

Comparative analysis between the early months of 2020 and 2021 in the process of monothematization of the news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic in Jornal Nacional

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the journalistic processes in the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by Jornal Nacional on TV Globo in the 2020-2021 period, directing journalistic attention to a comparative analysis in the monothematic coverage. It is considered that, since the outbreak of the disease and its consequences, the attention of journalists was divided among three political crises generated by the federal government. Such facts divide the times of TV news coverage with the biggest health crisis, on a global scale, in the 21st century. As research methods, bibliographical research, exploratory research, and the Content Analysis technique were employed to compare, from the news, how the sanitary and political crises intermingled and became a political crisis of public health.

Keywords: Monothematization. News coverage. COVID-19. Jornal Nacional.

Introduction

We seek to investigate the journalistic coverage of COVID-19 on television in the first months of 2020 and 2021, as a continuation of the research previously carried out by the Center for Studies and Research in Journalism (CAJAZEIRA; ANTONIUTTI; SOUZA; CABRAL NETO, 2020). This time gap is regulated for a few reasons: the declaration of the pandemic by World Health Organization, the political crisis in the management of the pandemic by the Jair Bolsonaro government, and the start of vaccination at COVID-19 in the first months of 2021.

The newscast is originally a polythematic journalistic product, however, in extreme occasions, depending on the coverage, it turns into monothematic or hybrid, approaching a single subject in much of its airtime and interspersing it with some generalist subjects. The word “newscast” presupposes a periodic publication or issuing that provides the audience with diverse news.

This paper aims to analyze and discuss some aspects of the television coverage of Jornal Nacional (JN) on COVID-19 concerning the processes of monothematization and the influences of political themes on the coverage of the pandemic. Our analysis begins on January 18th and extends to May 15th 2020, and, comparatively, we analyze the same period of 2021 and the political influences, especially from the Ministry of Health of Brazil, responsible for managing the battle against the pandemic.

Along with this, in Brazil, the political crisis is installed and the issue of the health crisis is divided with the political crisis, from the departure of three ministers of State from the government of President Jair Bolsonaro: Luiz Henrique Mandetta (Health), Sérgio Moro (Justice and Public Security) and Nelson Teich (Health). Since the beginning of the crisis, the Brazilian president has contradicted the recommendations of the WHO (World Health Organization) and has been present at different public events, greeting people, without any protection (mask or distance) and minimizing the risks and harmful effects of the new coronavirus.

In addition, researching the relationship between telejournalism and COVID-19 makes it possible to observe that

With the advent of unscheduled sanitary news coverage by the press, despite the fundamentals of journalism remain unchanged, such as objectivity, commitment to the truth and the provision of services, among others, the professional reality is no longer the same since the beginning of 2020 (CAJAZEIRA; SOUZA, 2020).

That is, this research made it possible to understand the new scenarios that emerged throughout the coverage that began in 2020 and that was extended throughout 2021 on COVID-19. Moreover, it helped understand how television journalism production was being impacted and transformed by the health crisis.

Theory review

Studying Brazilian telejournalism during this moment of COVID-19 pandemic requires, above all, a reflection around the role the media plays in the formation of a more critical society, with citizens that are more well-informed and aware of the issues related to the disease, which today impacts, equally, the worldwide population. The information occurs both from the international to national level, since cases originated in China, and from national to local, since the COVID-19 cases were introduced in large centers via airports with international flights and then entered smaller cities.

This way, it is important to understand not only to whom the TV news anchors and reporters address when structuring the broadcast, but also what they believe is more or less relevant and what they understand that may or may not interest the viewers. Thus, what they consider should be broadcasted in their shows is what we shall seek to understand from the analysis we performed during the news coverage of JN, by TV Globo.

A piece of information, from its selection to its publication, regardless of the means of communication, undergoes steps that go from the interpretation of newsworthiness criteria by the professionals of the vehicle, passing through the steps of selection of sources, collection of data, production, until the interpretation of those same criteria by the editor before the final presentation to the public.

To understand all these processes, theoretical support is sought in journalism theories, specifically in media scheduling, or the agenda-setting hypothesis, and in gatekeeper and newsmaking theories (WOLF, 2005; TRAQUINA, 2005; 2008; TUCHMAN, 1978), who argue that journalism is far from being a mirror of reality. “It is, first, the construction of a supposed reality” (PENA, 2008, p. 128, our translation), that is, the production of news, although it may seem like a simple process, needs to be planned as an industrial routine.

