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Negationism and anti-vaccine misinformation by Jair Bolsonaro¹²

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Abstract

This paper seeks to bring to the debate the philosophical interrelationships between denialism and nihilism, seeking to unveil the strategies used by the “merchants of doubt” (ORESQUES and CONWAY) to influence the population not to adhere to the vaccination against Covid-19, during 2021, through the use of misinformation. In this context, we adopted the Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness as an interpretative path (RICOEUR, 2010), which enables us to understand the narrative production of intentional disinformation and its collective and social appropriation. HHC offers us an interpretative possibility of the world of the text based on the relationship with history, the past and the experience, as entities affected by the past, which we are. In this sense, this paper’s structure has as its starting point a brief debate that seeks to confront Nietzschean nihilism and scientific denialism, in order to confront communication and disinformation and its current dimensions, intermediated by an interpretation of fake news about vaccines that circulated in 2021 and which have President Jair Bolsonaro as a promoter. The narratives posted here for interpretation were denounced by society through the @eufiscalizo app from Fiocruz-RJ and checked through the website <https://www.nujocchecagem.com.br/>.

Key-words: Misinformation; Negationism; Nihilism; Anti-vaccine; Bolsonaro

Resumo

Este artigo busca trazer ao debate as inter-relações filosóficas entre o negacionismo e o niilismo, buscando desvendar as estratégias utilizadas pelos “mercadores da dúvida” (ORESQUES e CONWAY) para influenciar a população a não aderir à vacinação contra a Covid-19, durante 2021, através do uso de desinformação. Nesse contexto, adotamos a Hermenêutica da Consciência Histórica como caminho interpretativo (RICOEUR, 2010), que nos permite compreender a produção narrativa da desinformação intencional e sua apropriação coletiva e social. HHC oferece-nos uma possibilidade interpretativa do mundo do texto a partir da relação com a história, o passado e a experiência, como entidades afetadas pelo passado, que somos. Nesse sentido, a estrutura deste artigo tem como ponto de partida um breve debate que busca confrontar o niilismo nietzschiano e o negacionismo

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² The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

científico, para confrontar a comunicação e a desinformação e suas dimensões atuais, intermediado por uma interpretação das notícias falsas sobre vacinas que circularam em 2021. e que têm o presidente Jair Bolsonaro como promotor. As narrativas aqui postadas para interpretação foram denunciadas pela sociedade através do aplicativo @eufiscalizo da Fiocruz-RJ e conferidas através do site <https://www.nujocchecagem.com.br/>.

Palavras-chave: Desinformação; Negacionimos; Niilismo; Antivacina; Bolsonaro

Introduction

When we relate negationism to the anti-vaccination movement around the world from a historical point of view, we end up noticing distant roots, which actually start before the use of immunizers, but which already appear in the fight that scientists were putting on, initially, to the processes of inoculation of the smallpox virus into healthy people to prevent the disease from settling in its most lethal form. There are indications that in the 9th century the Persians already used the practice of inoculation, also known as variolation.

In Europe, such practice was introduced in England around the 17th century and it faced opposition, having been approved by the Royal Society of London in the early 18th century (FENNER et al, 1998). At the end of the 18th century, the vaccine against smallpox was discovered by Edward Jenner from the inoculation of the virus from cows infected by the disease in healthy people, finally immunizing them. This time, the denial, the opposition and the use of false information came from the doctors and scientists who already worked with the inoculation of the smallpox virus and who made a lot of money with it (HENDERSON, 1994). Ever since, scientific negationism and vaccine misinformation have gone hand in hand.

In order to get an idea of the strength of the anti-vaccination movement throughout history, it is important to note that, at the end of the 19th century, the National Anti-Vaccination League was created in London, which brought together intellectuals who believed in the natural cure for diseases, as well as part of the working class who, deceived by a lot of misinformation, ended up believing that vaccination, above all, free and mandatory by the State, was yet another element of working class domination (ERMAN, 2022).

Throughout the 19th century, as well as in the first half of the 20th century, the fight against the mandatory vaccine spread out to most of the countries that, by then, already had access to immunizers not only against smallpox, but against whooping cough and other

diseases. In Brazil, the smallpox vaccine had its first major movement against it in November 1904 when a revolt broke out against mandatory vaccination triggered by Law No. 1,261 from October 31 of that year. The law provided for sanctions such as fines for those who did not get vaccinated, in addition to requiring a vaccination certificate for schools, events, trips and other situations. It is worth considering that the movement known as the Vaccine Revolt led to the arrest of almost 1,000 people, in addition to a hundred injured and about 30 dead. The League against the Mandatory Vaccine (*Liga Contra a Vacina Obrigatória*) founded on November 5th of the same year and composed of workers, was also at the forefront of the movement (SEVCENCO, 2018, p.11). However, it must be considered that not only workers were against mandatory vaccination in Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century. Sevcenco (2018, p.8) draws attention to Rui Barbosa's attitude, who, despite being part of the country's intellectual and political elite, was against the vaccine, as were many others.

