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To cite this article: Tiago Ribeiro Duarte (2020): Ignoring scientific advice during the Covid-19 pandemic: Bolsonaro's actions and discourse, Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society, DOI: [10.1080/25729861.2020.1767492](https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2020.1767492)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25729861.2020.1767492>



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Published online: 08 Jun 2020.



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Ignoring scientific advice during the Covid-19 pandemic: Bolsonaro's actions and discourse

One of the characteristics that analysts have attributed to the so-called “post-truth age” is an anti-science attitude and the outright downplay of scientific evidence by politicians and members of the public (Collins, Evans, and Weinel 2017; Fujimura and Holmes 2019).¹ Within this topic, the Covid-19 outbreak raises important issues for STS scholars. This highly contagious illness in a few months reached all continents. Although the death rate among the contaminated is not high in comparison to other contagious diseases, such as the Ebola, due to its transmissibility the death toll is significant and, at the moment of the writing of this op-ed, on the rise. For this reason, the World Health Organization (WHO) has urged countries that have communitarian transmission, i.e. when residents infect each other, to implement social isolation to prevent the number of cases from skyrocketing. If the coronavirus spreads too quickly, healthcare systems may collapse, being unable to treat all patients due to infrastructural limitations. However, several national authorities were initially hesitant to take stronger measures to deal with the Covid-19 outbreak. Some of them even denied the seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic and campaigned against stringent social isolation because of the potential economic impacts of such a measure.

In Brazil, around mid-March, most state governors and several municipality mayors introduced social isolation policies that allowed only what was deemed as essential activities to continue running. However, the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right populist, has been ignoring scientific advice on Covid-19 and downplaying the seriousness of the pandemic to the point of beginning a political crisis by accusing state governors, mayors, and the media of hysteria, of exaggerating the coronavirus threat, and of taking measures that would seriously harm the country's economy. This is not the first time Bolsonaro shows disregard for science (Monteiro 2020). However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation is even more pressing as his actions could result in thousands of deaths in the short term.

Bolsonaro defends the so-called vertical isolation, that is, putting in quarantine only people above 60 years old and other individuals who are highly vulnerable to Covid-19, such as those who have diabetes or high blood pressure, and returning the rest of the population to work. His main argument is that the economy cannot stop otherwise more people will die because of poverty and starvation than because of the pandemic.² He has threatened to decree the end of social isolation measures, something he was unable to do due to the Brazilian federalist political system.³ Following the lead of Trump, he also became a strong defender of the widespread use of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine against Covid-19 as if they were a panacea

¹I agree with critics (Jasanoff and Simmet 2017; Lynch 2020; Frickel and Rea 2020) that the term post-truth it is not conceptually accurate as it implies that there was an idyllic past in which truth prevailed in public debates, which is certainly not the case. However, as the concept has gained traction in STS debates and there is no substitute for it yet, I will use it in this paper.

²<https://www.jota.info/opiniao-e-analise/colunas/quaest-opiniao/brasil-politizou-pandemia-01042020>

³<https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/bolsonaro-diz-cogitar-decreto-para-toda-qualquer-profissao-voltar-ao-trabalho-1-24336772>; <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/04/15/maioria-do-supremo-vota-a-favor-de-que-estados-e-municipios-editem-normas-sobre-isolamento.ghtml>.

that would save thousands of lives, even though there is no consistent scientific evidence that these drugs can have an effect against the coronavirus.⁴ Furthermore, on April 12th, when the pandemic was still far from reaching its peak in Brazil, Bolsonaro stated that the virus “was starting to go away.”⁵ He has also been to public demonstrations organized in his support a few times since the Covid-19 first infected people in Brazil. In these events, he embraced supporters and took photographs with them, disregarding all scientific advice related to social distancing and the need to avoid crowds. He also went out at other times to talk with the population, to “buy a coca-cola,” to have an ice cream, and so on, when crowds gathered around him and he again took photographs and embraced fans.⁶

Bolsonaro’s actions and speeches received mixed reactions. The media was quick to point out that the president was ignoring scientific advice. Part of the population started banging pots and pans from their windows every night to show their discontent with the president.⁷ However, in several cities his supporters organized motorcades and in some cases even took to the streets to show their support for the president and to demand the end of horizontal social isolation.⁸ In some occasions, shops reopened defying the quarantine policy imposed by state governors.⁹

Neither Bolsonaro nor members of his entourage had any expert support to their claims. No study was presented, no data, no counter expertise was mobilized to underpin the president’s position.¹⁰ Still, he convinced part of the population that large-scale social isolation was a mistake; the coronavirus was not as bad as the media had been arguing; and that the damage to the economy due to the quarantine policy would be far worse than the impacts of the coronavirus itself. Feeling the pressure, some state governors allowed shops to reopen and social isolation diminished in the late weeks of April, in spite of the fact that the death toll due to Covid-19 in Brazil was still on the rise.¹¹

In the face of far-right populist leaders such as Bolsonaro, whose discourses and actions may result in the death of thousands of people, STS scholars cannot refrain from adopting a critical position. Bolsonaro’s outright neglect and downplaying of scientific evidence is not the classical type of STS case study in which subaltern people have their non-scientific expertise ignored in policy-making (Wynne 1996; Irwin 1995). As pointed out above, Bolsonaro does not have any basis on which to claim that the death toll resulting from the economic impacts of social isolation policies will be larger than that resulting from the pandemic itself if no quarantine is put

⁴<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/04/empronunciamento-bolsonaro-defende-cloroquina-e-volta-a-responsabilizar-governadores-e-prefeitos.shtml>.

