

The transmediatisation of COVID-19 in Brazil

Theoretical reflexions on the communication of
the pandemic across media spaces to make
visible (bio-/geo-)political repertoires of
(re-)interpretation

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About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

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This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

The transmediatisation of COVID-19 in Brazil

Theoretical reflexions on the communication of the pandemic across media spaces to make visible (bio-/geo-)political repertoires of (re-)interpretation

Jaime de Souza Júnior

In this working paper, I reflect on the centrality of media practices to propose a theoretical perspective that can contribute to analyse how the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis is being framed and communicated in Brazil across different media spaces. After presenting these preliminary reflexions and their related theoretical considerations, I suggest some possible directions to discuss how the COVID-19 virus and elements that relate to the abovementioned crisis can be understood in a transmedia process of circulation.

Keywords: *Pandemic frames, The transmedia order of discourse, Biopolitics, Geopolitics, Trump, Bolsonaro*

1 The COVID-19 pandemic, journalism and two related presidential repertoires of communication

Since 2019, the far-right elected president, Jair Bolsonaro, has been ruling Brazil. On 03/11/2020¹, the World Health Organisation (WHO) labelled the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a “pandemic”. The first local case of this disease was confirmed on 02/26/2020². Since then, controversial geopolitical components have been marking the trajectory of Bolsonaro’s governmental decisions in response to the pandemic. For the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on two of those components. Firstly, the enormous subnotification³ of cases. Secondly, the temporary lack of digital transparency⁴ about the disease’s official data, which has emerged with the militarisation of the Ministry of Health⁵.

It is important to take such components into account because they point to a relation that connects Bolsonaro’s government and the pandemic to the domain of the media. If critically examined, the decisions and responses referred to suggest that governing through (or selecting) what can or cannot become visible about the coronavirus crisis seems to have become central to the Bolsonaroian exercise of power.

1 See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51839944> [Accessed: July 1, 2020].

2 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-brazil/brazil-test-confirms-first-coronavirus-case-in-latin-america-source-idUSKCN20K1EU> [Accessed: June 21, 2020].

3 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-brazil-cases/brazil-likely-has-12-times-more-coronavirus-cases-than-official-count-study-finds-idUSKCN21V1X1> [Accessed: June 21, 2020].

4 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/judge-orders-bolsonaro-to-resume-publishing-brazil-COVID-19-data> [Accessed: June 21, 2020].

5 Up to the present, general Eduardo Pazuello is the interim minister. He has substituted two other civilian medical doctors (i. e. Mandetta and Teich) who had been running that Ministry previously.

In this ‘novel’ Brazil that is mostly influenced by Donald Trump’s administration and claims to be proud of being ‘a free land’ or a member of the so-called group of ‘neoliberal’, ‘patriot’ and ‘conservative’ Western ‘democracies’, selectivity seems to orient this governmental suppression of information and their media practices, which promote the circulation of more convenient (geo-)political information. These traces of orientation (i. e. suppression or selectivity) throw light on a configuration that leads the Brazilian Executive Power to interfere with and, in some way, control when and how the communicational practices of institutions like the Media (or the Press) take place in this ‘democracy’.

Despite all these grave inter-institutional problems, especially when they emerge amid the COVID-19 crisis, various Brazilian news organisations have come together to create a consortium of journalists⁶, in order to reclaim their constitutional and institutional journalistic role of informing the translocal population. On 06/19/2020, the consortium reported that Brazil, unfortunately, became the second⁷ country to surpass one million COVID-19 cases. So far, over 50,000 people have passed away, after contracting the coronavirus.

Echoing Donald Trump’s repertoires of interpretation in many aspects, Bolsonaro’s own way of communicating governmental and (geo-)political responses to the coronavirus crisis takes the media domain as a central dimension of *power-knowledge* (FOUCAULT, [1970] 1981). This centrality emerges because, more than ever, these related presidential repertoires and the media practices that they generate are capable of (des-/re-)organising networks that can act in a transdimensional way (i. e. by mixing or criss-crossing on-line and offline dimensions).

2 Framing the pandemic across media spaces: what may be involved or become (in-)visible in this process?

With the theoretical reflexions I will present henceforth, I seek to highlight the importance of considering different media spaces, the centrality of media practices and media discourse to: i) understand the communication of COVID-19 and the pandemic as a selective and productive framing process (GOFFMAN, [1974] 1975; BUTLER, 2010; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2020); and ii) make visible repertoires of (re-)interpretation and some of the geopolitical and biopolitical effects that communication (in the referred sense) derives.