At the end of the 20th century, the anti-vaccination movement intensified after the action of the British physician Andrew Wakefield, who published a research (later contested and proven false) that linked the growth in the number of cases of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (Asperger's Syndrome) with the triple viral vaccine (MMR) that protects against measles, mumps and rubella, used since the beginning of the 1970s and which caused a rapid drop in the number of deaths, mainly from measles. In 2010, Wakefield had his medical registration revoked and was banned from practicing medicine in England, as well as his publications in renowned journals such as *The Lancet* were finally removed, however, the damage had already been done and since then, the anti-vaccination movement has been growing by leaps and bounds.

In the fluidity of virtual life in the 21st century, the anti-vaccine movement has advanced in the digital environment and made use of the possibilities that the business model of the major platforms make available to producers of potentially profitable content, such as disinformation³. In 2021, the U.S. *Center for Countering Digital Hate-CCDH* published a study about the disinformation industry, focusing on the direct fight against vaccines. For the CCDH, the anti-vaccine movement, which uses a lot of misinformation and promotes scientific denialism, saw in the COVID-19 pandemic a great opportunity to increase business, having leveraged its ways of acting and means of distributing denialist and lying narratives, which end up bringing profits both for the movement itself and for any

³ In 2018, the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) published a study that identified that the power of disinformation to go viral is 70% faster than scientific or journalistic information (RÊGO, 2021).

pharmaceutical laboratories, partners or not, of the movement, in addition to digital platforms.

The CCDH report exposes both the top 12 anti-vaxxer entrepreneurs, as well as the network of companies, non-profit organizations, political actions, committees, affiliation schemes and social media marketing empires that make up the AntiVaxx Industry. Among the great entrepreneurs of the system, it is worth mentioning Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President of the NGO Children's Health Defense (CCDH, 2021). "Antivaccine organizations in the US, led by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Del Bigtree and Larry Cook have privately admitted in court cases that they depend on major social media/platforms for audience reach and revenue generation (RÊGO, 2021, p.120).

In Brazil, the anti-vaccine disinformation market has caused damage over the years, with greater emphasis during the current Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the last few months when childhood vaccination was put into effect, at the same time that alarmist and untrue narratives about the use of immunizers in children were boosted on social media. In February 2022, 3 weeks after ANVISA's authorization of children's vaccination against Covid-19, vaccination happened at a slow pace, on the one hand, according to a report by NEXO Jornal, due to the lack of sufficient doses and the ineffectiveness of the Health Secretary; and, on the other hand, to the lack of information that has led parents to choose not to vaccinate their children. "A large part of the misinformation about vaccines disseminated on social networks mentions the occurrence of serious adverse reactions to immunizers in children, such as myocarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle)" (NEXO, Feb 7 2022). Pfizer studies sent to Anvisa did not report this problem in children aged 5 to 11 years. At older ages (16 and 17 years), the risk was 0.007%, a very low value. A person who gets Covid-19 is four times more likely to develop myocarditis than a vaccinated person, according to a study in the scientific journal Nature.

Given this context, which interconnects scientific denialism, misinformation, digital platforms and the anti-vaccination movement, this paper seeks to bring to the debate the philosophical interrelationships between denialism and nihilism, seeking to unveil the strategies used by the "merchants of doubt" (ORESQUES and CONWAY) to influence the population not to adhere to the vaccination against Covid-19, during 2021, through the use of misinformation. In this context, we adopted the Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness as an interpretative path (RICOEUR, 2010), which enables us to understand the narrative production of intentional disinformation and its collective and social appropriation. HHC offers us an interpretative possibility of the world of the text based on the relationship with

history, the past and the experience, as entities affected by the past, which we are. The implantation of doubt, based on the exploration of personal and collective fear and anguish, in narratives that activate emotional keys, values and traditional beliefs, is the common thread that makes fake news more visible on social media, since they are in line with the programming of algorithms that seek to shape the experience of each individual in a society of surveillance and control that make up both an economy of action and attention (RÊGO, 2020). In this sense, this paper's structure has as its starting point a brief debate that seeks to confront Nietzschean nihilism and scientific denialism, in order to confront communication and disinformation and its current dimensions, intermediated by an interpretation of fake news about vaccines that circulated in 2021 and which have President Jair Bolsonaro as a promoter. The narratives posted here for interpretation were denounced by society through the @eufiscalizo app from Fiocruz-RJ and checked through the website <https://www.nujocchecagem.com.br/> .

Nihilism and Denialism

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect (NIETZSCHE, 2011, p.23).

The above paragraph opens Nietzsche's book published posthumously and which brings together some of his last writings, *The Will to Power*, also published in Brazil in another version, as *Vontade de Potência*. In the first part of the book, Nietzsche addresses the imminent advent of nihilism provoked by two poles that dispute the construction of meaning about the truth. On the one hand, the interpretation of an exacerbated Christian morality, on the other, reason and scientism.

