DISARMING DISINFORMATION

BRAZIL

Maria Cleidejane Esperidião, Thayane Guimarães,
Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir, Waqas Ejaz,
Kaylee Williams, and Nermine Aboulez

AUTHORS

Maria Cleidejane Esperidião, Thayane Guimarães, Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir, Waqas Ejaz, Kaylee Williams, and Nermine Aboulez

EDITORS

 Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir, and Kaylee Williams

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BRAZIL

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rise of viral disinformation[1] intertwined with targeted attacks on journalists has become a pressing global issue in a climate of surging authoritarianism, undermining democratic values, eroding trust in public interest media and facts in general, and placing journalists at risk. The rapid, largely unregulated development of artificial intelligence (AI) risks super-charging these threats.

Here, we present the first detailed research from ICFJ's Disarming Disinformation project, a five-country[2] study of editorial efforts to effectively counter narrative capture, which was conducted alongside national public opinion surveys measuring attitudes toward journalists and public interest media outlets in each country.

This work focuses on several intersecting challenges — viral disinformation, digital conspiracy networks, the targeted harassment of journalists online and offline, poor media and information literacy, and the facilitating role of predominantly U.S.-owned Big Tech companies and platforms — which together fuel the erosion of trust in facts and democratic institutions, and further polarise societies.

Against this backdrop, understanding how journalists, media outlets, and the public perceive and respond to these threats is crucial to fostering an informed and resilient citizenry.

Innovative responses to intersecting threats, challenges and opportunities in Brazil

The global phenomenon of intertwined threats and challenges associated with disinformation in the 2020s is clearly evident in Brazil — the geographic focus of this report — especially in the context of former President Jair Bolsonaro's authoritarian tilt, the impacts of which continue to linger. As this study was being finalized, the former president was charged with participating in a coup which involved incitement to storm the Capitol complex in Brasilia in January 2023 and assassinate the current president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Bolsonaro also stands accused of seeding disinformation narratives designed to undercut trust in the integrity of the 2022 election that led to him being ousted from office. He denies the charges.

While their work is critical to information integrity and the sustainability of Brazilian democracy, the country's journalists and news organisations are frequently attacked and demonised by antagonistic political actors and subjected to coordinated smear campaigns designed to discredit their work, fostering a hostile environment that jeopardises their safety and independence.

We assess the situation in Brazil, focusing on the strategies adopted by two very different Brazilian news outlets to navigate the whirlwind of manipulation and false content that has shaken the foundations of trust in Brazilian institutions over the past decade.

These two newsrooms — the national newspaper of record _Folha de S. Paulo_ and the Amazon-based journalism collective _Tapajós de Fato_[3] — employ varied, innovative strategies aimed at breaking the cycles of disinformation narratives which have contaminated the country's political spectrum and played a role in plotting 2022's failed presidential coup. These narratives feature false claims about electoral processes, natural disasters, traditional communities' productivity, public health, climate change, and the integrity and morality of individual journalists.

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1   For this study, we have adopted the definitions and theoretical frameworks identified by Bontcheva and Posetti (2020) in Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression published jointly by UNESCO and the UN Broadband Commission. By 'viral disinformation', we mean disinformation which achieves substantial reach via social media distribution which is often algorithmically boosted.

2   The countries studied are Brazil, Georgia, the Philippines, South Africa and the United States.

3   The name "Tapajós de Fato" draws inspiration from "Brasil de Fato", a national and international news outlet closely aligned with social movements, especially those advocating for land rights like the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). Additionally, it emphasises the Indigenous origin of Santarém's inhabitants, as "Tapajós" refers to traditional peoples in western Pará (also known as Low Tapajós region).

Our lead researchers spent nearly three weeks embedded with *Folha* and Tapajós de Fato in 2024 to enable close engagement with the research participants, deep-dive in person interviews, and effective observational research. To reach the remote communities served by Tapajós de Fato, they took a boat up the Amazon.

The journalists and editors interviewed outlined the specific challenges their organizations face in combating disinformation. They employ editorial strategies such as forensic data journalism, dedicated fact-checking units, platform accountability reporting, deep listening, community cooperation, creative audience participation, and radical collaborations.

They also highlighted the challenges of counter-disinformation efforts within newsroom settings, including assessing effectiveness, monitoring impact, and ensuring the sustainability and integrity of initiatives in the context of funding and resourcing barriers. And, they addressed safety concerns associated with reporting in high-risk environments, the intersection of disinformation with online violence, and the role of generative AI in both creating and countering disinformation, along with potential improvements in technological and structural responses.

Assessing public attitudes toward journalists in the context of disinformation-laced attacks on the press

Finally, we present fresh insights into public perceptions of disinformation, journalists, public interest media, and press freedom in Brazil through the results of a nationally representative survey of 1003 Brazilian adults which was conducted in concert with our qualitative research from August 2nd to 17th, 2024.

BRAZIL

19 KEY FINDINGS

GENERAL FINDINGS ABOUT THE MANIFESTATIONS OF DISINFORMATION

1. **Disinformation is a feature of violence against Brazilian journalists, in particular those who challenge and expose false narratives, which fuels an environment of risk.** Coordinated disinformation campaigns routinely involve smears against journalists designed to undercut trust in their factual reporting, exposing them to increased risk. Our interviewees described threats of physical violence, attacks on their property and pets. This physical threat is fuelled by pervasive anti-press narratives, smear campaigns and Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV).

2. **Counter-disinformation efforts including investigations, election coverage, and work to protect journalists under attack are hindered by shortcomings in the outlets' security protocols.** Those working in small independent outlets, in particular, often lack adequate physical, legal, and psychological protection to deal with physical attacks and smear campaigns targeting individual journalists. In the case of Tapajós de Fato, this deficit led to a decision not to cover municipal elections due to the unmitigated risk entailed.

3. **Disinformation campaigns that target journalists in the Amazon region exacerbate threats to media plurality.** The practice of public interest journalism is already precarious in the Amazon and such campaigns exacerbate this vulnerability.

4. **Disinformation narratives frame the lands of traditional communities as unproductive to justify their seizure by corporations, and narratives blaming NGOs for criminal activity dominate in the Amazon region.** In the context of scarce information sources, these narratives thrive outside of Southeastern Brazil, which is where the country's major media outlets are concentrated.

FINDINGS ABOUT STRATEGIES DEPLOYED TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

5. **Avoidance of 'bothsidesism' and the act of 'calling a lie a lie' are deployed as counter-disinformation strategies.** There is a move to reframe the concept of objectivity to avoid false balance in coverage, and examples of new editorial guidelines which employ more 'honest' language, such as describing the act of politicians deliberately sprouting falsehoods as "lying".

6. **Tapajós de Fato's innovative counter-disinformation work is characterised by 'deep listening' and meaningful community engagement, emphasising issues and communities not covered by mainstream outlets.** This effort is operated by journalists born or raised in the Amazon region. They used their connections with social movement leaders to tackle climate disinformation by hosting immersive and active listening sessions with community members to understand the environmental changes residents perceived, and how these impacted their livelihoods.

7. **Diversified counter-mis/disinformation strategies are more effective than isolated approaches.** Connecting editorial strategies, partnerships, innovative content distribution methods and media literacy

activities can be essential to tackling disinformation in a continent-sized country with a highly diverse population, many of whom live in remote areas. Strategic partnerships with universities or civil society organisations, for example, can fill resource gaps.

8. **Digital forensics methods and tools are valuable to investigations into disinformation campaigns.** *Folha* partnered with a private company specialising in tracking narratives in public instant messaging groups such as WhatsApp and Telegram to help focus their work on exposing coordinated disinformation campaigns with significant public engagement.

9. **Going low-tech is a necessary strategy to reach low-connectivity communities vulnerable to disinformation.** Tapajós de Fato distributes audio content on USB drives by boat to offline communities in remote areas. Forming partnerships with local community radio stations in the Amazon region allows the information to be played over loudspeakers.

10. **Effective counter-disinformation work requires going beyond fact-checking to undertake critical coverage of the social media platforms where viral disinformation is seeded, distributed, amplified, and coordinated.** *Folha* has approached this gap in their counter-disinformation work by ensuring that they are investigating the accountability of Big Tech and tracking platform regulation efforts.

11. **Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs are a feature of counter-disinformation strategies.** These range from implementing internship programs to address the lack of non-white journalists in newsrooms, to building teams entirely composed of people born in the territories covered by the newsroom. When news outlets' staff reflect the diversity of the communities they serve, they are more likely to be trusted.

12. **Transparency in storytelling and reporting is seen as one effective method for addressing vulnerability to disinformation campaigns among audiences.** The outlets have adopted an explanatory approach to reporting processes to aid media literacy. At *Folha*, columnists' and contributors' stories carry their names at the top, while editorials are identified with the label "What *Folha* Thinks"; and analysis or opinion pieces are prominently labelled "analysis" or "opinion". Additionally, *Folha* frequently explains the methodological process it follows to gather and verify the data.

