

Os Pingos nos Is: The Rhetorical Construction of Frontstage Journalism¹

Os Pingos do Is: A Construção Retórica do Jornalismo de Fachada

Os Pingos nos Is: La construcción retórica del Periodismo de Fachada

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Abstract: The rhetorical construction of journalism is inherently tied to socioeconomic and cultural context. This study examines the intersection of journalism and democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, focusing on the rhetorical strategies employed by 'Os Pingos nos Is' show on Jovem Pan Media Group. Specifically, it analyzes how the program utilized enthymeme-based arguments, prioritizing verisimilitude over veracity. A content analysis of opinions related to COVID-19 from November 2020 to March 2021 revealed argumentative structures aligning the program with audiences sympathetic to Jair Bolsonaro's government (2018-2022). The program validated government positions over to health authorities, employing "Frontstage Journalism" characterized by simplistic, biased reporting.

Keywords:

Frontstage Journalism, Os Pingos nos Is, Disinformation, Rhetoric, Health, Bolsonarism

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Resumo: A construção retórica do jornalismo não ocorre sem referência ao contexto socioeconômico e cultural. Nessa pesquisa busca-se discutir como o ambiente político nos anos de pandemia no Brasil interferiram na relação entre jornalismo e democracia, especificamente na maneira pela qual o programa Pingos nos Is, da Jovem Pan, recorreu a uma retórica baseada no recurso do *entimema*, argumentos sustentados na verossimilhança em detrimento da veracidade. Realizou-se uma análise de conteúdo, com base na retórica, nas opiniões relativas ao tema “Covid-19”, no período de novembro de 2020 a março de 2021. Foram identificadas estruturas argumentativas que vinculam o programa a um público já alinhado ao governo de Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022), ficando o programa na função de validar as posições do governo em contraposição às autoridades sanitárias. O jornalismo opinativo do programa não se baseou na complexidade dos fatos e adotou uma retórica caracterizada neste estudo como “Jornalismo de Fachada”.

Palavras-Chave:

Jornalismo de fachada, Os Pingos nos Is, Desinformação, Retórica, Saúde, Bolsonarismo

Resumen: La construcción retórica del periodismo no se produce sin referencia al contexto socioeconómico y cultural. Este estudio examina la intersección entre periodismo y democracia durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en Brasil, centrándose en las estrategias retóricas empleadas por el programa 'Os Pingos nos Is' de Jovem Pan. Específicamente, analiza cómo el programa utilizó argumentos basados en entimemas, priorizando la verosimilitud sobre la veracidad. Un análisis de contenido de opiniones relacionadas con el COVID-19 entre noviembre de 2020 y marzo de 2021 reveló estructuras argumentativas que alinean el programa con audiencias simpatizantes del gobierno de Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022). El programa validó posiciones gubernamentales contrarias a las autoridades sanitarias, empleando un 'Periodismo de Fachada' caracterizado por informes sesgados y simplistas.

Palabras clave:

Periodismo de fachada, Os Pingos nos Is, Desinformación, Retórica, Salud, Bolsonarismo

1. Introduction

Between 2019 and 2020, the viral respiratory disease known as Severe Acute

Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)⁴ caused an exponential growth on death rates around the world. It was an apocalyptic scenario, when the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended a global lockdown amidst an “infodemic” and a hyper-proliferation of information, some of which were entirely spurious regarding the subject at hand (World Health Organization, 2020). At that point, in Brazil, the government in charge denied the reality of the disease and promoted the spread of misinformation⁵, politicizing the necessary healthcare and leaving the population divided and confused. This initiative counted with the decisive participation of communication companies, self-proclaimed journalistic.

Journalism’s function as a tool of public interest is based on transmission of information, not only on a democratic level, but also in the practical, everyday life of every citizen and of society as a whole. Thanks to the exercise of this function, along with the knowledge acquired through contact with reality, citizens are made aware of events and are able to gather the necessary elements to comprehend and interpret them. This helps shape their way of thinking about the reality surrounding them, as well as the players involved in it at all levels: in politics, social relations, cultural experiences and also in what involves healthcare, as was evident in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In order to fulfill its function, information must be rooted in truth, based on facts, and also be the result of a meticulous verification process. Verified information aims to ensure factual accuracy and is essential to enable citizens to judge, deliberate and act within a democratic society. Otherwise, we must speak of the corruption of this function, in which information is disseminated and opinions are formed with no factual basis (Charaudeau, 2006; Lafer, 1997).

If there are journalistic outlets that aim to present facts on the principle of objectivity, and others that define themselves as opinion-based, focusing on interpreting facts, it should be considered that, in both cases, thorough investigation and verification of information is necessary. The classic distinction between informative journalism and opinionated journalism has become increasingly blurred lately. However, it is still essential, as previously mentioned, that facts be investigated and verified, and that multiple perspectives be considered (Christofolletti, 2019). This Christofolletti speaks to a commitment to reality and the independence inherent in the concept of impartiality, which differs from neutrality, a tool

⁴ According to the WHO website, the virus itself was named "SARS-CoV-2," indicating its relation to the original SARS coronavirus. Therefore, the disease is Covid-19, and the virus is SARS-CoV-2.

⁵ Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2021/03/relembre-o-que-bolsonaro-ja-disse-sobre-a-pandemia-de-gripezinha-e-pais-de-maricas-a-frescura-e-mimimi.shtml> Accessed on January 15, 2024.

often used to mask hidden agendas (Charaudeau, 2006), particularly when aligning with economic groups or political parties.

Although the relationship between journalism and crisis is widely discussed in theoretical approaches, empirical studies have scarcely explored this connection, limiting the formulation of legitimate evidence. This lack of investigation hampers the adaptation of journalistic practices to the rapid contemporary transformations, including the loss of credibility of the so-called "mainstream press" (Tavares e De Souza, 2019). In this context, explanations for the crisis in journalism become complex, involving central issues such as "credibility" and "trust" in the role of journalism in society. Thus, it becomes crucial to develop empirical studies that address professional practices, contributing to the understanding of the transformations within journalism (Christofolletti, 2019).

