fewer than half of national agencies and departments were processing ATI requests during the pandemic, because departments opted against deeming such requests a “critical service” (Robertson, 2020). In Brazil, president Bolsonaro tried to suspend the 30-day deadline<sup>9</sup> for public authorities and institutions to respond to requests for information submitted under the country’s Freedom of Information legislation, and forbid appeals in cases of denied requests, but a Supreme Court judge suspended the measure (CPJ, 2020).

Mexico, Kenya and the Philippines saw similar trends (Hivos, 2020; Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020). A study about the early consequences of COVID-19 for journalists in the Philippines showed that journalists found obstacles to accessing information because government offices weren’t working in full operation due to quarantine, and officers working from home lacked access to “Internet connection, laptop computers, and scanners, including digital copies of files” to answer to FOI requests (Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020, pp. 133-134). The study also noted that it was more difficult to get information from virtual press briefings and from sources without face-to-face interaction.

In addition to these difficulties, journalists have faced unprecedented challenges in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. A reporter interviewed for this study said: “We are at a level of stress that no other journalist has ever experienced—maybe only a war journalist or a journalist during the Spanish Flu. Not even them, because today the context is different. With so much information flow, we reached a level in which I cannot disconnect from the news” (Journalist 2). Besides, in infectious disease outbreaks, many journalists put themselves at risk when they have

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<sup>9</sup> The government is required by law to respond to ATI requests within 20 days, a period that can be extended for another 10 days, upon express justification.

to report in the field. In these situations, journalists were also on the frontline of the outbreak, along with physicians, nurses and essential workers.

As a result, the ICFJ and Tow Center for Digital Journalism survey showed that a great number of journalists who have covered the pandemic rated the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work. Worries about unemployment or other financial hardships, which are usually top concerns for those working in journalism, came in second. On the bright side, a majority of journalists responded that their commitment towards journalism has increased as a result of the pandemic (Posetti et al., 2020).

While these findings offer important insights on the impacts of COVID-19 for journalism, this current research wants to understand and register the lived experiences of journalists who covered the pandemic in the capital of Brazil, considering the particularity of the country.

Despite the human tragedy, the pandemic in Brazil has been marked by widespread mis- and disinformation amid a context of political instability and polarization. With this in mind, the study seeks to understand how this unprecedented coverage has impacted journalists' perceptions of their roles.

As previously mentioned, role perceptions may change in situational contexts (Klemm et al., 2017) such as health emergencies. But the internet and social media are also elements that may cause journalists to rethink their value to society. Deuze (2005) argues that multimedia developments and changes in society (multiculturalism) are both forces that push journalists to revise the news producer-consumer relationship and thus challenge perceptions and values attached to journalism for so long. "A valued detachment of society [...] may result in disconnections with certain publics and oversimplified representations of social complexity"

(Deuze, 2005, p. 454). Chaves and Braga (2019) point out that the “ongoing changes in the traditional model of news broadcasting are interconnected with a crisis in the social role of journalists and, by extension, in journalism itself” (p. 478).

With this in mind, the following section will discuss these ongoing changes in the news industry, as well as the rise of mis- and disinformation more generally.

### **Information disorder**

The internet has brought countless benefits to society, for it has democratized access to information and broken the monopoly of the traditional press. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2010) write: “In many ways, it even redefines what we mean by the idea of citizenship. [...] Though we may little understand how, we are all assuming more control over what we know about the world beyond our direct experience. We are becoming our own editors, our own gatekeepers, our own aggregators” (Chapter 1). News organizations in the latter part of the twentieth century aimed at targeting elite demographics groups—affluent readers at newspapers and women in television news—because it served the needs of advertisers at the time (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). But the web and social media changed this pattern, allowing marginalized groups to obtain news and information about subjects that interest them and to participate in public debates. On the internet, debates are no longer led only by traditional actors such as politicians, journalists and intellectuals, but also by other groups, movements or individuals that make their interpretations of the facts and testimonies public, which some argue provide for a more public and horizontal debate (Guazina, 2013).

On the other hand, the internet has created enormous challenges. Although the Digital Age has been described as a ‘golden era for journalism,’ it has also “delivered unprecedented, ongoing

challenges and structural changes to the news industry” (Posetti, 2018, p. 58). The nature of the networked media system has made the spread of misinformation easier and faster, and some social media channels have become a space where anonymous players can create and spread content with no accountability, allowing conspiracy theories and extreme views to flourish (Ireton, 2018). Additionally, even though the internet “promised” it would strengthen human interactions, there is no evidence that it has created a more democratic society (Chaves & Braga, 2019). Instead, as one study about interactions on social media platforms found, “[t]he technologies are being used to enhance pre-existing interaction patterns” (Chaves & Braga, 2019, p. 476).

In newsrooms, the internet has accelerated the pace of news flows, which has only reduced the time journalists have to check facts, and increased the chances of less precise information to be published, undermining the credibility of traditional outlets. New technologies have also challenged the gatekeeper role associated with journalism, as now the public can decide what they consume themselves, or rely on algorithms to provide them with the information and news based on their interests and beliefs. After the emergence of social media, public figures, especially populist politicians, gained direct access to their audiences, which has made it easier for them to disseminate their ideas without mediation or counterarguments, opening up space for increased manipulation of information and the creation of false discourses.

Adding to these problems, malicious content and rumours circulating through social media are normally available to users free of charge, while professional journalism requires a source of revenue. Consequently, people who cannot afford to pay for quality journalism, or who lack access to independent public service news media, are “especially vulnerable to both disinformation and misinformation” (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 8). This is especially true in

Brazil, the location of this study. As outlined in the previous chapter, the bulk of “fake news” in Brazil is spread on WhatsApp (Campos Mello, 2020a; Soares et al., 2021) and many mobile phone networks allow unlimited WhatsApp access to users, so even people who cannot afford an internet plan can use it.

While political propaganda, rumours and lies have been around for years, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that contemporary social technology has given space to a new phenomenon: information pollution at a global scale which can damage democracies and undermine public trust in institutions. They call it “information disorder” and propose the concepts of “disinformation” and “misinformation” to contrast with verifiable and truthful information in the public interest—i.e., the information pursued by authentic journalism. In this sense, “misinformation” refers to information that is false, but is disseminated without malicious intent by agents who believe it is true. “Disinformation” is information that is deliberate and intentionally false, and spread by actors who know that it is false and hope to cause harm, whether that’s financial, reputational or political harm. And finally, “mal-information” consists of information that is based on reality, but “is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5).

Even though it is frequently used, the term “fake news” is not sufficient to describe the complexity of this phenomenon. It has also been weaponized by politicians—including the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, and president Bolsonaro in Brazil, —to characterize coverage they do not like, as a way to discredit the news media industry. Using the same tactics as Trump, Bolsonaro has criticized the traditional press since the 2018 election, even before he became president, resulting in broader problems, such as online harassment of journalists, his political opponents or anyone else who disagrees with the president on any issue.

In an analysis about the dissemination of false stories via social media during the 2018 Brazilian presidential election, Chaves and Braga (2019) identified that “information disorder was central in the public debate during the electoral period and afterward” (p. 492).

If not properly discussed and addressed by journalists, citizens and institutions, such a new organization of the public debate on the internet, with new players who can create content without accountability, using bots and algorithms to reach more people, can cause more damage than benefits to society. The information cacophony of social networks poses risks to democracy by affecting the public understanding of reality, undermining trust in traditional media, allowing manipulation by populist leaders, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles, and enhancing polarization (Ireton, 2018, pp. 36-37).

As a response to these problems, fact-checking initiatives have surged around the world in recent years, some as independent and innovative start-ups and others inside legacy newsrooms, using the existing infrastructure and personnel to test new approaches (Singer, 2018).

As one of the most frequent values associated with journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) argue that the “discipline of verification” is what separates journalism from other forms of communication, such as entertainment, propaganda, fiction or art. However, in their book *Blur* (2010), the authors note that the line between these forms of communication has become more unclear and that it is up to the public to make the proper distinction between them. In the “post-truth” era—where “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford, 2016)—the verification role of journalism has gained even more relevance. Similarly, Shapiro et al. (2013) found that journalists use the discipline of

verification as “something that legitimizes a journalist’s social role as being demonstrably different from other communicators” (p. 669).

Some view fact-checking sites as the most significant innovation in journalistic practice in recent years (Graves et al., 2016), while others associate their work as returning to grassroots journalism (Martinez-Carrillo & Tamul, 2019). Mantzarlis (2018) suggests, however, that the traditional method of verification applied in traditional journalism—consisting of verifying factual claims made by reporters in their articles—what Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) call the “discipline of verification”—is different from what we see today in the “post-truth” politics or information disorder era. The “new” method—“ex-post” fact-checking employed by many fact-checking sites—happens after something is published and has a different purpose: to hold whoever made the claim (politicians and other public figures) “accountable for their words” (Mantzarlis, 2018, p. 87).

While these initiatives bring hope to a transforming industry by exposing and verifying falsehoods and making people accountable for their words, there is still a long road ahead. Studying the contemporary Russian propaganda model, “the firehose of falsehood,” Paul and Matthews (2016) argue that possible explanations for the effectiveness of this strategy are: (1) the propaganda is high-volume and multichannel; (2) it is rapid, continuous, and repetitive; (3) it makes no commitment to objective reality; (4) and it is not committed to consistency. Although the propaganda makes little or no commitment to the truth, messages can be appealing if the information is connected with familiar narratives, because people have “confirmation bias,” they view news and opinions that confirm existing beliefs as more credible than other news and opinions, regardless of the quality of the arguments (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Birks (2019) points out that “prior political beliefs are [...] often more influential on [people’s] credibility

judgments than evidence and expertise of the source” (p. 258). Also, once the disinformation is published and made viral, it is almost “impossible to pull back, even if journalists and other fact-checkers successfully debunk it” (Posetti, 2018, p. 59). All these elements make mis- and disinformation extremely dangerous. The producers of propaganda and falsehood reach more people nowadays, because they study the way that networks work, reverse engineer the algorithms of social media, and put their lies into those streams in ways that are effective to reach more people. The ultimate goal is not to make people believe the lie, but to make them doubt all the news (Rosenstiel, 2016).

In a way, the consequence of ‘information disorder’ is that a powerful group of people can create “truths” by persuading or forcing others to believe certain things that are in the interest of this powerful group. Ireton and Posetti (2018) state:

History also teaches us that the forces behind disinformation do not necessarily expect to persuade journalists or broader audiences about the truth of false claims, as much as cast doubt on the status of verifiable information produced by professional news producers. This confusion means that many news consumers feel increasingly entitled to choose or create their own ‘facts,’ sometimes aided by politicians seeking to shield themselves from legitimate critique. (p. 17)

As a result of the cacophony of social media and information disorder, facts have become “malleable” (Campos Mello, 2020a). These “truths,” or so-called “alternative facts,”<sup>10</sup> ultimately influence the public debate, by creating distractions and redirecting public attention from more serious issues, such as corruption or even the government response to a sanitary crisis like COVID-19.

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<sup>10</sup> The term “alternative facts” was first used by the U.S. Counselor to the President, Kellyanne Conway, to defend a false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump’s inauguration in 2017.



Many studies on information disorder have focused on political contexts. But, with the pandemic, it became clear that the spread of disinformation can damage both democracy and public health. Soares et al. (2021) studied the content of disinformation on WhatsApp political groups in Brazil between March and April 2020. They found that disinformation about COVID-19 was “politically framed, which benefited far-right views and helped circumvent a political crisis that could have harmed Bolsonaro’s government” (Soares et al., 2021). As a consequence, disinformation messages created a context in which people chose not to follow scientific guidance based on their political views. According to the study, conspiracy theories were the most prevalent category of disinformation in the messages analyzed. They concluded that misleading information and fabricated content were used to minimize the pandemic and detract from Bolsonaro’s opponents. Similarly, the work of Kalil et al. (2021) demonstrates how Bolsonaro used disinformation and conspiracy theories to mobilize fear and create ‘enemies,’ such as journalists, political opponents and institutions like the WHO.

In this scenario, journalists who have worked on the COVID-19 pandemic coverage in Brazil compete with the spread of mis- and disinformation, while being targeted as “enemies.” But while journalists have faced unprecedented challenges, the pandemic could also be an opportunity for people to see the importance of journalism and for journalists to reconnect with the audience. The journalist’s role gains another dimension during a public health emergency. When disinformation about the virus spreads rapidly, reporting accurate and truthful information can save lives. Posetti et al. (2020) identify opportunities for “journalism as a field to build on the renewed levels of mission, audience engagement and clearly demonstrated need for accountability reporting the pandemic has highlighted” (Posetti et al., 2020, p. 27).

While many studies have tackled the content of disinformation and how it can damage the public sphere, this study intends to address how journalists in Brazil, whose function is to verify and deliver accurate information to society, have adapted and dealt with this scenario. Sharma et. al. (2020) point out that free and independent media can be an effective antidote to the toxicity of the infodemic: “Besides providing facts and verified news to people, independent media also holds governments and public authorities accountable” (Sharma et. al., 2020, p. 1446).

The next chapter will outline the method used in this present study to investigate Brazilian journalists’ lived experiences covering COVID-19 and to answer questions about the roles mis- and disinformation have played in the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil.

### CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

As outlined in the earlier sections, Brazil has one of the highest rates of cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the world and has become internationally known for its handling of the pandemic. According to Our World in Data, Brazil's death toll is the second highest in deaths per million in the Americas, with 2,600 deaths per million. One of the factors that has contributed to this figure is the huge dissemination of mis- and disinformation about the virus via social media, messages that are oftentimes endorsed by elected officials. Also, the competing discourses from health authorities and the federal government about the seriousness of the disease have contributed to a failure to coordinate a unified response to the sanitary crisis.

In the face of these problems, this study has two main purposes. Firstly, it aims to understand and report the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. The second purpose of this research is to understand the roles mis- and disinformation have played in the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil and which strategies journalists have used to overcome this challenge.

To achieve these goals, this research conducted in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 journalists who have worked on the COVID-19 coverage in Brasília, Brazil's capital, during the outbreak. Qualitative interviews were chosen for this study because they have been identified as being able to get at the inner experience of participants and to determine how meanings are formed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) through the use of rigorous data collection and analysis methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Brinkmann (2013) writes: "such interviews are structured by the interviewer's *purpose* of obtaining knowledge; they revolve around *descriptions* provided by the interviewee; such descriptions are commonly about *life world phenomena* as experienced; and understanding the meaning of the descriptions involves some

kind of *interpretation*” (p. 25). Some characteristics in qualitative inquiry involve the use of a natural setting instead of a lab, the researcher as a key element in designing questions and collecting the data, and the use of complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After the interviews were transcribed, I carried out a thematic analysis adapted from a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). While this study does not do grounded theory, certain elements of its approach to data analysis were beneficial to this study, namely gathering rich data, asking questions, making comparisons throughout the coding process and conceptualizing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2006). The analytical process of this study was data-driven, i.e. came through the analysis itself, as in grounded theory. In other words, the analysis was “grounded” in data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon.

