

# Lies Have Short Legs: Brazilian Media Exposes Bolsonaro's Deceptive Claims Amidst Misinformation Surge

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## Abstract

In an era marked by widespread misinformation and declining trust in institutions and journalism, the deceptive statements made by former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro have gained significant attention. However, it was only in the second year of his term, during the COVID-19 pandemic, that news outlets actively began to expose and denounce his false and misleading claims. This article presents a content analysis comparing press coverage of the following four pivotal moments in the Bolsonaro administration during the pandemic: his speech at the UN General Assembly in 2020, his national radio and TV address in March 2021, his speech to ambassadors in July 2022, and his interview with *Jornal Nacional*, the most-watched news program in Brazil, in August 2022. By examining articles and headlines from the country's three most prominent newspapers, including two leading fact-checking agencies, this study reveals a shift in media discourse with the term 'lie' being increasingly used. Our hypothesis is that journalism is striving to reclaim its role as a trustworthy institution.

**Keywords:** headlines, newspapers, misinformation, fact-checking, lies, trustworthy

## 1. Introduction

On January 15, 2021, the fact-checking agency Lupa published its first article using the verb “to lie.” The agency reported that the Minister of Health, Eduardo Pazuello, and the then President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, disseminated false information about COVID-19 during a live broadcast. One of the false claims they made was regarding an “early treatment” for the disease. In an editorial released on the same day, the Lupa Agency explained the rationale behind their decision to use the term “lie”. The agency stated that while errors in statements made by public figures and politicians may seem like lies, they had previously chosen to simply label them as “false.” However, due to the current context and the realities of the pandemic, the Lupa Agency felt compelled to re-evaluate this approach. By January, the country had reached the tragic milestone of 200,000 covid-related deaths. The agency placed an importance on individuals within the nation who deliberately spread false information about the pandemic and its effects, stating that it was clearly time to address this issue (Lupa, 2021).

The Lupa Agency is part of a recent news media ecosystem that emerged around 2015 and has gained momentum due to the increasing amount of misinformation being spread on social media platforms. This is a growing concern shared by 84% of Brazilians (Digital News Report, 2020). Alongside agencies like Lupa and Aos Fatos (both founded in the same year), the Comprova consortium, consisting of 33 media outlets, and numerous other initiatives have also emerged. Currently, Brazil has the National Network to Fight Misinformation, which is a collaborative effort between media organizations, universities, and civil society entities.

The Lupa Agency’s approach of identifying and labelling lies was paralleled by other media outlets. On January 18, G1

published an article titled “Pazuello<sup>1</sup> lies”, claiming that the ministry had never recommended ‘early treatment’ for COVID” (G1, 2021). UOL Notícias, on the same day, used a similar headline: “Pazuello lies by saying that the Health Ministry never recommended medications for COVID-19” (UOL, 2021). Aos Fatos Agency followed suit with their article “Pazuello lies about early treatment for COVID-19” (Pacheco, 2021). These headlines stand in contrast to milder ones published months earlier, such as “Decotelli formally resigns from the Ministry of Education after questions over his curriculum,” which appeared on UOL. This article was about the lies that the former Minister of Education, Carlos Alberto Decotelli, included in his Curriculum Lattes; he held the position for only five days (Araújo; Andrade, 2020).

Upon initial examination, the changes made by news media websites in their approach to “falsehood,” “truthfulness,” and “lies” may appear subtle. However, these changes have raised some complex questions regarding transformations in professional practices. At a time when science denial and disregard for human rights is on the rise, the hypothesis of this article is about journalism trying to revive its role as a trustworthy entity, to reclaim one of the fundamental tenets of its professional *ethos* in modernity. News credibility was consolidated based on journalism’s authority to tell socially acceptable and shared truths. In contemporary times, delineating this position would involve identifying those who propagate falsehoods in order to reinforce the role of journalism as the guardian of truth.

To test this hypothesis, we used content analysis to compare press coverage of four pivotal moments in the Bolsonaro administration during the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) the President's speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 2020; 2) his address in March 2021 during a nationwide radio and TV broadcast; 3) his speech to ambassadors on July 18, 2022; and 4) his interview with *Jornal Nacional*, the most-watched news program in Brazil, on August 22, 2022. These events occurred before and after Lupa Agency’s decision (shortly followed by other media outlets) to adopt the term “lie.” We gathered all headlines, subheadings, print and online news articles from five sources — *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, *O Estado de S.Paulo*, Lupa Agency, and Aos Fatos Agency. We selected these four events due to the substantial number of unverified claims included by the former president, who drew extensive scrutiny from the press. *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Estado de S.Paulo* and *O Globo* are the largest circulation newspapers in Brazil, and Lupa and Aos Fatos are the most important fact-checking agencies. This article is composed of five sections. The first two sections discuss how credibility is built in journalism and the increase in misinformation. The remaining sections that follow present the methodology, findings and conclusion.

## 2. Building Credibility in Journalism

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the definition of journalism as a social form of knowledge, drawing from the perspective of Genro Filho (1987), a reference author in journalism studies in Brazil. According to Genro Filho, “Journalism’s criterion for information is inherently linked to the portrayal of an event from the perspective of its uniqueness” (Genro Filho, 1987, p. 163), even though the informational content is paradoxically associated with both the particular and the universal. The singular aspect represents the internal structure of journalism practice, which encapsulates the significance derived from the particular and the universal, transcending and preserving them as integral content. Thus, “singular” facts are not “purely objective” in journalism since they are embedded within the historical and social dimensions.