13. **Live journalism events can be an effective media and information literacy strategy.** Both outlets have organised in-person seminars and debates as strategies to penetrate echo chambers and enhance information integrity on complex issues. *Folha* has frequently opened its São Paulo auditorium to readers to discuss polarizing issues with national and international experts. In the Amazon, Tapajós de Fato organises outdoor cultural events to bring artists to public squares to discuss topics such as human rights, climate change and gender.

14. **Collaboration with competitors can be a game-changer.** Consortia, such as the groundbreaking coalition of news outlets formed in 2020 to help Brazil's most prominent news outlets overcome the then-Ministry of Health's decision to block data about COVID-19 case numbers and deaths, could become sustainable and less costly to respond to the lack of public transparency that can generate an environment rife for conspiracy theories.

15. **Care should be taken to avoid counter-disinformation collaborations that risk undercutting brand integrity.** Partnerships with questionable funders such as tobacco companies can prove toxic.

FINDINGS ABOUT PUBLIC OPINIONS ON DISINFORMATION, JOURNALISTS AND NEWS OUTLETS IN BRAZIL

16. **The majority (58%) of Brazilian adults express a high level of concern about encountering false or misleading news according to our representative survey.** This widespread concern reflects the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation in Brazil's fragmented media landscape, where both traditional and digital platforms shape public perceptions of information reliability. However, political ideology reveals a more notable divide, with liberals[4] (72%) reporting significantly higher concern compared to moderates (58%) and conservatives (53%).

17. **Nearly half (46%) of Brazilian adults reported encountering attacks on *Folha de S. Paulo* or its journalists that seemed intended to undermine their credibility.** However, nearly a quarter (23%) said they never see, read, or hear about such attacks.

18. **65% of Brazilian adults see attacks on journalists by senior politicians or government officials as a major threat to media freedom.** Yet, a quarter of respondents do not share this view, with 17% considering such attacks only a minor threat and 8% not seeing them as a threat at all.

19. **A majority (57%) of Brazilian adults believe the media should remain neutral, neither supporting nor opposing the government.** But 30% think it should support the government and 9% believe it should oppose it, with attitudes towards the media's role being most heavily influenced by political leanings.

1. The Context

1.1. METHODOLOGY

We adopted a mixed methods approach for this research, which encompasses an ethnographic study of two distinctive news outlets and a nationally representative poll of Brazilian adults.

Prior to commencing field research we conducted an extensive landscape mapping exercise, reviewing both academic and non-academic literature focused on the manifestations and impacts of disinformation in Brazil, along with efforts to counter the problem.

We considered the 2018 Brazilian national elections as a turning point, with the widespread use of false or misleading content deployed as a political strategy which caught authorities, journalists, and researchers off guard.

Guided by the literature, we also prepared an inventory of Brazilian media outlets' strategies for countering disinformation within different contexts (e.g., geographic location, size, reach, and business models). Finally, we mapped how the Brazilian electoral authorities, supreme court, civil society organizations, social movements, fact-checkers and policymakers have responded to the spread of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda.

Qualitative research: Embedding with the outlets

Adopting the principles of Participatory Action Research,[5] ICFJ researchers were embedded in two Brazilian news outlets, selected for their contrasting size, geographic location, and their creative efforts to counter disinformation.

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4   We are using the word 'liberals' to describe progressives and left wing respondents.

5   The 'Participatory Action Research' model means we focus on collaborative approaches to understanding issues and knowledge sharing, with the aim of strengthening journalism.

For two weeks, the lead researchers were embedded within one of the country's most influential newspapers, *Folha de S. Paulo*, in May 2024. The following month, they also spent one week embedded at **Tapajós de Fato,** a small non-profit digital cooperative news operation based in the Amazon region, operating in a high-risk context in the vast northern state of Pará. Across both sites, they conducted **37** in-depth, semi-structured interviews alongside research roundtables, including with editors-in-chief.[6] We also conducted observational research and monitored the outputs of the outlets during this period.

Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from interviewees associated with these outlets are original and were conducted for this study.

Quantitative research: Public opinion survey

Our public opinion research is based on a survey conducted by IPEC under commission to Langer Research Associates and on behalf of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). The purpose of the survey was to understand public perceptions of disinformation, the function of the news media, and the role of press freedom in Brazil. Data were collected via random-digit-dialed telephone interviews with 1,003 adults aged 18 and above in Brazil. The fieldwork was conducted from August 2nd-17th, 2024 in Brazilian Portuguese.[7]

The survey was conducted by professional interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interviewing software. IPEC implemented quality control measures by reviewing 301 completed interviews, with 21 removed for quality issues.

The data were weighted first to account for the selection probability of respondents with shared mobile phones and then to match national population parameters for sex, age, region, and metro status. The survey has a margin of sampling error of ±4.0 percentage points for the full sample.

It is important to note that this telephone-based methodology ensures representation of the national population, capturing responses from both urban and rural areas. However, telephone surveys are reliant on recall, which may be subject to biases. For example, questions related to perceptions of disinformation and threats to journalists measure respondents' views rather than objective exposure or experiences. While this methodology provides valuable insights, it reflects perceptions rather than verified behaviours or events. Careful questionnaire design and thorough pre-testing were employed to minimise biases and maximise data reliability.

1.2. DEFINITIONS

For this study, we have adopted the definitions and theoretical frameworks identified in the 2020 study Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression which was jointly published by the UN Broadband Commission and UNESCO. Instead of differentiating between disinformation, misinformation and other terms used to describe falsehoods, the term disinformation is used to broadly refer to content that is false and misleading with potentially damaging impacts - for example, on the health and safety of individuals and the functionality of democracy:

Such harm may be, for example, damage to democracy, health, minority and disadvantaged communities, climate challenges, and freedom of expression. Here, therefore, the operational approach to what constitutes disinformation (and hence responses to the phenomenon) are the characteristics of falsity and potentially negative impact on targets, rather than the intentionality, awareness or behaviours of its producers(s) or distributor(s).

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6   Interviewees were offered the opportunity to have their responses anonymized or attributable to them by name. While the vast majority of interviewees chose to be publicly identified, some responses were anonymised in the best interests of the participant.

7   IPEC was responsible for fieldwork and the initial data cleaning, while Langer Research Associates provided additional quality checks and applied weighting. ICFJ researchers conducted the data analysis.

1.3. ABOUT THE SELECTED OUTLETS: FROM A MEGACITY NEWSPAPER TO A REMOTE AMAZON NEWS COLLECTIVE

Folha de S. Paulo was founded in 1921 in São Paulo, located in Brazil's southeast, the fourth largest city in the world and the largest urban area by population outside Asia. *Folha* has one of the largest editorial teams in Brazil, consisting of around 300 journalists plus 180 columnists and it is the premier publication in Brazil in terms of subscriptions. In 2023, it recorded 797,000 paying readers, nearly double the second-ranked *O Globo* newspaper based in Rio de Janeiro. *Folha's* mission is based on four principles: "pluralism, non-partisanship, critical journalism, and independence". Its editorial principles state from the outset that its professional and unbiased journalism serves as an "antidote to fake news and intolerance", placing editorial responses to disinformation in clear focus.

Folha emphasizes accountability reporting focused on Big Tech as part of its counter-disinformation strategy, in the context of targeted attacks on its journalists by Bolsonarists. Editor-at-Large Patricia Campos Mello successfully sued former President Bolsonaro and his son, a federal congressman, over sexist disinformation-laced smears which she alleged fuelled an online violence campaign against her.

More than 3,000 kilometres to the north, is the nine-person team of Tapajós de Fato which was launched as a digital only outlet in Santarém in 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic. It operates in a sea of information pollution within a region where there are just a few precarious and low-standard media outlets but a flood of partisan commentary. Politically biased social media content and politician-run blogs, which evangelise and deliberately disseminate falsehoods for political or economic gain, proliferate in the region. As a small non-profit outlet in the Amazon, Tapajós de Fato grapples with insufficient staff and resources to cover a vast geographic region, which is rich in biodiversity, exposed to advancing extractive industries, and redolent with risk.

Wesley Pedroso and Isabelle Maciel co-founded Tapajós de Fato to provide information from the perspective of non-white individuals with a team of journalists born and raised in the Amazon region. The outlet is based in Santarém, a municipality in western Pará with a population of 330,000, which experiences significant land-related conflicts. "We understand the issues here because we come from the territory," Maria da Conceição Gomes, reporter community engagement lead at Tapajós de Fato said. "So we have this context of preservation, understanding what is essential and crucial for us who belong here."

Journalists at work in Folha de S. Paulo´s newsroom, May 2024. Photo: Maria Cleidejane Esperidião.

FOLHA DE S.PAULO

ICFJ researchers meet with Tapajós de Fato journalists in their improvised newsroom in Santarém, Pará state, in the Amazon region. Photo: Thayane Guimarães.