A core element in qualitative data analysis, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), consists of reducing the data into meaningful segments, through a process of coding, condensing the codes into broader categories (themes) and presenting the analysis in visual forms or discussion. In the end, “the final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44, in Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research is an attempt to document journalists’ experiences and it is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What have been the biggest challenges journalists have faced in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil?

**RQ2:** What strategies have journalists used to overcome these challenges?

**RQ3:** How has mis- and disinformation affected the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil?

**RQ4:** How do journalists perceive their roles in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil?

## **Sample**

To answer these questions, I interviewed 10 journalists who covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília. Brazil's capital was chosen as this study's main location, because the most influential and major media outlets in Brazil, both in terms of revenue and readership, have a bureau in Brasília or at least one journalist responsible for covering the political developments coming from the Presidential Palace, the National Congress and the Ministries; therefore, these journalists are "closer" to political current events and the democratic process in Brazil, and they are accustomed to following and investigating the government actions. Secondly, as this research focused on mis- and disinformation campaigns that were often spread by politicians, elected officials or members of the administration, it made sense to interview journalists whose day-to-day work concentrates on covering these political actors' routines and analysing what messages they have delivered.

Participant recruitment was first targeted toward journalists already known for political reporting and for their work during the COVID-19 coverage. Based on stories I read produced by these journalists during the pandemic and my personal knowledge of the Brazilian media environment,<sup>11</sup> I established a list of potential candidates from different newsrooms and media

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that I worked as an intern for a newsroom in Brasília for one year. Therefore, one journalist interviewed for this thesis is a colleague I had a chance to get to know better during my time as an intern. Even though we developed a friendship, I asked the questions professionally and our relationship as colleagues and friends didn't interfere in how the interview was conducted.

(print, broadcast and online) that have produced stories about the pandemic from Brasília. I looked for journalists responsible for producing stories about COVID-19 for the most traditional newspapers in Brasília. The recruitment also included snowball sampling (Stebbins, 2001), as some participants identified other journalists they knew who might be interested in participating in the project. Potential participants were sent an introductory email outlining the research project, what participation would entail, and why their participation would be beneficial to the research. I also contacted journalists via WhatsApp, as the messaging app is widely used by Brazilian journalists both for personal and professional reasons. See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for a copy of the recruitment message/email.

The final group of 10 participants consisted of political journalists and journalists responsible for the scientific and health coverage at newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, and online outlets located in Brasília. This coverage included following the actions and guidelines of the Health Ministry and sometimes reporting on the actions of president Bolsonaro. The participant pool was made up of four men and six women with experience in journalism that ranged between four and 16 years (see Table 1).

It is important to note that this study didn't target journalists working in fact-checking agencies—operations designed to verify information about a subject in order to attest for its accuracy—as it understands there is already a large body of literature about them and their techniques, but not as much about journalists working in mainstream news outlets and dealing with mis- and disinformation. This research is interested in outlining the strategies adopted by “typical” or “average” journalists (as in Shapiro et al., 2013) that aim to contain the spread of false information during a health emergency.

**Table 1 - Participant profiles**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Job Title</b>	<b>Years of working experience</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Type of medium</b>	<b>Area of coverage</b>
<b>Journalist 1</b>	Reporter	7	Male	Magazine	Politics
<b>Journalist 2</b>	Reporter	9	Female	Newspaper	Politics/Health Ministry
<b>Journalist 3</b>	Reporter	6	Female	Online outlet	Science reporting/Health Ministry
<b>Journalist 4</b>	Reporter	16	Female	Newspaper	Politics/Health Ministry
<b>Journalist 5</b>	Reporter	13	Male	Newspaper	Politics
<b>Journalist 6</b>	Reporter	5	Male	Newspaper	Politics/Health Ministry
<b>Journalist 7</b>	Producer	7	Female	TV	Politics/Science reporting/Health Ministry
<b>Journalist 8</b>	Reporter	5	Female	Radio	Science reporting/Health Ministry
<b>Journalist 9</b>	Reporter	4	Male	Online outlet	Politics

<b>Journalist 10</b>	Reporter	10	Female	Online outlet	Science reporting/Health Ministry
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One of the consequences of information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and disinformation campaigns led by authoritarian politicians is the deliberate targeting of journalists, especially women (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). As journalists in Brazil are experiencing high levels of harassment and violence, oftentimes coming from Bolsonaro and his supporters, this research protected the participants' identities as well as information about their workplaces. Therefore, once the audio recordings of participants were fully transcribed, all identifying information and elements that could connect participants to their statements were removed. This resulting thesis contains no identifiers that can connect them. Audio recordings were destroyed after they were transcribed and all the information gathered for this research will be destroyed five years after the end of this study.

The interviews took place between March 24 and May 11, 2021 and lasted between 40-110 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese and were recorded using the teleconferencing software Zoom. The next phase involved the transcription of the interviews and the translation of the main themes into English.

This study was approved by Concordia University's Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC), and all participants were asked to give informed consent before participating in the study (see Appendix 3 and Appendix 4).



## **Interview design**

The interview guide consisted of two main parts. After gathering the participant's basic information, I asked them general questions about the coverage of the pandemic in Brasília and how they saw their role during this coverage. I asked them to describe a typical day of the coverage in Brasília and to outline the biggest challenges they faced during this coverage. In the second part, I addressed questions related to mis- and disinformation and asked them to reflect on specific issues, for example, what, in their opinion, was motivating the creation and spread of disinformation about the coronavirus in Brazil and how it has affected their work. Finally, I asked them which strategies they used to overcome these challenges and finished with questions about the lessons learnt from the pandemic coverage (see Appendix 5 and Appendix 6). I followed a semi-structured design for the interviews with open-ended questions, which allowed me more leeway, compared to structured interviews, for follow-up questions and clarifications (Brinkmann, 2013).

## **Analysis**

After the interviews were translated, I reviewed the transcripts and completed a thematic analysis borrowing elements from grounded theory. The thematic analysis was adapted from Corbin and Strauss' (2008) approach, which involved constant comparison throughout the coding process. According to Charmaz (2006), "grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (p. 2). As previously mentioned, this study did not fully "do" grounded theory—its goal was not to generate a theory to be tested or to provide a framework for further research—but instead used grounded theory methods to carry out a data-driven thematic

analysis. A modified grounded theory approach was seen as appropriate due to its strength in moving beyond description of data to providing meaning and understanding of the studied experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Charmaz, 2006). Methods inspired by inductive analysis means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves, because the coding process doesn't try to "fit the data into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). This form of thematic analysis, then, is data-driven. A key component of analytic induction is coding, which can be "either concept-driven or data-driven," the latter implying that "the researcher starts out without codes, and develops them upon examining the material" (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 62).

The analysis process began with open coding, which consists of breaking down the data into manageable pieces, then interpreting, comparing and conceptualizing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews were then analysed using a modified grounded theory approach to facilitate the identification of patterns (themes) within the data. The data was organized according to themes that emerged from the interviews, and these themes were reviewed and analysed to see their relation to the initial codes and finally ordered into major themes.

Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, which consists of six steps, provides a simple and intuitive guideline that facilitated and complemented the analysis process of this study. The steps consist in: (1) familiarizing yourself with your data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Their approach "provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

With the goal of producing knowledge about journalists' routines, experiences and practices in mind, my intention was to obtain the journalists' descriptions about their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, as well as the challenges they have faced related to campaigns and movements denying the seriousness of the disease promoted in social media and often times spread by elected lawmakers and members of the government. In the end, my intention was to provide an in-depth picture of the journalists' experiences during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília, the description of methods used to contain the spread of false information in this setting, complement it with a thematic data analysis organized according to topics that emerged during the interviews and conclude with lessons learned from these themes.

Journalists' accounts and the political and scientific reporting around the pandemic in Brasília provided a robust data source to analyse the consequences of mis- and disinformation and its impacts in the response to a sanitary crisis of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's findings are presented in the next chapter, with a discussion following in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS**

Journalists in Brazil have faced unprecedented challenges during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, from disinformation campaigns, often promoted by elected officials, to personal attacks and mental health concerns. The importance of investigating and reporting their experiences is what motivated this study. This section presents the themes that emerged from the interviews with journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília. The interviews were held between March 24 and May 11, 2021, around one year after the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic, which allowed journalists to reflect on some issues and describe different challenges over time.

Following a thematic analysis inspired by a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) (see Chapter 3 for a full description of this research's methodological approach), five main themes emerged from interview data: (1) pandemic and work-related challenges, (2) access to information and relationship with the government, (3) mis- and disinformation, (4) journalists' perceived roles, and (5) strategies used to overcome challenges. This chapter will present the main findings from the interviews with journalists. A discussion about these themes will follow in the next chapter.

### **Theme 1: Pandemic and work-related challenges**

Journalists interviewed for this study described significant challenges during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília. The challenges varied from work-related problems, such as having to adapt to teleworking and learning how to deal with the technical and scientific information, to more personal challenges associated with mental health issues. Sometimes, they expressed fear of contracting the virus, especially in situations where other people weren't using

masks, for example during protests organized by Bolsonaro's supporters. Outlining the challenges experienced by journalists in Brazil is important to illuminate potential solutions to obstacles they encountered on the job.

*The "new virus": understanding the disease*

With COVID-19's spread worldwide, it has become the most discussed topic in news media, on the internet and in everyday conversations. The novel coronavirus was a new subject and many journalists with no previous experience in science and health coverage were assigned to report on COVID-19 developments. As a result, journalists interviewed for this study expressed concerns about understanding the disease, learning technical terms and "translating" them to the public. "The first problem, in the beginning, was a general lack of information, because even the scientists had doubts on how to handle this. And we needed to know as much as possible because there was a lot of misinformation during this period," said Journalist 1, who works for a news and analysis magazine and covers politics.

Over the past year and a half, participating journalists reported that the challenges have evolved. In the beginning, there were doubts about how COVID-19 spread, but as of the second half of 2020, journalists had to learn new things, for example how vaccines were developed. Journalist 3, who works for an online news outlet, said that it took her longer to write the first stories related to the novel coronavirus, because the information was new and "everybody was lost." "It was a challenge understanding in detail how the scientific process works. How do vaccines work? How do drugs work? Why is it more difficult to produce drugs for viruses? All details like that. As I didn't cover health or science before, it wasn't easy" (Journalist 3). For this reason, Journalist 10 mentioned that it makes a difference if newsrooms have journalists specialized in

health and science. “It is a very specific vocabulary, and most studies are in English. So you have to master the scientific language in English and understand all the doctors’ jargon.” Other journalists expressed the same concern. It became evident that newsrooms in Brasília weren’t prepared to deal with this new information.

### *Reporting from home*

As many other professionals, journalists had to adapt to the new reality of teleworking imposed by COVID-19. Although there was no national lockdown in Brazil, the governor of the Federal District, Ibaneis Rocha—in which Brasília is located—imposed measures to curb the spread of the virus in March 2020, closing schools, bars, restaurants and other non-essential services. Journalists interviewed for this study said their newsrooms tried to adopt those measures, allowing their employees to work from home whenever possible or providing protective equipment to journalists who had to report from the field. While some journalists were allowed to work from home, others continued to go in person to press conferences, to follow the president, or to cover other events. Participants who cover politics had to go out either to follow the president in some event or to go to the Planalto Palace, where the president works because the president and most of his staff continued to work in person. Others eventually had to do an interview in person because they wanted to obtain important information and judged that the risk of contracting the virus wasn’t high. In some cases, they had to go out following requests from their bosses.

Most interviewees said they were still working from home, one year after the restrictions in Brasília were first imposed. For journalists in Brasília, who were accustomed to having close contact with sources, one of the difficulties described was the challenge to build trust

relationships with new sources, especially for political reporters. Journalist 4, who has been working from home for over a year, said: “In normal times, it is already difficult to build a trust relationship with new sources to cover what happens behind the scenes. During a pandemic, the situation is even more difficult. You don’t have the opportunity to look the person in the eye, introduce yourself after a press conference, or try and get their phone number.”

Other journalists shared the same problem but noted that the change in staff and ministers during the crisis in the Ministry of Health added to the problem. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Brazil has had four Ministers of Health during the pandemic, and often these changes also meant a change of staff in the PR and communication teams, and in second-level secretaries, who journalists rely on for information, on and off-the-records comments or ask for clarification on some issue.

Journalist 8 echoed the sentiment: “We started to cover the pandemic from home, so we don’t know these people [from the Health Ministry] personally. Even though I participate every day in the press conference via YouTube, the secretary doesn’t know me.” The journalist, who works at a radio station, also said she had to rely on listeners to send them stories, because they avoided going to risky places during the pandemic. “We receive a lot of stories from the listeners, from normal people. The bosses don’t want us to go to crowded places, like hospitals, because it’s dangerous for us. So we’re depending on people, instead of going there to see what’s going on.” (Journalist 8) She described it as a problem because as a journalist, she used to report from the field, but now she “depends on others” to produce stories.

Besides this, remote work for these journalists also meant more hours working. One journalist said she works between 14 and 16 hours on some days. Another journalist said: “I joke, but it’s true. I wake up working on this coverage and I go to sleep doing this coverage. With WhatsApp, there is no longer a barrier. Sources send me messages any time, and so do my bosses”

(Journalist 2). Interviewees also shared more “general” challenges related to teleworking, such as difficulty focusing, problems with internet connection and challenges in coping with social isolation.

Despite this challenge, Journalist 1 highlighted the importance of adaptation for a reporter: “The notion that we, as reporters, have to adapt has become very palpable for me. If I’m going to stay at home for a year, I’ll find a way to do my job, to tell good stories, and look for scoops. If the internet is not working, we’ll find a way. Adaptation for a reporter is almost natural.”

### *Risks and fear of the disease*

Moving towards more personal challenges, journalists expressed fear of putting themselves at risk and contracting the virus. The group interviewed for this study consisted of political journalists and journalists responsible for scientific coverage in Brasília, which included following the actions and guidelines of the Health Ministry and sometimes reporting on the actions of the president. Therefore, the group reported more on national news rather than local news, like schools, hospitals or local issues. Because they didn’t have to report on local issues, most of them were able to work from home. Still, all of them admitted having to go out at least one time to do an interview, while others had to take risks more often to cover events or report from the field.

