

Did Covid-19 infect the news? How journalists, audiences and production processes have changed due to the pandemic

¿La Covid-19 ha infectado las noticias? Cómo los periodistas, las audiencias y los procesos de producción son alterados por las pandemias

Vítor de Sousa

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade - CECS,
Universidade do Minho Portugal
vitorde Sousa@ics.uminho.pt
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6051-0980>

Edson Capoano

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade - CECS,
Universidade do Minho, Portugal
edson.capoano@ics.uminho.pt
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6766-802X>

Pedro Rodrigues Costa

Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade - CECS,
Universidade do Minho, Portugal
pcosta7780@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1223-6462>

Ivan Paganotti

Universidade Metodista de São Paulo - UMESP, Brasil
ivanpaganotti@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5662-4240>

Received on: 08/07/2022 **Revised on:** 06/08/2022 **Accepted on:** 18/08/2022 **Published on:** 01/09/2022

Suggested citation de Sousa, V., Capoano, E., Rodrigues Costa, P. and Paganotti, I. (2022). Did Covid-19 infect the news? How journalists, audiences and production processes have changed due to the pandemic. *Universitas-XXI*, 37, pp. 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.17163/uni.n37.2022.01>

Abstract

This article focuses on journalistic activities in the context of the first wave of Covid-19, in 2020, when a high presence of post-truth and fake news was identified in news production, which is justified in addressing these two conceptual objects. The objective was to understand how problems in the production process, such as job insecurity during the pandemic, allowed information gaps, which were filled by misinformation and infodemics. For this, a quantitative method was used, with the application of an online survey to 365 participants from Ibero-America during 2020, on production processes, work routines, and information generated during the quarantine of journalists, and consumption of information during confinement to journalists and online news receivers. As a result, most journalists have changed their work routine, such as digital data checking and preference for scientific sources. About half of news receivers valued press work positively, even though news consumption has generated negative prospects. As conclusions, there is a need to review certain productive practices in the journalistic field, during exceptional situations such as the pandemic.

Keywords

Journalism, post-truth, fake news., disinformation, covid-19, production processes, job insecurity, infodemics.

Resumen

Este artículo se enfoca en las actividades periodísticas en el contexto de la primera ola de Covid-19, en 2020, cuando se identificó una alta presencia de la posverdad y las *fake news* en la producción de noticias, lo que se justifica al abordar estos dos objetos conceptuales. El objetivo fue comprender cómo los problemas en el proceso productivo, como la precariedad laboral durante la pandemia, permitieron vacíos de información, que fueron llenados por la desinformación y la infodemia. Para ello se utilizó un método cuantitativo, con la aplicación de una encuesta en línea a 365 participantes de Iberoamérica durante el 2020, sobre procesos de producción, rutinas de trabajo e información generada durante la cuarentena de los periodistas, y el consumo de información durante el confinamiento de periodistas y receptores de noticias en línea. Como resultado, la mayoría de los periodistas cambió su rutina de trabajo, como la verificación de datos digitales y la preferencia por fuentes científicas. Cerca de la mitad de los receptores de noticias valoran positivamente el trabajo de prensa, a pesar de que el consumo de noticias ha generado perspectivas negativas. Como conclusiones, es necesario revisar ciertas prácticas productivas en el ámbito periodístico, durante situaciones excepcionales como la pandemia.

Palabras clave

Periodismo, posverdad, *fake news*, desinformación, Covid-19, procesos productivos, inseguridad laboral, infodemia.

Introduction

An outbreak of acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-2) was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. A few weeks later, this virus spread to other countries (Zu *et al.*, 2020). On January 30, 2020, it was named “co-

ronavirus disease 2019” (Covid-19) (Velavan and Meyer, 2020) by the World Health Organization (hereafter WHO), and was declared as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, with “alarming levels of spread and inaction,” according to Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of WHO (Lusa, 2020, n.p.). Since then, continuous efforts have been made to eradicate the pandemic.

Therefore, professionals have had to adapt to this situation, applying a set of procedures to avoid contamination by the new coronavirus. We think that one of these professional categories would be journalism, whose labor precariousness during this period of pandemic may have contributed to the increase of misinformation during the public debate in networks and to the spread of the “infodemic” (Zarocostas, 2020). To understand how the productive practices of journalists covering the pandemic of the new coronavirus have changed, as well as the reception of content by the audience, we applied a survey entitled “Perceptions about the information generated during Covid-19”,¹ during the first wave of Covid-19, in April 2020.

In this context, in which journalists and the media in general played a leading role, we reflect on the field of journalism (Bourdieu, 1992), relating it to a constructivist notion of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1999). However, we used the notions of post-truth and *fake news* to stand out two of the main current forces driving the media in general, as well as to present a case analysis of institutions such as the WHO and the European Commission. The aim was to address disinformation and “infodemia” (Zarocostas, 2020), which occupy information gaps on the internet. A mixed method was used. In the quantitative dimension, we resorted to the application of an online survey that closed at the end of May 2020, with a sample of 365 participants, among journalists working in the press or in the media in general, on production processes, work routines, information generated during quarantine and news consumption during confinement. In the qualitative dimension, we resorted to the description of cases that demonstrate the presence of the post-truth and *fake news* in times of pandemic and how it affected social behaviors.