The agenda-setting hypothesis starts in the assumption that the means of mass communication have a certain capacity of determining the public agenda from what they publish (McCOMBS; SHAW, 1972). Dearing and Rogers (1996) define an agenda as a set of themes that communicate, according to a hierarchy of importance, at a given moment. One

theme in the agenda, in turn, is defined as “a social, conflictive issue that has received attention from the media” (DEARING; ROGERS, 1996, p. 3). Such definitions have served as bases for the construction of research designs aiming to measure effects of transfer of relevance from one agenda to another, in all phases of researches in agenda-setting.

McCombs (2005) states that even a brief mention in the evening news is able to portray the relevance of a fact, and the position of the news in the program besides the length of this news provide clues of the valuation of certain facts in relation to others. Thus, the media agenda, indeed, also becomes the social agenda. The agenda-setting process, in turn, is composed of the workings and observable relations among the media agenda, the public agenda, and the political agenda (DEARING; ROGERS, 1996), whose natures occur in terms of operational definitions.

It is understood that, more than signaling highlighted facts, the information selected daily by media professionals “directs our attention and influences our perception of what are the most important topics of the day. The ability to influence the relevance of issues in the public repertoire is what has been called agenda-setting by the news media” (MCCOMBS, 2006, p. 24). Thus, in a simpler way, it can be said that the media organize the relevant topics (media agenda). From there, it is the public that follows and sets its own agenda – the public agenda, which will relate to its repertoire of subjects and actions –, thus constituting the initial level of public opinion.

The study by White, in 1950, was also a great contribution for journalism theories. He helps us understand the entire process of news selection, presenting the main reasons to publish and reject a piece of news. Likewise, Wolf (2005) presents a study that contributes to the understanding of how the criteria used for the process of selection and construction of news in the means of communication take place. It is worth remembering what those theories are and how they must be inserted in our research work, which is based on the JN coverage of COVID-19.

German psychologist Kurt Lewin, in 1947, was the first author with social concerns in the area of mass communication to indicate that the passage of a piece of news through certain communication channels depends on gates that work within those same communication channels¹ (CORREIA, 2011).

The newsmaking theory is considered an update and complementation of the theory of the gatekeeper, which seeks to comprise the criteria of noticeability, as it seeks to understand the entire process of the routine of news production, i.e., the criteria that led the news to be publicized. In their studies, Erbolato and Wolf mention three moments: acquisition, writing, editing (ERBOLATO, 2006); and collection, selection, presentation (WOLF, 2005). Ward

1 The theory of the gatekeeper appeared for the first time in 1947, coined by German psychologist Kurt Lewin from his observations that raise the possibility of changing dietary habits of a population. Lewin presumed that not every member of a community boasts the same prestige to choose which foods will or will not go to the table when he noticed that, in the channels through which run the sequence of behaviors, certain regions may work as gates or gatekeepers restricting or not the passage of foodstuffs (CORREIA, 2011).

(2006), in turn, defends that the journalistic process must be described in four moments: identifying, obtaining, selecting, and ordering or presenting.

What differs between the two authors, Wolf and Erbolato, from Ward, is that Ward adds “identifying” to his processes. The explanation lies in the fact that those who defend only three steps do so, possibly because the identification phase cannot be perceived by those who do the analysis from the final product. It is only perceived by those who are following the news construction process from within the newsroom. It is worth understanding then that: “[...] the analysis of newsmaking describes the communication work of broadcasters as a process that ‘contains everything’” (WOLF, 2005, p. 267).

Therefore, from those theories, one can understand how TV news shows, particularly JN by TV Globo, carry out the choice of newsworthiness criteria from their routines of news production in the COVID-19 coverage.

Methodological Procedures

The methodology applied has a quanti-qualitative approach, aiming both at numerical analysis and the causes and motivations of the phenomenon researched in Jornal Nacional’s journalistic coverage about COVID-19. Therefore, the object of study is the journalistic coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the first months of 2020 and 2021, in the mentioned TV newscast, which is the longest running Brazilian news program in the country.

The period of analysis delimited from January 18th to May 15th, 2020 and January 18th to May 15th, 2021 was characterized by the emergence of the first cases of national and international contamination, and the beginning of vaccination in the Brazilian population. The corpus of analysis is composed of JN reports with the theme of COVID-19. The research team identified 1726 videos with the theme in various areas: health, economics, politics, services, culture, sports, behavior and international issues. The news collected had a direct or convergent relationship to the central theme. The analysis tool was supported by Globoplay’s video platform.