The research discussed in this article highlights the importance of rhetoric-based analysis for communication studies, where form takes precedence over content. Its focus is on the type of journalism we refer to as "Frontstage Journalism," practiced by the program "Os Pingos nos Is", which presents itself as both news and opinion-based on its webpage. The program is produced by "Jovem Pan" and broadcast on the YouTube platform⁶. The research examines the opinions related to the topic of "Covid-19" expressed by commentators who participated in the program between November 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021⁷. It observes how these opinions aligned with the government of Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022) and, through the rhetorical device of using verisimilitude instead of veracity, validated the government's positions. This ideological framing of a public health issue may have contributed to the loss of many lives.

The research analyzed how the program "Os Pingos nos Is" supported its partisan discourse through rhetoric, identifying the structures and arguments present in the participants' statements. Using the Content Analysis method, the study highlighted the rhetorical strategies, genres, and argumentative techniques employed (Reboul, 2004; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 2005; Meyer, 2007; Barriga, 2009; Aristóteles, 2011). It became evident that the program practiced what is referred to here as "Frontstage Journalism," a concept that involves presenting opinions as established facts without providing consistent facts or evidence on the topic of public health, or even outright denying them.

⁶ On YouTube, as of November 2023, the program had 5.4 million subscribers and an archive of over 13,000 videos with approximately 3.2 billion views.

⁷ This period represented the peak of Covid-19 cases and deaths in Brazil.

2. Democracy and Journalism, Truth and Misinformation

Journalism and democracy are heavily tied, as democratic coexistence and citizen participation depend on information that enables the understanding of facts and the formation of opinions. From a liberal perspective, democracy is a system which decentralizes power, and the press plays the role of an intermediary between citizens and the government, monitoring the actions of the latter. In this context, journalism is essential for the formation of the public sphere, as argued by Habermas (2003) and Tocqueville (2005), although these theories did not anticipate the impacts of digitization and the platformization of communication. Digitization represents a key ingredient in what is understood as the crisis of journalism. De Souza (2019) criticizes how the pursuit of sensationalist consumption and the abandonment of journalistic objectivity promote irrationalism, while Miguel (2018) discusses the process of de-democratization and the manipulation of reality, including the controversial role played by fact-checking agencies.

The “watchdog” press model, which is expected to provide accountability mechanisms, often succumbs to the influence of political and economic powers, becoming more of a “lapdog”. In Brazil, Albuquerque (2009, 2022) suggests that journalism has taken on the role of a Moderating Power, claiming authority as an arbiter of conflicts among the Government's three branches. This echoes historical practices from the imperial period and, more recently, has been mobilized in episodes such as “Operação Lava Jato”⁸ and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. Journalism’s structural dependency on sponsors also jeopardizes its public function. Lisboa and Benetti (2017) argue that this dependency affects journalistic credibility, which should be based on competence and integrity. Ideological fragmentation and polarization have intensified the rise of niche media, as studied by Lycarião et al. (2018), who analyze how these transformations hamper the social role of journalism.

The logic in digital environments favors the spread of false information, as emotions and personal beliefs often override facts. The Covid-19 pandemic soared the risks of misinformation⁹, with the proliferation of fake news complicating informed decision-making. Social media has created internet bubbles that reinforce preexisting beliefs, making the distinction between truth and falsehood irrelevant for many audiences (Moretzsohn, 2019).

⁸ Operação Lava Jato was an anti-corruption judicial initiative that, although initially celebrated as a milestone in the fight against corruption, ultimately destabilized Brazilian democratic institutions (Albuquerque, 2021).

⁹ The discussion on the misinformation landscape, as well as the concepts and authors used in this research, is detailed in the dissertation that fundaments this study (Ernsen Alves, 2024, p. 37). Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/1884/89103>.

This phenomenon is explored by Bennett and Livingston (2018), who describe how movements like the alt-right in the U.S. and Bolsonarism in Brazil use misinformation to destabilize democratic institutions.

The "catch-all" journalism model, which presented itself as impartial and committed to society as a whole, has lost its centrality in the face of ideological fragmentation and the political polarization of information markets. This decline reflects an adaptation to the dynamics of an increasingly competitive market, where niche media and ideologically driven content have become more economically viable than generalist approaches (Lycarião et al., 2018).

3. A news broadcaster to call your own

In this scenario, Bolsonarism, understood as a political phenomenon that catalyzes right-wing and far-right movements in Brazil, finds fertile ground to thrive, by adopting a "shock politics" strategy to mobilize groups on the fringes of traditional political debate through disruptive tactics. Despite holding positions of power, this movement positions itself as anti-establishment, employing aggressive and shocking speeches, along with the spread of fake news on social media and other platforms (Rocha and Medeiros, 2022). It frames political actors who do not align with its far-right ideology as representatives of a supposed "leftist cultural hegemony," excludes certain social groups from public debate, and uses alternative internet forums, such as the program "Os Pingos nos Is", to disseminate its ideas. This stance echoes alternative journalistic initiatives from the early 21st century, like the program "Custe o Que Custar" (CQC), which blended journalism and entertainment and provided a platform for controversial statements.

In this way, bolstered by other factors, Bolsonarism grew and demonstrated that a significant portion of society identified with its conservative, aggressive, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic discourse. This is the audience that "Os Pingos nos Is" sought to identify and captivate, converting political dissatisfaction—particularly with the Workers' Party (PT)—into audience and advertising revenue, creating a lucrative business. According to Ferraretto (2022), the strategic repositioning of Jovem Pan as an opinion-driven media outlet, aligned with the ideas advocated by Jair Bolsonaro, coincided with the rise of *antipetismo*⁷ that emerged before President Dilma Rousseff's second term and gained momentum during the impeachment process.