⁵<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/04/em-livecom-religiosos-bolsonaro-vai-na-contra-mao-de-especialistas-e-diz-que-virus-esta-indo-em-bora.shtml>.

⁶<https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/video-bolsonaro-passa-em-padaria-apos-deixar-planalto-repete-discurso-contrain-solamento-24362579>; <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/04/bolsonarovisita-obra-de-hospital-provoca-novas-aglomeracoes-e-criticado-por-mandetta-e-caiado.shtml>; <https://valor.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/04/18/bolsonaro-causa-aglomeracao-ao-comprar-picol-na-praa-dos-trs-poderes.ghtml>; <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/04/18/presenca-de-bolsonaro-provoca-aglomeracao-em-frente-ao-palacio-do-planalto.ghtml>; and <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/2020/04/19/bolsonaro-discursa-em-manifestacao-em-brasilia-que-defendeu-intervencao-militar.ghtml>.

⁷<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/03/bolsonaro-e-alvo-do-15o-panelaco-seguido-em-meio-a-novo-pronunciamento-na-tv.shtml>.

⁸<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/03/criticadas-por-ministro-carreatas-anticonfinamento-alinhadas-com-bolsonaro-se-repetem-pelo-pais.shtml>; <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/04/grupo-de-bolsonaristas-se-aglomera-ignora-pandemia-ataca-doria-e-pede-reabertura-do-comercio-em-sp.shtml>.

⁹<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/03/apos-falas-de-bolsonaro-circulacao-aumenta-e-parte-do-comercio-reabre-em-favelas-do-rio.shtml>

¹⁰<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/03/governo-bolsonaro-admite-a-estados-nao-ter-estudo-que-embasa-isolamento-vertical.shtml>.

¹¹<https://exame.abril.com.br/brasil/dez-estados-ja-tomaram-medidas-para-flexibilizar-isolamento-por-covid-19/>.

in place. This claim only becomes a public fact once he utters the words and he and his reporters, be them human or robots,¹² begin to share them on social media.

STS has shown that “facts” are socially constructed and not sufficient for settling controversies. It has also shown that facts and values, science and politics, cannot be disentangled. However, it has never denied the importance of facts in democracies. In the case of Bolsonaro fighting against scientific advice during the Covid-19 pandemic, there are two types of facts at stake. On the one hand, scientific facts that have been collectively constructed by using an assemblage of expertise, material infrastructures, interests, i.e. a complex sociotechnical order that aims at explaining the functioning of things. On the other, we have a far-right populist leader who has no relevant expertise in economics or healthcare policy and whose statements are not based on evidence produced by any expert, be they scientific or not. The facts here result from the “testimony” of a charismatic leader (Weber 1978), which is replicated again and again in social networks through humans and “bots” that build up an echo chamber (Nguyen forthcoming). Here we are facing a different case compared to other situations in which scientific advice was dismissed on the basis of fake controversies actively produced by denialists (Oreskes and Conway 2010; Weinel 2010). In the case at hand, there is no counter-expertise base on which Bolsonaro is relying to underpin his argument. Facts were not produced by any expert before his speeches. Rather, facts begin to circulate in social media after his speeches and gain traction with president supporters. In this case, the scientific fact-construction machinery should clearly prevail.

Science is not perfect and will never be. Scientific experts make mistakes and sometimes their arrogance can be disturbing (Wynne 1992). But it is still much better to rely on an institution that seeks to find the truth of the matter and that has mechanisms to correct itself than on the baseless testimony of a populist politician. Furthermore, science should not determine policymaking. Rather, policymakers should take into consideration knowledge produced by scientists or other types of experts when designing policy or making decisions. In this sense, policymaking should be informed by expertise, but not determined by experts. In the case of the Covid-19, politicians and policymakers need to hear scientific advice and take responsible measures based on it. Non-scientific expertise may also contribute to policymaking, although at this point, it is not clear who the “lay experts” that should bring their expertise to the table are. Dialogue with civil society is also important to implement effective and democratic policies. However, in the context of a pandemic in which social isolation is of utmost importance, face to face participation is not possible. For this reason, alternative channels of participation need to be deployed, such as polls, meetings with civil society representatives via video conference, and so on. Brazil, during the Covid-19 pandemic, would benefit much from policies based on expertise and public dialogue. It has much to lose, however, with an authoritarian president that has very little regard for science.

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¹²Kalil and Santini’s (2020) study of social media has shown that in Twitter a significant part of those who tweet in support of Bolsonaro are “bots.” In the particular instance of a call for a demonstration in support of Bolsonaro on March 15th, 2019, about 55% of the tweets were made by robots.

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