Journalist 7, a TV producer, said her routine hasn’t changed much with the pandemic, as she continues to go to the newsroom, to the Health Ministry or other places to report. She said the outlet she works for provides their reporters personal protective equipment (PPE) and has adopted social distancing measures for the workplace. Still, she said her number one fear was contracting the virus, because journalists are “on the front line.” She recalled that as the



country's capital, Brasília is a focus of COVID-19 transmission, since many politicians and business people travel from their home states to Brasília every week. Journalist 2 echoed this sentiment: "Here in Brasília, as we cover the government, we are not covering the riskiest situation, which is hospitals. But I had to go out several times to go to press conferences with a hundred people gathered."

Similarly, Journalist 5, a political reporter who works for a print newspaper, explained that he continued to follow the government's day-to-day actions from the Planalto Palace, where the president works, and accompanied Bolsonaro when he went to events or mass gatherings.

According to this journalist, only the press corps wears masks inside the Planalto Palace, and "journalists had to expose themselves a lot because of the president's behavior" (Journalist 5), as Bolsonaro often promotes gatherings and doesn't wear masks. A report from *O Estado de S. Paulo*,<sup>12</sup> that used data from the Planalto Palace's image bank showed that over 440 days of the pandemic, Bolsonaro traveled to 76 cities around the country, instigating 99 mass gatherings. For seven out of 10 of those events, or 73%, he didn't wear a mask. In many cases, journalists follow the president during these events and are in close proximity with him and his supporters.

In other situations, journalists are exposed not only because of the president's attitude, but also because of his supporters. Journalist 7, who reports on the Health Ministry, said a group of Bolsonaro's supporters sometimes go to the Ministry door to harass journalists, and call them "garbage," "rubbish" and "sellout media," an attitude that Bolsonaro himself reinforces.

Journalist 7 remembered: "We've left because of that, because people started screaming very close to us without a mask, and that's a risk, right?"

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<sup>12</sup> "Eventos de Bolsonaro durante a pandemia." *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Available at: <https://arte.estadao.com.br/politica/2021/06/deslocamentos-jair-bolsonaro-pandemia/>

Other journalists had to go out less often, but also reported fear of contracting COVID-19, even though they take protective measures such as wearing masks, maintaining distance and using alcohol sanitizers.

### *Mental health*

Finally, a common experience cited by journalists was the impact dealing with the coverage of the pandemic has had on their mental health. Most journalists described a routine of stress and an intense workload, which resulted in a state of burnout for many. Journalists also mentioned the burden of reporting and writing about death and the impacts of COVID-19 on a daily basis, as well as the challenges of social isolation. The situation in Brazil as one of the worst countries hit by the pandemic also added to these problems. Journalist 2 expressed the feeling: “I think journalists have a greater dimension of the tragedy, because there are a lot of things that we learn, but we can’t publish, either because we cannot prove it to write a story, or because the space in the newspaper is limited. But we, as human beings, know that.” She continued saying the routine is very intense and she “can’t get rid of the news like other people do,” because if she took a break and did not keep track of the coverage on weekends, for example, she would be lost when she’d return to her job on Monday.

Journalist 8 works at a radio station and is responsible for reporting the daily number of cases and deaths. She shared a story about when Brazil registered the first record in the number of COVID-19 deaths in 2021: “I’ve been reporting coronavirus every day since March of last year. [...] When we registered the first record of this year, which was the highest number of deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, I thought I wouldn’t be able to go live on the radio. I stayed in shock for a while, and I remember I just practiced. I don’t usually practice, but on that day, I

repeated the text several times, because if I hadn't practiced, I think I would have cried on air." Because the number of deaths is so high, journalists tried to humanize the stories, talking to people who lost relatives to COVID-19. Journalist 8 said that talking to relatives who have lost someone was a "horrible experience."

Interviewees also felt frustrated because of the amount of misinformation spread in Brazil and the difficulties in convincing people about the severity of the disease or to change behaviors and follow protective measures. Journalists 2 and 9 said they couldn't convince some of their own family members to believe in what they were writing instead of the misinformation that was being circulated on social media and WhatsApp. "I'm a journalist and I feel a crisis of credibility within my family. It's horrible," said Journalist 2.

## **Theme 2: Access to information and relationship with the government**

In addition to the general pandemic-related work challenges summarized previously, journalists described the difficulty in accessing information as a huge obstacle during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília. When asked about the biggest challenges they face, a majority of journalists independently stated the difficulty in accessing information from the Health Minister and the government in general. Journalist 3 stated: "I think there was a huge problem regarding access to public information from the Health Ministry. I worked for two outlets that covered the pandemic nationally. Sometimes we wanted a national overview and we didn't have this centralized information. The ministry's data was either too late or incomplete." Other interviewees expressed the same problems. Journalist 4 said that very basic data about the pandemic could be made available if there was "transparent communication and good will" from the Health Ministry. According to Journalist 6, who works for a print newspaper, there was a

“deliberate blocking” of data. “The government has placed barriers to access data that were previously more easily accessed. For example, the Access to Information Law, which is something I use a lot... the answers denying access to the information are more and more frequent, and more and more creative” (Journalist 6). As an example, he said he always asks for access to the full process, but the ministry denied it once, saying he could not ask for documents “generally” and that he had to be “more specific.”

### *Information blocking*

During the interviews, journalists described barriers to accessing information in general through the Health Ministry’s press office and sometimes via Brazil’s Access to Information (ATI) law. At times, journalists’ requests for official comments on their stories were denied or simply ignored. On other occasions the ministry’s press office gave vague, generic answers that didn’t respond to what the journalist asked for. “If the press office answered one out of 10 requests I asked for, I’m lucky. In general, they gave us generic statements that didn’t respond to what I asked,” said Journalist 2. According to Journalist 10, a health reporter, they gave “generic answers” because they are scared of the press and didn’t want to “implicate themselves.” Journalists 2 and 6 argue that authorities didn’t want to create a “negative agenda” for the government and for president Bolsonaro.

Many journalists recalled a specific episode of data blackout, when the Health Ministry removed data from its official website with the total number of confirmed cases and the overall COVID-19 death toll in June 2020. Prior to this, the ministry used to release the number of new cases and deaths every day around 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., but it started delaying the release of the figures to around 10 p.m. When asked by journalists about the change, Bolsonaro said, laughing: “No more

stories on *Jornal Nacional*,” mentioning TV Globo’s evening news broadcast, the most watched news program in the country. *Jornal Nacional* airs at 8:30 p.m. and it usually ends around 9 or 9:30 p.m., so the switch to 10 p.m. meant that the numbers for each day would not be broadcast on the leading news program in Brazil. On the same night, the official government platform that published COVID-19 statistics was taken down and when it came back the next day, it didn’t show the cumulative number of deaths and cases in Brazil. Instead, it only displayed the number of deaths and cases for the previous 24 hours. It also highlighted the number of “recovered cases,” as the government was insisting it was more important to report on the number of Brazilians who had recovered from the disease, instead of the ones who died. When the new website went live, Bolsonaro went to his Twitter account to say “the cumulative data does not reflect the moment the country is in.” The Supreme Court later ordered the government to resume the publication of the full numbers, but journalists felt they could no longer rely exclusively on the data coming from the ministry. Therefore, Brazil’s biggest media companies—including the newspapers *Folha de S.Paulo*, *Estadão* and *O Globo*, and the online outlets G1 and UOL—formed a consortium to collect the daily number of cases and deaths directly from State Health Secretaries and release it to the public. Since then, the consortium has been releasing the daily number of positive cases, deaths and now they are also collecting vaccination data. With the numbers, they’re also publishing statistics, such as the 14-day-moving average, which is widely used by scientists to understand how the virus spreads through the country. As Journalist 5 put it: “This is an absolutely non-transparent government, especially regarding COVID-19. That’s why media companies had to create a consortium.”

### *Relationship with the government*

A clear message coming from the media and government authorities is part of a disaster and sanitary crisis response. For this to happen, journalists and government authorities have to collaborate in order to improve their relationship. Veil (2012) points out that when journalists and emergency managers develop a stronger trust relationship, the quality of information delivered to the public during a disaster response improves. In the same way, Klemm et al. (2017) identified that, during health emergencies, journalists tend to assume a more ‘cooperative’ attitude towards authorities since they usually share the same goals. However, according to the journalists interviewed for this research, the opposite happened in Brasília. Journalist 2, who works for a print newspaper and covers the Health Ministry, struggled to get access to authorities because staff from the ministry “don’t give interviews, which was a common practice during previous administrations.” She attributes the difficulty in getting information to Bolsonaro’s ‘anti-system’ attitude, which encourages members of his administration to act in the same way. Since the campaign, Bolsonaro has adopted the posture of an “outsider,” someone who wouldn’t do “traditional politics,” even though he had been a congressman for 27 years. The posture includes speaking to the public directly via social media, instead of giving interviews to journalists or participating in debates. Journalist 2 summarized this issue: “They don’t understand that this [talking to the press] is part of the job of a public servant, a politician or an authority placed in charge. This government thinks it doesn’t owe the press anything, they don’t have a republican responsibility” (Journalist 2). Journalist 5, a political reporter who covers the presidency, says the administration doesn’t respond to journalists’ requests for comments as a strategy. “Their logic is reversed. They let the story out to publicly deny it and try to take away the credibility of the press” (Journalist 5). Even though the relationship between journalists and

Bolsonaro's administration was already problematic, during the pandemic it resulted in leaving journalists in the dark. Journalist 2 illustrated the challenge:

“If I were to rely on the official sources for this coverage, we wouldn't do journalism in Brazil, because it's impossible. I know that journalism is much more than relying on the official version, but the official version is also important, especially in this moment when we need the position of authorities. We need to know what their policy is to handle the pandemic.” (Journalist 2)

The reports from the interviewees also show that the relationship between journalists and government authorities from the Health Ministry and the Planalto Palace worsened over time. Journalist 4, for example, recognized that there was more information available in the beginning of the pandemic, especially during the administration of the first Health Minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta. However, as time passed, there was an attempt to suppress data, especially when the army general Eduardo Pazuello was in charge. The majority of interviewees said the relationship with authorities from the Health Ministry was worse during general Pazuello's administration. The data blackout episode also happened weeks after Pazuello was appointed interim minister. Journalist 4 said that it is not possible to know if it is a “deliberate choice of the government or a lack of an active press office,” but either way, the result was more barriers for journalists to report properly during the pandemic. Participants described having to put in twice the amount of energy to get the information they needed to produce stories, because they cannot count on the government. While it is not possible to prove that the barriers to access to information were a deliberate choice of the government, some evidence supports this conclusion. As previously mentioned, Bolsonaro insisted on dismissing the COVID-19 crisis as a “little flu” that was “potentialized by the media.” On different occasions, Bolsonaro blamed the media for reporting on the tragedy, the number of deaths and “ignoring the lives that were saved.” Journalists also described being mocked by authorities when they asked questions. This posture of denying the

seriousness of the disease has been echoed in the administration, according to the reports of journalists interviewed for this research.

Instead of improving the relationship with journalists, Bolsonaro and his cabinet's attitude towards the media led to a discrediting of the Health Ministry, in the eyes of many participants. More than one journalist interviewed for this study said they couldn't trust the ministry, nor the data it provided. Journalist 7 said: "We totally ignore the ministry. Today, the only data we consider from the ministry is the distribution of vaccines [because it's centralized there]. But the number of infected people, cases, deaths, number of vaccinated people—we use none of their numbers because they are very outdated." As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, a strategy journalists have been using is to search for other sources of information, talk with experts and rely on data coming from other sources, such as the media consortium, specialists, universities, and local state governments.

#### *Access to Information Law*

To overcome the barriers of obtaining information directly from the press office, many journalists interviewed requested information using the Access to Information Law (*Lei de Acesso à Informação* or LAI, in Portuguese). Brazil's freedom of information law came into force in 2012. Through this law, citizens can request access to any public information produced or held by the bodies and entities of the Public Administration at all federal, state and municipal levels.<sup>13</sup> Requests can be made by any citizen, for any purpose and for free. The government is required to respond to ATI requests within 20 days, a period that can be extended for another 10 days, upon express justification. The law only allows restrictions on access to information

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<sup>13</sup> Governo Federal. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/acessoainformacao/pt-br>



classified as secret for reasons of security or public health, or to personal information, of which confidentiality guarantees the right to privacy (Ventura, 2013).

Bolsonaro tried at least twice to change Brazil's access to information law. In January 2019, during the first month of his presidency, the government created a decree to expand the authority to classify public information as 'secret' and 'top secret' to a wide range of public officials. In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Bolsonaro signed a measure to suspend the deadline for public authorities to respond to ATI requests and forbid appeals in cases of denied requests while the country was in a "state of calamity," which was approved by the Congress in March 2020 due to the pandemic. On both occasions, he was forced to suspend the measures.

During the coverage of the pandemic, many journalists interviewed for this study said they relied on the access to information law to collect data for a story, to investigate the government actions and to produce good-quality journalism. Journalist 6 said he files access to information requests very often and is accustomed with the system, because he has used it since he was a journalism student. According to him, it was easier to have access to documents from the government before the pandemic. "In the pandemic, you have way more denials of this type of information. The excuses [for denying it] are the most varied" (Journalist 6). According to him, the same type of data he had access to in the beginning of the pandemic was denied a few months later. For example, he said he always asks for access to the full documents of a process. But when he asked for a process one time, the answer denying it said he could not ask for access "generally." Another journalist said the ministry delays answers saying it "demands additional efforts," but this is usually an excuse not to provide access.

When the information is denied, the person who made the request can appeal or make a complaint, but it can take time and jeopardize the timing of the story. Journalist 7 said she makes at least 10 ATI requests every month to receive one answer back. As it happens with information requested from the press office, some responses to ATI requests don't actually answer the questions journalists have asked. According to Journalist 7, they answer "one thing that won't help [the story] and the rest they don't respond to. In short, it's a breach of law" (Journalist 7). She said she would lose too much time if she complained every time she didn't receive a positive response, so she usually moves forward with other stories instead.

Both journalists filed ATI requests with the Health Ministry and said the justifications for denying information are becoming "more creative." More research in this area is needed to assess the level at which the government is delaying and denying access, but most journalists who covered the pandemic in Brasília interviewed for this study recalled situations in which their ATI requests were denied or incomplete.