This deep connection to place is rooted in concern for the impacts of commercial farming and extractive industries on the environment and traditional communities. Since the early 2000s, there has been a significant increase in soya bean plantations in Pará state. Despite promises of income and employment for local populations, these projects often lead to the displacement of traditional peoples and the devastation of previously protected Amazon areas.

The outlet unlocked themes that neither legacy media nor independent news outlets based in the southeast have historically explored, not even those funded by international donors and philanthropists. Previously, Santarém was covered by media outlets from outside Pará state, predominantly by white male journalists with bigger budgets that accommodated the high travel costs to the remote region.[8]

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8   It is important to note the work of Amazônia Real, founded 11 years ago and based in Manaus, in Amazonas. It aims to cover the entire region, including Pará, which focuses on topics that traditional media ignore. Similarly, Sumaúma, launched in 2022 in Altamira, Pará, which serves as an environmental journalism platform.

2. Brazil, a vast country drowning in disinformation

Constantly affected by economic crises, and still recovering from a coordinated assault on information integrity during the Bolsonaro presidency (2019-2022), Brazil has become fertile ground for disinformation via lies and manipulation distributed and amplified by digital platforms.

Contributing to this problem, Brazil also has a major problem with access to credible information. Although it has a population of 203 million, the 12 most prominent digital and print media outlets reach only 0.82% of the population, highlighting the issue of access to professionally-produced and curated news content in the country. A solid network of fact-checking organisations has emerged to try to address this problem, some of which were founded over a decade ago.[9]

However, the country had the worst performance in a 2024 OECD survey that measured people's ability to identify false content, while a new international study of Telegram users showed that Brazil leads both in the number of participants engaging with conspiratorial narratives that monetise the anti-vaccine movement and in the volume of content published containing related disinformation and misinformation. Nearly 60% of the messages circulated in these channels in Latin America and the Caribbean orginated in Brazil.

Under the current government, Brazil has received international attention for concerted attempts to address the crisis by seeking to hold the Big Tech companies that act as disinformation vectors accountable through legislative and regulatory efforts, and the courts. Brazil is among the few States continuing to focus on addressing risks relating to platform moderation failures, which includes regulation requiring social media platforms to remove content that jeopardises information integrity. However, these attempts have been framed as 'censorship' and radical attacks on free speech by critics.

Brazil banned X for 40 days in 2024, drawing global attention to the world's fourth-largest democracy's efforts to tackle disinformation. The ban punished the platform, now owned by Elon Musk, head of the U.S. "Department" of Government Efficiency (DOGE), for failing to remove several profiles associated with spreading disinformation about the 2022 Brazilian Presidential election. The ban was only lifted after Musk paid fines totalling 28 million reais ($5.1m) and agreed to appoint a local representative, as required by Brazilian law.

This occurred in the context of investigations into a January 2023 coup attempt, which former president Jair Bolsonaro is now charged with plotting, along with 33 allies. Fifteen hundred people were detained for questioning after a mob stormed the Brazilian congress on January 8th that year to prevent the new government from taking office, echoing the assault on the U.S. Capitol two years earlier. The groups associated with the coup attempt had specific responsibilities in each 'cell', including the Disinformation Group, tasked with spreading lies claiming the national election was fraudulent. The Brazilian prosecutor's report on the alleged coup attempt accuses the former president of seeding narratives designed to undermine public trust in election integrity from mid-2021. Bolsonaro denies the charges.

However, political disinformation is not the only threat to democratic deliberation and the Brazilian public's right to access credible information. Spurious health content, especially anti-vaccine narratives and the climate agenda are also associated with strong disinformation currents. Sentiments of global warming and deforestation denial have also reemerged sharply after extreme droughts affecting nearly 60% of the country in 2024, causing bushfires and environmental destruction. Lies coupled with decontextualisation also worsened the impacts of another disaster: the historic floods which killed 179 people in Brazil's southern Rio Grande do Sul state in May 2024. In this case, disinformation obstructed attempts to get aid to thousands in need and choked donations, while locals ignored official warnings to leave areas vulnerable to storms and landslides after fake posts on social media insinuated that the government was trying to alarm people unnecessarily.

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9   Such as Lupa and Aos Fatos. Out of the 417 fact-checking organizations operating worldwide from 2008 to 2023, Brazil has one of the largest networks in Latin America, with 15 identified initiatives from 2014-2015 onwards (active and inactive).

2.1. NORTHERN BRAZIL'S DISTINCTIVE DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

Politics, health, and the climate agenda remain some of Brazil's dominant disinformation narratives. However, outside the Southeast — where the country's major media outlets are concentrated — the strategies used to spread false information on these topics and some of their objectives remain largely invisible to the general public.

The demonisation of traditional land stewards and NGOs

According to Tapajós de Fato's team, two types of disinformation stand out in Santarém: narratives that frame the lands of traditional communities as unproductive to justify their seizure by mining and agribusiness corporations, and narratives that blame NGOs for criminal activity in the region.

One of these cases occurred in the agro-extractive settlement Project Lago Grande,[10] established in 2005 and covering 250,000 hectares. In this settlement, 144 traditional communities — approximately 35,000 people — live sustainably by extracting forest resources.

In 2021, Tapajós de Fato surveyed residents to identify the area's main products of family farming, the benefits of community-based tourism, and other sources of income for the local economy to counter disinformation narratives benefiting extractive industries that suggested these communities were "unproductive". As a result, they launched the editorial campaign "PAE Lago Grande Produces, Yes",[11] along with short podcast episodes featuring community members. They also distributed a series of print glossaries to help newcomers and outsiders understand the approach to sustainable farming in the area.

IMAGE: Public Hearing organized by the Tapajós Arapiuns Indigenous Council, and attended by 600 participants representing 14 different Indigenous peoples, to appeal to the Secretary of Indigenous Health for improvements in public healthcare services for the Indigenous peoples of the Lower Tapajós region. Photo: Thayane Guimarães.

One disinformation narrative aimed at discrediting NGOs surfaced in 2019 when four volunteers from the Alter do Chão brigade, founded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF Brazil), were falsely accused of arson in the forest. The volunteers were arrested, investigated, and persecuted by then-President Jair Bolsonaro who, in 2018, vowed to put an end to all activism in the country. The narrative resurfaced in 2021 and was repeatedly debunked by various Brazilian fact-checking agencies. Finally, in February 2025, more than five years after these lies had first been spread, a Federal Justice in Santarem shut down the inquiry citing a lack of evidence to support the accusations.

Health-related disinformation also plagues traditional communities in northern Brazil. It was prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic but has gained further traction in subsequent years, affecting vaccination campaigns and other public health efforts.

But this exposure isn't limited to communities with ready access to the internet who are exposed to digital disinformation distributed and amplified via social media. "Certainly, what shocks me the most is seeing that even in communities or places without internet access, there is still a strong presence of disinformation," Marcos Wesley, co-founder of Tapajós de Fato, said. "A practical example that collectively impacted us and triggered one of our campaigns was when we realised that [COVID-19] vaccination rates were very low in the Baixo Amazonas region, specifically in quilombolas[12] and extractive communities."

For example, in 2021 the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) was compelled to denounce the spread of misinformation and disinformation among Indigenous communities that was leading many Indigenous

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10   Extractive communities are groups of people who live by collecting natural products, such as fruits, wood, fibers, honey, andiroba and copaíba oil for their subsistence and social, cultural and material sustainability. Although there are such communities throughout Brazil, they began organizing as a social movement in the Amazon and they are therefore also referred to as 'forest peoples'. They are part of the traditional communities from the Amazon.

11   Projeto de Assentamento Agroextrativista (PAE) refers to a land ownership approach that ensures residents have collective rather than individual ownership to prevent them from selling their land to large companies.

12   Quilombola communities are ethnic groups - predominantly composed of the Black rural or urban population - with their own cultural identity, formed through a historical process that began during slavery in Brazil. They symbolize resistance to various forms of domination. These communities maintain a strong connection to their history and heritage, preserving the customs and culture passed down by their ancestors. Quilombola communities are part of a broader group of Brazilian social groups known as traditional peoples and communities.

people to reject the COVID-19 vaccine. According to the organization, local authorities, encouraged by the Bolsonaro government, spread conspiracy theories that Indigenous people were among priority groups to be vaccinated as part of a program to exterminate them like "guinea pigs" or that the vaccine causes cancer and alters people's DNA.

2.2. STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES TO MORE EFFECTIVE COUNTER-DISINFORMATION WORK

Disinformation narratives thrive in a climate of poor access to essential services.

Reporters we interviewed said poverty, inequality, hunger, a lack of fundamental civics knowledge and low incomes all have a direct connection to the spread of disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories online.