“Jovem Pan” grew significantly in the mid-2010s, riding the wave of disillusionment with the hegemonic political parties of the time, the Workers' Party (PT) and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB). It capitalized on the rise of the far-right and shaped its programming as a vehicle for propaganda disguised as journalism, specifically seeking to capture this target audience (Ferraretto, 2022). The *ethos* of “Radio Jovem Pan” is built around constructing an image that blends entertainment, opinion, and commercial orientation, reflecting the values that fundament its journalistic and business practices. This logic led to a transformation in the company's identity: from a traditional broadcaster focused on sports and music, it became, especially after 2013, a platform for news as a means for entertainment, where the boundaries between journalism and propaganda are blurred (Ferraretto, 2022). Investments in new technologies and integration with television formats highlight a bet on the market as a mediator of its discursive strategies. From a Habermasian critical perspective, this exemplifies the use of communication's technical structures within a model that, while presenting itself as a space of freedom, reflects the logic of an unregulated market.

4. Rhetoric's functions

Rhetoric, as a metalanguage, emerged in Greek Sicily in the 5th century BC, aiming to persuade popular juries about the interests and rights of citizens whose properties had been expropriated by tyrants who, when overthrown, left behind major legal confusion (Barthes, 2001; Reboul, 2004). Adopted by the Sophists, rhetoric was criticized by Plato as something evil, built on appearances and falsehood (Barriga, 2009), a false knowledge (Meyer, 2007), and a discourse of flattery, manipulation, and imitation (Barthes, 2001). Aristotle, on the other hand, defined it as the ability to persuade, the means by which one can influence an interlocutor. He distinguished it from logic, the science of demonstrating truth—logic would be responsible for determining the validity of the judgments proposed by rhetoric and dialectic (Bermejo-Luque, 2021).

Aristóteles (2011) divides rhetoric into three genres and identifies three pillars within it. The genres are defined as Judicial, Epideictic, and Deliberative; while the pillars are *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. The Judicial genre concerns determining whether an action is just or unjust, defending or accusing an individual or group for their actions by referencing something that has already happened. The Epideictic genre focuses on the present, aiming to praise or criticize behaviors. Whereas, the Deliberative genre centers on debating issues that will have future consequences, based on decisions that need to be made, using examples to guide those decisions.

Meanwhile, the pillars are defined as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. *Ethos* refers to arguments based on the authority of the speaker, their moral and/or ethical character, which inspires trust in the audience. *Pathos* denotes an argumentative strategy that appeals to emotions and works particularly well when the speaker and the audience share the same values. *Logos*, on the other hand, pertains to arguments where logical coherence is central, even if the argument's truthfulness is not necessarily related to it (Kleina and Sampaio, 2020; Barthes, 2001; Meyer, 2007).

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2005) revitalized rhetoric's prestige in the 20th century by reinterpreting it as a tool for understanding discourses, not just producing them. They developed a general theory of persuasive discourse that draws on Aristotle and rejects the rationalist views of Descartes and positivism, emphasizing rhetoric as a specific rationality focused on human problems. In this research, the authors are utilized to analyze the rhetoric of the program "Os Pingos nos Is", whose commentators shape their discourses to gain public support. In this context, "truths" are persuasive constructions which rely on studying the audience, confirming the premise that truth is a matter of consensus rather than being an absolute, as argued by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2005).

The enthymeme, a type of syllogism constructed solely for its effect of creating a sense of reality, lacks formal rigor because it is built on premises derived from common sense. It also lacks theoretical rigor, as it predominantly relies on arguments which can only be considered as probable. The enthymeme is grounded in verisimilitudes and is developed based on the audience's level of understanding and their preconceived notions, drawing from common sense, which can be easily manipulated by uncultured individuals (Barthes, 2001).

4.1 Frontstage Journalism

A journalism which disregards verifying information focuses on winning over its audience not through the accuracy of the information provided, as expected in the communicative contract, but through verisimilitude. This means that the information does not need to be grounded in reality but simply needs to appear real. Thus, it must align with the belief system of the specific audience segment affected by the communication outlet. This is a strategy that the program "Os Pingos nos Is" employs to build a relationship with its audience.

The enthymeme, the rhetorical syllogism mentioned by Aristotle, is a device that employs a "(...) deliberately degraded logic, adapted to the level of the audience, that is, of common sense and prevailing opinions" (Barthes, 2001, p. 16).

The strategy applied by the program “Os Pingos nos Is” appears to be the construction of a scenario resembling a journalistic program, with commentators who mostly identify as journalists and appear to speak through this *ethos*. If they do not thoroughly investigate the facts, or do so superficially or with bias, they utilize rhetorical tools that rely on verisimilitude rather than truth. This strategy can be understood through the term “front,” as proposed by Erving Goffman (2004, p. 29), which refers to “the standardized expressive equipment, intentionally or unconsciously employed by the individual during their representation.”

Goffman employs a theatrical (or dramaturgical) metaphor to describe the processes through which individuals adopt a social identity to control the impression others have of them—the “front,” which he defines as an expressive equipment mobilized by the actor before and during the interaction. The front encompasses both the setting and the actors. For communication to be successful, there must be coherence between these two aspects of the front, ensuring that the individual, whether consciously or unconsciously, conveys the desired impression in the performance of varied social roles.

By association, what is here defined as “Frontstage Journalism” is the counterfeiting of news wrapped in fictional discourses, relying fundamentally on rhetorical resources to captivate the audience. This is achieved through the ability to weave and sustain an argumentative web that persistently resorts to the enthymeme, that is, to the fictional construction which substitutes the factual foundation with a convincing appearance of veracity. This may be a possibility to comprehend the process of producing misinformation, denying facts and simulating news.