Through the notion of professional “ethos” established by Bourdieu (1992), we assume that the journalist should not give up the critique of the media communication paradigm, especially as an agent that contributes to the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1999). However, the forces of contingency, particularly in the era of screens and immediacy, tend

1 Published in: <https://bit.ly/3Jd4Ntb>

to strip reality and force the contingency “ethos” (Costa, 2020), which in our opinion could be solved by integrating specific production criteria to hypothetically avoid the dissemination of disinformation within their own production.

Added to this momentum are the uncertainties about the technical information on the new coronavirus. Such complexity generates several versions of the disease, sometimes contradictory and reported by organizations that were used as journalistic sources, putting at risk the boundaries between truth, post-truth, error, disinformation and *fake news*. This information ecosystem favors “infodemic” promoted by both spheres - the official information that characterizes journalism as an activity that generically obtains its data from official sources and the disinformation of the networks - threatening the understanding of the facts, both in the mainstream media and in the information channels with less influence. Faced with the urgent need to inform and tell the truth - even if this truth is provisional, since scientists, governments and societies in general were learning how to treat the disease while suffering from Covid-19, how to inform without leaving room for disinformation and “infodemic”?

Methods

To review the problems mentioned above, we used the survey “Perceptions of information generated during Covid-19” (Capoano and Costa, 2020),² whose purpose was to understand how the social constraints caused by the new coronavirus pandemic, such as social distancing, isolation and different forms of quarantine imposed on society around the world, changed the information processes for producers, receivers, and news creation processes during this pandemic. Between May 15 and June 30, in online form format and with an exponential number of invitations through Messenger and FB Message Sender tools, this survey was inspired by studies on journalist profiles (Figaro, 2020; Figaro *et al.*, 2013; Lima, 2013), and by concepts such as “production processes” (Adghirni, 2012; Deuze and Witschge, 2016), “work routines” (Heloani, 2006), and “perceptibility criteria” (Mesquita, 2003; Traquina, 2005; Wolf, 2012). The survey was composed of 21 questions addressed to journalists, some of these focused on knowing the respondent’s profile (age, gender); professional data (seniority, means of operation, newsroom

2 Survey available at: <https://bit.ly/3BpesuG>.

and company); work routine during the pandemic (change in workload, work place, protective equipment, obstacles and limitations at work); production processes (type and number of sources of information, format, gender, notoriety criteria); and contact (or not) with the disease.

This non-probability sample amounted to 365 participants, of whom 33.4 % are journalists producing information during the pandemic, 32.6 % are non-practitioners, and 29.5 % are not journalists but are frequent news consumers.³ In this study, more than half of the sample (53.2 %) was composed of young journalists between 26 and 40 years old; a quarter of the sample was composed of people between 41 and 55 years old; and the youngest, between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, totaling 12.1 % of the sample. In terms of seniority, 35.8 % of the respondents had worked for a period of 1 to 5 years and 20.9 % for a period of 6 to 10 years (56.7 % of the journalists surveyed were in their first decade of work). In the section applicable to journalists working in the media, 50.8 % of the sample indicated that they worked specifically in news media, in the following formats: web (14.7 %); print (11.7 %); news agencies (7 %); radio (8.8 %); television (5.8 %) and other related (2.9 %). For the analysis, and in order to classify the publishers in which the respondents worked, only the publishers mentioned by the professionals working in the news media were considered. Consequently, 45 valid editorials were identified, of which 11.1 % were associated with economics, 8.8 % with politics, 6.6 % with health and 2.2 % with science.

Results

Considering the survey applied to journalists during this pandemic and going deeper into the production processes (section 1. “Production processes”), we can conclude that 95.4 % of the respondents affirmed having experienced some degree of change in their work routine (minor, medium, major and complete), the most common being remote work (65.7 % of the respondents). The remaining sample indicates that 8.7 % work in the field and 23.4 % work in a newspaper company. The sample data proves that 64.9 % of the respondents claimed to have received PPE (Personal Protecti-

3 Respectively, 121 press journalists, 119 general journalists and 107 news consumers who are not journalists

ve Equipment), such as masks and disinfectant, although we could not identify whether the number of mobile workers coincides with the number of workers who received the equipment.

Only one-third of respondents experienced no change in their daily workday; 23.3 % said they were working less during the pandemic, and half (51.12 %) began working more hours per day. In addition to the precarious conditions in their routine, almost 20 % of the respondents were prevented from performing their work activity. Half of the participants were denied access to places or documents, and 34 % experienced verbal threats at some point in their activity.

Delving into the format of production (section 2. “Information produced during this pandemic”), 55.9 % of respondents responded text (for web or print versions), 15.5 % produced information for radio broadcasts; 12.3 % consisted of video content, 9.6 % of photos and only 4.3 % addressed graphics or infographics. In the sample, 90 % of the respondents stated that their data was verified mainly through the web.

In terms of information sources, the majority (65 %) used two (35 %) or three (30 %) sources for each content created, on average. As a verification method of the data collected, half of the sample used a combination of official sources (27.5 %) with specialized sources (22.4 %). The main sources considered “official” and “specialized” that were consulted and cited are: WHO, governments, health professionals and scientists.