The authors of this research were divided into two groups: G1 and G2. The first team was responsible for identifying and selecting the videos for coverage in the year 2020 whereas the second group was responsible for the videos from 2021. With that, we tried to watch all selected audiovisual material, verify the quantitative-qualitative relationship of journalistic coverage with the pandemic, the beginning of the vaccination processes, and the alternations that occurred in the Ministry of Health of Brazil that, by assumptions, affected the institutional management of the health crisis.

Analysis of Jornal Nacional’s News Coverage

To understand how the news coverage of JN took place during the first months (from January to May) and carry out a comparative study between the years of 2020 and 2021, we

sought to collect data on the news stories transmitted daily on the newscast. In this sense, carrying the data, it is possible to observe the issue of monothematization of COVID-19 coverage and how it has been happening throughout the analyzed editions of JN.

In the analysis of the first months of 2020, we find 911 news stories related to the COVID-19 theme. The number of stories approaching this theme was on the rise, since the disease was unknown. There were many doubts and several impacts towards other social sectors. Thus, we present Table 1 below with the number of stories about COVID-19 from January to May of 2020.

Table 1 – Number of news stories on COVID-19 on JN in 2020

| Month | Number of stories |
|----------|-------------------|
| January | 23 |
| February | 70 |
| March | 322 |
| April | 331 |
| May | 165 |

Source: the authors (2020).

The view of the most intense coverage of the pandemic does not mean that JN did not report on other topics, but that there was a predominance in reporting events that pervade the issue of the pandemic. Moreover, as the months passed, it was observed that this thematization had an exponential growth. In this sense, it is understood that the coverage of JN points, in fact, to a thematization of news coverage about COVID-19, from January to May 2020. As the disease spread around the world and, mainly because it started to reach Brazil, the coverage was even more intensified. Thus, the other topics, momentarily, were less discussed in the scope of the television news, giving space for journalistic coverage of health-related issues. This does not mean to say that other problems were paralyzed, on the contrary, they continued to happen. However, they weren't so broadcasted at this unique moment in world history.

At certain moments of this monothematic coverage, it was observed that the JN only stopped covering the topic, to report on the political crises that were spreading across Brazil in the midst of the pandemic. Regarding this political coverage, we highlight *April 16* (10 reports), when the resignation of the then Minister of Health Luiz Henrique Mandetta was announced; *April 24* (11 reports), covering the departure of the Minister of Justice Sérgio Moro; and *May 15* (7 reports), with the departure of the second Minister of Health, Nelson Teich, who stayed in office for about a month.

In this way, it can be seen that the monothematization of health journalistic coverage is resized only when the JN reports the crises caused by the government, such as the departure

of the ministers described above. Thus, on April 16, April 24 and May 15, the journalistic coverage of the JN was devoted, mostly, to the departure of the ministers. It is also pointed out that the departures of the two ministers were, in a way, related to this health coverage, but the main emphasis was on the relations, conflicts between the Federal Government and the ministers, and not on the actions that these actors were playing to improve public health in Brazil.

In the analysis of the same period one year later, the data on monothematization of the JN coverage of the pandemic features the following (Table 2):

Table 2 – Number of news stories on COVID-19 on JN in 2021

| Month | Number of stories |
|----------|-------------------|
| January | 101 |
| February | 144 |
| March | 230 |
| April | 237 |
| May | 103 |

Source: the authors (2021).

In this second moment of analysis of the coverage, it must be pointed out that the pandemic is already a more well-known issue. That is, it is not about understanding its origin or what the consequences are, but, instead, the production of vaccines and the process of vaccination of the Brazilian population as well as the updated data on the number of deaths in the country and in the world. Overall, the JN coverage between January and May 2021 had 815 stories about COVID-19.

The coverage about the pandemic over the first months of 2021 has a growing trend, as it is seen in the previous year. However, in the first two months (January and February), it is much more intense. In January 2020, there are only 23 stories, whereas the same period of 2021 had 101 stories on COVID-19. That means an increase by over 400% from one period to the other. In February, the year of 2021 had 50% more news stories compared with the same period of 2020. Up to this moment, the curve points to a significant increase, however, it begins to shift when March starts.