Claudia Collucci, *Folha de S.Paulo's* health reporter, has tried to get to the heart of the anti-vaxxing sentiment, and she highlighted the need to disentangle the intertwined issues of poor access to services and disinformation narratives associated with disease prevention:

> *In rural places, such as Roraima state, for instance, there's a precarious public health system in these corners, and people are utterly abandoned, you know? So, I saw mothers with completely out-of-date vaccination records, and this made me wonder, do they not believe in the vaccines? Then you talk to them, and it's not the case; it's because the vaccination unit is permanently closed, and it takes this mother two hours to get to the health center, then another two hours to get back home, and she has four children.*

Collucci's point is an important one: harmful disinformation narratives such as those connected to vaccine denialism, cannot be combated effectively without addressing structural issues such as access to essential services. "[U]nfortunately, we've had all this disbelief, this denialism and so on. And along with this, the service also became more precarious," she said.

So, reporting critically on service provision could help address vulnerabilty to disinformation.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: ASSESSING BRAZILIANS' CONCERN ABOUT FALSE CONTENT

Brazilians harbour widespread concerns about encountering false or misleading news and information. Building on previous findings about media trust and consumption, Figure 1 (below) shows that a clear majority of respondents are worried about the false content they are exposed to. 23% of respondents are 'extremely concerned', while an additional 35% are 'very concerned'. This means that the majority of our respondents (58%) express a high level of concern about encountering false or misleading information. This widespread concern reflects the challenges posed by disinformation in Brazil's fragmented media landscape, where both traditional and digital platforms shape public perceptions of information reliability.

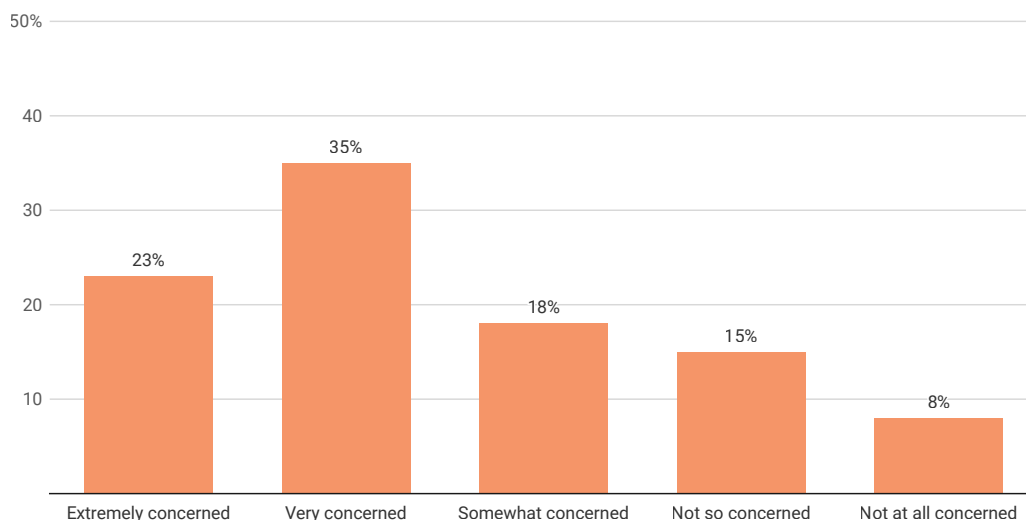## Levels of concern about false or misleading news in Brazil

FIGURE 1: "How concerned are you that some of the news you see, read or hear is false or misleading – are you extremely concerned about this, very concerned, somewhat concerned, not so concerned or not at all concerned?". Base: Total sample in Brazil = 1003

This pattern of concern persists across different demographic groups. However, political ideology reveals a more notable divide, with liberals (72%) reporting significantly higher concern compared to moderates (58%) and conservatives (53%). This suggests that while encountering false or misleading content is a widespread concern, political orientation has a stronger influence on the degree of worry than demographic factors.

3. Thematic analysis

3.1. A TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENT FOR JOURNALISTIC NORMS: RECONCEPTUALIZING OBJECTIVITY AND NEUTRALITY TO AVOID DISINFORMATION TRAPS

Our interviews with journalists and editors at Tapajós de Fato and *Folha de S. Paulo* highlight the reexamination of the principles of objectivity and neutrality via new editorial guidelines which avoid false balance or 'bothsidesism', and the practice of cause-oriented journalism, which has parallels with movement journalism.

Since its launch as Folha da Noite in 1921, *Folha* has presented itself as a nonpartisan newspaper, an innovative concept at the time. Its target audience was the urban workers of the emerging new metropolis. It aimed to "monitor the government" and positioned itself in opposition to *Estadão*, a much more conservative newspaper. After the military coup in 1964, like most of the Brazilian press, it supported the backed military dictatorship led by a right-wing regime and suffered government censorship. In 1983, the paper published an editorial op-ed supporting a call for direct elections and advocating for the restoration of democracy. Highlighting the ways in which decontextualized facts can yield disinformation narratives, in 1987 *Folha* referenced German dictator Adolf Hitler in a multi-award winning national advertising campaign with this line: "It is possible to tell a bunch of lies by only telling the truth. That's why it's important to be very careful with the information and the newspaper you receive. *Folha de S. Paulo*: the newspaper that is most bought and never sold"[13].

13   English translation for: "É possível contar um monte de mentiras dizendo só a verdade. Por isso é preciso ter muito cuidado com a informação e jornal que você recebe. *Folha de S. Paulo*: o jornal que mais se compra e nunca se vende".

According to research published by Agência Pública, *Folha* has recently been accused of collaborating with the dictatorship more willingly than was previously understood. *Folha* is broadly seen as a centrist newspaper, albeit a daring and impactful one. However, that does not stop those on the political fringes from accusing it of political bias. The Right often calls it "Foice de São Paulo" ("Hammer and sickle of São Paulo"), alluding to the Soviet-era communist symbol. At the same time, the Left refers to it as "Falha de S. Paulo" ("Failure of São Paulo") due to its supposed neoliberal political alignment and perceived bias in favour of capitalism.

When it is time to call a lie a lie

For journalists and editors at *Folha de S. Paulo*, offering quality information and debunking misleading content through fact-checking was insufficiently effective in mitigating the proliferation and growing sophistication of disinformation narratives and tactics, along with patently fake publications during Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022). It required coordinating strategies and breaking traditional protocols associated with non-partisanship, such as performative balance, when they risk obscuring the truth:

> *We weren't used to the President lying at such a high volume...even using the word 'lie' in headlines, we didn't use that. Then we realised we should start using it because we are dealing with lies.*
>
> *- Eduardo Scolese, political editor, Folha de S. Paulo*

Folha adopted a new approach to writing headlines, using the word "lie" to describe political speeches where there is no doubt about the truthfulness of the statement, which *Folha* journalists felt was a transformative moment for journalistic norms which had become problematic in the context of rampant political disinformation. The newsroom also created the 'Bolsonometer' in 2019, an indicator to monitor false statements and inaccurate information issued by the then-president, Jair Bolsonaro.

However, our interviewees demonstrated an awareness within the newsroom of tensions connected to using the word 'lying.' "I think [using the word] has to be the exception of the exception of the exception," former correspondent and political columnist at *Folha de S.Paulo* Fábio Zanini said. And Vinicius Mota, the Managing Editor, noted that applying the word 'lie' is not mandatory to defend truth:

> *We take caution when saying someone is lying — some subjectivity might contaminate that judgment, and we are committed to objectivity. So it's better to say that what they said contradicts the evidence or is factually incorrect rather than saying the person is lying.*

Cause-oriented journalism as an antidote to disinformation

Countering disinformation in a continent-sized country requires more than changing language. To that end, Tapajós de Fato seeks to deal with disinformation by rejecting mainstream dogmas and performative balance or 'bothsidesism' all together. It practices cause-oriented journalism with no hidden agendas and no obligation to achieve neutrality.

Tapajós de Fato was conceived with a clear editorial stance: to address issues of climate justice, gender inequality, nature, agroecology, and the defence of the Amazonian territory by exposing problems such as illegal mining, logging and deforestation, threats to biodiversity preservation and potential social impacts on forest-dwelling communities. To address these intersecting challenges, grassroots engagement and collaboration are fundamental. That's why Tapajós de Fato assembled a diverse team of journalists and communicators to pursue its mission, primarily individuals connected to local social movements.

Co-founder Isabelle Maciel says the core of Tapajós de Fato's work is spreading awareness about injustice, corruption, and wrongdoing in the Amazon to influence local debates and position themselves on the progressive side of the political spectrum. They counter disinformation narratives by exposing the impacts of agribusiness on the well-being of communities, including non-Indigenous groups. "[W]hen a local media outlet publishes a story about how multinational companies have made a lot of progress [within the] Amazon… We hear from the population affected by these projects," Maciel said.

Weighing facts: The costs of false balance

During a research roundtable at *Folha*, featuring reporters spanning a range of seniority levels, they highlighted another key editorial shift over the past four years: the move away from 'bothsidesism'. This is particularly important in cases where the imposition of journalistic balance could undercut accuracy and fairness through a process of false equivalency. For example, in the case of climate change or vaccinations where the science is settled, presenting climate denialism or anti-vaccination perspectives as though they were equal to validated scientific research would be misleading.