5. A sanitary crisis to put “the dots on the Is”(Os Pingos nos Is)

Since its launching, “Os Pingos nos Is”, airing at 6 PM, allowed for interactions with listeners through messages on an app called Viber. The audience numbers were surprising from the very beginning. Just six months after its launch, the program reached 87,000 listeners per minute in São Paulo’s metropolitan area¹⁰. On the following year, the audience grew to 100,000 listeners and continued to increase, reaching nearly 400,000 simultaneous views on YouTube during some broadcasts in 2021.

¹⁰ Available at: <https://www.mpf.mp.br/sp/sala-de-imprensa/noticias-sp/mpf-pede-cancelamento-de-outorgas-de-radiodifusao-da-jovem-pan-por-desinformacao-e-incentivo-a-aco-es-antidemocraticas> Accessed on December 21, 2023.

In 2017, journalist Augusto Nunes joined the program, where he remained until late 2022, after Jair Bolsonaro's electoral defeat. In 2020, Guilherme Fiúza became part of the group of commentators. The team, rounded out by the former setter for the Brazilian volleyball team, Ana Paula Henkel, became known for sharing unfiltered opinions about Covid-19, promoting inadequate treatments and discouraging the population from getting vaccinated against the disease (Ferraretto, 2022).

During this period, dozens of episodes were removed from YouTube for violating the platform's policies by spreading fake news and misinformation on topics such as Covid-19 and an alleged electoral fraud, which was baselessly claimed by Bolsonaro with no semblance of proof and was echoed by the program's commentators. Over these years, Brazil and its Unified Health System (SUS), faced their most severe sanitary crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By June 2023, over 702,000 deaths related to the new coronavirus had been recorded in the country.

The health crisis in question was exacerbated by political and economic instability, shaking the foundations of Brazil's federal pact and creating tensions between the Federal Executive Branch and state governors in formulating policies to combat Covid-19. The country became one of the global epicenters of the pandemic, even ranking as the second nation in the world with the most active cases of the disease in 2021. As an example of misinformation, it is worth recalling that in mid-2020, a group in the United States calling itself "America's Frontline Doctors" advocated for the use of hydroxychloroquine, a low-cost antimalarial drug, as a treatment for Covid-19. Fox News, along with other right-wing media outlets, echoed and supported this group's claims, which, curiously, included exotic figures such as a doctor associated with bizarre topics like alien genetics and demon sperm (Yang e Bennett, 2021). The program reverberated the defense of hydroxychloroquine as a Covid-19 treatment as early as May 2020 (Ferraretto, 2022), turning the debate over its use into a polarized political spectacle—"If you support Lula, you're against chloroquine. If you support Bolsonaro, you recommend chloroquine" (Jovem Pan, 2020).

6. Methodological Procedures

To analyze the material, the content analysis (CA) technique is utilized, which is based on systematic, intersubjectively validated, and publicly accessible procedures to create valid inferences for describing, quantifying, or interpreting phenomena in terms of their meanings, intentions, consequences, or contexts (Sampaio e Lycarião, 2021, p. 17). The

program “Os Pingos nos Is” is available on various platforms, such as the *Panflix* app and social media. For this research, observations were conducted on its YouTube channel¹¹ during the period from November 1, 2020, to March 31, 2021, a time when Covid-19-related deaths increased by 2,064.25% and vaccines were being introduced globally and in Brazil.

Out of a total of 109 posted episodes, 42 contained terms relevant to the research and were included in the analyzed *corpus*. The transcription was carried out using the *Captions Grabber* website, totaling approximately 13 hours and 25 minutes of content analysis and another 10 additional hours of active listening. The units of analysis were defined based on the period indicated in the title, provided they were related to the pandemic¹².

The NVivo software provided the necessary support for the analysis of qualitative information, integrating tools for working with textual documents, multi-method data, and bibliographic resources. At this stage, an exploratory study with a qualitative approach was conducted to systematize the data and select the units and subunits of analysis. This was achieved by creating and defining categories for the development of the Codebook (Sampaio e Lycarício, 2021).

The terms used for collecting and researching the videos included: health, vaccine, vaccination, pandemic, chloroquine, doctors, Ministry of Health, WHO, Covid, CoronaVac, coronavirus, Pfizer, Jansen, Dória, lockdown, and related terms. Then, for the Codebook, which aims to identify arguments and elements within the videos, the theoretical foundations for creating the variables were observed.

To achieve this, an analysis of enthymeme was conducted by cross-referencing the opinions expressed in the program with official publications from health authorities, such as the *Infogripe* bulletins from *Fiocruz*, the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and the WHO.

When addressing rhetorical strategies, it is important to remember that rhetoric focuses on the ability to persuade. In this context, the journalist represents the ethos pillar, a category grounded in their authority as an arguer, their moral and/or ethical character that inspires trust. It is necessary to examine the full context of the commentators' statements on Covid-19. As Kleina and Sampaio (2021) cites Martin (2014) in his study, rhetoric goes

¹¹ The research was conducted for the dissertation by the author (Ernsen Alves, 2024, p. 37). Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/1884/89103>

¹² General data, including a table with all analyzed programs, the topics discussed, participant involvement, and the total number of interventions, are available in a document accessible at: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XCwg2DPt8JtflWtGs1q-MNDHJwEiIS_2Z63M88tybsk/edit?usp=sharing

beyond language, as it describes "a multi-layered performance that, with the goal of persuasion and validation of a viewpoint, also mobilizes emotion, personal authority, and gestural elements."