To understand how frequent consumers of information (among non-practicing journalists in the news market and non-journalists) behaved during the pandemic, we created 13 questions (section 3. “Effects of infodemics on the public”) that addressed how they report, whether they encountered *fake news* during the process, and what emotions and moral issues were triggered by news consumption. This section drew on studies on *fake news* (Pennycock and Rand, 2019; Tandoc *et al.*, 2018), sociology (Berger and Luckmann, 1999; Bourdieu, 1989; Elster, 1999;), and narratives on emotions and moral attributes (Becket and Deuze, 2016; Dias, 2012; Orgeret, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020), to identify stimuli in news consumption decision-making processes using these questions:

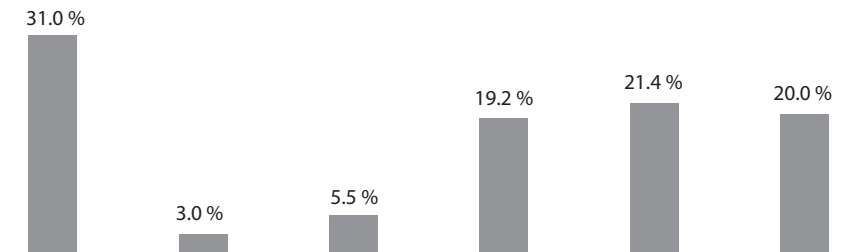
- What media do you normally use to obtain information?
- Do you feel informed about Covid-19?
- Has your news consumption been altered?

- Do you feel overwhelmed by too much information about the pandemic?
- Is/was the subject of the news you consumed related to the pandemic?
- What are the sources/interviews for most of the news you read?
- Is the press doing a good job covering the pandemic in your region?
- Have you identified any fake news about Covid-19 during news consumption?
- What format of fake news did you identify most?
- What method of fake news did you identify most?
- Are the emotions generated by the consumption of Covid-19 related news mostly positive, negative or neutral?
- What is the most common emotion elicited by press coverage of Covid-19 in your country?
- What motivates you most when consuming news about Covid-19?

According to the results obtained, there was a significant increase of 41.4 % in the consumption of information by the respondents (between “often” and “very often”).

Graph 1

Increase in news consumption during the crisis (N=365)

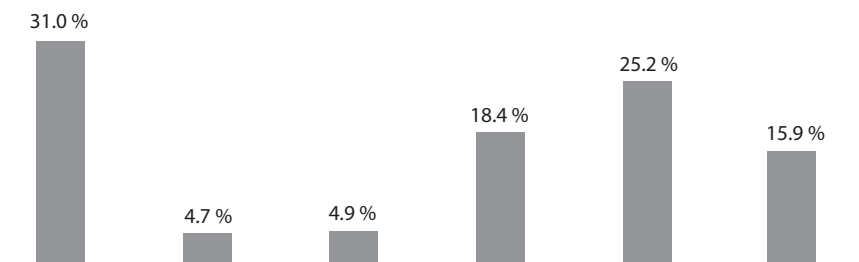


Note. The graph refers to the responses “no answer” (left); “never”; “a little”; “more or less”; “a lot”; “completely” (right).

41.1 % of the participants rated the work of the press positively (with responses ranging from often to very often). Only 9.6 % of the participants did not consider its performance to be positive (never or very rarely).

Graph 2

Perception of press coverage of Covid-19 (N=365)

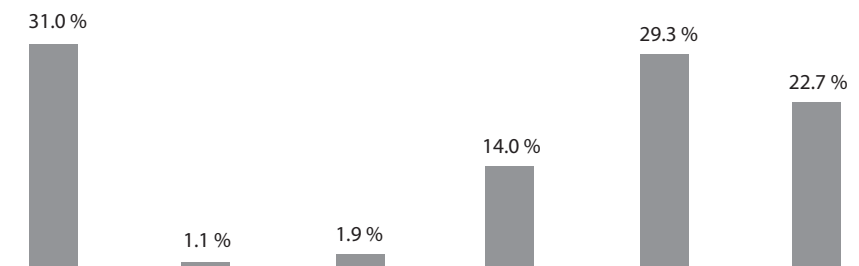


Note. The graph refers to the responses “no answer” (left); “never”; “a little”; “more or less”; “a lot”; “completely” (right).

About 52 % of respondents considered to be well informed (with responses ranging from often to very often). Only 3 % admitted that they rarely or never looked for information.

Graph 3

Perception of being informed about Covid-19 (N=365)



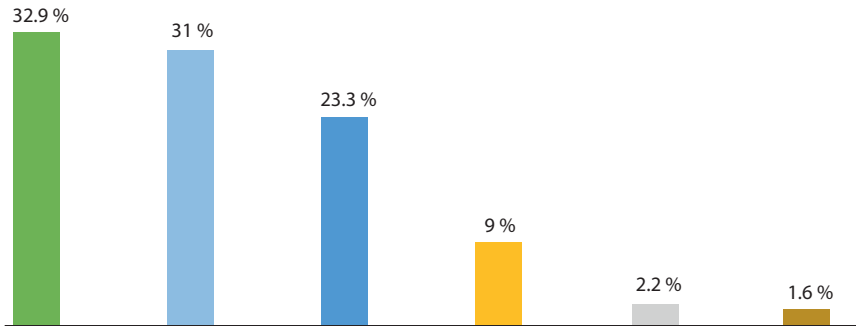
Note. The graph refers to the responses “no answer” (left); “never”; “a little”; “more or less”; “a lot”; “completely” (right).

Regarding the identification of fake news in the information about the new coronavirus, answers were in text (29 %), memes (15.6 %), video (24.3 %), audio (17.2 %) and mixed formats (13.3 %), about 56.2 % of res-

pondents said they had identified fake news when reading about Covid-19 (with responses ranging from often to very often).