Besides the challenges described by these journalists, most of them also cited examples of good stories they were able to write using the ATI law, which reinforces the importance of freedom of information laws to the quality of Brazil's news media environment and its democracy.

Whenever he is successful in receiving a document or information through an ATI request, Journalist 1 makes sure to include in the story that "the information was obtained using the Access to Information Law (LAI)." He explains:

"It's not only in the name of transparency, but also for those who are not journalists to know. It's almost a way to promote this law. This government has tried two or three times very strongly to weaken the LAI and the STF [the Supreme Court] overthrew it. So it's important for people to know that this law is used every day to hunt down public documents" (Journalist 1)

### **Theme 3: Mis- and disinformation**

One of the questions this research set out to answer was how mis- and disinformation has affected the coverage of COVID-19 in Brazil from the perspectives of journalists responsible for this coverage. Due to the many reports about Brazil's handling of the pandemic, it was anticipated that the journalists would have strongly felt the impacts of mis- and disinformation in their work. Indeed, Journalist 3 expressed that “disinformation has set the agenda.” All participants spoke about how mis- and disinformation has had a huge impact on their work, and many expressed concerns about the consequences of false or distorted stories during a global health emergency, as they can lead people to get sick and even die.

Mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 has not just been a problem in Brazil. According to the ICFJ and Tow Center for Digital Journalism global survey, over 80% of participating journalists reported encountering COVID-19 related dis/misinformation at least once a week. According to the survey, the biggest source of mis- and disinformation came from regular citizens, but political leaders and elected officials were in second (Posetti et al., 2020). Journalist 10, a health reporter, said Brazil “imported” some rumours and misinformation from other countries, including the United States and India. “I wrote a story about this [mis/disinformation trends in other countries], which was a trend in several countries. It wasn't just in Brazil, but ‘fake news’<sup>14</sup> increased during the pandemic. [...] I think it is a global phenomenon and we try to gradually dismantle it” (Journalist 10). But there were also “fake news” stories created and adapted to the Brazilian context.

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<sup>14</sup> This participant uses “fake news” here to refer to false or misleading information presented as a news story.

During the interviews for this study, participants demonstrated concerns about the huge amount of disinformation circulating on social media, especially on WhatsApp. But, the biggest challenge for journalists working in Brasília was dealing with the misinformation coming from the government and authorities, including the president. Every journalist interviewed as part of this study said the government sent conflicting information about the disease, which undermined the media's ability to deliver a clear message to the public. However, journalists also criticized the Brazilian news media itself, in a way offering a mea culpa, for giving space to authorities who denied the seriousness of the disease, which contributed to the cacophony of information related to COVID-19 in Brazil. Journalist 5, for example, said: "The Brazilian press, I think, took a bit of the same approach the American press did at the beginning of the Trump administration. We had a lot of trouble writing 'The president lied.' This was very problematic because the press published a lot of false information without providing the counterpoint, or making it too late."

### *Rumours and misinformation*

Regular citizens play a role in spreading rumours and misinformation, especially in situations of fear and uncertainty (Silverman, 2014). Journalist 3 said disinformation has set the agenda in Brazil, because she and her colleagues had to write stories debunking rumours that were circulating on WhatsApp groups. Journalist 10, who had covered health and science before the pandemic, wrote several stories debunking rumours and so-called "fake news." To do so, she talked to specialists or relied on the Health Ministry's official website, which had a section dedicated to answering questions from the public. "Fake news is usually a very messed-up thing, right? It's very clear that it's fake, but people still tend to believe it, so we checked it out" (Journalist 10). For example, she wrote stories debunking that oranges and other "miraculous substances" cured COVID-19.

Journalist 4 believes “fake news” is dangerous, because it’s often more compelling to the public than legitimate reporting. “I think the problem with ‘fake news’ is that it is always much more interesting. [...] It is easier for people to believe that a medicine that has been produced in Brazil for so long [the case of the antimalarial drug chloroquine] will be effective in helping us in the biggest pandemic in over a century” (Journalist 4). Journalist 3 echoed this opinion, saying that people believe in rumours and misinformation because “it is difficult to deal with relatives and friends who died or were left with sequelae, or with the person’s own fear of being contaminated... it’s easier to believe that such a medicine will work.” According to this view, there’s a psychology to disinformation, in which “lies” are more “comfortable” to believe in than reality, especially when reality looks grim.

Journalist 10 said most “fake news” stories, such as promoting oranges are a cure, seem harmless, but they’re not. “From the moment that a lot of people believe in them, they will start to follow them. And then the situation only gets worse.” She continued: “For me, honestly, fake news about health is the worst kind of fake news, because it can lead a person to die. [...] I think it is a total and complete lack of respect for others. I argue with everyone who sends me fake news on WhatsApp, because I think it's really absurd” (Journalist 10). Other journalists expressed the same feeling. Journalist 4 said the 2018 elections were a milestone for mis- and disinformation in Brazil, but the pandemic now “brings a sense of greater responsibility [for journalists] to inform correctly” (Journalist 4).

According to Journalist 1, “ordinary people” create and share fake news because “they are encouraged every day by the president, his sons, by ministers, by public officers. They follow their examples, and because authorities lie” (Journalist 1). Other journalists shared the same opinion. As the pandemic was highly politicized in Brazil, there’s also a political component in

the spread of mis- and disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as will be discussed in the next section.

### *The government as a source of misinformation*

Besides the rumours circulating on WhatsApp, journalists reported concerns about conflicting information and sometimes misleading content coming from authorities such as government leaders and elected officials. Participants said they couldn't count on the government to help them in delivering a clear message and fighting disinformation about the pandemic. On the contrary, the government, in particular president Bolsonaro's statements, were a huge source of misinformation, sometimes using the government structure to misguide the public. As a result, participants couldn't trust everything the government said, in the same way they couldn't trust the Health Ministry to provide access to information. The cacophony of conflicting information produced by the government has hampered journalists' ability to inform the public and to reach people who were not willing to distrust the president.

Journalist 6 described: "Misinformation was always present and, for example, the government produced documents with misinformation. The government created a guideline, through a Health Ministry's note, for the use of chloroquine for the first days of coronavirus symptoms. So you're always dealing with this type of information; it's a statement, an official guidance from the Health Ministry. How am I going to report this?" (Journalist 6). He was referring specifically to an informative memo<sup>15</sup> released by the Health Ministry in May 2020 that broadened the use of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, allowing doctors to prescribe the medicines for patients with early and mild symptoms of COVID-19. The ministry has responded to the critics by saying

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<sup>15</sup> Ministério da Saúde. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/ministerio-da-saude-divulga-diretrizes-para-tratamento-medicamentoso-de-pacientes>

the guidance gives doctors autonomy to prescribe the medicines, and therefore it's not an official recommendation, but just "guidance." Yet, Bolsonaro himself said he took hydroxychloroquine and the antibiotic azithromycin when he tested positive for COVID-19. When the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) revoked the emergency authorization to use hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine to treat COVID-19 in the U.S. or when the WHO suspended the clinical trials with the drugs because they didn't find evidence they reduced mortality of hospitalised patients, Brazil's Health Ministry didn't revoke its "guidance." Participants said it was a challenge to deal with this conflicting information coming from the WHO and scientific community versus the Brazilian Health Ministry. Journalist 10, when asked about this conflict, said that the Health Ministry would say the "WHO had to review their opinion" (Journalist 10).

As a consequence, journalists covering COVID-19 say they wasted time on the discussion about chloroquine and other misinformation stories. As Journalist 4 put it: "I think we wasted a lot of time saying, for example, repeatedly that chloroquine has no proven efficacy. Newspapers waste time having to reiterate this. When an authority, whether the president or another person, passes on false information, or information out of context, it is still a job that could have been avoided." She continued: "We wasted energy that didn't have to be wasted if people, especially authorities, had more responsibility when talking about something so serious" (Journalist 4). Likewise, Journalist 8 said that the government's attitude to spread misinformation made journalists go back to discussing the basics. "This action by the Health Ministry to go against the information is very serious and we have to do a story defending the basics. I had to do the story defending vaccination" (Journalist 8). Other participants said they emphasized in every article they wrote about chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine that "these drugs have no proven efficacy in treating COVID-19."

Moreover, participants said the government used official channels, such as the government's official Twitter account and official TV broadcaster, to misguide the public. One example was the campaign "Brazil Cannot Stop," launched on the Communication Secretariat of the Presidency's official Twitter account. The campaign called for the end of social isolation and the reopening of businesses, contradicting the recommendations of the Brazilian Health Ministry, led by Luiz Henrique Mandetta at the time, and the WHO (Ricard and Medeiros, 2020). The post was later deleted and, in a statement, the government said the campaign never existed and wasn't published on any official channel. Journalist 2 said the strategy of denying something they said in the past, even when there's proof, is part of the government's 'anti-politics' attitude. "It's like [George Orwell's] 1984's Ministry of Truth. It's crazy!" (Journalist 2).

A huge part of the misinformation about COVID-19 spreading in the country has come directly from Bolsonaro himself. Fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos* identified more than 1,700 false or inaccurate statements about COVID-19 made by Bolsonaro since the beginning of the pandemic.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, Bolsonaro told the population not to follow physical distancing orders, put doubts on the efficiency of masks to curb the virus spread and promoted the use of unproven drugs as a treatment for COVID-19. Bolsonaro's attitude was seen as dangerous because of his ability to mobilize the public. He's still popular in Brazil even though his popularity has been falling, as recent surveys show,<sup>17</sup> but he is still capable of mobilizing large groups.

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<sup>16</sup> Available at: <https://www.aosfatos.org/todas-as-declara%C3%A7%C3%B5es-de-bolsonaro/>

<sup>17</sup> According to Datafolha Institute, 51% of Brazilians disapproved of Bolsonaro in July 2021, up from 45% in the previous poll in May and the highest since he took office in January 2019. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazils-bolsonaro-disapproval-rating-rises-all-time-high-poll-2021-07-08/>



According to Journalist 1, who works for a magazine and covers politics, misinformation has become a political issue. “Bolsonaro always has to find a place for himself in the debate, something for him to be against, even if there’s nothing to do with politics” (Journalist 1). In his opinion, the government “took a side” in this pandemic and bet on denying the crisis. As a result, the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil became highly politicized, something which was echoed in society. Journalist 9 explained that those who support the president also support the use of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, while those who do not support him also don’t support the use of these medicines; they think it is a matter of opinion. “We were taken by this. I think we didn’t fulfill the role of informing people 100%, because everything was so fast and polarization was so strong that there was no time to be skeptical” (Journalist 9).

### *Mea culpa*

During the interviews, some participants said the Brazilian press wasn’t just a victim of misinformation, but in some cases was also responsible for problems in the coverage, which helped in the dissemination of rumours and misinformation. Journalist 5 said the press helped to spread misinformation especially in the beginning of the pandemic, when the information was changing and confusing. “From the moment you write that the president defends chloroquine as a treatment, a lot of people read that and said: ‘if the president said it, it should work, then I’ll buy it’” (Journalist 5). It’s a challenge, but Journalist 5 believes the press has a responsibility in reporting the speech of Bolsonaro and other authorities when they spread misinformation. In his case, his newspaper allows him to write “the president lied,” but that’s not the case with all outlets, as they fear losing advertisers and readers.

Some participants said the media “gave space” to deniers and people who didn’t believe in the gravity of the disease to contrast or “balance” the information from scientists. Journalist 6 reflected on this: “I think the press, in general, was wrong to give too much space to deniers, sometimes even trying to reduce some very serious issues to a political dispute, you know?”

Journalist 9 said that some journalists and media companies became “lost in the political fight” around COVID-19, reverberating what politicians were saying, which increased polarization.

Journalist 3 agreed with this vision and criticized what she called the “scoop in health journalism.” According to this view, reporting on science with a political bias helped in increasing polarization in Brazil, which, in turn, made it more difficult for journalists to reach supporters of the president. “What we can do is check all the information very carefully and understand the motivation of the person who is giving you that information. In some cases, it’s better to miss a scoop than to be irresponsible” (Journalist 3).

#### **Theme 4: Journalists’ perceived roles**

In addition to discussing the myriad of difficulties journalists have faced during the coverage of COVID-19 in Brasília, this study wanted to investigate how journalists perceived their roles amid this crisis, and if these perceptions have changed since the start of the pandemic. Overall, participants considered their work very important and said they feel more committed and engaged with journalism as a result of their experiences covering COVID-19. At the same time, many journalists felt exhausted because of the challenges imposed by this coverage and overwhelmed by constant attacks coming from some groups, such as the president and his supporters. Journalist 9 described the feeling: “We had to stay in the trenches to help the rest of the crowd, to try to bring some light. I think we play a role to some extent. But it was difficult,

because you are refuted or contradicted 100% of the time. There's no recognition for the work we do" (Journalist 9). Journalist 2 echoed the sentiment:

I always had a very romantic view of journalism, and viewed journalists as superheroes. But I'm in a very big internal debate regarding this [...] I feel that my role is fundamental at this moment, because if we lived this moment in an environment of disinformation, I think the damage will be much greater. As such, I am aware of how important my role is at this moment, but at the same time I feel frustrated because I don't think society thinks that way. (Journalist 2)

Despite the challenge, attacks and feelings of burnout, all participants said they felt a greater sense of responsibility, because they were reporting during a public health emergency. For most, it was the most important experience of their career. Journalist 5 said: "I think journalism has a role in this crisis. Of course we do not have the same role as nurses and frontline workers, but I think that this work of giving information and dismantling disinformation, I think we're helping to save lives. I think it gives a new meaning to the profession" (Journalist 5).

Given that the biggest challenges journalists in Brasília faced were related to the difficult relationship with the government and many leaders and officials acting as a source of mis- and disinformation, one of the most important roles described by the participants was providing a public service. Participants expressed that providing a public service meant explaining the disease and its developments and contrasting this with the official version coming from the government. Meanwhile, because the pandemic was highly politicized, it was possible to identify a trend in the interviews: political journalists tended to assume a watchdog role (Hanitzsch, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) while journalists who specialized in science and health reporting were more concerned about educating the audience about the virus. Journalists assuming the watchdog role "articulate their sceptical and critical attitude towards the government and business elites" (Hanitzsch, 2011) and act "as an independent monitor of power"

(Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Therefore, participants who assumed this attitude wanted to shed light on the problems of the government in handling the pandemic and on Bolsonaro's denialism. On the other hand, journalists who covered health and science were more concerned about reaching and accurately informing as many people as possible—including Bolsonaro's supporters. As a result, these journalists tended to focus more on stories about the virus and less on the political problems.