The focus is on the rhetorical strategies employed, including their genres, pillars, stylistic devices, and argumentative techniques, structured around three essential genres and pillars. The genres—Judicial, Epideictic, and Deliberative—determine the temporal focus and purpose of the discourse: assessing justice in the past, praising or censoring in the present, or guiding future decisions through examples. The pillars—*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—form the foundation of persuasion, respectively, by relying on the speaker's moral credibility, emotional appeals shared with the audience, and logical coherence, regardless of factual accuracy (Aristóteles, 2011). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2005) identify three argumentative categories which sustain discourses: quasi-logical, based on the structure of reality, and those that establish this structure, highlighting the richness of rhetorical techniques that go beyond mere factual exposition. The goal is to identify the structures present in the participants' speech to resonate with an audience that consumes such information and to propose a reflection on the consequences of this strategy in a democratic environment, recognizing that misinformation and democratic coexistence are incompatible.

It is understood that, when there is no factual basis, the device used is defined by Aristotle as an "enthymeme," a syllogism constructed solely for rhetorical effect, with its relations grounded in verisimilitudes rather than truth. Thus, the information does not need to be grounded in reality but simply needs to appear real. This device is developed based on unreflective common sense, which can be easily manipulated by uncultured individuals, as Barthes (2001) explains.

The objective is to classify the rhetoric based on the connection between the audience and the message across various transcriptions, allowing for the identification of specific meanings amidst polysemy, as "there is nothing inherent in a text; the meanings of a text are always brought to it by someone" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 22). The analysis performed includes determining to what extent the discourses were based on facts, whether they contained elements of verisimilitude, or whether they were unverifiable, in line with the concept of Frontstage Journalism, with arguments supported on enthymemes. It also examines how these arguments appear stronger than they actually are, regardless of whether they are deliberative discourses, of praise or criticism, accusing or defending.

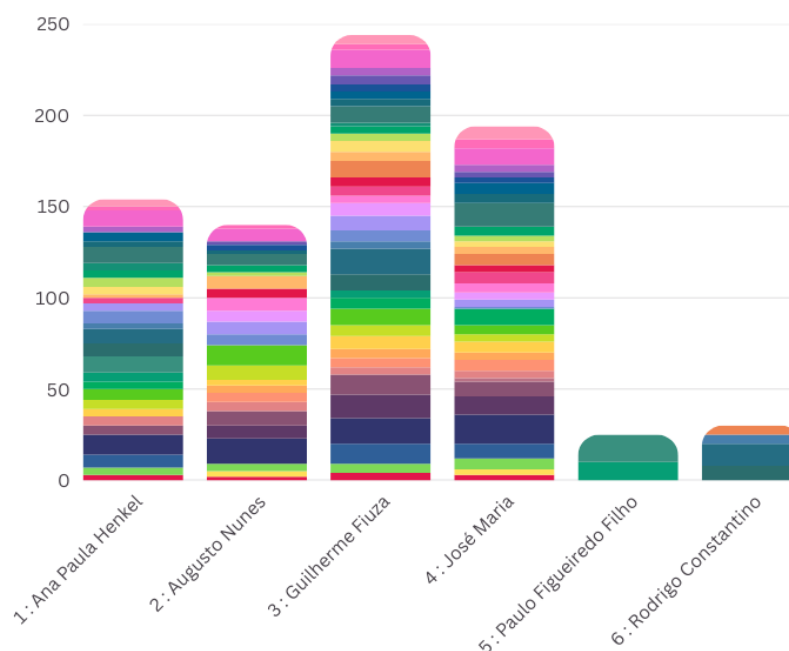
Besides the general facts, including time, video title and date, the commentators and their descriptions are also included. In NVivo, these characteristics are presented

within the code itself, or as referred to in the software, NODES. For this research, a Codebook¹³ was also created, containing 20 variables and descriptions of the codes (Sampaio e Lycarião, 2021).

7. Not what it looks like: the rhetoric of misinformation

The program “Os pingos nos Is” has no fixated or standardized structure. Its division is made according to the themes and subjects addressed. The analyzed episodes were segmented into blocks which explored the opinions on the chosen topics. In the beginning of each program, weather forecasts are presented, emulating a journalistic format, much like the setting and visual identity of the show.

During the analyzed period, the topics were introduced and moderated by Vitor Brown and Marcelo Mattos. Some episodes were structured with a general introduction, followed by the intro sequence, theme presentation and opinions. The four regular commentators are: Augusto Nunes, Guilherme Fiuza and José Maria Trinidad, all with journalistic backgrounds, along with Ana Paula Henkel. Rodrigo Constantino participated in four of the analyzed episodes and journalist Paulo Figueredo Junior appeared in two, both substituting members for regular panelists who were on vacation. The chart below represents the total participation, with colors representing the days and frequency of participation.



¹³ Codebook: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1g_f05OSN62g8L8E6GbBjmDLofFVMhzmmGeoHkSIK-Io/edit?usp=sharing.

Chart 1. Total Participation of the Commentators. Source: The authors.



Figure 1. Panel of the Program Os Pingos nos Is. Source: “Os Pingos nos Is” channel – YouTube.
[Figure translation: “mandetta reappears to criticize anvisa. Former minister of health attacks politicization around the vaccine”]

One of the peculiarities is the way the panelists greet each other. Expressions like "master," "great brother" and "buddy" are used daily. It's an informal language that brings the audience closer to the commentators. Augusto Nunes and José Maria greet each other like old friends, creating a familiar atmosphere.

Guilherme Fiúza, live from Rio de Janeiro! What's up Fiúza, good evening! What's up Vitor Brown, José Maria Trindade, Ana Paula Henkel and Augusto Nunes: the master!

Host - 11/12/2020 - 6'55

The commentators often repeat certain arguments. Each has their own *modus operandi* for presenting their opinions, showcasing divergences. Each speaker is characterized by the image they create of the universal audience they aim to win over for their opinions, based on established values, thereby forging an alliance. As the research suggests, this is about establishing “Frontstage Journalism”, creating a bond with the audience.

