FAKE NEWS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A DISSERVICE TO BRAZILIAN SOCIETY

FAKE NEWS EN LA PANDEMIA DE LA COVID-19: UN MAL SERVICIO A LA SOCIEDAD BRASILEÑA

FAKE NEWS NA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19: UM DESSERVIÇO À SOCIEDADE BRASILEIRA

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Abstract
The present study aims to categorize fake news about COVID-19, in addition to pointing out the main strategies for tackling this false information in Brazil. The methodology consisted of two stages: survey and categorization of news about COVID-19, and the search for strategies to minimize impacts of news identified as false, from January to May 2020. In the survey, 186 Fake News about COVID-19, which were later categorized into 5 themes: cure and prevention of COVID-19, disbelief in isolation, dubious research, data manipulation, quality of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and scams on social networks. Thus, it was highlighted that 37.6% and 28.5% of the news were related to data manipulation and deceptive ways of curing or preventing the virus, respectively. In addition, in the search for strategies to combat fake news about COVID-19, there was an emphasis on the initiatives of Federal and State institutions with the dissemination of truthful information through social media. The study managed to achieve the proposed objective, however, it was understood that hundreds of new fakes news are shared all the time, and with that, it was not possible to cover in this work all the news that are published and shared in the information vehicles. Thus, there is a need for further studies on the effects, reasons and who favors the promotion of this type of information.

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Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

1

Keywords: COVID19; Fake News; Disinformation; Infodemia; Social Media.

Resumen
El presente estudio tiene como objetivo clasificar las noticias falsas sobre COVID-19 y apuntar las principales estrategias para el combate a la información falsa en Brasil. La metodología consistió en dos etapas: levantamiento y categorización de noticias falsas sobre COVID-19, y búsqueda de estrategias para enfrentar noticias falsas, de enero a mayo de 2020. En el levantamiento, se encontraron 186 noticias falsas sobre el COVID-19, que luego fueron clasificadas en cinco temas: cura y prevención de COVID-19, incredulidad aislada, investigación dudosa, manipulación de datos, calidad del Equipo de Protección Personal (EPP) y fraude en las redes sociales. Los resultados mostraron que 37,6% y 28,5% de las noticias falsas estaban relacionadas con la manipulación de datos y formas engañosas para curar o prevenir el virus, respectivamente. Además, en la búsqueda de estrategias para combatir las noticias falsas sobre COVID-19, se resaltan las iniciativas de las instituciones federales y estatales con la difusión de información veraz a través de las redes sociales. El estudio logró el objetivo propuesto, sin embargo, se entendió que es costoso seguir la velocidad con la que se desencadenan cientos de nuevas noticias falsas, por lo que en este trabajo no fue posible contemplar todas las noticias falsas publicadas y compartidas en los vehículos de información. Por lo tanto, es evidente la necesidad de realizar más estudios sobre los efectos, las razones y quién favorece la promoción de este tipo de información.

Palabras-clave: COVID-19; Fake News; Desinformación; Infodemia; Redes Sociales.

Resumo
O presente estudo tem como objetivo categorizar as *fake news* a respeito da COVID-19 e apontar as principais estratégias para o enfrentamento às informações falsas no Brasil. A metodologia consistiu em duas etapas: levantamento e categorização das notícias sobre a COVID-19, e busca de estratégias para minimizar os impactos de notícias identificadas como falsas, no período de janeiro a maio de 2020. No levantamento realizado foram encontrados 186 *fake news* sobre a pandemia, que posteriormente foram categorizadas em cinco temas: cura e prevenção da COVID-19, descrença no isolamento, pesquisas duvidosas, manipulação de dados, qualidade dos Equipamentos de Proteção Individual (EPI) e fraudes em redes sociais. Os resultados apontaram que 37,6% e 28,5% dessas notícias eram relacionados a manipulação de dados e formas enganosas de cura ou prevenção do vírus, respectivamente. Além disso, na busca por estratégias de enfrentamento às fake news sobre COVID-19 houve destaque para as iniciativas de instituições Federais e Estaduais com a divulgação de informações verídicas por meio das mídias sociais. O estudo atingiu o objetivo proposto, entretanto, compreendeu-se a dificuldade em acompanhar a velocidade com que são disparadas centenas de novas informações falsas, logo neste trabalho não foi possível contemplar todas as notícias publicadas e compartilhadas nos veículos de informação. Desta forma, evidencia-se a necessidade de novos estudos sobre os efeitos, os motivos e a quem favorece o impulsionamento deste tipo de informação.