Nothing could be more current than turning to Nietzsche's writings in our context of denialism in which the philosopher's look at nihilism can serve as a basis for understanding the present moment, since from different angles one perceives the nihilism that is in line with an enhancement of personal denial to the point where one denies one's own existence and the meaning of life. From the personal to the collective, doubt, fear and anguish are ubiquitously present in our social context and, while contributing to denial, collective hatred

and misunderstanding, they are also influenced by them. On both sides, it is possible to see the phenomenon of disinformation performing.

In our pandemic contemporaneity, both with regard to Covid-19 and the production and circulation of narratives that misinform, the tensions are located in the confrontation between regimes of truth structured on reason, science and the methods forged in the modernity, on the one hand; and, on the other, regimes that are structured on experience, or even those formed by values and beliefs as a ballast, such as those located in a mystique and in a religious morality of a tradition from the past.

For Nietzsche, the *will to truth* or the *will devoted to truth* can even mask a *will to deceive* or value the error based on misleading interpretations that lead to a meeting point in which the constructions of meaning unite with the judgments of others. value situated as “[...] essence of *“truth”*. As the philosopher reinforces when revealing that “[...] the confidence in reason and its categories, in the dialectic, therefore, the evaluations of logic only approve by experience, their proven *usefulness* for life: not their *“truth”* (NIETZSCHE, 2007, p.69).

The lie and the *will to deception*, as components of action, are revealed to be intrinsic to the truth, composing its essence, as its opposite, masked by the senses that, according to Nietzsche, endow the “unreal”, the “untrue”, the “apparent”, with “real” effects. In this way, Nietzsche ponders that, if that were the case, that is, if we suspected that all the conceptions of what surrounds us were false, it would follow that “[...] all the influences of things on us would start to be perceived and explained in terms of a *false causality*: in short, we would measure value and disvalue, advantages and losses in terms of deception, considering the world that matters so much to us to be false” (NIETZSCHE, 2007, p. 65). This would be fertile ground for nihilism.

Within Christian morality, the truth would be, in this context, a speech from God positioned as non-contestable and as an imperative of what could be defined as true. This truth, however, would have turned against its own morality, since it would be configured as an incarnate lie the morality wanted to get rid of. A place sold as true, but not realized as such. From this “[...] antagonism – not valuing [*schätzen*] what we know and no longer being able to value what we would like to impose on ourselves as a lie [*was wir uns vorlügen möchten*]: this results in a process of dissolution” (NIETZSCHE, 2011, p. 30).

Regarding the categories of reason that stand as pillars of modernity, Nietzsche also places them as builders of a nihilistic process. Analyzing the influence of reason, Nietzsche reveals three forms of nihilism within a psychological state that would be installed as

reflection. The first form would come from a conscious awakening to nihilism that would reveal itself from meaning and intentionality, in which man feels the need to interpret life. Here nihilism would be the result of a feeling of emptiness. The second form would be nihilism as a totality, as an organization “[...] in every event and under every event: so that the soul, thirsty for admiration and veneration, is quenched in the overall representation of a supreme form of government and of domain [...]”. In the third and last form, nihilism would condemn the world of becoming and create a new world that would be given as true, “[...] But, as soon as man discovers how this world is structured only by psychological needs and how he has no right to do so, then the last form of nihilism appears, which includes disbelief in a world” (NIETZSCHE, 2011, p. 32).

The beliefs in the categories of reason would be, therefore, and also, the cause of nihilism. Values, even in the age of reason, would be at the center of the process of construction and interpretation of meanings. For Nietzsche, we seek to frame the world within judging, however, when the values of this world do not always meet ours, we devalue them, since the valuation of the world from a psychological point of view considers our perspectives of utility that would sustain the domain of the human and that would have been fraudulently “[...] projected into the essence of things. It is still always about the hyperbolic naivety of man: [placing] himself as the meaning and value criterion of things” (NIETZSCHE, 2011, p. 33).

The analysis carried out by Nietzsche in relation to the projection of nihilism for the next two centuries (it is worth remembering that the text was written almost a century and a half ago) are, at the very least, provocative for the interpretation of the world that allows texts that contain *disinformational* narratives to exist nowadays. Individually potentiated nihilism has become, in other parameters, a collective phenomenon.

What Nietzsche points out, therefore, is that the constructions of truth in the environments of a Christian morality and in the environment of a science, both exacerbated, would lead to a potentialization of nihilism in the *future-past* he refers to.

When discussing the *will to power* as knowledge, Nietzsche also exposes the schism that historically has placed science and religion on opposite sides, since in his conception the *pathos* of humanity - and here we adopt *pathos* in the Heideggerian conception formed a posteriori, as fundamental affective disposition, which would have stood against “[...] our concept of what the “truth” should be, of what the service of truth, our objectivity, our method, our calm, prudent, distrustful way should be [...] (NIETZSCHE, 2011, p.255). For the author, an aesthetic taste made humanity strongly believe in the fantasy of truth and for that, he reveals “it is as if an *opposite* had been achieved, as if a leap in truth had been taken, that

learning through moral hyperboles prepared, step by step, that *pathos of a more tender kind* that was embodied as a scientific character” (idem).