However, Genro Filho also claims that journalism and its socio-professional environment are marked by a functionalist-pragmatic approach, which often means professionals fail to grasp the connection between facts and their historical-social dimension. By emphasizing the ontological dimension of social facts and the inherent subjective component of their composition, the author argues that interpretation, opinion, ethical judgment, and ideology are intrinsic in discourses that try to shed light on the phenomenon. It is therefore not a matter of one fact and multiple opinions, but rather “the same phenomenon - an indeterminate manifestation regarding its meaning - and a plurality of facts, shaped by opinions and judgments” (Genro Filho, 1987, p. 49). The fact is objective and it is understood through its relationship with history. Although journalism, according to its modern conception, should refrain from explicit value judgments, it is worth noting that valuation is already present in the form of recognition, hierarchization, and the selection of facts.

This knowledge of recognition – the ability to discern a “true statement” from a lie – provides journalists with a competence defined by Miguel (1999) as an “expert system”. The concept of expert systems, as presented by Giddens (1991), refers to systems of technical or professional competence that organize social and material environments, and generate cognitive trust and belief in the credibility of knowledge. Journalism is an expert system to the extent that the public trusts the information it disseminates because they believe that journalists have technical expertise in the area, while it provides credibility because the public believes that accurate journalism has been used to produce the news.

Miguel (2019), in one of his more recent texts, critically examines and expands upon journalism as a monopolistic expert system by delving into the historical development of its discursive mediation based on the principles of impartiality,

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<sup>1</sup>Eduardo Pazuello was the Health Minister at the time.

objectivity, and neutrality. However, in the era of digital information and communication technologies, the reinforcement of self-referential discourse no longer serves as a distinguishing factor or a viable argument to establish the authority and social legitimacy of journalism.

As a response, journalism places high importance on its professional values of objectivity, of respect for factual truths, and of the separation between news and opinion. For decades, studies have shown how the epistemological foundation of journalism's self-discourse is fragile and reliant on strategies of universalizing a particular social viewpoint (Miguel, 2019, p. 50). Even though contemporary structural changes have a profound effect on journalism, the modern standard of providing relevant and credible information continues to give professional journalism the values it associates itself with. "News, the pursuit of truth, independence, objectivity, and a notion of public service," are ideas that Traquina (2004, p.34) highlights as sustaining the intellectual pole of journalism. These values remain strongly linked to informative journalism, a model invented and consolidated between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, which relies on narratives centered on referential reality and discursively structured in the genres of news and reporting.

The deontological principle that underpins this commitment is objectivity (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003), which is understood as the "appropriateness of a representation to reality" and is closely tied to the notion of truth, namely an epistemological understanding that views truth as correspondence (Sponholz, 2009, p.19). Critical studies examining the definition of truth as correspondence in journalism (Tuchman, 1999; Schudson, 2010; Rodrigues & Aguiar, 2020) demonstrate that the societal authority granted to professional journalists to provide accounts of "truth as correspondence" about social reality and fulfil their mediating role has been based on their expertise, developed through strategic practices employed in news production.

In a scholarly work examining the ideology embedded in news language, Lage, another reference author in journalism studies in Brazil, asserts that the production of news is intricately linked to the realm of social actions and the discourse surrounding this practice within society. News consists of fragments of appearances. Therefore, it excludes verbs that refer to the invisible and the unverifiable, such as thinking, believing, trusting. What someone thinks or what the people trust is not news, unless it is expressed (made apparent) in a discourse (Lage, 1979, p. 48).

By asserting that the informative genre in journalism must align with immediate reality as its reference, and that the value of truth in journalism relies on the accuracy and precision of language, the author highlights the exclusion of certain verbs that express subjectivity. According to Lage (1985, p. 18), "What someone thought, imagined, conceived, or dreamed is not news, but what someone said, proposed, reported, or confessed is." The primary verb system in news production highlights its main characteristic: the perfective aspect<sup>2</sup>, which represents the completion of the action. Within this linguistic perspective, when analysing the ideology of news, the choice of verbs and grammatical forms with a perfective aspect for building texts is linked to the type of knowledge that informative journalism offers.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2003) argue that objectivity, as a journalism method, allows journalists to establish means of verifying their reports. They emphasize that impartiality and neutrality serve as techniques and resources rather than inherent values. However, it is worth noting that the authors themselves warn about the potential pitfalls of these techniques. They warn that "neutrality can lead to distortion." Striving for neutrality by including all perspectives does not always provide an accurate reflection of reality. For instance, giving voice to dissenting opinions on topics where the scientific consensus is strong, such as climate change or medical treatments, can mislead readers and undermine the truth. Unfortunately, the pursuit of neutrality in journalism is often flawed, resulting in an oversimplified interpretation (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2003, pp. 121-122).

According to Genro Filho's analysis, the concept of objectivity in journalism entails perceiving the world as a collection of "ready-made and finished facts," assuming their existence prior to any form of perception, and asserting their autonomy from any ideology or world view. In this perspective, the journalist's role is reduced to a mere act of collecting these facts "as if they were colourful pebbles" (Genro Filho, 1987: 188). Genro Filho regards this view as a "naive vision" rooted in positivist and functionalist foundations. However, while acknowledging the connection between journalism and the development of capitalism, the author also sees journalism as "a new social modality of knowledge" with potentials that extend beyond the current system (Genro Filho, 1987, p.188).