For one experienced investigative reporter, *Folha's* shifting policy could be seen as a way to mitigate disinformation campaigns:

> *We have become more open to something often discussed in law: treating unequals unequally. So, we always try to be impartial and maintain a standard, but some things are so unequal that we have to give them their weight…. Certain speeches, certain behaviours, and specific lies must be treated with greater rigour.*

IMAGE: A roundtable discussion at Folha's newsroom in São Paulo in May 2024, where ICFJ researchers, Folha reporters and editors came together to share insights and strategies. Photo: Renata Santos.

Another journalist explained the problems associated with 'bothsidesism' or false balance with regard to reporting on reproductive rights. "There was such a crazy obsession to hear the other side. But if we are writing about the impact of abortion on public health, it is not the place to ask for a quote from the Brazilian Conference of Bishops," they said.

This change in approach represents a breakthrough in the Brazilian media landscape. Academics have accused *Folha de S. Paulo* and other traditional newspapers (such as *O Globo* and *Estadão*) of taking neutrality to an extreme without addressing the complex framework of objectivity. They argue that the uncritical approach of 'declaratory journalism' (also known as 'stenography journalism', or 'he said/she said' reporting), which involves simply presenting the statements of sources or officials without critique or analysis, normalized the toxic discourse of populists and framed them only as "controversial" and "radical". Brazilian scholar Fabiana Moraes, for instance, stated that "by hesitating to treat Bolsonaro as a unique figure, journalism has helped erode the Brazilian democratic environment".

Platforming disinformation agents can backfire

In November 2024, *Folha* received fierce criticism when it published an article by defeated former president Bolsonaro titled "Accept Democracy", framing Donald Trump's second U.S. presidential victory as a triumph for the world's right-wing political movement (which he referred to as a conservative wave), without offering a strong and immediate rebuttal. *Folha´s* ombudsman, Alexandra Moraes, recognised that it would have been better if the newspaper had presented counterpoints immediately after publishing the former president's op-ed. Two days later, the paper published a news report on how Jair Bolsonaro "now hammers on about democracy after accumulating coup-related evidence". The report critically reflected on the editorial decision, quoting a researcher who said ""By giving him space, Folha legitimizes this type of discourse."

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: WHAT DO BRAZILIANS THINK ABOUT REPORTING ON THE GOVERNMENT AND PRESS NEUTRALITY?

We asked our survey respondents about their views on whether the media should support, oppose, or remain neutral toward the government. We do not suggest that fact-based critique and reporting that sheds negative light on governments or political actors in a negative light necessarily amounts to "opposition", however public perceptions are relevant. Figure 2 (below) highlights public perceptions of the news media's role in relation to the government, reflecting broader debates about press independence and partisanship. A majority (57%) believe the media should remain neutral, neither supporting nor opposing the government, while 30% think the press should support the government and 9% believe it should oppose it. Political ideology strongly shapes

these perceptions. Liberals (74%) show the strongest support for media neutrality, compared to moderates (57%) and conservatives (52%). Support for neutrality is stronger among younger respondents but declines with age, particularly among those 60 and older. Additionally, gender differences show men are more likely (63%) than women (52%) to favour neutrality. This finding reflects research across other countries that suggests the concept of neutrality is a predominantly male approach to understanding the value of information. Our findings suggest that while neutrality is the dominant view, attitudes towards the media's role are shaped by both demographic factors, especially gender, and political leanings.

FIGURE 2: "Do you think it is the role of news organizations to support the current government of Brazil, to oppose the current

Public views on the news media's role in relation to government, by age, gender, and political leaning
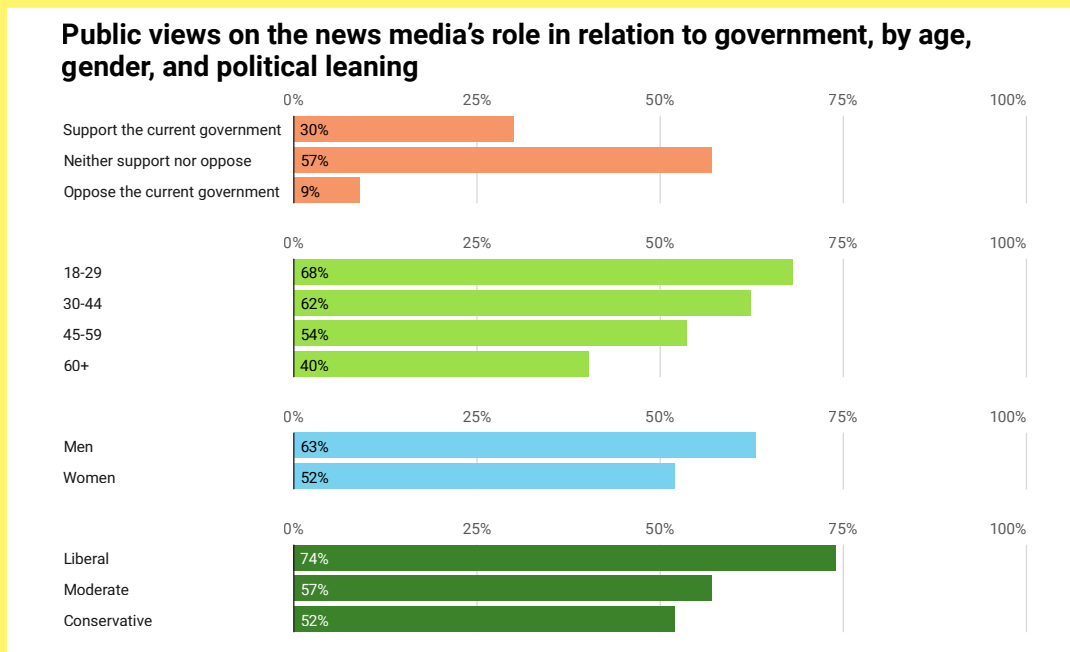
government, or to neither support nor oppose the current government?" NOTE: Age, gender, and political leaning data represent only those respondents who chose 'Neither support nor oppose.'

3.2. DIVERSIFYING COUNTER-DISINFORMATION STRATEGIES TO MAXIMISE EFFECTIVENESS

Our research participants highlighted the need for newsrooms to develop hybrid strategies to defend information integrity, rather than relying on adhoc and isolated strategies. Diversified approaches to audience and community development include a combination of building deep partnerships with civil society organizations, collaborating with data scientists, deploying 'active listening' audience development methodologies, and going low-tech to reach remote and economically marginalized communities without access to the internet.

Radical collaborations as a bulwark against disinformation

Tapajós de Fato practices radical collaboration as a core strategy to fight disinformation. They leverage their connections with social movement leaders and NGOs, such as the Association of Indigenous Women Suraras of the Tapajós, the Union of Rural Workers of Santarém, the Health and Happiness Project to reach various traditional communities and develop their grassroots initiatives.

One of Tapajós de Fato's projects — Popular Communication and Health: Debunking Myths in the Tapajós and Baixo Amazonas Territories — was developed in partnership with the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) to provide traditional communities with reliable information about the importance of vaccination and the universal healthcare system Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS).

Meanwhile, thanks to training and support from Tapajós de Fato, local NGOS, the Indigenous Council Tapajós

and Arapiuns (CITA) now share a communication department. Similarly, a quilombola movement has developed a small communication unit.

With a similar emphasis on radical collaboration, *Folha de São Paulo* has been developing multiple strategies to combat disinformation since 2018, focusing on climate and health narratives. It joined its traditional competitors **to create a pioneering consortium to provide COVID-19 information sourced directly from state health departments, bypassing the Ministry of Health, which had restricted access to pandemic-related data.** The newspapers with the highest circulation numbers in the country (*Folha, O Globo, O Estado de S.Paulo*, and *Extra*) as well as the country's most prominent news sites (UOL and G1) set aside their rivalries and, for the first time, joined forces to collect and tally data on infections and deaths up to 2023.

For *Folha de S. Paulo* Assistant Managing Editor for Diversity Flavia Lima, "There is no silver bullet to eradicate fake news other than providing high-quality journalism and a combination of paths, like this successful collaborative initiative." And the acute public interest value of the collaboration was key:

IMAGE: Some of the team at the Data Desk of Folha de S. Paulo. Photo: Maria Cleidejane Esperidião.

There were lives at stake, and the press decided to come together precisely to react to data that either failed to be published or were published in a way that was more intended to confuse than to clarify the situation. I felt that readers valued this initiative. This was also when many realised that embarking on false content can sometimes put their lives at risk.

Going low-tech to reach isolated communities

Content for [Tapajós](#) de Fato's project in partnership with the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) discussed above was tailored to the local context and delivered offline, including in the form of booklets shared through discussion circles in rural communities, Indigenous villages, and quilombolas.