On the other hand, but in the same analytical path, it is worth noting that the theory of knowledge has several paths and confrontations and, within the Nietzschean critical thinking, it is placed **not** as something given as facts in a positivist logic of evidential proof, but rather, as text to the interpretable world. In Nietzsche’s words (2011, p.260) when situating the knowledge proposed based on the Comtian thought, “[...] against positivism, which stays in the phenomenon ‘there are only facts’, I would say no, precisely there are no facts, only interpretations [*Interpretationen*]”.

In a recent essay, De Paula (2021) elaborates some theses around denial based on Freud, Nietzschean nihilism and Brazilian denialism, focusing on Jair Bolsonaro's speeches during the Covid-19 pandemic. For this author, Nietzsche's contributions to thinking about the present day are of great value, based on the writings mentioned above, in which the philosopher performs the diagnosis of the centuries to come (XX and XXI) as the era of nihilism, in view of the tensional and exposed experience of the truth that ends up influencing the way of conceiving and contesting the world.

Brazilian denialism would be, in this context, both an exacerbation of Freudian denial, for De Paula (2021, p.106), a “kind of hypertrophy of the most basic aspect of the intellectual function of denial, in the sense that, in this discourse, one can perceive the desire to expel and even consider as an enemy everything that is considered different from oneself [...]”, as well as a nihilistic appropriation of the world whose knowledge is alien to them, since their relationship with the historical past and with the collective experience is vague, which allows for the emergence of alternative truths and their consequent *true hyperboles* in the way Donald Trump conceived them and has practiced them (RÊGO and BARBOSA, 2020).

In the historical environment, researchers Valim, Avelar and Bervenage (2021) seek to historicize the concept of denialism based on its uses throughout history, especially in periods of wars, genocides, exterminations of peoples, diseases and pandemics, etc., among which they highlight the holocaust, in addition to the genocide of the Armenian people, as well as, in a *decolonial* perspective, the genocide of the black people in Brazil and, finally, the denialism surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. The use of the term by the historian Henry Rousso to designate people who denied the atrocities of Nazism ended up popularizing the word which, in this way, “began to be used in the opposite sense to that used by the denialists themselves, who saw themselves as founders of a ‘revisionist school’ (the term was proposed by the denialist Roubert Faurisson) and intended to give intellectual

and scientific credibility to what was nothing more than falsification and distortion of evidence” (Idem, 2021, p.14).

Regarding Brazilian denialism in the current pandemic environment, the authors state that it was spectacularized during the Covid-19 pandemic, giving “shape to a logic of denial that precedes and goes beyond the health dimension and takes place, in our present time, under the form of governmentality” (VALIM, AVELAR and BREVENAGE, 2021, p. 25).

Nihilism and denialism are not synonymous, but, in the perspective adopted here, as well as in the path taken by De Paula (2021), denialism is confirmed as a form of nihilism, of denial of the world and construction of parallelisms that confront reality. Next, we dedicate to the intricacies of the phenomenon of disinformation and its interrelationships with its opposite information and with communication.

Communication, Information and Disinformation in the core of virtual life

For Castells (2002) information technologies played an essential role in the reconstruction of the capitalist system at the end of the 20th century, with technological development aimed at the fruition of information and communication being appropriated by the logic of capitalism. In the prologue of *The Rise of the Network Society. The information age: economy, society and culture*, Castells clarifies that although capitalism and informationalism were intrinsic processes, they ended up being appropriated in different ways by societies, in theory, such diverse appropriation would have the culture and history of each people as local motivating factors. Even with these disparities in relation to the experience of the hybrid construction of capitalism-informationalism, Castells defends the existence of an informational society.

This author recognizes the previous traces of information as something intrinsic to the social and historical context, but he focuses his analytical process on a time around the end of the 20th century, around which humanity would have experienced a “rare interval in history” in which the material culture would have been transformed due to the influence of information technologies, declaring, in a way, the potentialization of a collective *virtual life* immersed in a digital world built and fed by informational data and by all kinds of knowledge, in which we live immersed nowadays.

If Castells' analytical process takes place in this moment of transition between the 20th and 21st centuries, highlighting the potential of the information age, Mattelart (2002),

in turn, in his book *History of the Information Society*, presents a critical approach pointing out to the alliance between positivist scientism and capitalism as the cause of a functionalist society based on informationalism. In *History of the Theories of Communication*, Armand and Michèle Mattelart already point out mistakes in the Information Theory built from the formal model of Shannon (Claude Elwood Shannon) proposed in his work *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, in which he launches a general system of communication in order to reproduce informational data in a linear way. Shannon's theory focused on processing information on a large scale, without producing noise. According to the authors, the model by Shannon, who was a mathematician and an electrical engineer, influenced “[...] very different research schools and currents on the means of communication, sometimes radically opposed” (MATTELART and MATTELART, 2001, p. 60).