### 3. Misinformation, Disinformation and Journalism

Hannah Arendt's perspective on factual truth offers valuable insights for enriching the discussion on journalism and its role as a means of knowledge and its limitations in today's society. Arendt posited that the defining characteristic of "factual truth" lies in its distinction from mere error, illusion, or opinion. Instead, it encompasses deliberate falsehoods

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<sup>2</sup>In Latin languages, the perfective is also sometimes described as referring to a "completed" action, but it would be more accurate to say that it refers to an action or situation that is seen as a simple whole.

and lies (Arendt, 2014, p. 308). While recognizing that conveying the truth of facts extends beyond the everyday task of journalists to produce information, Arendt places a particular emphasis on the political function of journalism as a form of knowledge in immediate social reality.

Journalism centered around factual truth, as proposed by Arendt, has the potential to initiate a transformative process that could ultimately dismantle the prevalence of falsehoods in contemporary society. Arendt directs our attention to a historical shift that has taken place, where lies are habitually employed as political tools in modern times, only to be succeeded by a postmodern reshaping of History in the present era. In Arendt's words, "where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truth teller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act" (Arendt, 2014, p. 311).

Unfortunately, Arendt's expectation has not been fulfilled. Journalism is not currently leading to the decline of falsehood in contemporary society. The issue lies in the fact that falsehoods find fertile ground on today's digital platforms, where journalism competes with false narratives. In this context, we adopt the perspective of platformization as proposed by Poell, Nieborg and Van Dijck (2020), who align with the tradition of cultural studies:

We therefore understand platformization as the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life. And in the tradition of cultural studies, we conceive of this process as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms. (2020, p. 5).

In the realm of journalism, empirical evidence confirms the significant reorganization of its practices due to the influence of major platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter. Remarkably, a sizable 51% of the global population now relies on social media and Google as primary sources of news and information. Conversely, a mere 28% of readers actually access news organization websites to consume their news (Digital News Report, 2020). This shift raises concerns as the visibility of news within these platforms is governed by algorithmic mechanisms, thereby diminishing the reach and impact of news articles that were traditionally arranged by journalists to shape the news agenda (Barsotti, 2018). Consequently, the prevailing standard undermines the historical foundation of journalism as a trustworthy institution in modern society.

The platform landscape, characterized by the ability of individuals to produce and distribute content, plays a significant role in facilitating the proliferation of misinformation. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) have proposed the term "misinformation" as one of the categories to supplant the term "fake news" put forth by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who defined it as the intentional fabrication of facts through deceptive news channels, with the aim of misleading users.

Wardle and Derakhshan suggest the expression "information disorder" instead of "fake news". Misinformation is one of three categories that make up "information disorder". For the authors, there are three types of "information disorder": 1) misinformation, which refers to false content disseminated without the intent to cause harm; 2) mal-information, which refers to authentic content used to propagate hate speech and harassment online; and 3) disinformation, which refers to content that is manufactured and distributed with the intent to cause harm and influence public opinion. According to these authors' classification, Bolsonaro's false claims belong in the disinformation category.

As stated by Rêgo and Barbosa (2020), the role of journalism in establishing truth in the contemporary era is subject to constant tension. This tension arises from narratives propagated on social media platforms by various political mainstreams in different countries who seek to undermine and discredit the credibility of journalism.

The reality is that the journalism *ethos*, which was established in a modern environment primarily as a marketable social practice closely aligned with factual reporting, has faced challenges. This challenge has emerged from the political mainstream in various countries, as well as from society and the misinformation market. Empowered actors within these spheres produce content without concern for factual accuracy or striving for proximity to the truth, thereby contesting and appropriating the established journalism norms and values that uphold the visibility of factual reporting to the public. (Rêgo & Barbosa, 2020, p. 81)

According to these authors, there are currently two conflicting dynamics at play: "the ascendancy of falsehood that replaces truth, even within the scientific domain, and the desperate reinforcement of truth construction methods" within the institutions and spheres such as Journalism, Science and Law (Rêgo and Barbosa, 2020: 57). Rodrigues and Aguiar (2020) drew upon the works of Nichols (2017), Kakutani (2018), and Abramson (2019) to investigate the reasons behind the decline of journalism's expertise. In short, they conclude that the global process of disseminating misinformation across digital platforms contributes to the erosion of journalism's credibility. They also argue that the theoretical perspectives of postmodernism and relativism further support the idea of a detachment from reality, thereby exacerbating the decline in trust in journalism's authority.

Souza (2019) also identifies the proliferation of "fascist lies" in the form of "fake news" on social media as a heightened manifestation of irrationalism rooted in postmodern thought, resulting in an ideological decline (2019:10). According to

the author, the unrestrained irrationalism exhibited by the purveyors of “fake news” negates objective reality, submerging it within the dominant ideological truths of their beliefs (2019, p.:13).