José Maria employs epideictic discourse as a persuasive strategy to solidify his audience's support, grounding his arguments in universal values that appear unquestionable. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2005), this discourse aims to establish both an emotional and rational connection with the audience, in which the speaker assumes the role of an educator. This relationship is strengthened by the construction of what we conceptualize as "Frontstage Journalism", with a structured projection designed to promote credibility. By

relying on verisimilitude and introducing claims such as herd immunity or the low lethality of the disease, José Maria integrates these elements into the program's argumentative context, which unfolds continuously over days. This approach highlights the dynamic nature of persuasive discourse, whose effectiveness depends not only on explicit content but also on how values, contexts, and argumentative gaps are articulated to win the audience's consent. He is the commentator who most frequently uses epideictic discourse, 26.20% of which is supported by the rhetorical proof of logos.

IBGE, which is a reputable institute that conducts the Census, carried out a PNAD, a special sampling survey, on infections in Brazil. The conclusion is that many cities have already surpassed twenty percent of the population having had contact with the virus. Whether they developed symptoms or not, but tested positive. This already represents the so-called herd immunity. It's a strong indicator that Brazil will not experience this second wave.

José Maria - "Os Pingos nos Is" program - 11/12/2020 - 15'49

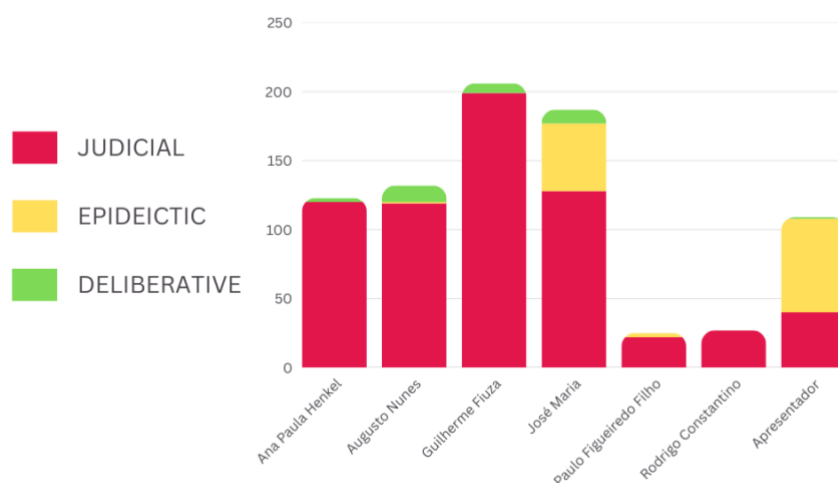


Chart 2. Rhetoric Genre by Commentator. Source: The authors.

Guilherme Fiuza is the one who most frequently makes claims without factual basis. As shown in Chart 02, his discourse is predominantly judicial and relies on the rhetorical proof of pathos. His statements are repetitive: he denies the effectiveness of the lockdown and the vaccines being developed, claims that data from European health authorities is invalid without citing sources, and undermines both scientists and institutions. He employs argumentative strategies of denialism and hate speech to delegitimize, such as suggesting the

existence of lobbies in favor of vaccine companies. Additionally, he dismisses the lethality of the virus and claims there is no evidence supporting the lockdown.

They even want, like what happened in Europe, for example, there wasn't any significant evidence of a rise in deaths, but we know that even those statistics are entirely under suspicion. And here in Brazil, unfortunately, they will try this again. I'd like to believe—or rather, I don't want to believe—that it's a vaccine lobby, right?

Guilherme Fiuza - “Os Pingos nos Is” program - 11/12/2020 - 9'20

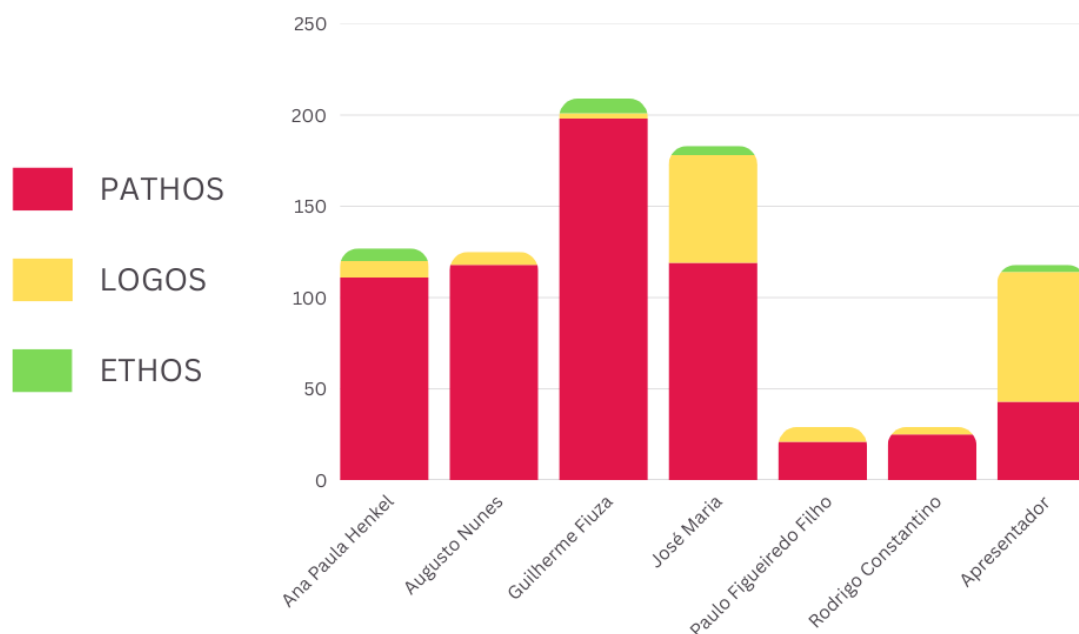


Chart 3. Pillars by Commentator. Source: The authors.

Augusto Nunes employs a rhetoric of invalidation, predominantly using the judicial genre. An example of the *logos* pillar, as shown in Chart 3, is when the vaccine was already being administered and Israel had already administered it, showing how this could come to improve the economy.