Still according to the above-mentioned theorists, the concept of information would have its construction related to the development of biology and would be potentiated by Shannon's model. On the other hand, the emergence of Information Sciences in the post-war period was motivated by the development of information technology, which ended up transforming information into easily transmissible and salable data, a process currently enhanced in the virtual space.

Mattelart and Mattelart (2001), when presenting the cybernetic proposition of decentralization of information proposed by Wiener, highlight this author's warning regarding the entropic action of systems that would have the vocation “[...] to precipitate biological degradation and social disorder”, thus it would be a threat. “Information must be able to circulate. The information society can only exist under the condition of barrier-free exchange. It is by definition incompatible with the embargo or with the practice of secrecy, with inequalities of access [...]” (MATTELART and MATTELART, 2001, p. 66).

In this context, we seek to place information as a social phenomenon structured in dimensions that crosses the history of humanity and that is closely related to the technological process, since the advent of writing, to the possibilities of transformation, storage and fruition of data.

Our gaze at this moment goes beyond information and communication technologies, as well as its surrounding capitalist universe, but it does not depart from them due to the *locus* in which we are located. However, we think of information and its fruition process, communication, as phenomena in a perspective that allows us to transcend the original intentionality of its constructions from the “[...] split, in the object itself, between its supposed in-itself, and its pure appearance” (RICOUER, 2009, p. 13-14), making here a transgression between being and collective being.

We adopt a perspective of visuality of information as a phenomenon and not only as concepts, so that we can encompass the above contextualizations and those offered by Castells and Mattelart. Our approach to the phenomenon follows Husserl (2015), who tells us that, for a phenomenon to establish itself, it is necessary to reveal what is hidden, in the shadows, however, our gaze is guided specifically by the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (2010), which recognizes the internal and external dimensions involved in the interpretation of narratives that enable hermeneutics to reveal the world of the text, or the world that enables the existence of narratives about phenomena.

Posseti and Bontcheva (2020), in a research carried out in partnership between the *International Center for Journalist -ICFJ* and UNESCO, seek to work on the concept of *disinformation* as referring to false content with potentially negative impacts and that can lead to fatal consequences during the current pandemic. The researchers are emphatic in stating that the intention of a given agent to produce content about false treatments or cures for ideological or profit reasons is an example of disinformation that makes up the current *disinfodemic*. The authors investigate *disinformational* narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on themes, forms of hybrid construction, main topics, agents of dissemination and, finally, list strategies to combat the disinformational phenomenon.

A large number of researches approach disinformation based on the author's intentionality; for us, the visuality of the phenomenon is more important, although we are not here minimizing the author's intentionality as a factor that can define the narrative as informative or disinformational, but our argument refers to the fact that in the general calculation of the phenomenon along with the subject in its social context, the disinformational narratives composed intentionally or not; true, but out of context, inaccurate or manipulated, hybrid or not, they all end up contributing for the chaos or informational disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) in a degree and relevance that is often similar, and may even harm the health of citizens.

Thus, we clarify that what interests us in the disinformational phenomenon are not the concepts, but the phenomenon's potential to intervene in the social context in which it is established, promoting political disagreement in a perspective guided by Rancière (2018), which can divide society and install hate.

For Burke (2021), unlike Rêgo and Barbosa (2020), disinformation does not only work for the construction of personal and collective ignorance, but also and perhaps mainly for the maintenance of ignorance that is crossed by numerous policies at different levels that seek to maintain the ignorance of the vast majority, in favor of the privileged knowledge of

others. Ignorance, therefore, may be the source of misinformation in certain contexts, but it is mainly its destiny.

In the context of the *digital bios* (SODRÉ, 2002, 2021), within a new and more predatory experience of capitalism, called by Zuboff (2020) surveillance capitalism, in which the human being is the raw material exploited in all its angles, for the infinite profit of digital platforms, disinformation ends up being a strategy for those who easily appropriate the business model of *big Techs* (RÊGO, 2020), profiting politically and financially, and providing a great return in profit for the aforementioned platforms.

It is in this scenario that the anti-vaccine movement we talked about at the beginning of this paper works intensely, since its growth and scope depends on its communicative capacity and its expertise on the digital flows of messages through social media, through which it manages to prospect new audiences, who, far from scientific knowledge and/or a ballast with historical and collective experience, allow themselves to remain in ignorance or be seduced by a new form of ignorance.

It must be considered that the anti-vaccination movement has received reinforcement from political personas and also personas from other fields, such as culture and entertainment. In Brazil, the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro, is probably the greatest propagator of an anti-vaccine narrative about Covid-19, to date.