Souza (2019) argues that this ideological landscape generates a crisis of trust that is reflected in the widespread dissemination of falsehoods. However, the author also identifies potential solutions for revitalizing journalism as a form of knowledge:

The endeavour to overcome the estrangements elaborated by the metabolism of capital and its irrationalist expression in the realm of ideas becomes not only necessary but indispensable for the revitalization of journalism as a form of knowledge capable of exposing the conflicts that arise in society. This endeavour aims to advance the fight against “post-truth” as a subjective tone of everyday life. (Souza, 2019, p.14).

The strategy adopted by newspapers to explicitly identify and label falsehoods could potentially be a new path toward critical journalism and instigating transformative shifts in the cognitive and socio-professional processes of news production; however, it is noteworthy that this shift in media discourse is recent, as demonstrated in our findings. A study on Brazilian news media sites in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that 60.36% of the headlines reproduced the former president’s discourse without acknowledging it was a lie or an error. Only 13.51% of headlines corrected Bolsonaro’s false or misleading claims (Gehrke, Träsel, Ramos and Ozorio, 2023) .

#### 4. Methodology

In order to examine the shift in vocabulary used by the press when covering the Bolsonaro government, a content analysis methodology was adopted (Bardin, 2020). To determine whether a change in position occurred, four significant and widely-publicized events were selected: 1) President Jair Bolsonaro's speech at the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2020; 2) his televised address on March 23, 2021; 3) his speech to ambassadors on July 18, 2022; and 4) his interview with *Jornal Nacional*, the most-watched news program in Brazil, on August 22, 2022. Given the multitude of unverified claims made by the former president, these speeches were extensively fact-checked by the media. In June 2023, Brazil’s Superior Electoral Court rendered Bolsonaro ineligible to run for office for the next eight years due to his abuse of power and misuse of the media during his speech to foreign ambassadors at the Alvorada Palace, the official residence of the Presidency of the Republic. The research corpus is comprised of the three leading newspapers<sup>3</sup> in Brazil (*Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S.Paulo*) as well as the two major fact-checking agencies Lupa and Aos Fatos. A total of 54 content pieces from these five sources were analyzed.

A total of 16 content pieces on the former president's speech at the United Nations General Assembly were analyzed from the five sources. Print and online editions of the newspapers were also examined. The 16 content pieces consisted of two headlines (*Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Estado de S.Paulo*), one front-page headline (*O Globo*), two print news articles from *Folha de S.Paulo*, two print news articles from *O Globo*, two print news articles from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, two online news articles from *Folha de S.Paulo*, one online news article from *O Globo*, two online news articles from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, one online news article from Lupa Agency, and one online news article from Aos Fatos Agency.

We examined a total of 12 content pieces from the same five sources in our analysis of the media coverage of the former president's televised address. These included one headline from *Folha de S.Paulo*, two front-page headlines (*O Globo* and *O Estado de S.Paulo*), three print news articles from each of the three newspapers, one online news article from *Folha de S.Paulo*, one online news article from *O Globo*, two online news articles from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, and two online news articles from each of the two fact-checking agencies.

We also analyzed 14 content pieces regarding Jair Bolsonaro's address to ambassadors. Three headlines were collected (*Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo* and *O Estado de S.Paulo*), a front page headline (*O Globo*), a print news item from *Folha de S.Paulo*, two print news items from *O Globo*, two print news items from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, online news from *Folha de S.Paulo*, online news from *O Globo*, online news from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, online news from Agência Aos Fatos, and online news from Lupa Agency.

We analyzed a total of 12 content pieces regarding Bolsonaro’s interview with *Jornal Nacional*. These content pieces consist of two headlines (*Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Estado de S.Paulo*), one front page headline (*Folha de S.Paulo*), two print news items from *Folha de S.Paulo*, one print news item from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, one online news story from *Folha de S.Paulo*, two online news stories from *O Globo*, one online news story from *O Estado de S.Paulo*, one online news story from Agência Aos Fatos, and one online news story from Agência Lupa.

<sup>3</sup>According to Wolf (2009), reference newspapers are those that serve as a benchmark for other publications. In the United States, this role is attributed to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Aguiar (2008) noted that competition among newspapers contributes to the establishment of prominent titles. In Brazil, the models would be *Folha de S.Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S.Paulo*.

A total of 11 categories were created based on keywords: nouns related to the realms of falsehood and truth. According to Fonseca Jr., “categorization involves the task of classifying and regrouping the units of data into a reduced number of categories, with the aim of making the mass of data and its diversity intelligible” (2015, p.298). According to Bardin (2020), a well-executed categorization should possess the following attributes: 1) mutual exclusivity (preventing the inclusion of the same element in multiple categories); 2) homogeneity (including only units of the same nature within a given category); 3) relevance (ensuring that the categories reflect the objectives of the investigation); 4) objectivity and fidelity (using procedures that are objective and replicable in future research); and 5) productivity (yielding results that facilitate meaningful inferences).

In accordance with Bardin's observations, a set of 11 categories was established based on the semantic domains of truth and falsehood. These categories contain terms such as 1) lie, 2) truth, 3) distortion, 4) error, 5) omission, 6) exaggeration, 7) imprecision, 8) contradiction, 9) unsustainability, 10) falsehood, and 11) unsupported claims. To facilitate our analysis, verbs and adjectives associated with these concepts were grouped under their corresponding keyword category. For example, a news outlet claiming that the former president “lied” was classified under the “lie” category.