Graph 4

Perception of having identified fake news when reading about Covid-19 (N=365)

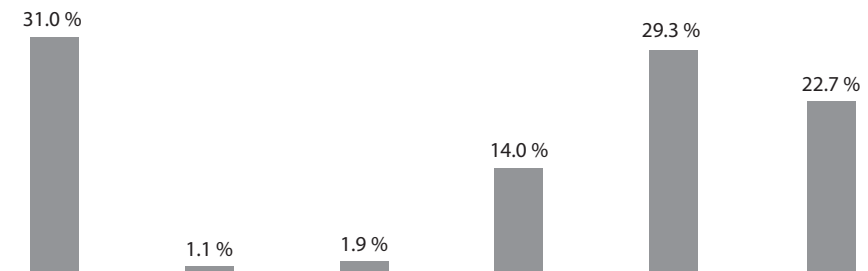


Note. The graph refers to the answers “no answer” (light blue); “never” (orange); “a little” (gray); “more or less” (brown); “a lot” (dark blue); “completely” (green).

About 97 % of the participants felt occasionally, often and very often overwhelmed by the excess of information consumed.

Graph 5

Feeling overwhelmed by the excess information consumed during the pandemic (N=365)

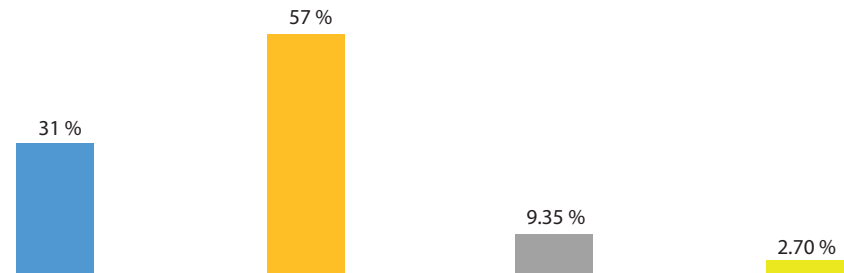


Note. The graph refers to the responses “no answer” (left); “never”; “a little”; “more or less”; “a lot”; “completely” (right).

Based on responses about the most frequent emotions triggered by news consumption during the pandemic, approximately 57 % of respondents said they were negative emotions.

Graph 6

Emotions generated by news consumption during the pandemic (N=365)



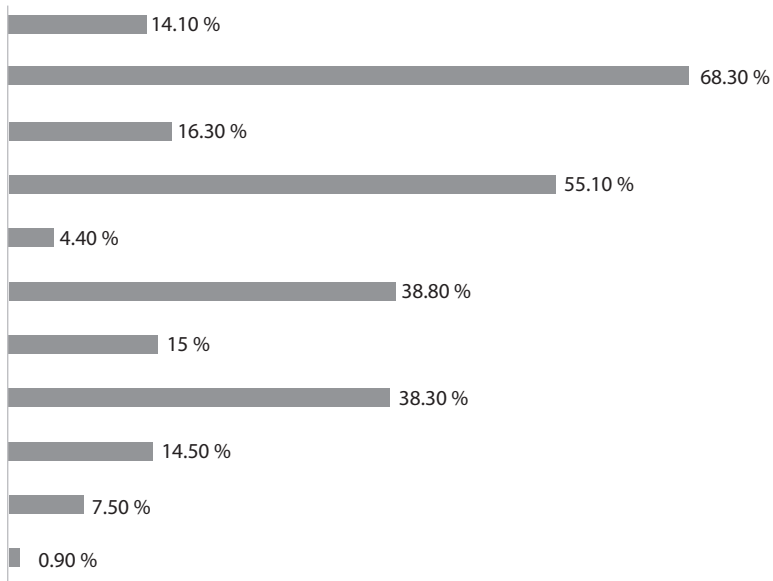
Note. The graph refers to “no answer (blue); “negative” (orange); “neutral” (gray); “positive” (yellow).

According to this sample, the most frequent emotion felt by respondents was sadness (68.3 %), followed by fear (55.1 %), indignation and anger (38.8 % and 38.3 %, respectively). The remaining emotions (hope, interest, contempt, disgust, surprise and happiness) are all below 20 %.

Regarding the questions about what led respondents to continue consuming news, derived from the theory of moral foundations (Graham *et al.*, 2013), most of the answers are related to phrases such as “Avoiding damage to health”, whose narrative is related to the fundamentals of care or harm, reaching 28.6 % of the answers; “Being aware of the new routine and what life will be like in the future”, related to the fundamentals of loyalty or betrayal focusing on the common good, reaching 25.6 % of the answers; “Concern for life on Earth and the environment,” related to the fundamentals of sanctity or degradation of nature, reaching 12.3 %; and “Recognize those responsible for managing the crisis and their powers,” related to fairness or deceit and authority or subversion, reaching 11.5 % of the responses.

Graph 7

Emotions most frequently felt when consuming pandemic news (N=227)



Note. The graph refers to “hope” (above); “sadness”; “interest”; “fear”; “guilt”; “shame”; “contempt”; “anger”; “disgust”; “surprise”; “joy”.

Discussion

As observed, most journalists have changed their work routine, and an example of this is the consultation of digital data and the preference for scientific sources. Nearly half of news recipients value the work of the press positively, despite the fact that news consumption has generated negative perspectives. These perceptions of news production, consumption and circulation during the Covid-19 pandemic point to risks, dilemmas and opportunities in journalism. However, it is necessary to contextualize some characteristics of journalism, for example, the professional identity, the ethos in which it operates and some vices of the productive routine that were highlighted when informing about the pandemic.