Transdimensional networks and their *socio-technical* character (LATOURETTE, 2005, p. 80) may relate the population’s bodies, social or media spaces, technological devices, media screens, algorithms, (ro)bots, the field of journalism and internet users along with their *semiotic work* (KRESS, 2015; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2020). Such a work creates an emergent configuration and the latter can be described as a domain where media practices generate frames materialised as digital texts, meanings and discourses that may be (re-)forged, circulated and (re-)interpreted. This description is an attempt to summarise what elsewhere I have proposed to call the *transmedia order of discourse*, where transmedia practices circulate or the process of transmediatisation becomes visible.

Henry Jenkins (2006, pp. 95–96) had conceptualised *transmediatisation* by arguing that it would generate media practices that communicate through different media spaces and construct messages of “convergence” or, as I understand it, a sense of cooperation and stability in this process of circulation. In my theorisation (SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2020, pp. 143–154), through which I have sought to update the Foucauldian concept of *order of discourse* (FOUCAULT, [1970] 1981) relating it to the domain of media discourse, I highlight the emergence of (multi-)semiotic *transgressions* (PENNYCOOK, 2007; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2020) and struggles involving the (re-)interpretation of messages and meanings across different media spaces.

Transmediatisation, therefore, may derive (re-)framings and on-line textual disputes that can (de-)stabilise the communication of transdimensional events (e. g. contemporary situations of conflict and/or crisis). In such struggles, domains of power-knowledge (e. g. ‘authorised’/disciplinary medical, juridical and journalistic discourses or ‘non-authorised’/social media collaborative semiotic work) can be (re-)articulated as a mix of power-knowledge dimensions. The intertwining of the latter generate multilayered (or hybrid) discourses, such as the COVID-19 discourse of crisis⁸.

The constitutive fields of this hybrid discourse and the power operations that those combined fields derive (whilst the pandemic is communicated) produce different (re-)actions and effects. These (re-)actions and effects become exposed via the media domain along with its own discursive potentials of distribution and rearticulation of information every time we (as participants in a network of media screens) experience situations of conflict and/or crisis. Since it contributes to (re-)articulate dimensions of power-knowledge and the hybrid discourses that circulate

- 6 See: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/internacional/en/scienceandhealth/2020/06/news-organizations-team-up-to-provide-transparency-to-COVID-19-data.shtml?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsen [Accessed: June 21, 2020].
- 7 On 04/28/2020, The United States was the first country to confirm this amount of cases. See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/28/health/us-coronavirus-tuesday/index.html> [Accessed: June 21, 2020].
- 8 For some, it can also be a ‘discourse of war’ against the virus or ‘the invisible enemy’. Cf.: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/03/coronavirus-south-korea-declares-war-on-outbreak-as-who-experts-arrive-in-iran> [Accessed: June 27, 2020].

through digital(-ised) texts, the transmedia order of discourse gives rise to practices of transmediatisation which become visible through the collaborative semiotic work of internet users. Thus, through that *order*, power operations and resistance emerge from multiple framing spaces.

These users' transmedia practices may 'compete' with those of 'authorised' or professional journalism, making the latter discursive field vulnerable to social media users' communicational interferences that may, on one hand, delegitimise (e. g. by denying, invisibilising or defying) distinct domains of expert power-knowledge (including that of journalism) or, on the other, make visible and reinforce their status of legitimised 'authority' in relation to what is circulated about the pandemic.

More specifically, in the Brazilian panorama of the COVID-19 crisis, Bolsonaro's media practices and his performance as a social media user at once: i) put the spotlight on a presidential transdimensional ethos that can be seen as a 'non-authorised' but recalcitrant commentator; and ii) produce repertoires of interpretation that can be distributed, consumed, incorporated or reinterpreted and countered in the circulation of transmedia practices along with the complex process it derives.

3 Communication, government and multimodal (dis-/ re-)orientation about the pandemic across media screens

Digital circulation generates a complex multimodal process which communicates through verbo-visual frames and messages. Such a process allows Bolsonaro to exert power through different notions of 'government'. Here, I am drawing on the Foucauldian notions of *governmentality* and *pastoral power*⁹ (FOUCAULT, 1982, pp. 783–784) to describe a particular way of operationalising power that produces "technologies of conduct" in association with a network of media screens. To some extent, this configuration of power exercise leads the Brazilian president to respond to the pandemic by mobilizing repertoires of interpretation and a network of media screens that can be sustained by his social media followers as Bolsonarian co-framers. These cooperative participants can expand the reach of their president's beliefs when that network disseminates them.