### *Essential service*

Due to the problems outlined earlier related to the government acting as a misinformation source, blocking access to information and sending conflicting messages to the public, most participants viewed their role as providing a public service. Journalist 1, for example, said there was an increase in audience engagement, because some people realized journalism was a “life-saving service, an essential service.” Public service-oriented stories included those explaining the disease and its symptoms, what the best measures to curb the spread of the virus are, and how vaccines work. In a sense, these journalists understood their work almost as educational. Journalist 10, for example, said she wrote stories answering questions people had in a didactic way. According to her, the most-read stories in the beginning of the pandemic were stories with a question in the title and the answers in the text.

Moreover, providing a service in an environment of disinformation also meant being a counterpoint to the government and contrasting with the “official source” that omitted information and told a different story. As Journalist 1 sarcastically said: “According to the official report, it seems that we are living in New Zealand, it seems that there is no COVID-19, there is nothing” (Journalist 1). Journalist 6 went further: “I think the press has had a very

important role in Brazil because the government omitted information during the pandemic, tried to black out the number of deaths and COVID-19 cases in the past, tried to make changes in the way they disclose data, and never made a clear, objective campaign about social distancing” (Journalist 6). Journalist 8 added: “People cannot rely exclusively on the ministry, you know? When the population relied only on the ministry, the ministry said it would no longer deliver the data” (Journalist 8).

The huge amount of disinformation circulating in the country also motivated participants to do a better job. “We have a very important role precisely because before, fake news influenced elections in Brazil; now, fake news is killing people. People who are guided by misinformation are not taking care of themselves and they are dying” (Journalist 5). Journalist 8 echoed the sentiment: “What motivates me is, there is no other way but the truth. Because the other way is wrong; it is the way of disinformation.” (Journalist 8).

### *Motivations*

When talking about their roles in this coverage, participants shared mixed feelings. They feel drained because of the challenges and adversities, but they also expressed a greater sense of purpose towards the profession. Journalist 1 said when he understood his work could “really make a difference and influence a million things, public policy, a story that makes the government back down,” he felt much more motivated. “We learn in university about the social role of journalism. But it was a very abstract thing, at least in my career, I hadn’t had such a clear notion of it. It’s not just a job, it’s not just for your career, because you want to be a great reporter. There’s something bigger. So, I think it gives you more motivation” (Journalist 1). The idea of being part of something bigger was also voiced by Journalist 8: “My individual role is

tiny in this pandemic. But when I think about the collective, there is a huge dimension because there are many little ants doing a gigantic job” (Journalist 8).

For many participants, the coverage of the pandemic was also an opportunity to reconnect with values associated with journalism. Journalist 2 expressed the sentiment: “Being a journalist is perhaps the main aspect of my identity as a human being. I put myself in the world as a journalist. It wasn’t a profession I chose for status; it wasn’t a profession I chose for money. It was a profession I chose out of values” (Journalist 2). Likewise, Journalist 5 said he has given speeches in universities and noticed students were much more motivated to study journalism, because he thinks the students are seeing the importance of journalism during the pandemic. “I don’t think there’s a disbelief in journalism, but there’s a burnout in the profession, in which people are questioning whether to continue in journalism or not. But I think it gave a very big incentive to this new generation” (Journalist 5). According to this view, journalism is still considered an important pillar to democracy and society, and therefore the new generation is motivated to be part of this. However, the conditions to be a journalist are deteriorating, because of the financial difficulties of the media companies and the constant attacks by populist politicians and their supporters.

### *Different role perceptions*

Although this study didn’t explicitly divide journalists into two groups to compare them, the data emerging from the interviews indicated a noticeable trend in different role perceptions between political and science journalists. The findings of this research indicate that political reporters in Brasília assumed a watchdog role, while science reporters tried to depoliticize the coverage around COVID-19, in an attempt to maintain credibility and reach as many people as possible.

Journalist 1 indicated this watchdog role when he said his motivation to show the government's wrongdoings increased during pandemic coverage. "If I don't show it, no one will. I want to show this is wrong [...] So this motivation even increased, because there are so many absurd things happening that we can question [the government] much more than in normal times" (Journalist 1). He added: "One of the roles of the press is really to challenge [authorities] and it always will be. In addition to providing a service, we're doing our job. It's gratifying to see that finally this can help in some way" (Journalist 1). Journalist 5 shared the same vision: "Journalism has to be objective and has to criticize everyone. I think my view of journalism is a critical view. Journalism must be critical 24 hours a day. It's not up to journalists to praise the government, I don't think it's our role; this is the role of press officers. Journalism's role is to be critical" (Journalist 5). In the same manner, Journalist 6 shared stories he wrote showing that the government knew about the risks of not doing a national lockdown or ignoring the opinion of technicians and scientists. "I think that publishing this information that the government was trying to omit was very important" (Journalist 6). Other participants also share stories showing the contradictions of the government, some produced using documents obtained under the Access to Information law, despite serious obstacles in this system.

On the other hand, Journalist 3, who focused on stories about science during the pandemic, criticized what she called the "scoop in health journalism." As an example, she said journalists wasted time echoing the political fight between Bolsonaro and São Paulo's governor, João Doria, around the vaccines, instead of focusing on explaining the importance of vaccination. Doria, although an ally of Bolsonaro in the past, became a huge critic of the president due to his handling of the pandemic. Doria adopted social distancing measures in São Paulo, Brazil's most populous state, and signed a contract with the Chinese laboratory Sinovac to produce the

Coronavac vaccine in São Paulo. Because of that, he became one of the favorite targets of Bolsonaro and his supporters in defamation campaigns. “I think that sometimes it gets too focused on the political aspect of the discussion and then this creates an image of people who are suspicious of the vaccine, rather than explaining why the vaccines only work in a collective way. I think that when journalism is sometimes less explanatory and more in this (political) line, it is also harmful” (Journalist 3). She also said that political reporters tend to get access to information from institutes and they publish, for example, a study saying that vaccines work against the new variants before the study is published in a scientific paper. According to Journalist 7, in the beginning these issues became politicized because everything was new. When talking about chloroquine for example, they used to say ‘this medicine has not *yet* been proven.’ “Nowadays, we already know a lot of things. So, we have been trying to politicize less these days. We say it’s wrong because science said so and it’s over” (Journalist 7).

Journalist 5, a political reporter, also said journalists in Brasília are usually too worried about the backstage of politics while there are bigger problems in the country. He tends to assume a watchdog role, but he also thinks that, in order to depoliticize the coverage, journalists should be objective:

“I think it has to be as objective as possible. If the president said something that is false, I think you can disprove the information he gave without making a value judgment about the president. You can say ‘this information is false’ not ‘the president is acting in bad faith.’ There is a difference between making a value judgment of the president’s behaviour and making an analysis of the information” (Journalist 5).

Other participants also criticized the fact that the pandemic became highly politicized in the country. As a consequence of this, people treated serious issues, such as drugs, medicines and vaccines, as a matter of opinion. Journalist 9 said he couldn’t convince his family because they think “if you think the drug doesn’t work, okay, that’s your opinion” (Journalist 9).



## **Theme 5: Strategies and a path forward**

The final theme emerging from the interview data was the strategies these journalists used to overcome the challenges outlined earlier in this chapter. In view of the main problems these journalists have faced in covering COVID-19, this section seeks to elaborate on the best practices and solutions interview participants described.

### *Access to Information Law as a lifeline*

As previously mentioned, all participants experienced difficulty in obtaining information during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília. Journalists' requests for comments on their stories or requests for information through the government agencies' press offices were either denied or ignored. To overcome this barrier, many journalists relied on Brazil's Access to Information Law (LAI), even when they were unsuccessful in obtaining data in many cases. For many, the law was one of the main important resources to obtain official information from the government on sensitive topics, such as the purchase of tests, vaccines and the policies to handle the pandemic. Journalist 2 summed this up: "The access to information law has been a lifeline for journalists in this government." This journalist explained that what she usually does is use the ATI law to confirm information she received from an internal or external tip, especially when she can't get the confirmation from the press office. Journalist 1 said it is part of his routine to file ATI requests. When the president makes a statement or mentions a dubious study, he requests the documents that support the declarations and, when there are no supporting documents, he writes a story to show that the statement had no basis. When his request is denied because the government classifies it as 'secret,' he also writes a story to show the audience the government classified a document about the pandemic as 'secret' and is withholding important information from the public. In his view, either way, there is a story.

Many participants shared situations of successful stories they were able to write only because of the ATI law. Even with the barriers encountered, ATI law was proven to be essential to journalism during the coverage of COVID-19.

### *Search for other sources*

As a result of the Health Ministry's attitude not to respond to journalists and suppress relevant information related to the pandemic, such as the number of COVID-19 deaths and cases, participants had to rely on other sources. Journalist 3 said: "I think being less dependent on the Health Ministry was a strategy to be able to bring more reliable information" (Journalist 3). The most notable response to this was the initiative by the media companies to create a consortium to collect and publish COVID-19 data. Many interviewees mentioned the consortium as an unprecedented initiative that helped them in stories about COVID-19 trends and developments.

Participants also looked for reliable information from infectious diseases associations, universities, national and international health science agencies and several groups of infectious disease doctors and specialists formed because of the pandemic. As a result, Journalist 10 said she found "wonderful" sources outside the traditional Rio-São Paulo-Brasília "bubble," such as in the North and Northeast regions of Brazil. According to her, the discrediting of the Health Ministry also served as an opportunity for journalism and science to regain the public's trust. "The scientists used to say, at the beginning of the pandemic, that nobody cared about science and from the moment that science had to intervene, that science had to explain, that science had to create a medicine, a vaccine—from that moment on, everyone started to respect science more" (Journalist 10). In a report published in *Nature* in April 2021, scientists said Bolsonaro's administration has undermined science during the pandemic and being a scientist in Brazil was

frustrating (Taylor, 2021). For this reason, the organization of civic society, universities, scientists and the media was essential in reducing the damage caused by the government's omission.

In this scenario, journalism was an important ally of science, as it served as a bridge for translating scientific terms into everyday language used by laypeople. Journalist 6 also pointed out that the pandemic was an opportunity for journalism to recover credibility lost because of the new technologies and the campaign to discredit them promoted by some politicians. "As the government fell into disrepute for a good part of the population, for spreading disinformation and everything else, I think the press gained credits that it had lost" (Journalist 6).

#### *Dealing with politicians' misinformation*

For journalists, it is a challenge to deal with politicians who lie. In the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, television networks such as CNBC, ABC and CBS cut off Donald Trump's speeches when he was repeating false claims about election fraud. However, this was not common practice before he lost the election. When journalists say politicians are lying, politicians and part of the audience accuse them of being biased, and they fear it can affect their credibility. One of the questions this study wanted to answer was how the "average" journalist was dealing with the spread of mis- and disinformation in Brazil during the pandemic. Therefore, participants were asked how to debunk misinformation when it was coming from official sources, such as the president and other elected officials. The most current falsehoods were about the effectiveness of lockdowns, isolation and masks and the use of unproven drugs such as chloroquine as a treatment.

Most journalists shared concerns that the press was amplifying Bolsonaro's falsehoods by just reproducing what he said. Journalist 7 said: "This is a very personal opinion of mine. I think it takes a long time to give up giving the official version of things. We spent months reporting that the president wrongly recommended an 'early treatment' [for COVID-19]. But should it matter so much because he talked about it?" (Journalist 7). Other participants shared the same concerns. Journalist 5 echoed: "We cannot continue to echo false information just because it was the President of the Republic who said it. We need to have a critical sense within the news content" (Journalist 5). At the same time, journalists said they cannot just ignore the president and his ministers. Journalist 8 pointed out: "He is the president of the country. When he speaks, it is very difficult not to report. Because it's the president talking, he was chosen by the population, that's what the population wants, right? It's to know what the president thinks about these things, what he thinks about the lockdown, what he thinks about chloroquine, about the coronavirus" (Journalist 8).

As a consequence, participants generally agreed it is irresponsible to reproduce what authorities say without context and a counterpoint. Participants described two ways in which they can contrast a false claim: either by outright stating that the authority lied, or by showing it. As noted earlier, Journalist 5 said his newspaper allows him to write "the president lied" and to be more critical when authorities say false or inaccurate speeches. Journalist 1 also said he has the autonomy to say "they distort data" or "it's not true that this happened," but other media companies cannot openly say when the president is lying. Journalist 8, for example, explained: "I use the word 'controversial.' I hate it, because he's not being controversial—he's lying! But, I'm just a reporter who's been working at the newspaper for three years" (Journalist 8). Even if journalists cannot use the word "lie," participants said they can *show* when they're lying, using

documents, talking with specialists or showing the government's contradictions, sometimes through official documents. "Unfortunately, I think that even if they are wrong, we have to report it. But that's why the counterpoint is so important. We're listening here to the official source, the president, but we're going to put another counterpoint in the article that shows the president is wrong" (Journalist 8).

Journalist 5 said they had to be prepared to contrast the most recurrent falsehoods coming from the president and members of the government. Because some topics were always being repeated by Bolsonaro and other members—such as the defense of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine as a treatment, the speeches against social isolation measures and the discredit of opponents, especially governors and mayors—journalists develop a "handbook" to contrast these speeches. "Newspapers had to adapt and we had to learn. We kind of ended up developing a little handbook of some recurrent lies from the government and the president. So, for example, the president always says that the Supreme Court forced him not to act to face the pandemic, which is not true. What the Supreme Court determined was that the states and municipalities have autonomy for their policies, but that the Union<sup>18</sup> also has its autonomy and must also protect the population from COVID-19" (Journalist 5). As previously mentioned on Chapter 1, the Supreme Court ruled that states and municipal governments had the autonomy to determine rules on isolation, but Bolsonaro would later claim that the Supreme Court didn't allow him to take any measure related to COVID-19.

Many participants said they use one "official source" to contrast with another "official source," because there are documents produced by the government that go against what the president

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<sup>18</sup> Brazil is a federation and it has three levels of government: the Union, or central government; states governments and municipal governments.

says. It is a challenge, because the cacophony of information undermines the media's ability to explain complex issues and deliver a unified message to the public. Given the circumstances, journalists said they don't know if showing that something was false is sufficient to change people's mind about the government, but it is their role to do so nevertheless. Most participants expressed they thought the pandemic will help journalism regain credibility, especially because the media has proved to be essential during the health crisis. As Journalist 1 put it: "The safe harbour is really the press, because there you will find confirmed and verified data, and, if there is an error, we will correct it—that's an important difference from these blogs" (Journalist 1).