Similarly, they formed partnerships with local community radio stations, like the [web radio Uxicará](#), **and produced audio content distributed on USB drives sent by boat to offline communities, where the information could be played over loudspeakers.**

Deep, active, cooperative listening may help inoculate communities against disinformation

To tackle climate disinformation, Tapajós de Fato hosted immersive, active listening sessions with groups of five to 15 community members to better understand the environmental changes residents perceived and how these impacted their livelihoods. "Everyone sensed that something was happening," Tapajós de Fato's co-founder Marcus Wesley said.

People complained that it was getting hotter, that the açaí[14] was drying up earlier than usual, and that trees like andiroba and copaíba weren't producing the same oil. Everyone knew something was off, but no one could pinpoint it. That's when, while speaking with a partner, the idea came to me to create booklets for community-based discussions built around the impressions and perceptions of residents.

IMAGE: Glossaries distributed by Tapajós de Fato.

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14   Açaí is a fruit of Amazonian origin that serves as a cornerstone of the regional bioeconomy, integrating environmental conservation, economic development, and cultural appreciation. Traditionally harvested by riverine communities, açaí production helps preserve the forest while promoting the natural regeneration of palm trees. This supply chain generates employment and income for families, strengthening the local economy.

A series of booklets on climate change, written in accessible language and reflecting the communities' knowledge, emerged from this cooperative listening process as part of an immersive media and information literacy intervention. The initiative included workshops to discuss these topics, with the booklets distributed within community schools throughout the project area. They aimed to teach children about climate change through day-to-day experiences such as açaí collection.

Live events help build shared understanding amid polarization

Both Tapajós de Fato and *Folha de S. Paulo* have experimented with public events as a means of building shared understanding within their communities and audiences in the context of disinformation-fuelled polarization.

To broaden the audience for their messages in the Amazon, Tapajós de Fato also uses creative approaches like cultural events and public debates to facilitate dialogue and foster critical thinking on pressing issues. Cultural events like the "Sarau Curupira" bring together community members, artists, and activists in public spaces to discuss topics such as climate change and human rights in an engaging and accessible format. These gatherings help demystify complex issues and encourage attendees to question disinformation they may encounter.

Tapajós de Fato's outdoor cultural events bring artists to public squares to discuss topics frequently weaponized by disinformation agents seeking to divide communities. Themes include human rights, climate change and gender. *"We try to break through bubbles by bringing the debate to public squares, hosting public cultural events, and engaging people directly on topics such as the Ferrogrão[15] project or COP discussions,"* co-founder Isabelle Maciel said.

Folha has also frequently opened its auditorium to engage readers in conversation with national and international experts on polarizing topics. One discussion highlighted the use of artificial intelligence as a campaign tool and for manipulating voters, democracy and diversity in public service, and the importance of algorithmic transparency.

3.3. TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, INTEGRITY AND TRUST

While the issue of declining trust in facts and public interest journalism should not be considered in isolation from the polluted information environment, the role of Big Tech, and targeted attacks on journalists and news organizations, transparent practice, and public engagement with ethical dilemmas can help support public trust in journalism. Creative approaches to developing media and information literacy in partnership with audiences can also prove to be valuable.

Linking media and information literacy to trust

Recognising the value of transparent journalistic practices to trust in independent journalism, *Folha de São Paulo* reinforces and highlights the lines between fact and opinion. When those lines are blurred, trust can be undermined, helping misinformation and disinformation to flourish. So, *Folha* sometimes explains at the end of a story whether it is a piece of opinion, analysis or an ongoing report. "For years, we have taken for granted that readers knew the difference between an opinion column, a breaking news [story], and an in-depth investigation. Basic things that we think, or thought, were clear to readers. Still, they are not," *Folha´s* Flavia Lima, said.

The series Fala, Folha! ("Talk, Folha!") is another example of an engaging media literacy effort. Readers' questions are answered via video by *Folha*'s staff. Topics addressed have included the mechanisms for protecting confidential sources, as required by industry codes of ethics, as Lima explained:

> *The idea is to explain things straightforwardly through videos... Depending on the question, [journalists] provide explanations and try to answer readers' questions, be it about specific coverage, a function, the difference between a news report and an opinion column, or basic things that we think or thought were clear to readers, and they are not.*

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15   The EF-170, or Ferrogrão, is a project for the construction of a railway between the municipalities of Sinop (Mato Grosso) and Miritituba (Pará), for transporting agricultural production. Ferrogrão, like other planned railways, has been criticized not only for its environmental impact but also for the lack of attention to land conflicts and the social complexity of the region. A report produced by a partnership between InfoAmazonia and O Joio e O Trigo reveals that, in total, at least six Indigenous lands, home to approximately 2,600 people, and 17 conservation units are within the designated area, which spans 25 municipalities in Mato Grosso and Pará, with an estimated population of nearly 800,000 people.

Another *Folha* program "Como é que é?" ('How and What is it?'), which runs from Monday to Friday on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X, and Twitch, also answers reader questions about reporting practices and norms. For example, one of the themes in June 2024 was "How does *Folha* fact-check if a news story is false?"

Other partnerships are less controversial. In 2022, *Folha* launched the first season of "Ask Folhinha" ("Ask Little Folha"), an animated series of eight short YouTube videos designed to explain the news to readers under 12 by answering general questions like "Will artificial intelligence steal people's jobs?". The idea came up after receiving funding and mentorship to develop projects that combat disinformation in Brazil as part of Jogo Limpo ("Fair Game"), a program run by ICFJ in partnership with YouTube Brazil.

Many of our interviewees at Folha were surprised by questions from the public that they considered "obvious", such as those about newsworthiness criteria. However, the strategy has been well received by the newsroom as a way to bring the outlet closer to its audience and increase media literacy among the public.

Folha has also increased its 'explainers', a form of explanatory journalism that breaks down more technical information and provides critical context, encouraging readers to ask questions to clarify their understanding of underlying issues. Examples of this practice include a suite of articles providing context for understanding issues prone to disinformation narratives, such as the reliability of digital ballot machines used to count votes during elections and links between climate change and natural disasters. These include: "Understanding the differences in fires in the Pantanal, Cerrado, and Amazon", "How do electronic ballot machines work", and "Understand the link between climate change and the disaster in Rio Grande do Sul: scientists had already predicted that the region would face more intense rainfall due to global warming".

IMAGE: Folha de S. Paulo auditorium, in a session to explain to trainees the paper´s guidelines to avoid ambivalence in headlines. Photo: Maria Cleidejane Esperidião.

Airing the news organization's dirty laundry as an act of accountability

Folha is still Brazil's only newspaper with an **ombudsman** to oversee its operations and channel readers' criticisms. Alexandra Moraes is the 15th person to hold the position, created in 1989. The ombudsman's duties include producing a weekly column published on Sundays and an internal critique from Monday to Friday, distributed only to the newsroom. The ombudsman is also responsible for forwarding readers' complaints and comments to journalists.

In December 2024, Moraes wrote that *Folha* needs to rethink its advertising model, which opens the door to scammers and charlatans. A six-month-long investigation led by the fact-checking site Aos Fatos revealed that out of 90,000 health-related ads across 242,000 native ads published by nine Brazilian news websites, including *Folha,* almost 90% contained false or distorted claims.

Previously, *Folha´s* commercial department was criticised for emulating the paper´s layout in 'native advertising,' and confusing the reader. While *Folha* defends the practice, it can be difficult for the average person to distinguish ads from reportage on the paper's website.

An example of a "native" advertisement visually similar to a news article, making it difficult for readers to distinguish between reportage and sponsored content. Screenshot: Estúdio Folha.

Where there is smoke, sometimes there is fire

According to Agência Pública, in 2023, the tobacco industry, including Philip Morris, published "brand content" on major journalistic Brazilian websites, including *Folha*, to influence politicians and public opinion about the safety and health effects of smoking.

Philip Morris, the world's largest tobacco company, also sponsors *Folha's* successful training programme, which began in 1988 and has trained over 700 journalists. The same company has now controversially funded the expansion of a new fact-checking project named "Checamos" ("We Checked").

Sérgio Dávila, Head of News, acknowledges that there was some friction internally about *Folha* partnering on a fact-checking project with Big Tobacco. But he argues that Philip Morris cannot and does not interfere in editorial content:

> *Would it have been better to avoid such friction by partnering with, I don't know, a company with a better or less controversial public image? Yes, maybe. But I use a lot of war rhetoric; it is a fight against fake news, a constant battle; you go to war with the weapons you have, right? If they are the company willing to partner with us, then we will go ahead with it.*

Dávila insists that *Folha* does not just partner with any company, "…but if it's an established company that pays taxes, doesn't engage in any illegal activities, and follows all the regulations in Brazil [then] there's no reason for us not to pursue this partnership. We treat it like any other company."

However, the decision to partner with a company historically accused of undermining fact-based science about smoking and cancer which is and is a current lobbyist for e-cigarettes in Brazil, causes embarrassment and discomfort among media critics, and silence in the newsroom.