Additional decisions had to be made in an attempt to ensure consistency and coherence in the analysis. For instance, the verb “maquiou” (meaning “masked” or “disguised”), used twice by *Folha de S.Paulo* in their coverage of the UN speech, was classified under the “distortion” category. On the other hand, the term “inflou” (meaning “inflated”), used in a news article by *O Estado de S.Paulo*, was categorized as an example of “exaggeration”. In the case of *O Globo*, three labels used by the Globo Organizations fact-checking service were also grouped into similar categories. The word “fake” was categorized under “lie” or “falsehood”. The term “fato” (meaning “fact”) was categorized as “truth” or “verity”, and the expression “não é bem assim” (meaning “it's not quite like that”) was included in the “exaggeration” category. As for the Lupa Agency, the label “verdadeiro, mas” (meaning “true, but..”) was included in the “truth” category, despite the reservations implied by the word “but.”

## 5. From Falsehood to Lies

On September 22, 2020, former president Jair Bolsonaro delivered a speech at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which was held virtually for the first time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 1949, it has been the responsibility of the Brazilian president to deliver the opening speech at the event. The former president's speech garnered significant attention in the press due to a number of false statements he made, particularly regarding the actions taken by the Brazilian government in response to the pandemic and the wildfires in the Amazon and Pantanal regions. The dissemination of these false statements by the former president himself generated widespread media coverage and public scrutiny.

One of former president Bolsonaro's statements that received widespread scrutiny from the press was his claim that “by judicial decision” all measures of isolation and freedom restrictions were delegated to each of the 27 governors. As extensively reported by news media, the Supreme Federal Court (STF) deliberated on three cases and ruled that governors and mayors had the autonomy to establish their own plans to combat the coronavirus. However, this did not absolve the federal government from its responsibility to develop a national strategy to address COVID-19, which, regrettably, was not undertaken.

Additional unfounded claims about the pandemic were disseminated in the former president's speech, including his endorsement of early treatments based on alleged consultation with healthcare professionals. However, it is important to note that at the time, the World Health Organization (WHO) had already issued warnings regarding the use of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine. Not only did the WHO emphasize the ineffectiveness of these medications, but they also warned against their potential side effects (Bianchini, 2020).

In the same address, the former president made the assertion that Brazil was a leader in the conservation of tropical forests. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that available data from June 2020, provided by Global Forest Watch, a non-governmental organization dedicated to monitoring forests globally, indicate that one-third of primary tropical forests lost on the Earth have occurred in Brazil. What's more, fact-checking conducted by the Lupa Agency (Macário et al., 2020) revealed that Brazil ranked first among the top ten tropical countries in terms of the highest loss of primary forests in 2019. This stark disparity between the former president's statement and the verifiable data underscores the significance of accurate information and the urgent need to address environmental challenges effectively.

Despite the substantial amount of unverified, deceptive, or distorted claims presented in the UN speech, it is worth noting, as indicated in Table 1, that the analysed news outlets refrained from employing the term “lie” in their coverage. Instead, the most prominent category within the truth/lie semantic field across all five media sources was the noun “falsidade” (meaning “falsehood”). It is important to recognize that this category encompasses the corresponding adjective “false,” as previously specified.

Table 1. Analysis of the Coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's Speech at the UN

Keywords groups	Folha de S.Paulo	O Globo	O Estado de S.Paulo	Lupa Agency	Aos Fatos	Total
Falsehood	1	3	3	5	11	23
Unsupported Claims	6	4	8	0	0	18
True	1	2	0	2	12	17
Exaggeration	5	2	3	5	1	16
Imprecision	3	2	1	0	7	13
Distortion	2	0	8	0	0	10
Unsustainability	0	0	0	1	6	7
Contradiction	0	0	0	0	4	4
Error	2	1	0	0	0	3
Omission	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lie	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: authors' own.

The word “falsidade” was found 23 times in media coverage from *O Globo*, *O Estado de S.Paulo*, *Folha de S.Paulo*, Lupa Agency, and Aos Fatos Agency. It is noteworthy that this word was used 11 times by the Aos Fatos Agency, the most among all aforementioned media outlets. The *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper only used this word once, which was the least among all media outlets.

The “unsupported claims” category was the second most frequently used category in media coverage of Bolsonaro's speech at the UN among the analysed news outlets. *O Estado de S. Paulo* used this category eight times, *Folha de S.Paulo* six times, and *O Globo* four times. The “truth” category was third in terms of the total number of records. However, there was a noticeable discrepancy among the media outlets regarding its usage. This category was used a total of 17 times, the Aos Fatos Agency accounting for 12 of those times, making it the media outlet that most frequently used the expression “falsidade” (falsehood) and its related terms.

One of the statements regarded as “true” was the number of individuals who benefited from the emergency assistance program during the pandemic - approximately 67 million. However, of note is the fact that all the news outlets we analyzed unanimously identified an exaggeration in the value of the financial assistance mentioned by the former president, who claimed it was US\$ 1,000. In reality, the actual amount disbursed as assistance totaled US\$ 772, as reported by the Lupa Agency (Macário et al., 2020), which was in line with findings from the other news outlets.