They hate the return to normalcy, but we are returning, we are returning. I wish I were running a newspaper today to repeat the headline I've always dreamed of, just like I did with the Iraq War: 'Peace'. The scale of the war, I... the pandemic is over. Now it's about normalcy; we will live with the virus until the vaccine arrives, an effective vaccine.

Augusto Nunes - “Os Pingos nos Is” program - 11/12/2020 - 12'28

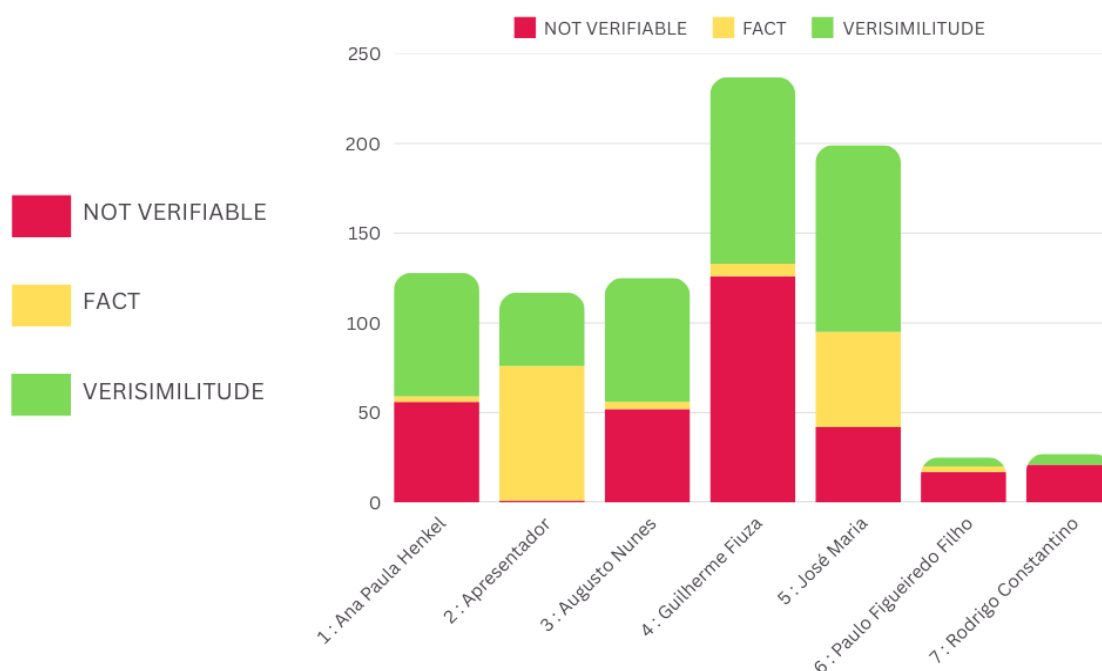


Chart 4. Verification by Commentators. Source: The authors.

Chart 04 shows the frequency of verisimilitudes, that being statements that appear credible but are not supported by the health authorities used in this research for verification. An example is Ana Paula Henkel's speech, which presents judicial discourse and imbues deliberative, and epideictic elements when discussing vaccine data. The commentator leans heavily on *pathos* when referring to the governor of São Paulo. While these statements may seem truthful, supported by rhetorical proofs of *logos* and *ethos*, they demonstrate how misinformation can be embedded within rhetoric:

And the question we have to ask Governor Dória and all those who want to mandate a vaccine that doesn't even exist yet is this: If there is scientific proof, if the vaccine has gone through all the processes... A stroke of the governor's pen... According to Dr. Nise Yamaguchi and Dr. Anthony Wong, whom we interviewed here, a person who goes through the disease asymptotically contracted the virus and passed through the infection without symptoms.

Ana Paula Henkel - "Os Pingos nos Is" program - 11/27/2020 - 17'01

Analysts evaluate the effectiveness of lockdowns and vaccines based on Bolsonaro's statements, emphasizing his view that the danger of the virus is insignificant compared to the

economy. Comparing Brazil to the United States, they highlight the fact that three analysts reside in the U.S. Paulo Figueiredo Filho criticizes lockdowns, aligning with the judicial discourse but incorporating elements of description and comparison, using the rhetorical proof of *logos*. He also draws analogies between the behavior of government leaders and that of his daughters, suggesting that the federal government should follow São Paulo's example. In the segment "CORONAVAC QUESTIONED," the efficacy of CoronaVac is discussed, raising concerns about missing data and lockdown measures. Paulo Figueiredo questions the vaccination of non-vulnerable individuals and its potential risks, using the analogy of the polio vaccine to express doubts about the safety of oral vaccines.

How can you know the long-term results of a vaccine that started being tested just a few months ago, right? I gave the example yesterday on air, during President Bolsonaro's live broadcast, of the polio vaccine. After people researched its history, they discovered that the oral vaccine wasn't good, and the oral vaccine was discontinued.

Paulo Figueiredo - "Os Pingos nos Is" program - 01/08/2021 - 30'01"

Drawing on Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2005) to analyze argumentative techniques, arguments based on the structure of reality were used, establishing a connection between opinions about the pandemic and those aimed at convincing the public to accept them. Additionally, doubts about vaccine efficacy, opposition to lockdowns, and the downplaying of the disease's lethality can be considered examples of arguments based on the structure of reality, as they seek to persuade the audience by leveraging preexisting beliefs and opinions about the pandemic. Bolsonaro's own statement reinforces the belief in the effectiveness of the lockdown and the low lethality of the virus.

Based on the data presented above, we argue that the "Frontstage Journalism" of the program "Os Pingos nos Is" is built on the predominance of the judicial genre and the *pathos* pillar, with the rhetorical device of the enthymeme—responsible for creating verisimilitude—taking center stage.