## **CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION**

This study set out to understand and report the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and to understand the roles of mis- and disinformation in this coverage. To achieve this goal, I conducted interviews with 10 journalists who covered COVID-19 in Brasília, Brazil's capital. The questions that guided this research were: (1) What have been the biggest challenges journalists have faced in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil? (2) What strategies have journalists used to overcome these challenges? (3) How has mis- and disinformation affected the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil? And (4) How do journalists perceive their roles in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil? The purpose of this chapter is to relate the findings outlined in the previous chapter to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and present my final thoughts about the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. The next section aims to answer the research questions based on the experiences of journalists interviewed for this study and the existing literature.

### **Challenges and strategies**

Regarding the first question, the findings and literature demonstrate that journalists encountered significant challenges during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Due to the many news reports about Brazil's handling of the pandemic published both in the Brazilian and international press, it was expected that journalists would have felt enormous challenges and difficulties, as the first three themes that came out from the interview data showed. These difficulties included pandemic and work-related challenges; barriers to accessing information and building relationships with sources from the government; and dealing with mis- and disinformation.

The findings of this research resonate with the results of the global survey by the ICFJ and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, which showed an “unsettling picture of burnt-out journalists in the grip of a mental health crisis” due to the COVID-19 crisis (Posetti et al., 2020, p. 9). In Brasília, pandemic- and work-related challenges included difficulties in reporting from home, the fear of contracting COVID-19, and mental health concerns related to an intense workload and the situation in Brazil as one of the countries with the highest rates of cases and deaths attributed to COVID-19. Also, participants reported not being prepared to cover the pandemic because they lacked scientific knowledge. Many journalists with no scientific background were assigned to cover the pandemic, which included learning technical terms and translating them for the audience. This finding illustrates how newsrooms in Brasília weren’t prepared to cover science and health, despite being the city where the Brazilian Health Ministry is located. In light of this, the lessons learned from covering COVID-19 could be seen as an opportunity for newsrooms in Brasília to specialize and invest in health and science journalism. Most of the participants highlighted the importance of specialization to cover the Ministry of Health, and science and health topics in general. Due to financial strain on the news industry, journalists are frequently assigned to cover different areas, therefore assuming generalist tasks. But Journalist 6, who focused on the coverage of the Health Ministry in Brasília during the pandemic, emphasized that it’s important to have a certain degree of knowledge in one subject only, “to stay on top of the same topic, to specialize in the topic, to understand the bureaucracy on the topic, the rules and the legislation” (Journalist 6). This aligns with Klemm et al.’s (2017) findings that specialist reporters are more capable of covering health events critically, because they’re more likely to challenge authorities, provide contextual information and act as a ‘sober voice’ inside news



organizations to avoid fear-mongering, which is one of biggest concerns about health crisis reporting.

The challenges described by participants in this research also emphasize the importance of mental health support for journalists to help alleviate the stress and burdensome routine.

However, as outlined in Chapter 1, the news media industry has been facing difficulties due to competition with social media and other online information sources, dropping ad revenues, decreased newspaper circulation and layoffs. Moreover, news companies in Brazil announced wage cuts and reduction in the hours due to the economic impacts of COVID-19, which has only added to the anxieties journalists have felt during the coverage.

The experiences of journalists in Brazil also relate more broadly with the experience of journalists who covered the pandemic in other countries (Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Sweet et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020). Recent studies show that journalists in the Philippines, Mexico and Kenya have also encountered barriers in accessing information from the government (Hivos, 2020; Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020). In the Philippines, the government suspended the processing of freedom-of-information (FOI) requests (Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020), and India also suffered the effects of mis- and disinformation circulating on social media platforms and the damage of the overabundance of information—the infodemic—to health journalism practice (Sharma et al., 2020). Sweet et al. (2020) point out that the COVID-19 pandemic heightened a longstanding crisis in public interest journalism in Australia, with wide-ranging implications for public health. On the other hand, they argue that times of radical disruption such as this crisis could be seen as an opportunity for reforms focusing on developing new and innovative models for public interest journalism (Sweet et al., 2020). Similarly, participants interviewed for this study said they felt the audience was more interested in reading

public service-oriented stories that directly impacted their lives, such as stories about how to protect yourself from the disease and about the development of vaccines. As the Brazilian environment became highly politicized, such stories that didn't focus on political issues were more "accepted" by the public, according to the interviewees. They also believe that health journalism, because it relates directly to people's lives, was an opportunity to connect journalists to the public. In the same way, the consortium created to counteract the government's attempts to suppress information on COVID-19 was mentioned as an unprecedented and valuable initiative. Therefore, journalism in Brazil would benefit if the focus on public service journalism, coupled with more collaboration between journalists and news companies, continues after the pandemic.

Another topic that emerged from the interview data was the relationship with the government, in particular the difficulty journalists encountered in building trust with authorities and accessing information from the Health Ministry and other government departments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Literature shows that journalists and authorities responsible for managing emergencies often mistrust each other, which in turn makes the relationship between them more difficult. "Emergency managers believe journalists often sensationalize stories to stir up panic and prosecute government entities regardless of the response effort; journalists believe emergency managers frequently obstruct rather than facilitate the flow of information to the public" (Veil, 2012, p. 290). The findings of this study corroborate this perception. All participants said they had difficulty in accessing information from the government and a majority of participants said it was the biggest challenge they have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Veil (2012) identified that stereotypical judgments, a lack of trust, paradoxical challenges, and unrealistic expectations are usually elements that jeopardize the emergency manager-media relationship, but the findings of this study showed that during the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil,

there has been more than just mistrust between journalists and authorities. The situation in Brasília was aggravated by Bolsonaro and his ministers 'anti-system' attitude (Journalist 2), which led to an even more adversarial relationship between the government and journalists. Studies about Bolsonaro's communication strategies also show that the Brazilian president treats journalists as enemies, along with political opposition or anyone who disagrees with his discourse (Kalil et al., 2021; Soares et al., 2021). The perception that journalists are "against" the government is seen in Bolsonaro's discourses. On more than one occasion, he has said the coronavirus was "potentialized by the media" and blamed the press for "spreading panic among the population."<sup>19</sup> As a result, this study's participants said members of the government, including the Health Ministry, ignored journalists, refused to give interviews and even denied journalists' requests for information and comments, which left them in the dark. Moreover, they reported situations where they were mocked by authorities when they asked questions, and were the victims of attacks orchestrated by Bolsonaro's supporters both on social media and in public spaces. "It is a strategy to attack journalists," summarized Journalist 1.

Within this scenario rife with challenges, strategies were essential. Because the government didn't cooperate and sometimes withheld important information about COVID-19, journalists relied on Brazil's Access to Information law and on different expert sources like universities, diseases associations, national and international health science agencies and several groups of infectious disease doctors and specialists formed because of the pandemic.

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<sup>19</sup> Governo Federal. Remarks by President Jair Bolsonaro at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly – September 22, 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mre/en/content-centers/speeches-articles-and-interviews/president-of-the-federative-republic-of-brazil/speeches/remarks-by-president-jair-bolsonaro-at-the-general-debate-of-the-75th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-september-22-2020>

Participants also pointed out how important it is to not just reproduce what an authority is saying without context. The most current misleading or false messages spread by government officials in Brazil have been about the effectiveness of lockdowns, isolation, mask wearing and the use of unproven drugs such as chloroquine as a treatment. In this regard, participating journalists offered a mea culpa, saying the media gave space to authorities who denied the seriousness of the disease, especially in the beginning of the pandemic. Journalist 6 said the press was wrong to “give too much space to deniers, sometimes even trying to reduce some very serious issues to a political dispute.” As a strategy to provide a counterpoint to the lies from politicians, some participants (Journalist 1, Journalist 5) would explicitly report that an authority lied when they gave a statement proven to be false. But, the majority of participants took a less direct approach by “showing the lie” in their stories by using documents, talking with specialists or showing the government’s contradictions, sometimes through official documents.

### **Infodemic in Brazil**

To answer Research Question 3, the literature (Campos Mello, 2020a; Ricard & Medeiros, 2020; Kalil et al., 2021; Soares et al., 2021) and participating journalists’ experiences confirmed that mis- and disinformation has been a huge problem during the COVID-19 outbreak in Brazil. The overabundance of information along with rumours and disinformation spread through social media and endorsed by some politicians has hindered the coverage and limited journalists’ capacity to deliver a clear and precise message. Many participants called out the consequences of false or distorted stories during a global health emergency, as they can lead people to ignore scientific advice, get sick and put others in danger.

The large number of rumours and amount of disinformation circulating on social media in Brazil, especially via WhatsApp groups, are cause for concern, as they can undermine public health strategies, leading people to ignore protective measures, such as social distancing, isolation and the use of masks. As the results of a survey released by the Gapminder Foundation in March 2020 showed, people who have come across and believed more misinformation are less likely to take actions to keep themselves and others safe, and are more likely to distrust the news media (Winters et al., 2020). Soares et al.'s (2021) work about disinformation on WhatsApp groups in Brazil also demonstrated how disinformation can create a context in which people may choose not to follow scientific guidance based on their political views (Soares et al., 2021). Participants shared this perception, as some noted that even their family members were ignoring their advice and preferred to trust misleading information they received via social media, often related to political themes (Journalist 2, Journalist 9).

The politicization of COVID-19 and misinformation coming from the government and authorities, including the president, were also described as significant obstacles for journalists who have worked on this coverage. Bolsonaro's statements were a huge source of misinformation as demonstrated by the fact-checking agency *Aos Fatos*, which identified more than 1,700 false or inaccurate statements about COVID-19 made by Bolsonaro since the beginning of the pandemic. Participants in this study also called attention to the government structure, such as the government's official Twitter account and official TV broadcaster, being used to misguide the public and spread misinformation. In the same way, 25% of participating journalists of the ICFJ and Tow Center for Digital Journalism global survey identified government agencies or their spokespeople as major sources of disinformation and 34% of respondents cited propagandistic or heavily partisan news media, or state media as top sources of

disinformation (Posetti et al., 2020). In Brazil, the cacophony of conflicting information and misinformation produced by the government has limited journalists' ability to reach people who were not willing to distrust the president.

Journalists' responses and the literature (Kalil et al., 2021; Soares et al., 2021) converge to show that mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 were framed as a political issue in Brazil. Soares et al.'s (2021) study about disinformation on WhatsApp political groups indicated that disinformation about COVID-19 in Brazil was connected to political themes that were in the public debate in the country. Disinformation messages related to conspiracy theories about alleged plots by the "leftists," the Brazilian Supreme Court, and by media outlets to overthrow or harm Bolsonaro (Soares et al., 2021). This approach helped Bolsonaro to dissociate himself from the negative consequences of the pandemic and avoid responsibility. Kalil et al. (2021) investigated conspiracy theories and narratives disseminated by Bolsonaro and his supporters during COVID-19, and they found that Bolsonaro continuously mobilized fear, connecting an alleged 'communist conspiracy' to the pandemic by creating narratives around the terms 'Chinese virus' and 'Chinese vaccine.' According to the authors, these narratives, adapted to the Brazilian context, feed on anti-communist and nationalist conceptions, both ideological pillars of Bolsonarist rhetoric, and gave Bolsonaro and his supporters an opportunity to frame the political debate as a war. In this scenario, Bolsonaro and his supporters targeted 'enemies', "who were using the pandemic as a political opportunity" such as the 'enemies of freedom', 'the enemies of the nation' and the 'enemies of the government' which are, in this case, "the media conglomerates, pro-public-health measures from local governments and the public individuals defending social distancing" (Kalil et. al., 2021, p. 8). Those narratives contributed to a hostile attitude towards journalists, a tendency that has been observed since the election of Bolsonaro in

2018, but which was aggravated with the pandemic. As a result, journalists have been targets and the perceptions of this study's participants confirm that tendency. Participants reported being mocked by authorities and attacked by Bolsonaro's supporters and sometimes by the president himself. The 'anti-system' posture of Bolsonaro and his administration also resulted in a difficult relationship between journalists and government sources, which in turn, hindered the coverage, because authorities weren't willing to give interviews or provide information to journalists. As a result, journalists and citizens feel the consequences of the lack of information. Journalist 8 said people couldn't rely on the Health Minister: "When the population relied only on the ministry, the ministry said it would no longer deliver the data. We had to create a consortium to give the correct information to the population" (Journalist 8).

### **Public service versus watchdog role**

Regarding the fourth and final research question, the data obtained through the interviews revealed that journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília mainly saw themselves as assuming a public service role. Because there was a huge amount of mis- and disinformation circulating in the country and the government downplayed the gravity of the pandemic, providing a public service meant verifying and getting accurate information to inform the public, but also being a counterpoint to government misinformation.

The findings of this study also suggest that journalists assume different roles depending on the area or beat they are specialized in (for example, politics, economics, science). Although this thesis didn't explicitly divide journalists into two groups to compare them, it was possible to discern this trend emerging from the data. The interviews indicated that political journalists who covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília tended to assume a strong watchdog role

(Hanitzsch, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014) while science journalists saw themselves as practicing more of a service journalism, writing stories about the virus developments, precautionary measures and vaccination. The latter group was more concerned with getting accurate information about COVID-19 to the public, assuming almost an educational role (Schwitzer et al., 2005). Both groups saw the polarization of COVID-19 as a problem in the coverage, and therefore viewed themselves as providing an essential service during the pandemic, sometimes as a counterpoint the government misinformation (in the case of those who assumed a watchdog role), and others to inform the public accurately (in the case of science and health journalists).

According to the literature, journalists who adopt the watchdog role “articulate their skeptical and critical attitude towards the government and business elites” and thus they have an “emphasis on providing the audience with political information” (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 485), which in turn enables citizens to be “free and self-governing” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Political journalists who assumed a strong watchdog role wanted to shed light on the problems of the government in handling the pandemic and on Bolsonaro’s denialism, because his actions were putting peoples’ lives at risk. Therefore, these journalists assumed an almost adversarial role and were overly critical of the government response to the pandemic. Some participants said their motivation to show the government’s wrongdoings increased, as well as their sense of responsibility towards the public.