In our country, misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines began to circulate with great emphasis at the end of 2020 when the first immunizers were in the approval and release process. However, already at the end of March 2020, shortly after the start of lockdown in Brazil, narratives with misinformation about vaccines had already started to circulate. In the present research, we identified about 170 checks of material containing misinformation about immunizations against the new coronavirus on the Nujoc Checking Project website⁴, between March 2020 and March 2022. Among these, we chose 4 news articles to bring to the debate in this paper, considering that our interpretative proposal has a qualitative nature and is guided by Ricouer's (2010) Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness and it does not have the premise of defining types and modalities of narrative construction that have disinformative components, although the material is extremely rich and can reveal the profile of the senders, as well as the composition of the narratives, and the potential public.

In this sense, what interests us here is to point out the evidence in which the nihilism alerted by Nietzsche and the widespread scientific denialism, especially from the last

⁴ Service project linked to the Center for Research in Journalism and Communication of the Graduate Program in Communication (PPGCOM) of the Federal University of Piau  (UFPI) and developed by senior undergraduate students, journalists, masters and doctors in Communication. www.nujocchecagem.com.br

decades of the 20th century to the present day, influenced the construction of these narratives. What the four narratives have in common is the President of the Federative Republic of Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, as their central character, in addition to the mode of construction and viral dissemination through social media.

Nihilism and denialism in disinformation about vaccines - Bolsonaro ahead

For De Paula (2021), the moment in which a “post-truth era” is experienced from the advent of the potentialization of the phenomenon of disinformation in its various dimensions and forms (RÊGO, 2020, 2021) is the main indication that Nietzsche's predictions that the next two centuries would be marked by nihilism were right.

Rêgo and Barbosa (2020) warn about the problematic of the phenomenon of disinformation and its confrontation with the regimes of truth of modernity, having as a starting point the unveiling of an exacerbated scientism on the one hand, and, on the other, the appropriation of the speeches of a philosophy that sought to reveal the intricacies of the construction of modernity's truth regimes, policies and games, such as in Nietzsche and Foucault. The authors speak of a context in which politicians appropriate a discourse about the non-existence of truth and its construction from points of view in order to open space for alternative truths, as in Trump.

Bolsonaro enters this context by appropriating both the expertise of his family members, concerning the business model and marketing strategies made available by digital platforms, as well as embarking on the model of creating great waves of lies, invading the news deserts in our country and reaching the homes of many Brazilians forgotten by the media and public policies, positioning himself, in the end, as a political character of great communicative influence and with great power of opinion formation, although his trajectory as a politician in the National Congress lacked much expression or action.

It is worth highlighting here that a survey carried out by BBC⁵ in the first half of 2020 in the United Kingdom revealed 7 types of profiles of people who, during the COVID 19

⁵ Corona vírus: os sete tipos de pessoas que inventam e disseminam fake News. Disponível em: <<https://www.uol.com.br/tilt/noticias/bbc/2020/05/08/os-sete-tipos-de-pessoas-que-inventam-e-disseminam-fake-news.htm>>. Acesso em 17 mai. 20.

pandemic, create and circulate fake news, namely: the joker (trolling); the scammer; **the politician**; the creator of conspiracy theories; the insider (this type usually records audios pretending to be doctors, scientists, nurses and talks about cures or denialist or panic situations, in general, the audios are difficult to verify); the relative; and, finally, the celebrity, who ends up endorsing a false narrative by continuing the process of visibility of such in their social media, adding credibility to fake news among thousands of followers (RÊGO and BARBOSA, 2020) .

Another research carried out by the *Reuters Institute* in partnership with the *University of Oxford*, also in the first half of 2020, on the circulation of narratives currently classified as disinformational, brings interesting results about the characteristics that make up the disinformation market in the United Kingdom. This research analyzes the various sides of disinformation, such as source types, main agents, narrative types, among other characteristics of disinformation and, regarding sources of disinformation, the analysis of the vertical flow from top to bottom, involving politicians, celebrities and other public figures, showed that these characters are responsible for around 20% of problematic information in the UK. However, the risk is much higher than with other agents, as they represent **69% of social media engagement**, while the remaining fake news represent a much smaller involvement (RÊGO and BARBOSA, 2020).

As mentioned before, Jair Messias Bolsonaro fits into this context as a character with great power of persuasion in Brazilian society, having his profile as a popular and conservative politician built through many communication channels in the last decade.

The first article we bring for interpretation is the fact-check performed by the NUJOC team on October 8, 2021, in which the physician Raíssa Soares, an advocate of early treatment and then holder of the position of Secretary of Health of the city of Porto Seguro, in Bahia state, congratulates President Jair Bolsonaro for his speech at the UN⁶. The medical doctor praises and appreciates the President's speech, bearing in mind that, having been coerced to speak in front of the world, he needed to side with vaccination (although up to the present moment, he continues to declare that he has not been vaccinated). However, he reinforced the importance of the early treatment that had already been completely dismissed by the World Health Organization and even by the Brazilian Secretary of Health, whose actions during the pandemic were quite controversial and even denialist at various

⁶ Article by Nujoc, fact-check available in: < <https://www.nujocchecagem.com.br/medica-faz-afirmacoes-falsas-sobre-discurso-de-bolsonaro-nas-nacoes-unidas/>>. Accessed on Feb 16 2022.

times. Below we transcribe some excerpts from Bolsonaro's speech at the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 2021⁷.