Starting from the perspective that social reality is a construction, Berger and Luckmann (1999) point out the existence of multiple realities. Among these, there is one that stands out: everyday life, which they call the prevailing reality, because symbolic language goes beyond reality and becomes one of its main components, giving rise to a subjective cutout. Therefore, the legitimacy resulting from the symbolic universe highlights realities other than those of everyday life.

The social field is typified by Bourdieu (1992) as a place of tensions, where those who integrate it are aligned in a differentiated way, in a perspective that moves away from the canonical Marxist concept of “social class”. The sociologist situates the subjects in the same social space, although in different and aligned positions, considering shared interests in the different spheres of the social sphere. Thus, he typifies the “journalistic field” where the social position of the agents is determined and the figures of “authority” are revealed. The legitimacy of the media is conferred by the other social fields, which are necessary to circulate their discourses and the journalistic sources considered as spokespersons of the social fields, giving visibility to the fields of discussion.

Bourdieu (1989) has also established concepts that can be related to the media (or to journalism); for example, “capital” (which allows identifying agents in the social field); “habitus” (what is acquired over time by individuals in social experiences) and “symbolic violence” (adherence of those who are dominated by a specific field, naturalizing the rules and generating critical deficit). Therefore, although events are the raw material of news, not all of them make news. The media event, for example, is based on the relationship and intersection between the “journalistic field”, the different social fields and journalistic “habitus”, which prioritize (limited) time as a criterion. In making the news, a report of significant and interesting facts occurs, conditioned by time, space, freedom of expression, market, technique, self-censorship and editorial line.

According to João Carlos Correia, “facts do not exist in themselves, with evidence and a self-sufficient ontological foundation, of which journalistic formulations would be pure reflections” (2008, p. 4). In this sense, reality is not autonomous, resulting rather from mediations that affect how journalism creates and processes information about reality, as well as from the logic of power and the potential conflicts of interest inherent in the flow of information. Bourdieu draws attention to the existence of categories accor-

ding to journalists, which derive from their “specific perspectives”, through which they “see some things and not others; and they see things in a certain way; they operate a selection and a construction of what is selected”. In the case of television, the principle of selection is based on the search for the sensational and the spectacular, i.e., for what has the potential to have an audience, because that is something that surely “sells” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 12).

Additionally, he mentions the fact that contributes to the failure of the diversity expected from the different types of media, due to what is called “circular flow of information”. Nobody reads as many newspapers as journalists, pointing at each other (considering that all citizens do the same), justifying themselves in competition (fight for the audience) “to know what they are going to say, they need to know what they said to others. This is one of the mechanisms through which the homogeneity of the proposed products is produced”, becoming a kind of “game of mirrors, reflecting each other and creating an incredible effect of completion, a mental enclosure” (Bourdieu, 1997, pp. 18-19). This means that the people who have the mission of informing the public are generally informed by other sources of information, leading to the homogeneity of the hierarchization of news. Therefore, it is not surprising that the information conveyed by the media is almost always the same, transmitted from the same approach, with the same soundbites and the same quotes from the key players.

Starting from the uncertain complexity of the journalistic field as a constructor of realities, it is important to connect journalistic and media phenomena with the way in which the informative fact can be presented. Therefore, we start from the concept of “post-truth”.

According to Antoni Bassas (2016), this neologism refers to any situation in which objective facts have less influence than emotions and personal beliefs. After understanding this dynamic, the producer of information, involved in an “information capitalism” and connected to technological production and dissemination tools in the networks (Castells, 2007), ends up being carried away by the number (of visualizations, likes and shares) instead of valuing the objectivity of the facts (Costa *et al.*, 2020). For Bruno Latour (2020, n.p., §11), this post-truth perspective is also a defensive position, since it defends the idea that “there are alternative truths from which the individual can choose”. In Latour’s perspective, this differs greatly from the construction of a science based on “rational skepticism.”

The concept of post-truth is associated with the concept of fake news because these consist of distributing information through information channels whose deliberate purpose is to misinform or spread rumors to mislead and, ultimately, to obtain economic or political benefits. Fake news also appeals to emotions and are accompanied, most of the time, by exaggerated or clearly false titles to get attention (Hunt, 2016). Narratives can alter the decision-making processes of the message receiver by relating to common moral aspects of users (Graham *et al.*, 2013).⁴

The problem of post-truth and fake news is related to the complex and, at the same time, subtle screen era. The screen serves as a stage that “draws attention to the other” (Costa, 2020). However, the attention span on the screen is very short. Living in what Bruno Patino (2019) calls “civilization of red fish” (to refer to the short attention span of young people), characterized by the omnipresence of individuals mediatized by “smartphones”, commanded by a digital economy that creates techniques of “captology” (science of capturing attention), where various socio-technical and behavioral psychology means converge (Jenkins, 2009), and where people become hostages of “attention” capturing strategies. Communication companies know that attention is their goal and, in a brief pause capable of attracting attention, they generate a whole economy around it, the “attention economy”. Because of this, fake news became the “cannon” of post-truth, raising it exponentially (Patino, 2019). If facts, however vaguely empirical and vaguely correct, are “provided by thousands of fake news creators in Siberia, it is very hard to resist” (Latour, 2020, n.p., §11). Post-truth places sociotechnical contingency under the effect of a mixture of subjective information, rational decisions and affective relations connected with subjects, constantly disarming individuals.