Another piece of information regarded as “true” by the Aos Fatos Agency was the former president's claim that he had allocated a sum of close to US\$ 400 million toward the development, research, and production of the COVID-19 vaccine, in partnership with Fiocruz, the University of Oxford, and AstraZeneca (Ribeiro et al., 2020). However, the Lupa Agency considered this information to be “exaggerated”, and estimated the value to be around US\$ 351 million (Macário et al., 2020).

Only two of the three print newspapers highlighted the topic in their headlines: *O Estado de S.Paulo* and *Folha de S.Paulo*. In *O Globo*, the topic was addressed on a front-page headline. The headline in *O Estado de S.Paulo* adopted a more critical tone: “At the UN, Bolsonaro distorts data on fires and COVID” (Na Onu, 2020). *O Globo's* headline read: “Bolsonaro takes a defensive tone in UN speech” (*O Globo*, 2020). *Folha de S.Paulo* followed a similar line: “Bolsonaro defends himself at the UN regarding the pandemic and fires” (*Folha de S.Paulo*, 2020). As shown in Table 2, the São Paulo newspaper completely changed its tone for its coverage of the former president's subsequent televised address.

Table 2. Analysis of Media Coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's Address on March 23, 2021, Broadcast on National Radio and TV

Keyword groups	Folha de S.Paulo	O Globo	O Estado de S.Paulo	Lupa Agency	Aos Fatos	Total
Distortion	2	4	4	1	0	11
Lie	6	0	0	1	2	9
Truth	0	0	2	3	3	8
Falsehood	0	0	1	1	4	6
Omission	1	3	1	0	0	5
Exaggeration	0	0	1	1	1	3
Unsustainability	0	0	0	0	3	3
Imprecision	0	0	0	0	2	2
Error	1	0	0	1	0	2
Unsupported Claims	0	0	0	0	0	0
Contradiction	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: authors' own

On March 23, 2021, former President Jair Bolsonaro delivered a five-minute nationwide radio and television address<sup>4</sup>. During his speech, Bolsonaro announced the government's intent to make 2021 the “year of vaccination for all Brazilians.” This statement came shortly after Brazil recorded its highest daily covid-related death toll, with 3,128 fatalities over the preceding 24 hours. Despite the grim situation, the former president expressed his solidarity with those who had suffered losses and claimed that the government had consistently taken significant measures to combat both the coronavirus and the economic crisis. However, this media address was met with public dissent, as demonstrated by the protests and the widespread “panelaço” (banging of pots and pans) which occurred in several capital cities across the country.

Our analysis of media coverage from the five analyzed news outlets revealed a noticeable shift in tone, as evidenced in Table 2, with the inclusion of the word “lie,” which had not appeared in the reports on Bolsonaro's UN speech. The most prevalent category was “distortion,” being used 11 times. *O Globo* and *O Estado de S.Paulo* were the media outlets that utilized this category the most, employing it four times each. On its front-page headline, *O Globo* wrote: “Amidst pot-banging, Bolsonaro speaks about vaccines on TV” (*O Globo*, 2021). Additionally, the “distortion” category was used (page 12) with the headline: “Bolsonaro distorts data and makes promises of vaccines for all” (Lindner et al., 2021). In *O Estado de S.Paulo*, there was no specific front-page headline on the subject; it was only mentioned at the end of the headline by addressing the number of deaths caused by the pandemic. On page 10, the title read: “Bolsonaro mentions vaccines and becomes target of pot-banging” (Moraes, 2021). The article claimed that “the speech, filled with distortions, was accompanied by pot-banging protests in several cities across the country.” It further added that “for months, Bolsonaro had doubted the effectiveness of vaccines and had even blocked the decision to purchase the CoronaVac vaccine”.

“Lies” is the second most frequently used category, mentioned a total of nine times. Among the analyzed news media, *Folha de S.Paulo* used this category the most, a total of six times. Following the former president's televised address, the newspaper featured a prominent headline on the front page of its print edition, which read: “Bolsonaro lies about pandemic measures in TV address” (*Folha de S.Paulo*, 2021). On page 10, the top headline read: “On television, Bolsonaro lies about pandemic actions and declares 2021 as the year of vaccination” (Carvalho; Uribe, 2021). The accompanying article, also available online, highlights that “Throughout the past 12 months, Bolsonaro has consistently downplayed the severity of the pandemic, organized and attended large gatherings, publicly criticized the use of face masks, impeded vaccine procurement negotiations, and expressed scepticism towards vaccinations on multiple occasions.”

In the third position, similar to media coverage of the UN speech, the “truth” category was observed. Neither *O Globo* nor *Folha de S.Paulo* used this category, and only the two fact-checking agencies and *O Estado de S.Paulo* employed it. AOs Fatos deemed the following information as truthful: the agreement between Fiocruz and AstraZeneca for the transfer of technology and production of 100 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, the government's participation in the Covax Facility consortium, the international alliance for COVID-19 vaccines created by the WHO, and the allocation of an additional R\$ 20 billion in funds to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. However, it is important to note that the headline of the fact-checking article chose to emphasize the “lies” category: “Bolsonaro repeats lies about actions against COVID-19 in address” (Ribeiro et al, 2021).

<sup>4</sup>Available at

<https://www.gov.br/planalto/pt-br/acompanhe-o-planalto/pronunciamentos/pronunciamentos-do-presidente-da-republica/pronunciamento-do-senhor-presidente-da-republica-jair-bolsonaro-em-cadeia-nacional-de-radio-e-televisao-23-03-2021>. Accessed on: September 13, 2021.