Image 1 – *Nujoc Check about live in Doctors for Life covid19*



(10min23s) So far, the federal government has already distributed more than 260 million doses of vaccines and more than 140 million Brazilians have already received at least the first dose, which represents almost 90% adults. 80% of the indigenous population has also been fully vaccinated. Until November, all those who chose to be vaccinated in Brazil will be assisted.

We support vaccination; however, our government has positioned itself against the health passport or any obligation related to the vaccine.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have supported the physician's autonomy in seeking early treatment, following the recommendation of our Federal Council of Medicine and I was one of those who underwent early

⁷ Speech available in: < <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/discurso-bolsonaro-na-onu/>>. Accessed on Feb. 16 2022.

treatment. We respect the doctor-patient relationship in the decision of the medication to be used and its routine use.

We don't understand why many countries, along with much of the media, were against the initial treatment. History and science will know how to hold everyone responsible.

In the middle of the United Nations Assembly, President Jair Bolsonaro reaffirms his convictions and his scientific denialism worldwide, reinforcing his support for early treatment, which in Brazil had great commitment from the Secretary of Health during part of the pandemic period, including the purchase, manufacture and distribution of medicines that came to compose the famous Covid kit (hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin and others) and that were completely dismissed by the World Health Organization, leading the Secretary of Health of Brazil to apologize during the period in which the Covid Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (*CPI*) was active in the Senate. Even though he is aware of updates from the Secretary of Health in Brazil, Bolsonaro maintains his stance, confronting a large amount of research and researchers from several countries that have carried out scientific investigations involving such drugs and have almost always reached the same verdict, namely: that they are not effective in treating the disease caused by SARS-Cov-2 and its variants.

Image 2 – CNN speech by Jair Bolsonaro at the UN



A few days before President Jair Bolsonaro's speech at the UN, a video with Bolsonaro speaking, recorded by supporters and released by congresswoman Bia Kicis

(removed from her channels during the Covid-19 *CPI*) contained similar content. The fact-check was carried out by the www.nujocchecagem.com.br team on September 9, 2021⁸

Coronavac is 50% effective, they got it through people's heads that those who take [the vaccine] have less severe symptoms, and a lot of people are dying, in Chile, in other countries, in Brazil too, and the person, instead of seeking early treatment, he's like 'it's going to be less serious', we don't know if it's going to be less or more serious, there's no scientific proof of that, so he should seek early treatment, he should seek the doctor and that's it", declared the President, surrounded by supporters.

Once again, Jair Bolsonaro returns to the discourse of discrediting the Coronavac vaccine and the Butantan Institute, reaffirming the effectiveness of early treatment. Denialism is repeatedly present and impregnated with a nihilism that accompanies it in the process of construction and dissemination of the President's speeches to his supporters. The effects of meaning that Jair Bolsonaro imprints to his speeches are loaded with effects of doubt that they find, in the reconfiguration of narratives by the population, an activation of values and a distrust in science, scientists and institutions that have worked incessantly to overcome Covid -19. His speech, from a locus of power, has great influence among the approximately 20% of Brazilians who make up his strongest base.

In a material verified by the Nujoc Checking team on December 3, 2021⁹, it was found President Jair Bolsonaro's assertion that vaccines against Covid-19 could develop Aids among those immunized, in his live on October 21, 2021, removed from the platform a few days later by YouTube in Brazil. During the speech, the President stated:

I'm just going to break the news, I'm not going to comment. I've talked about this in the past, I've been beaten a lot. Here we go: Official reports from the UK government suggest that those fully vaccinated [...] are developing acquired immunodeficiency syndrome much faster than anticipated. I recommend you to read the article, I won't read it here because I may have a problem with my live, I don't want the live to be dropped, I want to give you information¹⁰.

⁸ In video, Bolsonaro questions the effectiveness of vaccines and insists on early treatment. Available at: <<https://www.nujocchecagem.com.br/em-video-bolsonaro-questiona-eficacia-de-vacinas-e-insiste-em-tratamento-precoce/>>. Accessed on Feb. 14.

⁹ According to the President, the vaccines against Covid-19 could cause Aids. Available at: <<https://www.nujocchecagem.com.br/segundo-o-presidente-do-brasil-as-vacinas-contr-a-covid-19-podem-desenvolver-aids-procede/>>. Accessed on: Mar. 01, 22.

¹⁰ Facebook removes live in which the President relates Covid-19 vaccines to Aids. Available at: <<https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2021-10/facebook-remove-live-em-que-presidente-associa-vacina-de-covid-aids>>. Accessed pm Mar 3, 22.