Palavras-chave: COVID19; *Fake News*; Desinformação; Infodemia; Mídia Social.

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

2

Introduction

In December 2019, after China registered the first cases of an outbreak of respiratory infection, a new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was identified as responsible for causing the infectious disease COVID-19. The disease presents from milder and asymptomatic respiratory conditions to more severe respiratory conditions. The transmission is from person to person, through close contact, droplets expelled through coughing, sneezing, and contact with contaminated objects or surfaces. The most common symptoms are fever, cough, and difficulty breathing (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION - WHO, 2020a; CENTRE FOR DISEASE PREVENTION AND CONTROL - CDC *et al.*, 2020).

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the new Coronavirus as a pandemic, since it already registered cases of the disease in several countries and continents (WHO, 2020). News about the new virus has spread rapidly around the world, as access to the Internet allows networked social communication with free transmission of information in real time, which can be produced, shared and received. (MOLINA, 2013).

Currently, the Internet is an important source of information on the health/disease/care process and also a technology that enables instantaneous communication between people (IRIART; SILVA, 2015). Faced with the speed of information and with the development of communication technologies, the COVID-19 pandemic scenario opened space for fake news to become a serious public health problem, favored by the rapid spread of information about the new disease (NETO et al., 2020).

For Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) fake news is the intentional and proven false news that could mislead people. This phenomenon has been reported since the Roman Empire, however, it became popular in the U.S. presidential elections and from this, the growing prominence in the social media has highlighted the need to understand them.

According to Delmazo and Valente (2018), although the so-called fabricated news is an old phenomenon, the online environment provides dissemination

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

3

through the culture of sharing, opening the way for misinformation to have a greater reach. This issue gained evidence when it began to reach political systems, especially in elections, triggering increased polarization.

Also, according to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020), the current pandemic situation of the new coronavirus differs from other pandemics due to the growing technological advance that drives the excessive use of social media. Considering that these are valuable digital tools capable of updating news in real time worldwide. However, they are also capable of circulating false or misleading content that can threaten the well-being of the population (UNITED NATIONS - UN, 2020).

The tactic of using false news is not something new, it has been present since the beginning of the history of communication networks, and considering this scenario, the awareness of the population has been standing out (CONDE, 2018). In view of this, public agencies such as WHO and the Ministry of Health have developed strategies aimed at identifying and correcting this dubious information conveyed mainly by social networks, reinforcing the fight against COVID-19 disinfodemia.

Facing the challenges of a society in a dynamic transformation process, it is necessary to use digital platforms and other technological tools as a means to face the dissemination of false information, especially in health, in view of the impact of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic (OSSEGE et al., 2020).

This study aims to categorize the fake news about COVID-19 and to point out the main strategies to face the disinformation about the pandemic in Brazil.

Materials and Method

The present work was divided into two stages: survey and categorization of fake news about COVID-19 and search for strategies for its confrontation. The search was developed from January 1 and finalized on May 31, 2020.

A bibliographic review was carried out in electronic addresses with a greater quantity of news published about COVID-19, present in the history of publications of

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

4

these websites. For the search, the selected websites were: the fake news portal of the Ministry of Health's website; Projeto Comprova that brings together journalists from the main media outlets in the country; Lupa which is a fact-checking project of Folha de São Paulo; Aos Fatos and Uol Confere that they are websites for fact-checking.

Later, the fake news were categorized through the reading of each title and news content. The model proposed by Neto (2020) was used as reference. Then, these categories were adapted according to the most frequent themes in the news about COVID-19, being them: cure and prevention of COVID-19, disbelief in isolation, doubtful researches, data manipulation, quality of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and financial and property frauds in social networks.