In this way, we can see that this notion of government and the dynamics it produces can be operated through the media domain by forging and distributing social media reper-

toires of interpretation and conducts, as if they were individual (i. e. from a social media 'friend') and not presidential. This blurry configuration can contribute to make such conducts not only visible and embraced by individual subjects that emerge as Bolsonarian co-framers but also replicated as a potential totalising presidential/state (infra-)norm (or an almost 'invisible' norm) across other media screens, disorienting bodies and part of the population governed by Bolsonaro in the context of the pandemic.

The presidential communicational 'style', the governmental network of expansion it produces across different media or translocal spaces along with the transdimensional participation of his supporters may (de-)stabilise the 'authoritative' practices of communication. With the help of *attention* that emerges as a 'productive commodity', dynamics of (de-)stabilisation produce (re)framings and effects which can affect the population's visual field. Such dynamics may (re-)forge what/who captures people's attention and, then, what they see in relation to the medical dimension of the pandemic or other inter-related issues (e. g. a country's economy, health/educational systems or, yet, un/employment). The potential for expansion alluded to, however, implies visibility, more contact and co-existence across media spaces with other transdimensional participants that are part of the translocal population, but in no way supporters of Bolsonaro's beliefs or responses regarding the COVID-19 crisis.

It is exactly the Bolsonarian search for visibility to reaffirm the president's opinions, beliefs or responses as legitimate and the abovementioned contact (associated with frictions between transmedia practices and repertoires of reinterpretation) that may pave the way to expose Bolsonaro's communicational and *biopolitical* strategies of government (FOUCAULT, [1975–1976] 2003, p. 245) as well as the impact they have on bodies, lives and deaths. The digital events (SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015) that have circulated with the following hashtagged memetic expressions, #StopBolsonaro and #GoBolsonaro, can contribute to illustrate this point that involves Bolsonaro's governmental strategies of communication during the pandemic and the textual disputes or frictions that such strategies catalyse. Such frictions generate textual disputes that attract more expert re-framers to orient and co-construct a related network of social media supporters along with their collective-collaborative transmedia practices of reinterpretation based on the rearticulation of expert discourses' authority disseminated through the media domain. When the semiotic work of re-framers from traditional media and social media users emerges, the media domain becomes a central di-

9 The aforementioned 'conservative' agenda and the neo-pentecostal segment that are locally convergent and define or support the communicational strategies of Bolsonaro's government(-ality) play an important part in the hybrid state-religious-pastoral and algorithmic replication of such conducts that circulate through a kind of 'techno-preacherism' among Bolsonarian social media users. This suggests that the latter may see in Bolsonaro's messages a presidential 'passport to salvation' which would make them immune or special (to the point that they may selectively deny the existence of the disease or minimise its impacts over other people's lives/deaths).

mension of power-knowledge – it turns into a discursive arena in the context of the pandemic.

Bearing in mind the Brazilian scenario, I resort to Foucauldian genealogical and critical discursive perspectives (FOUCAULT, [1970] 1981, p. 73) to create intelligibility about how domains of media power-knowledge, say, traditional and social media, generate textual trajectories and semiotic-discursive disputes. The latter puts on the spot light networks that involve Bolsonaro, his social media supporters as co-framers and those who oppose or contest the Bolsonarian network as re-framers. In this direction, I will not only focus on the chronological trajectory of the pandemic as a transdimensional social event but also on the governmental, journalistic and social media users' discursive modulations that make visible transmedia practices, processes of (re-)interpretation and their reverberations regarding the aforementioned death toll.

4 Beyond theorisation: next research steps

As a final remark, the theoretical reflexions that I have presented in this paper, I think, can contribute to: i) make visible the referred reverberations and some of the perspectives that circulated across media spaces; and ii) expose the dynamics of power and resistance that emerge through pandemic frames and what such dynamics produce when those frames communicate a social event like the COVID-19 crisis.

Further research directions related to this work will lead me to interact with a corpus of transmedia data (i. e. a thread with multimodal social media posts sharing embedded hyperlinks that point to news items or with the latter having as their 'content' social media posts). Whilst discussing the posts from the corpus that project potential interconnexions, I will seek to understand how participants from different media spaces frame and make sense of some of the following (bio-/geo-)political inter-connected elements that relate to the coronavirus crisis, namely: i) the COVID-19 virus; ii) bodies, social spaces and strategies of prevention; iii) the Brazilian population; and iv) Brazil's economy and its relation with notions such as: work, liberty, life and death.

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