Jair Bolsonaro's speeches are situated as narrative strategies for attributing disparate meanings to bizarre situations that, in his mouth, gain the status of truth, considering the place from which he speaks, provoking a social engagement potentially superior to that of other narratives conveyed by characters who are not in his condition of power. By raising doubts about the vaccine at different times throughout the years 2020 and 2021, as well as nowadays in 2022, Bolsonaro reinforces his denialism and, at the same time, also reinforces the crisis of meaning and the tension between the regimes of truth, above all, between evidence and experience, in the pandemic environment, taking his speeches to meet the values and beliefs of a society that has no ties to the past and, therefore, is a fertile ground for denialist perspectives and for the reception of fake news that spread as credible information. Failure to recognize factuality and its link with the truth is the nihilistic reinforcement that Bolsonaro imprints to his scientific denialism. Planting doubt and fear are part of his intentional narrative scope.

Illation – denialism as a projection of current nihilism

But what kind of world is this that the phenomenon of disinformation as another side of information reveals?

This question is part of the investigative axis that guides us and which, in addition to being methodological, is a way for us to interpret the narratives and get to know the worlds they reveal, which is the *hermeneutics of historical consciousness* by Ricoeur (2010), already mentioned above, that allows us to explore the narratives through the concepts of tradition, traditionalities, traditions. Enabling us to reveal a world driven by history in which, as *beings affected by the past* that we are, we end up activating and influencing this past, based on the disputes we wage in the present, through the past as a *space of experience* in order to build a *horizon of expectations* (KOSELLECK, 2015) for our society. Thus, we also dispute the domain of truth, confronted by the dimensions of the information phenomenon and its opposite side, disinformation.

This world driven by the past is impacted by the intervention of values, beliefs, experiences that come to us through tradition, through the entrances of time and memory, as well as through the forms of acquisition of experience and end up defining our conduct, our values, our morals and our ethics.

However, the disinformation market and its political intentions explore, through traditionalities, narratives of the past built from not only doubt, but also from fear based on interpretations of history that bring complex and often unthinkable versions, but that get empathy from the non-critical audience of current social media users.

Individual denial characterized by historical unconsciousness places the problem of doubt and certainty, enhanced by fear and anguish, since according to Hartog (2015), when analyzing Koselleck's categories (2015), the smaller the experience, or knowledge of it, the greater the expectation. Without past and history as references, we place ourselves vulnerably and uncritically in our historical time, available for the emergence of values and beliefs collectively triggered by awareness narratives that sell a better social condition and eternal salvation.

The world that disinformational narratives reveal is a world that, in the middle of the 21st century, has not been able to reduce social and economic disparities, it is a world in which people, having no support or justification for the social ills they suffer, resort to the speech of God, as the place of comfort, but in antithesis, also as a place of sacred exclusivity that provokes hatred of other beliefs.

The world that disinformation reveals is the world of cultural and educational inequality and which, therefore, is the ideal world for the emergence of the phenomenon of disinformation.

Denialism, in this context, is the decadence of a world that lives in confusion, in which the truth no longer exists in primacy, where the truth games and politics of contemporary societies have been imploded, making alternative truths permissible. As Nietzsche told us, nihilism would become a chronic illness, which, in our view, as well as in De Paula's (2021), has denialism as one of its manifestations nowadays.

Is there a cure? Maybe not, but there are ways to mitigate the impacts of disinformation and it goes through education, also for the media, through social, economic and educational inclusion that is closely related to the degree of freedom of individuals and peoples; through empathy, synergy and humility of professionals who work building socially accepted truths. For De Paula (2021), coping with denialism involves recognizing reality, although this author recognizes that the denialist discourse has many supporters and will not be easily defeated.

President Jair Bolsonaro, aware of his position as an influencer of a large part of the Brazilian people, has sought to take advantage of opportunities of communication with the

public, to directly influence the behavior of the population in relation to the issues on which he disagrees, and, invariably, his speeches carry a denialist potential, especially when it comes to topics such as the environment, the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccines. With regard to the last two, Bolsonaro has been against the verdicts of science and the word of scientists, defending early treatment and attacking the effectiveness of vaccines. In the excerpts listed above, one can see the author's intention to plant doubt in the population and, at the same time, question the quality of vaccines.

Bolsonaro uses a narrative that seeks to plant doubt and deny the possibilities of science in vaccine development. As De Paula (2021) warns us, the nihilism in Bolsonaro's speeches manifests itself in a "fluctuation of senses", seeking to disqualify the institutions responsible for science at a global and national level. Attacks on the WHO and the Butantan Institute and even Fiocruz were recurrent, followed by a relativist manifestation of the truth that can change depending on the environment and the public for which the speech is given.

In this sense, Jair Bolsonaro and other characters relevant to denialism and the anti-vaccination movement, such as Olavo de Carvalho himself, are important pieces to be contested in the struggle that Brazilian society is waging today in favor of information, facts and reality, perhaps with great ambition, for versions of truth that can contribute to social and collective life.

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AUTHOR 1 – Conceptualization, Methodology , Formal Analysis and Funding Acquisition

AUTHOR 2- Investigation and Formal Analysis

AUTHOR 3- Investigation and Formal Analysis

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