However, recent academic studies show difficulties to precisely define the concept of fake news. Considering references in the field of communication, Tandoc *et al.* (2017) state that fake news “can be humorous content,

4 According to moral foundations theory, narratives may contain foundations that relate to individuals’ moral choices, thus eliciting commitment, such as (1) caring / harm (concern for the suffering of others); (2) fairness / deceit (preference for reciprocity and fairness); (3) loyalty / betrayal (concern for the common good and prejudice against outsiders); (4) authority / subversion (reference to domination and hierarchy); (5) holiness / degradation (concern for purity); and (6) freedom / oppression (feelings of restraint and resentment toward those who dominate and restrict their freedom) (Graham *et al.*, 2013).

such as satire or journalistic parody (where irony may not be evident, thus puzzling the majority of the audience, which mixes humorous purpose with traditional news content), advertising in journalistic format (such as branded content), political propaganda, and fabrication of manipulated images and facts”. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) classified misinformation into seven types: satire/parody, false connection (the text does not support what is suggested by the title or images), misleading content (such as fallacies), false context, imposter content (copying from legitimate sources), manipulation (image editing, for example), and fabrication (creating nonexistent information). On the other hand, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213), look for a more specific definition of fake news, considering that the current meaning can be characterized by “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”

Regarding the manipulation of information for commercial purposes, it is worth mentioning the case of an article in the “Correio da Manhã” (5/6/2020), entitled “English newspaper manipulates data during coronavirus in Portugal to show the risk of traveling on vacation” revealing how the data by country were at the service of interests. The English newspaper “Daily Mail” was caught omitting the truth in a seemingly harmless choice of tourist destinations. In revealing the usual holiday destinations of the English, which were analyzed considering the corresponding epidemiological situation, it was written that “only TWO travel spots have a worse infection rate than the UK”: Portugal and the United States (USA). The newspaper “Correio da Manhã” alleged manipulation, stating that the “Daily Mail” deliberately used a comparison of “new daily cases per million people, without taking into account other relevant data, such as the number of tests performed per million people, the total number of cases per million people” in which “Portugal ranked 23rd in the world ranking (after Spain, Ireland, Belgium, United Arab Emirates or Italy)” (Correio da Manhã, 2020, s.p., §4). This is another example of the use of part of the truth in favor of geopolitical interests.

Christofolletti (2018) had already suggested that fake news not only allows certain languages and formats, often journalistic, to attract the attention of the unsuspecting public, but also leads fake news producers to adopt, through copying, “patterns of manipulation” similar to those of conventional media, previously identified and denounced by Abramo (2016). Mistakes and deceptions due to frequent misunderstandings caused by the

media destroyed the trust of part of the public, which is now seduced by the siren songs of fake WhatsApp audio recordings, texts without sources on obscure websites or “memes” without authors on Facebook. Even information verifications that refute fake news are often faced with public rejection, precisely due to the lack of trust of the audience, which is disappointed with the continuous deceptions caused by the mainstream media (Costa, 2019). In this sense, we can say that the “failed news” published in haste, incompetence or malice, opened the doors to *fake news*. Today, these face difficulties to counteract the monster they have created.

To avoid doing the same mistakes in a high-risk context, it is necessary to remember that journalism, like science, works with “temporary truths” (Gerald, 2001, p. 9). It is necessary to be even more careful in an emergency such as this one, where the public’s attention looks for answers to complex questions, which even specialists do not dare to answer. Regarding Natércia (2008, n.p.), “in relation to truths that, if they exist, are temporary, transitory and ephemeral, the only thing left is to read science critically”. After all, even the specialists consulted continue to work with the available information, presenting more uncertainties than absolute truths. This is the only possible way to avoid being criticized the next day for tragic predictions or miraculous cures that did not happen.

It is important to address one of the biggest controversies in times of pandemic: the continuous dithering of the WHO. According to “Le Monde” (April 14, 2020), quoted by IOL, since the beginning of Covid-19, this institution “has been accused of being an ally of China, of flattering the measures taken by the Beijing authorities against the disease and of being slow to issue a global warning about the danger of the new coronavirus” (IOL, April 14, 2020, n.p., §2). In this case, one of the main initiators of the attacks on the WHO was Donald Trump, “following a tweet by the US president on April 7 “in which he accused the organization of being “completely wrong”, as it only acknowledged that the virus was transmissible between humans on “January 22, a month after its appearance in Wuhan, and only considered the disease a threat to the world on February 11. This delay would have contributed to transforming the Chinese epidemic into a pandemic (IOL, April 14, n.p., §5).

Marie-Paule Kieny, former WHO director, stated that “WHO member states want it to remain weak, as health is primarily a political issue and a national prerogative” (UOL, 2020, n.p.). These statements may indicate un-

derlying power games and interests. The controversy surrounding hydroxychloroquine, which allowed some advances and setbacks, exposed the danger of such interests and the remote creation of strategic post-truths. Having based decisions against the development of hydroxychloroquine drugs on articles published in the scientific journals “The Lancet” and “The New England Journal of Medicine”, we can assume that WHO could not have imagined the underlying problem. According to an investigation by “The Guardian”, there were considerable errors in the databases of these studies. The Australian version of this journal found these errors in a study conducted by “The Lancet”, precisely in the database provided by a company called Surgisphere. The study mentioned that the researchers in charge obtained data through this company and that such data had been previously collected in five hospitals, registering 600 patients with Covid-19 and around 73 Australian deaths since April 21.