Critics argue that since tobacco ads have not been allowed since 1996, the partnership between *Folha* and Philip Morris is a way to advertise products that cannot be shown, and it is part of the tobacco giant's efforts to remake its image and portray it as a change maker. "For decades, the tobacco industry has heavily invested in burying scientific evidence that its product causes cancer," journalist and professor Marcelo Soares wrote. Cristina Tardáguila, founder of Lupa, the first fact-checking outlet in Brazil, agreed: "One of the industries that most conceals data and manufactures health misinformation in the world now wants to clean its image by supporting a fact-checking project."

An example of a 'native' advertisement which appears on Folha's X profile. In English, the text reads, "Sponsored content: adult smokers chose an alternative considered to have reduced risk". And: "Philip Morris begins testing cigarettes with tobacco that doesn't burn". Screenshot: a post by Folha on X.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: ASSESSING BRAZILIANS' TRUST IN *FOLHA*

We note that trust in a news brand should not be assessed in isolation from consideration of attacks and disinformation narratives directed at the outlet (See Figure 5 below). However, we asked survey respondents about specific media brands, with a particular focus on *Folha de S. Paulo.* This was relevant as our researchers were embedded within its newsroom, making it important to assess public perception of the outlet. Figure 3 (below) shows that trust in *Folha* is mixed, with 12% expressing a great deal of trust and 13% a good amount, while 26% say they trust it somewhat. However, 16% of respondents indicated they had little trust in *Folha,* and 22% said they did not trust it at all. These findings suggest that while some Brazilians have confidence in *Folha (51%)*, a substantial proportion remain distrustful or undecided.

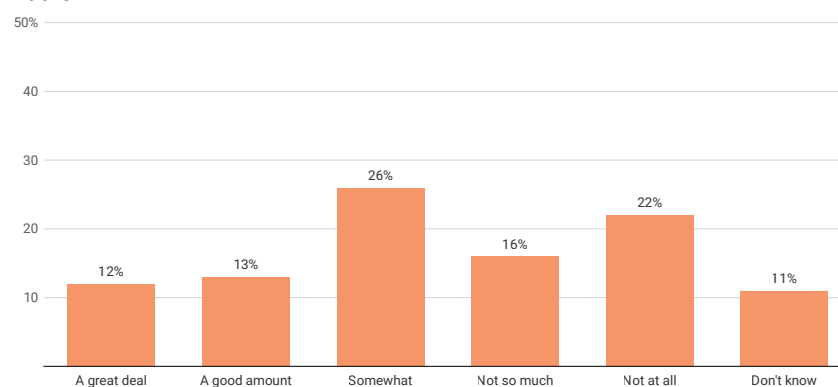**Percentage of respondents who say they trust or do not trust** *Folha de São Paulo*

FIGURE 3: "How much do you trust journalists at Folha d. Sao Paulo to provide fair and accurate reporting about current events – do you trust them a great deal, a good amount, somewhat, not so much, or not at all?". Base: Total sample in Brazil = 1003.

3.4. GOING BEYOND FACT-CHECKING: INVESTIGATING SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION AND BIG TECH ACCOUNTABILITY

Brazilian newsrooms are increasingly going beyond fact-checking to acknowledge the deleterious impacts of Big Tech companies and their platforms on the information ecosystem. *Folha* has approached this gap in their counter-disinformation work by ensuring that they are investigating the companies, considering their accountability for disinformation, and tracking platform regulation efforts. "For us, disinformation is much more than just fact-checking and correcting errors," Patrícia Campos Mello, *Folha's* Editor-at-Large, said, acknowledging that for a long time reporters felt restricted to simply correcting viral disinformation.

Another critical strategy for *Folha* has been assigning reporters to investigate political disinformation, monitoring orchestrated disinformation campaigns, and tracking discussions around regulatory measures. Three key methods include monitoring whether online platforms follow their own rules (where they still exist) for moderating disinformation, tracking the progress of regulatory and lobbying efforts, and directly addressing disinformation. "Should we also check what the platforms are doing about it? What does the law say about it? How is it going viral?" Campos Mello asked, explaining that they don't stop at seeking to understand the political context of disinformation. "Another thing that we monitor is which public figures are specifically spreading this disinformation content."

Renata Galf, who covers disinformation and politics, highlighted the importance of an interdisciplinary approach across beats:

> *Discussing tech innovation or a bill with experts might end up on the politics desk if it has an electoral impact bias. But all of this is interconnected. We have different reporters covering these topics, and it depends on how disinformation or social media ties into this or that.*

Digital forensics capability is also now important to editorial responses to networked disinformation. So, in early 2024, *Folha* partnered with Palver, a company specialising in tracking narratives in public instant messaging groups such as WhatsApp and Telegram. *Folha* Political Editor Eduardo Scolese explained the partnership: "Palver monitors WhatsApp and Telegram groups to identify where viral disinformation originates, not just fake news, but any trending topic. This allows us to anticipate what's gaining traction and help our readers understand what's being distorted."

The partnership aims to shed light on coordinated disinformation campaigns which attract significant public engagement, rather than simply reacting to every false news item. The paper's political desk uses data from Palver to guide its reporting while taking care not to amplify disinformation.

Leveraging AI to tackle disinformation

In June 2024, *Folha* created an artificial intelligence desk. The goal of this desk is not to cover AI as a topic (which will remain in the purvue of technology desk), but rather to "accelerate and understand the best ways to use artificial intelligence both in internal newsroom processes and in those aimed directly at readers," explained Daniela Braga, who leads the new desk.

In November 2024, they began testing the Mosaico tool, which allows journalists to quickly transform textual narratives into short videos, using AI as an aid in the process. The tool is integrated into the newspaper's own image and video database, and the code will be available for adaptation and use by other news organizations. According to *Folha*, the purpose of the system is to address the growing challenge of disinformation in a media landscape where short video consumption on social networks has increased significantly.

Daniela Braga, the journalist leading the project, explains: "Automation allows *Folha* to publish more videos and reach a larger number of internet users, especially those who prioritize videos over text for consuming news."

3.5. DISINFORMATION AS A PRESS FREEDOM THREAT AND A FEATURE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST BRAZILIAN JOURNALISTS

Editorial efforts to counter disinformation are extremely challenging in Brazilian contexts where journalists are routinely exposed to threats of physical violence, subjected to gendered disinformation, and operate in an information ecosystem where anti-press disinformation narratives that echo those directed at journalists in the U.S., remain rife. These narratives erode trust in public interest journalism, but they also create an enabling environment for crimes against journalists.

The chilling effect of disinformation-fuelled anti-press violence

Violence against journalists in Brazil is one of the main challenges to press freedom and democracy in the country. The Sombra report on press freedom in Latin America identified that between 2014–2024, Brazil recorded 11 unresolved journalist murders. The high levels of impunity foster a climate of permissiveness for attacks on journalists and fear, perpetuating cycles of violence and self-censorship. Disinformation-laced smears against targeted journalists and outlets deepen the impacts and increase the risks.

The continuum of violence — from online to offline — directly impacts journalists' mental health and their ability to carry out investigative reporting on sensitive topics, particularly outside major urban centres. The threats are most acute in the Amazon. Between June 30th 2022 and June 30th 2023, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) recorded 66 press freedom violations across the nine states of the Amazônia Legal region.

These included serious incidents targeting the team at Tapajós de Fato. Since 2021, co-founder Marcos Wesley has faced various forms of intimidation, such as being followed on the streets of Santarém and having all four tyres of his car slashed in an act of sabotage and intimidation. On one occasion, Wesley found a severed cat's head and a threatening note in the front garden of the home which he shares with his mother. This gruesome incident prompted him to relocate to the state capital, Belém, to protect himself and his family.

In 2022, the team's equipment was stolen, and one of their reporters was injured in a knife attack just meters from the outlet's former office.

This crisis contributes to the phenomenon of news deserts in Brazil, which involves the absence of media outlets in thousands of cities. Targeted disinformation campaigns exacerbate this vulnerability, threatening media plurality, especially in the Amazon region where independent journalism is extremely vulnerable.

Online threats exacerbate offline danger

Alongside disinformation narratives intended to discredit their reporting, Tapajós de Fato's journalists often face other instances of online violence, including cyberstalking. A recent case involved the journalist João Paulo de Souza after he released a video of himself interviewing Santarém residents about the social and environmental impacts of the Ferrogrão railway project, which affects protected areas, including Indigenous lands and conservation units.[16] The video was shared by right-wing blogs in the region which doxxed him, exposing the reporter's private social media accounts and triggering a wave of 'virtual lynching'.

> *"I was terrified and had anxiety attacks. I stayed home for at least six days; I didn't leave the house," Souza recalled. "Since working as a reporter, I did not visit my mother, who lives nearby, for a year; I want to protect her and my entire family".*

These incidents create a hostile and dangerous working environment, leading to psychological distress among team members. For instance, Tapajós de Fato co-founder Marcos Wesley has reported experiencing anxiety and depression as a result of repeated threats and harassment. Measures to ensure the safety of the team, such as relocation, have been necessary but challenging.