Science journalists, on the other hand, tended to understand their role more as a service they were providing to society. The group of journalists who worked on the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília and focused on the scientific and health coverage wanted to inform the public about the virus and how to prevent infections without “entering the political fight.” These journalists even



saw the political fight between Bolsonaro and governors and the politicization of COVID-19 as a problem that was hindering the coverage and their ability to reach more people. Journalist 3 echoed this sentiment when she criticized what she called “scoop in health journalism.” As an example, she said that some political reporters had access to documents from health authorities and they published it just to give the scoop, even if the paper was not peer-reviewed. As a result, these science journalists tried to depoliticize the coverage and focused on reporting accurately to avoid mistakes, which could lead to the discrediting of journalism. Some literature (Schwitzer et al., 2005) says there is “an inherent educational role” that science journalists must assume, because people need help in understanding scientists and policymakers’ decisions. This role best represents what these journalists were doing in Brasília. Participants who covered science felt the audience engaged more in stories that affected their lives, for example, didactic stories answering people’s questions (Journalist 10). To do these stories, journalists talked with scientists and specialists, rather than the government, which represents a shift from earlier studies of emergency response coverage in Brazil. In an analysis about the coverage of the H1N1 flu, da Silva Medeiros and Massarani (2010) found that news reports about the epidemic relied more on official sources and government authorities than on scientists.

Overall, journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic said they felt a greater sense of responsibility because of the unprecedented nature and importance of the COVID-19 coverage. They also reported more commitment and engagement towards journalism itself. However, some participants shared concerns about the high level of attacks and public mockery by government authorities, and about the rise of authoritarianism in Brazil, since Bolsonaro’s election in 2018.

## **Importance of journalism and limitations**

For this study's participants, the importance of their work both for public health and Brazil's democracy, has become more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they are aware of their limitations. Journalists interviewed shared feelings of frustration and powerlessness about not being able to compete with some disinformation messages, especially when these messages related to people's core beliefs. Journalist 5, for example, said: "There has always been a confirmation bias, people looking for information that confirms their point of view. [...] It's a bit frustrating, but I think people are looking for it more and more, perhaps because of radicalism. I think radicalism, polarization led to that." They also acknowledged their limitations in changing the political situation of Brazil, even if they were worried about the risks the Bolsonaro government poses to Brazil's democracy. Journalist 1 illustrated this sentiment when he said "our role is not to judge or investigate, we are not the police. We are here to report."

Other participants (Journalist 5, Journalist 7, Journalist 9) drew attention to structural problems in Brazil, such as the high socio-economic inequality, lack of media education, and media coverage largely focused on "big problems," such as the government's budget, the stock market and political negotiations, themes that interest the elites. Journalist 7, for example, said political analysts that appear on TV programs don't "speak the same language" as ordinary people and are not worried about the same things. "I think that journalism is guided by what interests the upper classes. And then, we put in the middle some stories that interest everyone, such as the price of beans, and that we're running out of oxygen. But somehow, we only get into things when the super elite is involved" (Journalist 7). Similarly, Journalist 5 said that the pandemic was an opportunity for journalists who work in Brasília and are too focused on the "political backstage" to look more broadly for the problems of the country. "Brasília is a bubble. We are not in contact

with poverty, we are not in contact with anything. So I think journalism has learned to look at some places it hasn't looked at before, for example, the pandemic in the state of Amazonas<sup>20</sup>” (Journalist 5). These barriers appeared as minor themes during the interviews and are specific to the Brazilian context, but are also important to understand the limitations of journalists in the fight against disinformation and political manipulation.

Despite the challenges faced by journalists, journalism in Brazil during the pandemic has been a “lifeline,” as the press has created tools to overcome the government’s lack of transparency, provided truthful and accurate information during a public health emergency and has also held authorities accountable for their actions and negligence. Because of this, some participants reported that the audience of their websites reached records in engagement and readership during COVID-19. Therefore, it is my hope that the lessons learned from the pandemic continue to bring more recognition to the work journalists do, and also motivate media companies to unite against the challenges posed by the government and in their goal of providing the public accurate and truthful information to help citizens make beneficial decisions for themselves.

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<sup>20</sup> The state of Amazonas, where part of the Amazon rainforest is located, was one of the regions hardest affected by COVID-19 in Brazil and experienced two deadly waves of the disease, in the early and late 2020. In January 2021, hospitals in the city of Manaus, capital of Amazonas, ran out of oxygen supplies and the city’s health system collapsed. Indigenous communities in the state were also heavily affected by the pandemic.

## CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSION

This thesis project aimed to understand and report the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, as well as to understand the roles mis- and disinformation have played in the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil. To achieve these goals, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 journalists who have worked on the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil's capital and then carried out a thematic analysis inspired by a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Five main themes emerged from interview data: (1) pandemic and work-related challenges, (2) access to information and relationship with the government, (3) mis- and disinformation, (4) journalists' perceived roles, and (5) strategies used to overcome challenges.

Pandemic and work-related challenges included the adaptation to teleworking, learning technical and scientific information about COVID-19, and more personal issues such as the fear of contracting the disease and mental health concerns due to an intense workload, social isolation and the situation in Brazil as one of the countries with the highest rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The second theme describes the difficulties journalists in Brasília have had in accessing information from the Brazilian Health Ministry and other government agencies. The third theme details how mis- and disinformation have played out in Brazil and their impacts on journalists' work. Rumours and misinformation circulating on social media have been a huge cause for concern, but the biggest problem is misinformation coming from the government. Because the government has sent out confusing and misleading messages to citizens and to the media, participating journalists expressed that they felt they wasted time on reporting about unnecessary debates, such as the use of unproven drugs to treat COVID-19, leading to these issues becoming

politicized. The findings of this research and existing literature converge to show that disinformation was politically framed in Brazil, which increased polarization.

The next theme outlines journalists' perceived roles during the coverage. Despite the problems faced, journalists see themselves as assuming a public service role, either because they were providing truthful and accurate information to the population, or because they acted as a counterpoint to government misinformation. It was also possible to notice a trend emerging from the interview data: political journalists who covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília tended to assume a strong watchdog role, while journalists who covered science tried to depoliticize the coverage in an attempt to reach as many people as possible and educate the audience about the virus.

The final theme describes the strategies the participating journalists have used to overcome the challenges described above. The strategies included using Brazil's Access to Information Law (LAI) to obtain information from the government, and relying on sources outside of government, such as specialists from universities, infectious disease associations and health science agencies. Journalists also developed strategies to debunk falsehoods from authorities, such as clearly stating that an authority lied or showing it through documents and by quoting specialists. In both cases, journalists agreed it is irresponsible to just reproduce a speech from an authority when there is false information in it. Giving context and showing the other side is essential.

As in other parts of the world, journalists in Brazil are feeling the effects of the changes brought by the internet, the decline of the traditional ad-based news media business model, dropping newspaper circulation, and fears of unemployment and other financial hardships. The media environment has deteriorated since the election of Jair Bolsonaro, who tries to undermine the

credibility of the professional press, criticizes and verbally insults journalists, spreads misinformation messages and encourages his supporters to attack journalists.

But while the pandemic has impacted the news media industry even harder, it is possible to identify opportunities and ways forward. In Brazil, in the midst of disinformation campaigns, journalism has provided truthful and accurate information that has helped save lives, and has held authorities accountable. Journalists interviewed for this study felt their work has been essential during the pandemic and felt a greater sense of responsibility and commitment. One of the perceptions described by participants was that the media was becoming disconnected from the public, especially in Brasília, where the bulk of news reports are about politics. The pandemic, thus, was an opportunity for these journalists to write stories that directly affected people's lives, which in turn increased the interest of their audiences in journalism. It is important that newsrooms and journalists use the public's renewed interest in journalism to continue to provide public service-oriented stories and connect to the audience. The internet and social media are tools reporters can and should use to explain their work and get closer to the public.

Another lesson from the pandemic in Brazil is the advantages of collaboration between journalists and newsrooms from different companies. As a consequence of the government's attempt to block information, newsrooms in Brazil united in an unprecedented initiative to create a consortium and release data about COVID-19 cases and deaths. Many participants interviewed for this study worked in companies that were part of the media consortium, although they were not directly responsible for collecting the numbers. They described the initiative as unique and very valuable to the coverage of COVID-19, as well as to scientists, society and policymakers. Therefore, news companies in Brazil should consider other collaborative initiatives and maintain

this collaborative attitude after the pandemic, especially when populist leaders are trying to undermine credibility and public trust in journalism.

Similarly, the pandemic has shown the importance of health and science coverage. Participants who specialized in health and science coverage in Brasília felt they were talking directly about issues that affect people's lives and viewed this as the reason audience engagement had increased during the pandemic. For this reason, it is important that news companies continue to invest and specialize in science and health coverage, especially because these stories relate directly to people's lives. Science journalism and public service-oriented stories present possibilities to connect the work of journalists to the audience's real problems and concerns. To do so, it is important to have specialist reporters on these topics inside newsrooms.

Finally, the importance of Brazil's Access to Information law (LAI) was another theme that emerged from the interview data. Even encountering barriers to access information, journalists were able to produce good stories using the LAI, which reinforces the importance of these laws to Brazil's democracy. LAI was mentioned many times during the participant interviews, possibly because the sample is composed of journalists who work in Brazil's capital and are more used to covering the central government. It is important that more journalists learn how to request access to documents using the LAI and how to appeal when access is denied.

### **Limitations**

It is important to recognize that this study is limited in a couple of ways. First, the sample is composed of journalists who work in major newsrooms in Brasília and are responsible for the political and scientific coverage around COVID-19 coming from the government. The experiences of these journalists should not be generalized to represent the experiences of

journalists from other regions or media markets in Brazil. Also, although the participants had to go out to do interviews and cover events, the sample did not capture the experiences of journalists who covered the COVID-19 pandemic on the frontline, such as in hospitals. Second, my own background in journalism and previous knowledge about the journalism market in Brasília could have helped me in creating assumptions about the routines and dynamics of journalists who covered the pandemic from Brasília. To mitigate this, I asked questions professionally and tried to challenge and question participants' descriptions to avoid misinterpretations. At the same time, my experience as a journalist and my own background as Brazilian may have helped me to better understand the dynamics of the country and its political background.

### **Future studies**

The findings of this thesis indicate numerous possibilities for further scholarly investigation about the impacts of the pandemic in the journalism industry in Brazil. For example, more research focusing on collaboration between journalists in Brazil is needed in order to better understand the benefits of this practice and to suggest ways forward. Another minor theme that emerged from the interview data and needs more investigation is media education and media literacy as an approach for mitigating the disinformation problem in Brazil. More than one participant mentioned that the population doesn't understand the role of journalism, and many times they cannot discern news reports from opinion pieces. Therefore, studies about media education and disinformation would be a huge asset to the discussion around disinformation in Brazil.



## **Closing remarks**

As this study has demonstrated, journalism is one of the last barriers containing the dissemination of false information in Brazil, as well as the rise of authoritarianism in the country. Despite the many problems described above, journalists in Brazil are providing an essential service. I hope that the study of the pandemic coverage in Brazil serves as a lesson of what journalism can do to contain the spread of disinformation and political manipulation in the midst of a political and sanitary crisis. It is also my hope that this thesis contributes to the growing literature about mis- and disinformation in Brazil and in the world.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Recruitment email English

Hello,

My name is Luisa Marini and I'm a master's student in the Digital Innovation in Journalism program at Concordia University, in Montréal, Canada. For my thesis, I want to understand and report the lived experiences of journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. I am writing to you today to ask if you might be interested in participating in my thesis research project.

The objective of this research is to report the lived experiences of journalists who covered the Covid-19 pandemic in Brasília, as well as to understand the role of disinformation in this coverage and what strategies journalists have used to overcome this challenge. I chose Brasília because many disinformation campaigns were spread or endorsed by politicians, and I wanted to understand and share the experiences of journalists responsible for covering their daily routines.

If you agree to participate, you will be invited for an interview, which will last up to 60 minutes and will be done via Skype or Zoom. All your information will be protected, your name will not be shared and the data collected will be used for academic purposes only.

I strongly believe that your experience will greatly help my thesis research. If you are at all interested, please let me know and I will send you additional information on the project.

Best regards,

## **Appendix 2: Recruitment email Portuguese**

Olá,

Tudo bem?

Meu nome é Luisa Marini e sou estudante de mestrado no programa de Inovação Digital em Jornalismo na Concordia University, em Montreal, Canadá. Na minha tese, quero relatar a experiência dos jornalistas que cobriram a pandemia de Covid-19 no Brasil. Estou te escrevendo para perguntar se você estaria interessado em participar da minha pesquisa.

O objetivo desta pesquisa é relatar as experiências vividas pelos jornalistas que cobriram a pandemia de Covid-19 em Brasília, bem como compreender qual foi o papel da desinformação nessa cobertura e quais estratégias os jornalistas têm usado para superar este desafio e manter a confiança do público.

Brasília foi escolhida por estar próxima ao poder. Como muitas informações falsas ou imprecisas foram divulgadas ou endossadas por políticos, essa pesquisa quer entender e compartilhar as experiências dos jornalistas responsáveis por cobrir suas rotinas diárias.

Se você concordar em participar, você será convidado para uma entrevista, que terá duração de até 60 minutos e será feita via Skype ou Zoom. Todas as suas informações serão protegidas, o seu nome não será divulgado e os dados coletados serão usados somente para fins acadêmicos.

Como jornalistas, não estamos acostumados a desempenhar o papel de fonte. Mas, no momento em que o jornalismo profissional sofre ameaças em várias frentes, eu acredito que é mais importante do que nunca contar as histórias dos jornalistas. Por isso, acredito que a sua experiência vai enriquecer muito a minha pesquisa. Se tiver interesse, por favor me responda este email e eu enviarei mais informações sobre o projeto.

Muito obrigada pela atenção.

## Appendix 3: Consent form English



### INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**Study Title:** Disinformation and Political Instability: A look into the media coverage of COVID-19 in Brazil's capital

**Researcher:** Luisa Torres Marini Ferreira

**Researcher's Contact Information:** 438-530-6833; luisatmarini@gmail.com

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Elyse Amend

**Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information:** 514-848-2424, ext. 2466;

elyse.amend@concordia.ca

### Source of funding for the study:

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

### A. PURPOSE

Journalists in Brazil have had to deal with various challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, from disinformation campaigns, often promoted by elected officials, to personal attacks. With this in mind, the purpose of this research is to understand and report the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília, Brazil's capital. It also aims to understand the roles mis- and disinformation have played on the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil and which strategies journalists have used to overcome this challenge there.

### B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-on-one semi-structured interview and answer questions about your experience covering the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, describe the challenges and obstacles you have faced, which methods you have used to overcome challenges and how you view your role as a journalist working in this coverage.