However, data from Johns Hopkins University, which followed the Australian data, showed that only 67 deaths from Covid-19 were recorded in Australia up to the same date. The number did not increase to 73 until April 23. Surgisphere director Sapan Desai admitted that an Asian hospital had accidentally been included in the Australian figures, leading to an inflation of the number of cases in the country. This event prompted “The Guardian” to explore the issue further. The newspaper contacted five hospitals in Melbourne and two in Sydney, whose cooperation would be crucial in confirming the number of Australian patients in the database provided by Surgisphere. All the hospitals contacted denied any involvement in the database and said they had never heard of Surgisphere. This raised further doubts in The Guardian and prompted a further investigation of the company. This investigation concluded that Surgisphere employees had little scientific training. In addition to the science editor being a science fiction author, the marketing executive is a former model, frequent event host; and the company’s LinkedIn page has less than 100 followers. Between May 20 and May 30, 2020, the company had six employees. On June 2, 2020, that number changed to three employees, although Surgisphere claims to have one of the largest and fastest databases in the world, it has almost no online activity. Its Twitter ID has fewer than 170 followers and no posts between October 2017 and March 2020; as of May 31, 2020, the contact button on Surgisphere’s official page redirected users to a cryptocurrency website, leading to questions about how hospitals could easily contact the company to be-

come part of its database; Surgisphere's director, Sapan Desai, was involved in three medical malpractice lawsuits (Davey *et al.*, 2020).

The crisis of journalism, which began some time ago, has increased during the pandemic we are still living through and has increased with the intensification of the digitalization of information. However, despite the discussion and criticism of journalism and journalists, their importance for the social construction of reality is not questionable; they report on world events and make them accessible to all, representing one of the pillars of democracy. Journalists help to understand the world, interpreting it for the public that consumes the information. In this way, those who produce news are hindered by the system they are part of and which is part of society, with all the existing power relations.

A field of Media Education is important in this framework for the formation of citizens which, despite not having immediate effects, represents an investment in the future for the critical education of citizens. It is necessary to invest in better journalism, regardless of the inherent limitations of the profession, and bearing in mind that what is at stake is journalism, not any other element coexisting in the media space.

The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic do not bode well for journalism, with the word "uncertainty" further limiting the future. In this scenario, increasingly crowded with professional information sources, journalism is now more threatened than ever, due to the precariousness of the sector.

However, the problem is worse than that related to the practice of journalism, and it is noticeable in the type of media consumed. More work cannot be done with less manpower and much less with low salaries. Only by changing this scenario will it be possible to survive fake news and all the other threats that loom over the sector, since the journalist, as a mediator, interprets reality for the public.

It is considered that the media should avoid presenting themselves as owners of the monopoly of legitimate discourse and continue to emphasize the limits of scientific studies in a reflexive and rigorous presentation of their partial results.

Because news now reaches various production and distribution platforms, it becomes even more connected to media culture, challenging our standard concepts of how it should work. With this in mind, several questions remain unanswered about journalistic work: What differentiates information produced by journalism from information produced by other mediators of social information, such as influencers and independent publishers?

What happens when information generated by the press becomes as inaccurate as information circulating online? Why not admitting flaws in production processes to the audience? How to create news with temporary truths without giving rise to disinformation? How to get the audience's attention without creating infodemics? How to avoid mistakes that create fake news?

Support and financial support for research

This work was supported and financed with national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under project UIDB/00736/2020.

References

- Abramo, P. (2016). *Padrões de manipulação na grande imprensa*. Fundação Perseu Abramo.
- Adghirni, Z. L. (2012). *Mudanças estruturais no jornalismo: travessia de uma zona de turbulência*. *Jornalismo e sociedade: teorias e metodologias*. Florianópolis: Insular, pp. 39-79.
- Allcott, H. and Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and “fake news” in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-36. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
- Bassas, A. (2016). L'anàlisi d'Antoni Bassas: 'La postveritat'. *Diari Ara* (em catalán).
- Beckett, C. and Deuze, M. (2016). On the role of emotion in the future of journalism. *Social media+ society*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116662395>
- Berger, P. L. y Luckmann, T. (1999). *A Construção Social da Realidade*. Dinalivro.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). *O Poder Simbólico*. Difel.
- Bourdieu P. (1992). *Réponses*. Seuil.
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). *Sobre a televisão*. Celta.
- Capoano, E. and Costa, P. D. (2020). Inquérito “Percepção sobre as informações geradas durante o Covid-19”. <https://bit.ly/3MMmwaU>
- Castells, M. A. (2007). *Sociedade em rede. A era da informação: economia, sociedade e cultura*. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.
- Christofolletti, R. (2018). Padrões de manipulação no jornalismo brasileiro: “fake news” e a crítica de Perseu Abramo 30 anos depois. *RuMoRes*, 12(23), 56-82. <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-677X.rum.2018.144229>