Concepts for fake news categorization were defined in:

a) **COVID-19 cure and prevention**: News about the methods used for cure and prevention without sufficient scientific evidence to prove their effectiveness;

b) **Disbelief in isolation:** False statements, which induce the population to disbelieve the measures of social isolation as a form of prevention of infection by COVID-19;

c) **Data manipulation**: News that suggest manipulation, concealment and alteration of data from confirmed cases of COVID-19 generating discredit to official data sources;

d) **Quality of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** News that suggest low quality and contamination of Personal Protective Equipment;

e) **Social Network Fraud:** News used to commit virtual fraud, taking advantage of the vulnerability of the population in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

f) **Dubious research**: News without support or scientific evidence, without described or inadequate methodology;

The second stage consisted in the search for strategies to combat fake news about COVID-19. Thus, the sources used to survey the strategies were: the initiatives

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

5

of the Ministry of Health, state and municipal health, in addition to public and private institutions of higher education involved in scientific research. The keywords used in the search through the Google platform were "Combat COVID-19", "confront COVID-19", "combat", "strategy", "fake news", "information", "misinformation", "false news". After inserting the keywords in the platform, the official federal, state and journalistic government websites were selected to check facts. Thus, strategies were selected that aim to identify and correct false information about COVID-19 and the pandemic situation. Thus, the strategies found were organized in a spreadsheet separating by category and finally, the duplicity of content was checked and removed.

Results

After the survey, 186 fake news were found in the selected electronic addresses. The news were allocated in six categories as shown in the graph below.

Graph 1- Percentage of fake news by category. Brazil, 2020.
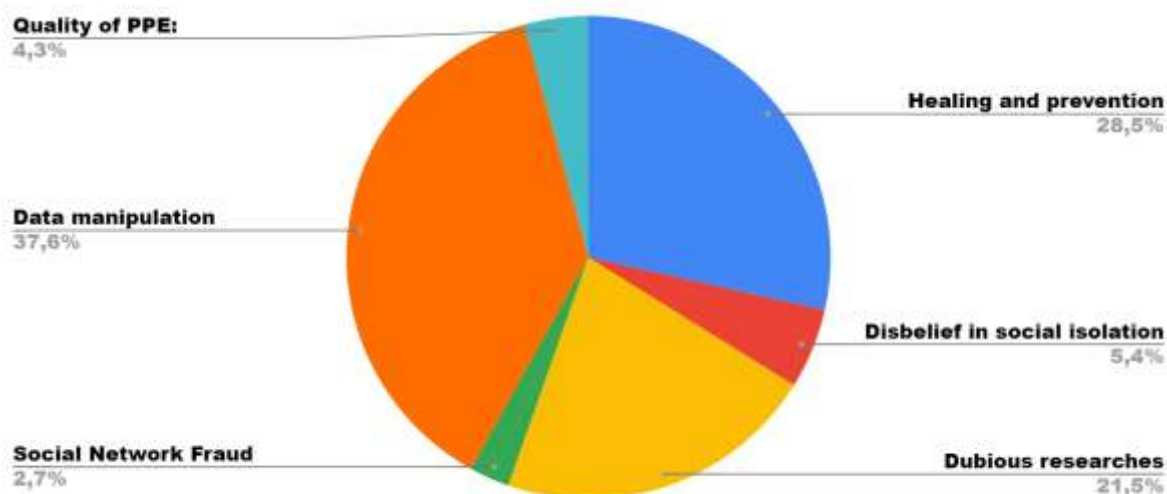
Source: Ministério da Saúde (2020); Project Comprova (2020); Lupa - Folha de São Paulo (2020); Aos Fatos (2020); Uol Confere (2020).