In total, participating in this study will take up to **60 minutes**, or the length of the interview. The interview will be done over Skype or Zoom. It would be scheduled at a time most convenient for you.

## C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

This research is not intended to benefit you personally. The benefits of the research are generally academic; your participation will support informed public dialogue and best practices for journalism research and education. The goal of this research is also to provide a guide that is useful to other journalists, journalism educators, and students, containing the best practices applied by journalists in covering a pandemic. If you agree to participate in the study, you will be helping to build this knowledge.

The risks associated with this research include low levels of discomfort that you may feel recalling stressful situations faced during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. To avoid any discomfort, questions will be asked in a professional way, and you can skip certain questions, but still participate in the research. The interviews are structured in a way that is flexible for participants to raise questions and concerns and they will be encouraged to describe their experiences as they feel comfortable to.

As journalists in Brazil are being targeted by disinformation campaigns, this research will ensure you that the participants' identities and information about their workplaces **will be protected**. All the data collected for this research will be coded/de-identified and presented in a way that will make it impossible for others to connect the participant to their statements.

## D. CONFIDENTIALITY

For this research, we will use one-on-one semi-structured interviews to gather information about your experiences as a journalist covering the pandemic in Brazil.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form.

**The information gathered will be confidential. That means that people involved in this research (me and my supervisor only) will know the participants' real identities, but it will not be disclosed in the thesis or subsequent publications.**

We will protect the information by storing all data on the principal researcher's password-protected computer.

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

We will destroy the information five years after the end of the study.

## **F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION**

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher within one month of your interview date. Retained data will be de-identified/coded within one month of the interview date. Once the data has been coded, participants cannot withdraw their participation.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

## **G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION**

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE  
\_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or [oor.ethics@concordia.ca](mailto:oor.ethics@concordia.ca).



## Appendix 4: Consent form Portuguese



### INFORMAÇÕES E TERMO DE CONSENTIMENTO

Título do estudo: Desinformação e instabilidade política: um olhar sobre a cobertura da Covid-19 na capital do Brasil

Pesquisadora: Luisa Torres Marini Ferreira

Contato: 438-530-6833; luisatmarini@gmail.com

Orientadora: Dr. Elyse Amend

Informações de contato da orientadora: 514-848-2424, ext. 2466; elyse.amend@concordia.ca

Você está sendo convidado a participar da pesquisa mencionada acima. Este formulário fornece informações sobre o que significa participar. Leia com atenção antes de decidir se deseja participar ou não. Se houver alguma coisa que você não entenda, ou se quiser mais informações, pergunte ao pesquisador.

#### A. OBJETIVO

Jornalistas no Brasil tiveram que lidar com vários desafios durante a pandemia da Covid-19, desde campanhas de desinformação, muitas vezes promovidas por autoridades eleitas, até ataques pessoais. Com isso em mente, o objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender e relatar as experiências vividas e o conhecimento tácito de jornalistas que cobriram a pandemia de Covid-19 em Brasília, capital do Brasil. Também visa compreender os papéis da desinformação na cobertura da pandemia no Brasil e quais estratégias os jornalistas têm usado para superar esse desafio.

#### B. PROCEDIMENTOS

Se você aceitar contribuir, você será convidado a participar de uma entrevista semiestruturada e a responder perguntas sobre sua experiência cobrindo a pandemia, descrever os desafios e obstáculos que enfrentou, quais métodos você usou para superar esses desafios e como você vê seu papel como jornalista trabalhando nesta cobertura.

No total, a participação neste estudo levará até **60 minutos**, ou a duração da entrevista. A entrevista será feita pelo Skype ou Zoom e será agendada de acordo com o horário mais conveniente para você.

### C. RISCOS E BENEFÍCIOS

Esta pesquisa não se destina a beneficiá-lo pessoalmente. Os benefícios da pesquisa são geralmente acadêmicos; sua participação ajudará a dar suporte ao diálogo público informado e às melhores práticas para pesquisa e educação em jornalismo. O objetivo desta pesquisa é também fornecer um guia útil para outros jornalistas, professores de jornalismo e estudantes, contendo as melhores práticas aplicadas por jornalistas na cobertura de uma pandemia. Se você concordar em participar do estudo, estará ajudando a construir esse conhecimento.

Os riscos associados a esta pesquisa incluem baixos níveis de desconforto que você pode sentir ao relembrar situações estressantes enfrentadas durante a cobertura da pandemia de Covid-19. Para evitar qualquer desconforto, as perguntas serão feitas de forma profissional, você poderá pular algumas perguntas, mas ainda assim participar da pesquisa. As entrevistas são estruturadas de forma flexível para que os participantes levantem questões e preocupações e eles serão incentivados a descrever suas experiências da maneira que se sentirem confortáveis para fazê-lo.

Como os jornalistas no Brasil estão sendo alvo de campanhas de desinformação, esta pesquisa irá garantir que as identidades dos participantes e as informações sobre seus locais de trabalho **serão protegidas**. Todos os dados coletados para esta pesquisa serão codificados e apresentados de forma que impossibilite que outras pessoas associem o participante às suas falas.

### D. CONFIDENCIALIDADE

Para esta pesquisa, usaremos entrevistas semiestruturadas individuais para reunir informações sobre suas experiências como jornalista cobrindo a pandemia no Brasil.

Não permitiremos que ninguém acesse as informações, exceto pessoas diretamente envolvidas na condução da pesquisa. Usaremos as informações apenas para os fins da pesquisa descrita neste formulário.

As informações coletadas serão confidenciais. Isso significa que as pessoas envolvidas nesta pesquisa (eu e minha supervisora apenas) saberão as identidades reais dos participantes, mas isso não será divulgado na tese ou nas publicações subsequentes.

Protegeremos as informações armazenando todos os dados no computador protegido por senha do pesquisador principal.

Pretendemos publicar os resultados da pesquisa. Porém, não será possível identificá-lo nos resultados publicados.

Vamos destruir as informações cinco anos após o final do estudo.

## F. CONDIÇÕES DE PARTICIPAÇÃO

Você não precisa participar desta pesquisa. É puramente sua decisão. Se você participar, você pode parar a qualquer momento. Você também pode solicitar que as informações fornecidas não sejam utilizadas, e sua escolha será respeitada. Se decidir que não quer que usemos suas informações, você deve avisar ao pesquisador no prazo de um mês a partir da data da entrevista.

Os dados retidos serão codificados dentro de um mês a partir da data da entrevista. Uma vez que os dados tenham sido codificados, os participantes não podem desistir de sua participação.

Não há consequências negativas por não participar, parar no meio ou nos pedir para não usar suas informações.

## G. DECLARAÇÃO DO PARTICIPANTE

Eu li e entendi este formulário. Tive a oportunidade de fazer perguntas e todas as perguntas foram respondidas. Concordo em participar desta pesquisa nas condições descritas. Por favor, assine a versão em inglês deste formulário que foi enviada em um pdf junto com este documento.

Caso você tenha alguma dúvida, por favor, não hesite em perguntar. Agradecemos a sua participação nesse projeto.

## **Appendix 5: Interview Guide English**

### **Introduction**

Hello, my name is Luisa, I'm a Master's student at Concordia University.

The purpose of this research is to understand the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of journalists who have covered the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil as well as to describe the roles mis- and disinformation have played in this coverage, and which strategies journalists have used to overcome this challenge.

To do so, I'll interview journalists who have worked on the coverage and reported from Brasília, as many misinformation campaigns have come from elected officials and members of the administration.

I'll ask you questions related to your experience and obstacles faced during the COVID-19 coverage in Brazil, which methods you used to compete with the spread of false information, and how you view your role as a journalist working in this coverage.

But, before going ahead, I'd like to make sure you understand your participation in this project. It's outlined in the consent forms, which I'll ask you to sign before we get going. Have you had a chance to read the forms?

Do you have any questions about the interview, or my project as a whole?

I want to make sure you understand that your participation is completely voluntary, and that you can withdraw at any point without any consequences.

As I understand journalists in Brazil are being targeted by disinformation campaigns in Brazil, I want you to understand that I'll take steps to keep participant identities confidential. I won't be including any identifying information outside of, for example, "a print journalist working for a São Paulo newspaper". So, anything you say here won't be directly linked back to your name.

### **Consent**

Can I start recording the conversation?

*(if yes, start recording)*

Since we cannot meet in person, may I ask you again if you agree to participate in this research under the conditions described?

### **Information contact:**

- Can you please state your name, your job title, and how long you have been working as a journalist?
- Please describe the type of news media you work for (i.e., do you work for a newspaper, an online news organization, TV, radio or other)?

## Questions:

### *(general questions)*

- Could you describe a typical day in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brasília?
- In your view, what were the biggest challenges journalists had to face during the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil?
- What were the biggest challenges *you* faced during the coverage from Brasília?
- Did you receive personal attacks because of the stories you wrote? If so, could you describe them?
- As a journalist, how do you see your role during this coverage?
- In your view, has this role changed in the face of the pandemic? Do you feel more committed to your work?

### *(questions related to disinformation)*

- In your opinion, how has disinformation about the COVID-19 affected the coverage of the pandemic in Brazil?
- In your opinion, what is motivating the creation and spread of disinformation about the coronavirus?
- The professional media is often criticized for being responsible for amplifying the spread of “fake news,” once these stories leave WhatsApp groups and go to the press. In your opinion, is the professional media also responsible for the rise of the disinformation problem? If so, how do you think journalists should face this problem?
- At the same time, journalists have limited power to counter the disinformation problem. Some “fake news” stories are related to people's core beliefs and it is very difficult to get people to contest those beliefs. How do you feel about it? What should journalists do in the face of these limitations?
- Many “fake news” stories and misleading narratives come from members of the government. Oftentimes, the government would give the population one message and the press another one (examples are the effectiveness of the lockdown and the use of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment). How can the press debunk stories coming from “official sources” without being labeled as partisan?
- In your experience, what methods are more effective to regain public trust in journalism, in face of the disinformation problem?
- Do you think the COVID crisis was an opportunity for journalism to regain public trust?

- In your opinion, do you see this coverage as an opportunity to strengthen the democratic role of journalism? Why? Why not?
- What were the most important lessons you learned through this coverage?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

## Appendix 6: Interview Guide Portuguese

### Introdução

Oi, meu nome é Luisa, sou estudante de mestrado na Concordia University, em Montréal.

O objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender as **experiências vividas** pelos jornalistas que cobriram a pandemia COVID-19 no Brasil, bem como descrever o **papel da desinformação** nessa cobertura e quais estratégias os jornalistas têm usado para superar este desafio.

Para isso, eu escolhi entrevistar jornalistas que trabalharam na cobertura de Brasília, já que muitas campanhas de desinformação vieram de autoridades eleitas e membros do governo.

Eu vou te fazer perguntas sobre a sua experiência, os obstáculos que você enfrentou, quais métodos você usou para superar esses desafios e como você vê seu papel como jornalista trabalhando nessa cobertura.

Mas, antes de prosseguir, gostaria de ter certeza de que você entendeu sua participação neste projeto. Tudo está descrito no formulário de consentimento que eu te enviei. Você já teve a chance de ler os formulários?

Você tem alguma dúvida sobre a entrevista, ou sobre o meu projeto como um todo?

Quero ter certeza de que você entende que sua participação é totalmente voluntária e que você pode se retirar a qualquer momento sem quaisquer consequências.

Como os jornalistas no Brasil estão sendo alvo de campanhas de desinformação, quero que você entenda que eu não vou divulgar a identidade dos participantes dessa pesquisa. Não vou incluir nenhuma informação de identificação além de, por exemplo, "um jornalista que trabalha para um jornal impresso de São Paulo".

### Consent

Posso começar a gravar?

*(if yes, start recording)*

Como a gente não pode se encontrar pessoalmente, posso pedir para que você diga mais uma vez se você concorda em participar desta pesquisa nas condições descritas?

### Information contact:

- Pode me dizer o seu nome, o seu cargo e há quanto tempo trabalha como jornalista?
- Pode me dizer em qual meio você trabalha (jornal impresso, TV, rádio, online)?

## Questions:

*(general questions)*

- Você pode me descrever um dia típico da cobertura de Covid-19 em Brasília?
- Na sua opinião, quais foram os maiores desafios que os jornalistas tiveram que enfrentar durante a cobertura da pandemia no Brasil?
- Quais foram os maiores desafios que *you* enfrentou durante a cobertura de Brasília?
- Você recebeu algum tipo de ataque por causa das matérias que você escreveu? Se sim, você poderia descrevê-lo?
- Como jornalista, como você vê seu papel durante esta cobertura?
- Na sua opinião, esse papel mudou por causa da pandemia? Você se sente de alguma forma mais comprometido com o jornalismo? / a sua relação com o jornalismo mudou?

*(questions related to disinformation)*

- Na sua opinião, como a desinformação em torno da Covid afetou a cobertura da pandemia no Brasil?
- Na sua opinião, o que está motivando a criação e disseminação de informações falsas sobre a Covid?
- A imprensa profissional às vezes é criticada por ser responsável por amplificar a divulgação de notícias falsas ou "fake news", quando essas histórias saem dos grupos de WhatsApp e vão para a imprensa. Na sua opinião, a imprensa também é responsável por essa maior disseminação de notícias falsas? Se sim, como você acha que os jornalistas deveriam lidar com esse problema?
- Ao mesmo tempo, os jornalistas têm poder limitado para combater o problema da desinformação. Algumas notícias falsas ou "fake news" estão relacionadas às crenças das pessoas e é muito difícil fazer com que as pessoas contestem essas crenças. Como você se sente em relação a isso? O que os jornalistas devem fazer diante dessas limitações?
- Muitas notícias falsas e mensagens conflitantes vêm de membros do governo. Muitas vezes, o governo passava uma mensagem para a população e a imprensa, outra (exemplos são a eficácia do lockdown e o uso da hidroxicloroquina como tratamento para Covid). Como a imprensa pode desmentir essas notícias vindas de "fontes oficiais" sem ser rotulada como parcial?
- Na sua experiência, quais métodos são mais eficazes para reconquistar a confiança do público no jornalismo, diante do problema da desinformação?



- Você acha que a crise da COVID foi uma oportunidade para o jornalismo reconquistar a confiança do público? Você percebeu mais engajamento do público?
- Na sua opinião, você vê essa cobertura como uma oportunidade para fortalecer o papel democrático do jornalismo? Porque? Por que não?
- Quais foram as lições mais importantes que você aprendeu com essa cobertura?
- Há mais alguma coisa que você gostaria de compartilhar?