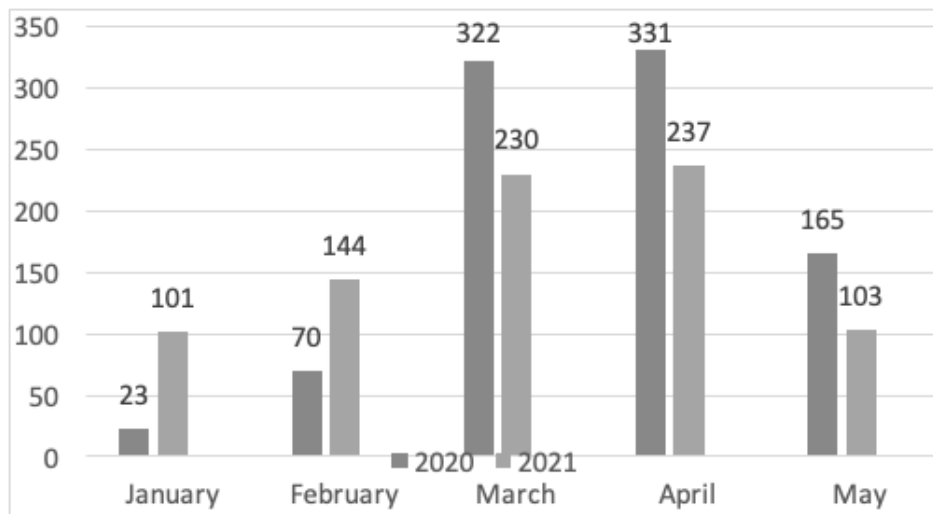
In March 2020, there is the milestone of the global decree that the world was experiencing a pandemic, which may have directed the newscast towards monothematic coverage. A year later, the issue of coverage has 92 less reports than in 2020. And in the following months this data also tends to decrease: in April 2020, there are 331 reports, and the same period in 2021 has 237; in May (until the last day of collection, 15th), there were 165 COVID-19 stories in 2020 and 103 in 2021.

In 2021, the political crises involving the Ministry of Health were also featured. On March 15th, General Pazuello resigns; on the 27th, vaccination (15 stories) starts, and, on April 16th, the parliamentary inquiry committee to investigate responsibilities of misconducts in the management of COVID-19 relief efforts began in the Federal Senate. In other words, over the same analysis period between 2020 and 2021, JN presented the same type of stories in which, on one hand, we have the coverage of COVID-19 and, on the other, the Brazilian political crises.

Content analysis allows inferring that vaccination was the focus of the stories. That can be indirectly observed in the headlines seen during the data collection period. Brazil was one of the last countries to start vaccination and, in this process, there were countless political problems in purchasing vaccines and inputs, among other issues.

However, this comparative study also shows that 2020 had a higher number of stories about the pandemic. Therefore, we understand that the monothematization of the news coverage on JN was the highest between January and May 2020 than in 2021, as Plot 1 shows:

Plot 1 – Growth of the monothematization of the news coverage of JN in 2020 and 2021



Source: the authors (2021).

The two periods analyzed exhibit moments of growth, peak, and decrease. However, whereas in 2020 there were 911 news stories, in 2021 there were 815. Those are close numbers that show the power of the theme in face of the news coverage, but that signal to a return to other themes being covered on the news show.

As mentioned, monothematization is not unheard of. However, in this moment of the history of Brazil and of the world, we see a full redirection of effort of the news show and its team to emphasize the pandemic coverage as well as to discuss political problems that can be seen as a pause in such monothematic coverage.

Final Considerations

The study undertaken in this article points out, in view of the dimension, the advance of cases and spread of the new coronavirus from China until its arrival in Brazil. JN's journalistic coverage became monothematic due to the concern of organizations such as the WHO and the lack of knowledge about the effects of the virus, its forms of contagion and the health guidelines with their due care. Thus, since January 2020, JN has reported some news about the emergence of the new coronavirus, but without great fanfare for still being a restricted case in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

However, in February, cases started to worsen and a significant number of deaths were recorded and reported by international journalism. On March 11th, 2020, the WHO declared a pandemic and with that we also saw a higher concentration of the news coverage on COVID-19 in that month here in Brazil and, more specifically, in the news show that is the object of this study.

In the comparison between the two years, it can be seen they have the same pattern: growth, a peak, and the start of a decline. However, 2020 had 911 stories and, on the other hand, 2021 had 815. In the first year, the stories were more general, since COVID-19 was more unknown by the population and spread quickly and intensely. In 2021, however, the focus was centered on vaccination and on the problems surrounding this process. In addition, the two years analyzed have political crises that shortly pause this monothematic coverage.

It is possible to conclude that the monothematization identified in the journalistic coverage of the JN implied the directing of all the efforts of the television news team to report, narrate and explain the occurrences, facts and transformations of the new coronavirus - from a continuous update and presentation of daily updated data on the advancement of the virus, number of infected, fatal victims of Brazilian cities and states that most have outbreaks of the disease. However, the years 2020 and 2021, in the same period, are similar in terms of this monothematic coverage of COVID-19. This initially signals a process of repetition in the same way that the coverage has been carried out by JN.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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