Of these news, 70 (37.6%) were about data manipulation, 53 (28.5%) about misleading ways of curing or preventing the virus, 40 (21.5%) were researches without scientific proof, 10 (5.4%) about the inefficacy of social isolation, suggesting that

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

6

it is not an effective way to prevent infection by the virus, 8 (4.3%) addressed the quality of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) distributed by the government and 5 (2.7%) referred to frauds related to the pandemic to deceive the population.

The news exemplified in Table 1, illustrate the different ways of dissemination of fake news, which in turn are shared in social networks and communication vehicles. Some of these publications were repeated in electronic addresses, such as the case of the first example, "Lemon tea and hot bicarbonate cure Coronavirus", which was published by all selected websites.

Table 1 - Examples of fake news found and its counter-argumentation, according to the websites of the Ministry of Health, Project Comprova, Project Lupa and Aos Fatos from January to May 2020.

Site	Category	Title	Counter-argumentation
Ministry of Health	Healing/ Prevention	"Lemon tea and hot bicarbonate cure Coronavirus"	So far there is no medicine, substance, vitamin, specific food or vaccine that can prevent coronavirus infection
Project Comprova	Disbelief in social isolation	"Contrary to what the blog says, WHO recommends isolation as one of the measures to combat the new Coronavirus".	The World Health Organization recommends that in order to avoid the spread of the coronavirus, in addition to other measures, social distancing is necessary. These measures may vary according to the situation of each country or region.
Project Lupa	Dubious researches	"It is false that Italian authorities have discovered that COVID-19 is caused by bacteria"	The new coronavirus is part of a family of viruses that are responsible for respiratory infections, and the first discovery was in 1937. The Italian Ministry of Health has not announced that COVID-19 is caused by a bacterium, and on its website, the organ explains about the SARS-CoV-2 virus which is the true cause of the disease.
Aos Fatos	Data manipulation	"It is false that states receive federal funds at each death registered by COVID-19"	There is no financial transfer from the Ministry of Health based on the number of deaths by COVID-19. Resources allocated to health in states and municipalities are based on population size and complexity of the service provided.

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

7

Project Lupa	Fraud	"New scam offers free cleaning and hygiene product kits in the pandemic"	The company used in the coup in a note said that the publication about free kits is false.
Ministry of Health	Quality of PPE	"China donation masks are contaminated with Coronavirus"	The Ministry of Health ensures that there is no evidence to confirm that the masks sent from China contain the coronavirus. Furthermore, the virus does not survive for long outside the human organism and the transport takes several days.

*The counter-arguments were taken from the very sites that published the fake news.
Source: Websites Ministério da Saúde (2020); Project Comprova (2020); Lupa - Folha de São Paulo (2020); Aos Fatos (2020); Uol Confere (2020).

Table 2 presents examples of strategies found to address the dissemination of fake news. The study found most social media strategies, but we can highlight the Bill that punishes the creation and dissemination of fake news that are still in progress for approval in the Senate.

Table 2 - Examples of strategies found to address the risks caused by fake news on official federal and state level websites from January to May 2020.

Institution	Strategy	Objective	Information vehicle
Ministry of Health	Whatsapp Number	Exclusive space to receive viral information, which will be verified by the technical areas and officially answered if they are true or false.	Social Media
Government of Ceará	Antifake CE	Clear doubts, receive complaints, check data and inform.	Social Media - Website
Government of Piauí	Exclusive space on the state's official website	Clarify false information circulating through social networks regarding actions related to the fight against COVID-19.	Social Media - Website
State Health Secretariat of Federal District	Fepecs Against COVID	Profile with the objective of spreading technical, scientific and epidemiological knowledge of COVID-19 in the Federal District.	Social Media - Instagram
Federal Senate	Fake News Bill	Law to punish and combat fake news	Official Gazette

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

8

Fiocruz	App "Eu Fiscalizo"	Exclusive channel for reporting inappropriate content and fake news.	Social Media
Social Media	Removal of fake news and redirection to news from a reliable source	Social networks are identifying and removing fake news, and redirecting the user to news from trusted sources.	Social Media

Source: Mídias Sociais do Ministério da Saúde (2020), Governo do Ceará e do Piauí (2020), SES/DF (2020) e Fiocruz (2020); Senado Federal - Diário Oficial(2020).