The fact-checking agency Lupa, while identifying three “truths” in the former president's address, used the expression “true, but” twice. These qualifications were made regarding the government's adherence to the Covax Facility consortium, acknowledging that it could have been done on broader terms. The other qualification was related to the distribution of 29.9 million vaccine doses at that time, instead of 32 million. However, the agency explained that this margin of error was still within the parameters of “true” information. Curiously, the headline for the fact-checking article also chose to employ the “lies” category: “In his address, Bolsonaro changes tone, but repeats lies about vaccination” (Macário, Romany and Afonso, 2021).

In the third event chosen for this study – President Jair Bolsonaro's speech to ambassadors at the Alvorada Palace – the group of keywords related to “lie” increased considerably among coverage from the five media outlets we analyzed. The verb “lie” and the noun “lie” were used 16 times, as shown in Table 3. The group of keywords most used by the five media organizations was “falsehood”, used 47 times, followed by “unsupported claims”, used 18 times.

Table 3. Analysis of Media Coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's Speech to Ambassadors on July 18, 2022

Keyword groups	Folha de S.Paulo	O Globo	O Estado de S.Paulo	Lupa Agency	Aos Fatos	Total
Falsehood	0	9	9	5	24	47
Unsupported claims	7	7	3	1	0	18
Lie	8	7	0	1	0	16
True	0	0	0	1	13	14
Exaggeration	0	0	0	3	4	7
Distortion	0	0	1	0	3	4
Error	2	1	1	0	0	4
Omission	0	0	2	0	1	3
Unsustainability	0	0	1	0	0	1
Imprecision	0	0	0	0	0	0
Contradiction	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: authors' own

In his speech, Bolsonaro repeatedly cast doubt about the security of electronic voting machines, despite these suspicions having already been denied by official bodies. The former president also attacked two ministers of the Superior Electoral Court and said that Brazil would only “have peace” again if the TSE adopted measures to change the electronic voting machines. The event was broadcast by TV Brasil, a state broadcaster. Bolsonaro made other false claims, maintaining that only two countries in the world used electronic voting machines. Data from the International Institute for Democracy and Social Assistance (Idea Internacional) show that a total of 23 countries used electronic voting machines for general elections in 2015 – and a further 18 countries used them in their regional elections. The information had already been explained to the public by the TSE itself (Rodrigues et al, 2022). This speech would eventually lead to the former president being banned from running for office for the next eight years due to his abuse of power and misuse of the media. On the same day as this presidential speech, the American embassy released a statement claiming that the Brazilian electoral system was an example “for the world”.

The *Folha de S.Paulo* was the newspaper that used the “lie” keywords the most. The day after the former president's speech to ambassadors, the newspaper published the headline “Bolsonaro lies to foreigners about ballot boxes” (Folha de S.Paulo, 2022). On page 4, the newspaper used “lies” again and added the verb “distort” in the title: “Bolsonaro makes new coup threats and repeats lies in speeches to ambassadors” (Feitoza et al, 2022). The Lupa Agency also adopted “lies” in its title: “In a meeting with ambassadors, Bolsonaro depends on lies to attack the electoral system” (Nomura et al, 2022). The *O Estado de S.Paulo* newspaper was more to the point in its online edition, with the title: “Bolsonaro gives false information about the electoral process in a meeting with foreign ambassadors” (Pacheco et al, 2022). The front page headline of this same newspaper's print edition claimed that Bolsonaro's attacks on electronic voting machines were “unsupported claims”. The *O Globo* newspaper also focused on Bolsonaro's attacks being “unsupported claims” included it on the front page headline and its online coverage.

One month after his speech to the ambassadors, during his re-election campaign, Bolsonaro repeated lies in an interview conducted by Brazil's most watched television news program, *Jornal Nacional*, on TV Globo. The *O Estado de S.Paulo* newspaper then published the following title on its online edition: “Bolsonaro tells 1 lie every 3 minutes on *Jornal Nacional*”. The former president gave at least 13 “false” pieces of information during the 40-minute interview, according to the report. The report goes on to state that Bolsonaro “repeatedly gave out misleading information” about the COVID-19 pandemic and the integrity of the electoral process, “misquoted” unemployment data from former president Dilma Rousseff's time in government and “distorted” information about the situation and preservation of the environment under his government (Pacheco et al, 2022a). The text was produced by *Estadão Verifica*, the newspaper's *fact-checking* team. The other presidential candidates were also interviewed by *Jornal Nacional* over the course of the week.

In the fourth event selected for this article, the “lies” keywords had the second-highest number of occurrences in news coverage for the five media outlets we analyzed. The word “lie” and the verb “lying” were used 16 times in the titles and reports (see Table 4). In first place was the “falsehood” category, used 45 times. Similar to *O Estado de S.Paulo*, the *O Globo* newspaper opted to use the “lie” keywords. “During Jornal Nacional interview, Bolsonaro says he will respect elections 'as long as they are clean' and lies about the ballot boxes, the STF, and the pandemic”, reads the title of the online report (Marinatto & Mello, 2022). The *Folha de S.Paulo* also chose to use the verb “lie” in its online news title for the president's interview: “Bolsonaro lies in JN and sets conditions for accepting election results” (Teixeira et al, 2022). Both the *Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Globo*'s front-page headlines used the “lie” keywords.