7.1 Polarization, pandemic and chaos

On top of the vaccines, the lockdown and social isolation measures were also questioned, particularly in the context of festive periods such as new year's celebrations and Carnival. The restrictive measures adopted by governors and mayors represented the strategy found to combat the pandemic while awaiting vaccine availability. The efforts of professionals working in public administration and education were not acknowledged by the

commentators, who, whenever possible, emphasized that teachers and "employees in suits and ties" were reluctant to carry out their duties.

In this context, the image of the President of the Republic and even the Ministry of Health at the time contradicted scientific institutions, contributing to misinformation and, consequently, to the increase in Covid-19 cases and deaths. Recuero et al. (2021) argue that those who spread false information gain prominence by framing issues as political, using authorities to legitimize problematic content, and facilitating the spread of misinformation.



Figure 2. Word Clouds - Timeline - November 2020 to March 2021. Source: The authors through the NVivo software. [Figure translation: november- main word- vaccine; december- main word- vaccine; january- main word- vaccine; february-main word- lockdown; march-main word- government]

The word clouds featuring the term "vaccine" were actually arguments against its efficacy, casting doubt on the responsible laboratory, in this case, the Butantan Institute and China. The rise in cases and deaths was reflected in the shift in arguments. "Lockdown," which stands out in February, also appears due to opposition about the protective measures implemented by government leaders. It is shocking how they highlight Manaus while completely ignoring the surge in deaths, the lack of oxygen, and medications, mentioning the city only to oppose social isolation and defend the then Minister of Health, Eduardo Pazuello. The arrival of the vaccine and its efficacy, the need for isolation, and Bolsonaro's disdain for the sick and science eroded the hateful rhetoric against science, increasing mentions of the need for government action, a prominent feature in March's word cloud.

8. Final considerations

It is evident that in recent years, there has been a significant increase in material related to misinformation, its causes, and consequences. Therefore, research that takes this phenomenon as its focus is essential to better understand it, as it has serious repercussions for democracy, social coexistence, and, as in the case of this study, for citizen's health. As the observation and transcription of the programs indicate, our object of study—the Frontstage Journalism of "Os Pingos nos Is"—adopted practices unsuitable for journalistic standards,

which posed considerable risks to democracy, as it spread misinformation, but, more importantly, to the well-being and health of the population.

In the case of this research's subject, the strategy of observing, classifying, and studying rhetorical genres and pillars through the tools of rhetoric, the use of enthymemes and verisimilitude to fill the gap left by the absence of truth, was highly effective in understanding how the commentators' discourses were constructed to emotionally engage the audience without provoking reflection, almost entirely avoiding counterarguments, except in the participations of journalist José Maria. The commentator disagrees by citing official information, grounded in the epideictic genre of demonstration and the logos pillar. To do so, he used a calmer tone of voice compared to the other commentators.

“Os Pingos nos Is”, at least during the studied period, sought not the “public interest” but the “interest of the public.” It is worth noting that the then-president of the “Jovem Pan Group” had a background in the entertainment industry, a spirit that, all indicates, he brought to the network's journalism, particularly to the program analyzed here. In this case, news is understood merely as another commodity, and the key is that the public, or a specific audience, consumes it. After all, Frontstage Journalism is designed to entertain and please its target audience, and this is, as observed, the service it aims to provide.

Contradictions or disagreements were also observed in the studied programs, divergences were punctual and tactical by journalist José Maria. Additionally, the mutual treatment among the program's regular commentators reinforces an atmosphere of affection and intimacy, creating an internal sense of brotherhood where anything outside this affective circle is seen as a threat and becomes the target of criticism and attacks. This forms “filter bubbles” (Moretzsohn, 2019), sustained by algorithms, in which participants are deemed correct as long as they reinforce the group's prevailing beliefs, even if those beliefs are unrealistic or not grounded in rational elements of reality. The key, in this case, is not to inform but to seduce and please the audience. In this context, misinformation becomes an inevitable consequence, as reality often does not align with preconceived notions, and certain adjustments to it are frequently necessary to please those meant to be pleased.

Following the promotion of medications with no proven efficacy, endorsed by the then President of the Republic, the commentators of the program did little more than echo the inappropriate statements of the public figure holding the highest office in the Executive Branch. Similarly, when the topic of “vaccines” was addressed, they promoted and reinforced prejudices against vaccination, opposing any and all measures by health authorities aimed at

curbing contagion and preventing the overburdening of public and private healthcare systems. Instead, they advocated for a reckless and potentially genocidal "herd immunity".

The opinionated journalism of “Os Pingos nos Is” inappropriately appropriated ethos—the moral and/or ethical character that inspires trust in the communicator, typically associated with professionals committed to the public function of their work— and took to divulging uncertain or untruthful information, not supported on the search for veracity in the facts, as long as they are verified.

It is expected that this research contributes to understanding the complexity surrounding processes of misinformation in contemporary society. The aim here was to highlight how the rhetorical strategies of the program “Os Pingos nos Is” were constructed using the enthymeme, which characterized the Frontstage Journalism practiced by the network. In this sense, rhetorical analysis allowed for a concrete critique that, without it, might have remained at a merely impressionistic level. The front plays an important role in social interactions to create a bond; in the case studied, it served to establish this bond on the basis of misinformation. The concept of “Frontstage Journalism” can be useful for understanding the ethical, political, and social implications of practices that claim to be journalistic yet prioritize verisimilitude over veracity. This dynamic, observed in programs like “Os Pingos nos Is”, emphasizes the need for comprehensive research that goes beyond new media and also investigates how traditional media outlets contribute to the consolidation of this model¹⁴¹⁵.

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¹⁵ A preliminary version of this work is available as a preprint on the SciELO Preprints platform and can be accessed at: <https://preprints.scielo.org/index.php/scielo/preprint/view/9327>.
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