Discussion

According to the Pan American Health Organization (2020), misinformation regarding COVID-19, about therapeutic measures, forms of prevention, transmission and origin of the disease can circulate and be absorbed very quickly by the population, changing behavior and potentially leading it to assume greater risks.

According to Reuters Institute and Oxford University (2020), the main sources of misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic are: digital influencers, politicians, celebrities, public figures and social networks. This group is responsible for about 70% of the news that is broadcast and of this total, 20% were false news (INSTITUTE BUSINESS EDUCATION, 2020).

In studies conducted by Neto et al., 2020, 70 fake news were identified between January 29 and March 31, 2020 at the Ministry of Health bank on COVID-19. The classification of these findings consisted of 40 information related to the speeches of health authorities, 17 on therapeutics, 9 with prevention measures, 2 on disease prognosis and 2 on vaccination.

According to the results of this study, it is possible to consider that there was a significant growth of fake news related to disease prevention. In this sense, there is a fear related to public health with disseminated misinformation, considering that these conduct disorient the population and hinder health prevention measures (Mercedes et al., 2020).

From another perspective, social media brings possibilities of interaction never before experienced, reducing physical and temporal barriers, stimulating

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

9

social mobilization, and, therefore, can guarantee greater reach of essential information to society regarding its health. Social networks can be used by the government to understand doubts, elaborate proposals, identify the population's desires and, from that, strategically formulate measures to meet these demands.

With regard to coping strategies, the Ministry of Health has created a special page to combat fake news about COVID-19. The page provided a number of WhatsApp, for the population to send dubious facts conveyed in social media and message applications, to be checked by a technical team of the Ministry. On the site, the information is classified in two lists, according to the stamps "This is fake news" or "This news is true". Data on prevention, virus transmission and care are also collected by the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS), and it is possible to access a podcast on the pandemic, produced by the Ministry of Health.

Among the strategies adopted to combat fake news, the Federal District has adopted a WhatsApp number so that the population can clear up doubts, notify suspicious cases and verify the veracity of the information (Federal District, 2020).

Another institution that launched an initiative to fight fake news was the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), through strategies based on discussions and guidance from specialists in the public health area. The official website of Fiocruz presents special content about the Coronavirus, where it is possible to check news, videos and ask questions about the pandemic. In addition, the institution has the application "Eu Fiscalizo" which has the function of denouncing false contents.

In the context of dissemination of fake news, the Senate approved on June 30, 2020 the Bill on fake news reported by Senator Ângelo Coronel (PSD-BA). According to a report by Folha de São Paulo, the bill was approved with the veto of one of its main points, which was the need to provide identification document and cell phone number at the time of registration of users (LEMOS, 2020).

Other important points were maintained in the proposal approved by the Senate, such as: storage of records so that the origin of the message can be traced, automated accounts will not be allowed and suspension of accounts with disabled cell phones.

Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

10

These measures to combat fake news gain space and strengthen the moment of the Joint Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPMI) of fake news that acts to investigate and hold accountable companies, politicians and organizations that finance and disseminate these news.

Final Considerations

The use of fake news in the health scenario stimulates a feeling of despair and fear in society, leading to wrong decisions, thus generating greater difficulty for health agencies in combating the pandemic.

From this perspective, the study achieved the proposed objective, however, it was understood the difficulty in following the speed with which hundreds of new false information are fired. Therefore, considering this objective condition, it was not possible to contemplate all these news published and shared in the information vehicles.

The need for new studies on the motivations for promoting false information and its effects, as well as clarification on who is favored, is evident. It is crucial to identify the funders of the scheme to disseminate such news in the same way that it is necessary to invest in the media in order to guarantee the reach of essential information to society and the exercise of citizenship in order to be able to deal more efficiently with misinformation.

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11

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12

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13

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Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

14

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Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

15

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Revista Cenas Educacionais, Caetité – Bahia - Brasil, v. 3, n. e9300, p. 1-16, 2020.

16