Table 4. Analysis of Media Coverage of Jair Bolsonaro's Interview with Jornal Nacional on August 22, 2022

Keyword groups	Folha de S.Paulo	O Globo	O Estado de S.Paulo	Lupa Agency	Aos Fatos	Total
Falsehood	5	0	11	5	24	45
Lie	11	12	2	2	1	28
Exaggeration	1	5	0	0	3	9
True	1	1	1	2	2	7
Distortion	0	4	1	0	2	7
Error	0	4	1	0	2	7
Omission	2	0	1	0	0	3
Unsupported Claims	1	0	1	0	0	2
Imprecision	0	0	2	0	0	2
Contradiction	2	0	0	0	0	2
Unsustainability	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: authors' own

Of particular interest is that the fact-checking agencies were not as emphatic as the newspapers when pointing out the lies the former president told during his interview. The Aos Fatos Agency opted for an uninformative title: “We fact-checked Bolsonaro's interview on Jornal Nacional” (Ribeiro et al, 2022). The Lupa Agency placed its emphasis more on the “falsehood” keywords: “During Jornal Nacional interview, Bolsonaro uses false information to accuse Bonner of 'fake news'” (Nomura et al, 2022a). During his interview, the president denied ever insulting ministers of the Federal Supreme Court and accusing the television news presenter, William Bonner, of supporting “fake news” against him. The ombudsman considered the Lupa Agency's stance to be timid (Costa, 2022). The journalist drew attention to the low number of fact-checks on the two main candidates – Bolsonaro and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (now in his third term) – and called into question the agency's supposed neutrality: “Lula and Bolsonaro were both accused of giving “false” statements three times. After analyzing the two interviews, I believe there is no doubt that the current president spoke more untruths than the former president”, claimed Costa.

Based on the content analysis, it becomes apparent that the act of explicitly labelling lies was a delayed strategy employed by the five examined news media outlets in their coverage of four significant events involving former president Bolsonaro during the pandemic. However, the integration of the term “lies” into the lexicon of journalism has the potential to instigate changes in professional practices. In agreement with the viewpoints expressed by Genro Filho (1987) and Souza (2019), who perceive the inherent power of journalism and its ability to transcend systemic challenges and reaffirm itself as a social form of knowledge, the response of the journalism industry to these “fascist lies” (Souza, 2019) may signify a path towards the reassertion of journalism's authority.

We concur with the perspectives put forth by Genro Filho (1987) and Souza (2019), who recognize the capacity of journalism to surmount systemic obstacles and reaffirm itself as a socially significant form of knowledge. The journalism community's response to what Souza (2019) describes as “fascist lies” may serve as an indication of a path toward re-establishing journalism's authority.

As noted by Arendt (2014), the antithesis of factual truth is lie, and journalism, as a form of knowledge pertaining to immediate social reality, bears the responsibility of fulfilling its political role. In the current landscape characterized by disinformation, misinformation and the algorithmic dissemination of news, where the credibility of journalism's discourse is put to the test as an authoritative system, there arises a possibility for truth-oriented journalism, focused on exposing lies, to reclaim its position as a disseminator of truths and make strides in dismantling the narratives of “post-truth.”

## 6. Conclusion

In light of the content analysis conducted, it becomes apparent that the shift in vocabulary employed by the news media to identify falsehoods in public discourse serves as evidence that supports the hypothesis put forth in this article. It is important to acknowledge that the act of lying inherently involves an intention to deceive. Therefore, it is this intention that serves as the differentiating factor between veracity and falsehood within the realm of journalism's discourse. What emerges as a crucial

question in contemporary times is that deliberate acts of deception lead to the erosion of the public sphere, consequently rupturing the symbolic agreement that designates certain knowledge domains, including journalism, as integral components of this shared space, despite the existence of multiple and diverse interpretations within their respective understandings.

The ongoing process of postmodern rewriting of History, as described by Arendt (2014), results in the production of narratives that are heavily influenced by appeals to emotions and personal beliefs, devoid of a solid scientific foundation. This phenomenon reflects the philosophical conundrum that characterizes the so-called crisis of modernity, wherein the notion of objective facts is challenged, and various subjective versions of events take precedence. While lying within the realm of politics may be perceived as a commonplace and even acceptable practice, the coverage of political affairs by professional journalists necessitates a deliberate political effort and resistance, as emphasized by scholars such as Lage (1979) and Genro Filho (1987).

If we were to accept the premise that truth has become an elusive concept within the contemporary public sphere, it could be argued that the narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are rendered indistinguishable. However, the field of journalism turns to rigorous methods of verification in order to build news reports based on a discourse that starts from the realm of scientific inquiry. It is within this context that we can place our faith in the restoration of credibility.

In the face of the moral imperative generated by the civilizational forces of the Western world, which have necessitated a commitment to truth-telling, the act of lying during the pandemic reached new heights, going beyond the realms of mere moral or ethical transgressions, it has become a matter of life and death. Consequently, the explicit denouncement of falsehoods in headlines, a crucial responsibility that falls on journalism's shoulders to fulfill its ontological principle, assumes a paramount role in safeguarding harmonious coexistence within the public sphere.

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#### **Authors contributions**

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