- Correia, J. C. (2008). *Habilitation Lecture-Lição de Agregação. O jornalismo e a construção do real: notas para uma abordagem sociofenomenológica da teoria da notícia*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31135.36004>
- Correio Manhã (2020). Jornal inglês manipula dados do coronavírus em Portugal para mostrar risco em viagens de férias. *Correio da Manhã* (5 de junho). <https://bit.ly/3xmP3yh>
- Costa, A. B. (2019). Não há fatos contra argumentos. A falha da atestação da Verdade como validador do Jornalismo. In *XVII SBPJor*, 2019, Goiânia, GO. <https://bit.ly/3PX15Gs>
- Costa, P. R. (2020). Impactos da captologia. Problemáticas, desafios e algumas consequências do “dar vistas” ao ecrã em rede. *Sociologia Online*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.30553/sociologiaonline.2020.23.4>
- da Costa, B. B., Viegas, D. de J., Moreira, T. A. and Abreu, P. A. (2020). O movimento antivacina no YouTube nos tempos de pós-verdade: Educação em saúde ou desinformação? *Revista Mídia e Cotidiano*, 14(1), 220-239. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22409/rmc.v14i1.38210>
- Davey, M., Kirchgaessner, S. and Boseley, S. (2020). Surgisphere: governments and WHO changed Covid-19 policy based on suspect data from tiny US company. *The Guardian*, 3.
- Deuze, M. and Witschge, T. (2016). O que o jornalismo está se tornando. *Parágrafo*, 4(2), 06-21. <https://bit.ly/3Sf26LF>
- Elster, J. (1999). *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Figaro, R. (Coord.) (2020). Relatório dos resultados da pesquisa: como trabalham os comunicadores em tempos de pandemia da COVID-19? *Relatório da ECA-USP*. São Paulo.
- Figaro, R. (2013). Perfis e discursos de jornalistas no mundo do trabalho. In FIGARO, R.; NONATO, C; GROHMANN, R. (orgs.), *As mudanças no mundo do trabalho do jornalista* (pp. 7-143). Editora Atlas, São Paulo, Brasil.
- Geraldes, E. (2001). Jornalismo e legitimação científico-tecnológica: o caso da erradicação da poliomielite no Brasil. In *XXIV Intercom*, Campo Grande, MS. <https://bit.ly/3cRhJJd>
- Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P. and Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral foundations theory: The pragmatic validity of moral pluralism. In *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 47, 55-130). Academic Press. <https://bit.ly/3OK3bbi>

- Heloani, R. (2006). O trabalho do jornalista: estresse e qualidade de vida. *Interações*, (22), 171-198. <https://bit.ly/3cFoiyg>
- Hunt, E. (2016). What is “fake news”? How to spot it and what you can do to stop it. *The Guardian*. (17 de dezembro). <https://bit.ly/3PMb0P4>
- Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century* (p. 145). The MIT Press.
- Latour, B. (2020). Bruno Latour: ‘This is a global catastrophe that has come from within’. <https://bit.ly/3Bn3YMx>
- Lima, S. P. (2013). *Perfil do jornalista brasileiro: características demográficas, políticas e do trabalho jornalístico em 2012*. Editora Insular.
- Mesquita, M. (2003). *O Quarto Equívoco: o poder dos media na sociedade contemporânea*. Minerva Coimbra.
- Natércia, F. (2008). Por uma leitura crítica da ciência. *ComCiência*, 100. <https://bit.ly/3JdrVb5>
- Orgeret, K. S. (2020) Discussing Emotions in Digital Journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 292-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1727347>
- Paganotti, I, Sakamoto, L. and Ratier, R. (2019). Mais fake e menos news: resposta educativa às notícias falsas nas eleições de 2018. In Costa y Blanco (orgs.), *Liberdade de expressão: questões da atualidade*. ECA-USP. <https://doi.org/10.11606/9788572052597>
- Paganotti, I. (2018). Notícias falsas, problemas reais: propostas de intervenção contra noticiários fraudulentos. In Costa y Blanco (orgs.), *Pós-tudo e crise da democracia*. ECA-USP. <https://doi.org/10.11606/9788572052092>
- Patino, B. (2019). *A civilização do peixe-vermelho: como peixes-vermelhos presos aos ecrãs dos nossos smartphones*. Gradiva.
- Pegurer-Caprino, M. and Martínez-Cerdá, J. F. (2016). Alfabetización mediática en Brasil: experiencias y modelos en educación no formal. *Comunicar*, 24(49), 39-48. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C49-2016-04>
- Pennycook, G. and Rand, D. G. (2019). Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*, 188, 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011>
- Souza, V. (2017). A luz, as sombras e a procura da verdade. Os média e a construção de uma realidade equívoca e totalizante. (OBS*) Observatorio, 11(1), 20-40. <https://doi.org/10.7458/obs1102017979>

- Tandoc Jr, E. C., Lim, Z. W. and Ling, R. (2018). Defining “fake news” A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital journalism*, 6(2), 137-153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143>.
- Traquina, N. (2005). *Teorias do jornalismo*. Editora Insular.
- Velavan, T. P. and Meyer, C. G. (2020). The COVID-19 epidemic. *Tropical medicine & international health*, 25(3), 278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tmi.13383>
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2020). An emotional turn in journalism studies? *Digital Journalism*, 8(2), 175-194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1697626>
- Wardle, C. and Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. *Council of Europe report*, 27. <https://bit.ly/3bjo5QX>
- Wolf, M. (2012). *Teorias da comunicação*. Presença.
- Zarocostas, J. (2020). How to fight an infodemic. *The Lancet*, 395(10225), 676. <https://bit.ly/3OLE3RH>
- Zu, Z. Y., Jiang, M. D., Xu, P. P., Chen, W., Ni, Q. Q., Lu, G. M. and Zhang, L. J. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): a perspective from China. *Radiology*, 296(2) <https://doi.org/10.1148/radiol.2020200490>