The experiences of the Tapajós de Fato team confirm a global trend reported by UNESCO in 2024, showing that, over the previous five years, there was a significant rise (+42%) in attacks against journalists covering a range of environmental topics (e.g., protests, mining, land conflicts, extreme weather, pollution and fuel industry)

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16   These areas are legally established by the government to ensure that traditional populations can use natural resources sustainably.

globally.[17] As some experts pointed out, the killing of British journalist Dom Phillips and Indigenous journalist Bruno Pereira in 2022 in the Amazon region "sent shockwaves" through Brazilian media outlets. In this context, Amazônia Real — an award-winning independent, investigative, non-profit media outlet — implemented new safety protocols, such as avoiding nighttime travelling and providing health insurance for reporters.

One consequence of the lack of resources to ensure journalist safety was Tapajós de Fato's decision not to cover the 2024 municipal elections until they could develop an adequate security strategy. As a result, voters in the state of Pará, particularly those in the municipality of Santarém, were deprived of Tapajós de Fato's coverage regarding the candidates' policies. This included an absence of reporting on their support or opposition to the agendas and rights of Indigenous people and traditional communities in the region. It also created an environment for misinformation and disinformation narratives associated with the municipal elections to thrive unabated.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: ASSESSING BRAZILIANS' ATTITUDES TO PRESS FREEDOM

Our nationally representative survey shows that 65% of respondents see attacks on journalists by senior politicians or government officials as a major threat to media freedom. Yet, a quarter of respondents do not share this view, with 17% considering such attacks only a minor threat and 8% not seeing them as a threat at all. Our findings highlight that while the concern of political attacks on journalists is widespread, these figures suggest a notable degree of tolerance for such threats to the press and a lack of understanding about the role of press freedom in democracies. They also indicate the need to reinforce protections for the safe and free practice of journalism in Brazil which helps secure access to credible information in the public interest.

Public perceptions of political attacks on journalists as a threat to media freedom
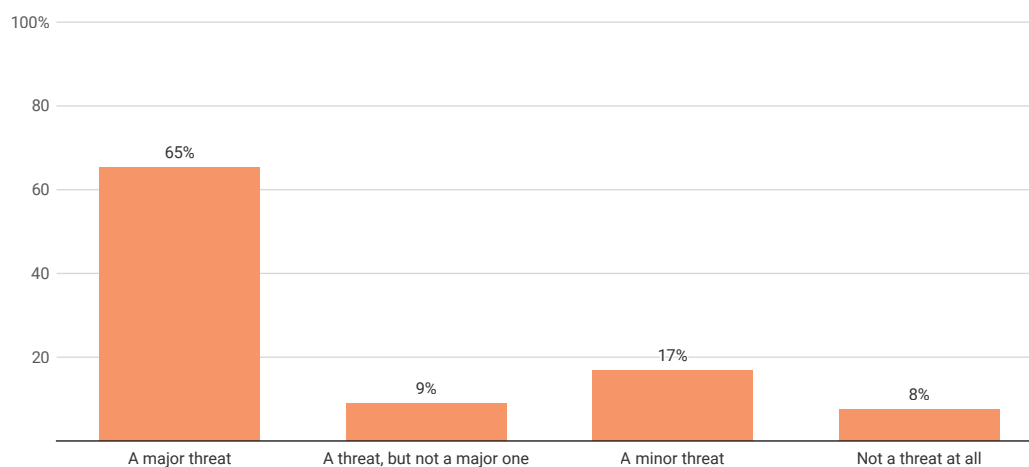

FIGURE 4: "If journalists are attacked by senior politicians or government officials, do you think this poses a major threat to the freedom of the media, a threat but not a major one, a minor threat or not a threat at all?". Base: Total sample in Brazil = 1003.

Gendered disinformation as a feature of targeted attacks

In 2024, the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji) released a study showing that online violence against journalists and media outlets has been persistent and severe. Between 2019 and 2023, over half of the incidents recorded by Abraji were classified as online attacks. Women were targeted in 78.1% of these cases, with 52% involving explicitly sexist, misogynistic, or transphobic comments. Such attacks often employ offensive sexualised and sexist memes or puns designed to tarnish the reputation and credibility of journalists.

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17   "Press and Planet in Danger" by UNESCO found at least "749 journalists and news media outlets reporting on environmental issues were targeted with murder, physical violence, detention and arrest, online harassment or legal attacks in the period 2009 - 2023".

One of the most high-profile cases involves *Folha de S. Paulo*'s Editor-at-Large, Patricia Campos Mello. In late 2018, she faced extreme online violence after publishing a series of reports investigating disinformation campaigns connected to former President Jair Bolsonaro. In 2020, the orchestrated attacks included false allegations that she exchanged sexual favours for information – claims spread by right-wing bloggers and Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, the former president's son. Thousands of fake videos and sexually explicit memes were spread on social media to tarnish her reputation. Many continue to circulate.

> *There is a connection between disinformation and attacks on female journalists. For example, Eduardo Bolsonaro said in some interviews that I had been promoted to Folha US correspondent after I wrote "paid" articles about his father. That never happened.*
>
> *— Patricia Campos Mello*

Both the former president and his son were ultimately ordered by Brazilian courts to pay compensation to the journalist in connection with the gendered disinformation narratives they had directed at her.

Gendered online violence against Campos Mello escalated again in April 2024 when she wrote about South African-American billionaire, Trump campaign donor and X owner Elon Musk. She pointed out that Musk had not protested against content removal orders in India and Turkey despite fighting the Brazilian authorities' efforts to remove hate speech and disinformation content from his platform. "And again, they bring it all back," she said. "They pull out fake porn photos, and they start dragging these things up again." Campos Mello's case also demonstrates the ways in which AI is maliciously operationalized to generate cheapfakes and deepfakes.

PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY: ASSESSING BRAZILIANS' EXPOSURE TO ATTACKS ON *FOLHA* AND ITS JOURNALISTS

Nearly half (46%) of Brazilian adults reported encountering attacks on *Folha de S. Paulo* or its journalists that seemed intended to undermine their credibility. Among them, 26% said they occasionally encountered attacks, with smaller but notable proportions saying they saw them somewhat often (15%) or very often (5%). However, a large group either remains unaware or does not frequently encounter such attacks. A significant portion of respondents either rarely (25%) or never (23%) see, read, or hear about such attacks, while 6% are unsure, suggesting that many people may be unaware of efforts to undermine the publication's credibility and target its journalists with disinformation narratives. Nevertheless, the exposure of nearly half of Brazilian adults to attacks that seemed designed to undercut the credibility of *Folha* or its journalists is a factor which must be taken into account when assessing the levels of trust in the outlet indicated by the respondents (See Figure 3 above).

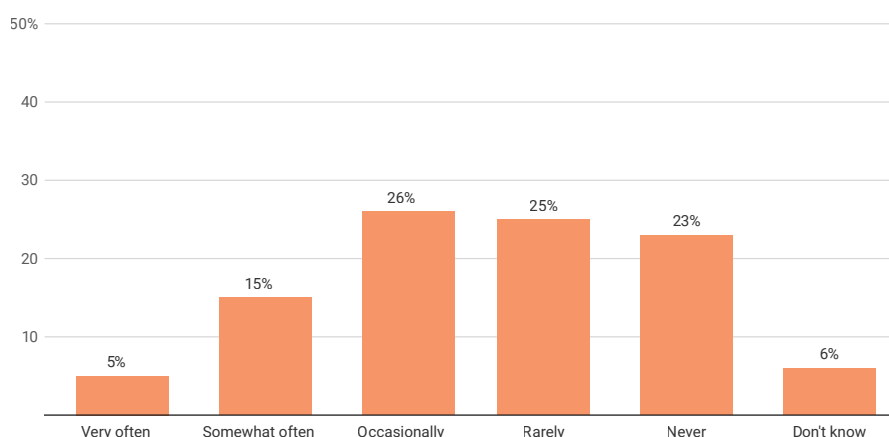### Proportion of people who frequently see, read, or hear attacks on *Folha*

FIGURE 5: "How often, if at all, do you see, read or hear attacks on Folha de S. Paolo, including on its journalists, that seem intended to undermine its credibility as a news outlet? This could be on social media, websites, radio, TV or newspapers". Base: Total sample in Brazil = 1003.

There is still protective work to be done

After disinformation-laced attacks and lawsuits against Campos Mello, *Folha* revised its security plans and expanded its legal team of advisors by making them, in the words of Head of News Sérgio Dávila, "...more agile to respond very quickly to any threat, whether directly, in person or virtually through a comment on a story or a *Folha* employee's social media account". This "legal security" protocol was activated during the pandemic for those directly threatened or felt threatened. A mental health professional was made available to staff over eight hours daily, for 30 or 60-minute sessions, in what Dávila described as "unprecedented" for most editorial teams. "For any reason, whether they were feeling in danger, feeling threatened, dealing with burnout, thinking the pandemic would never end, or struggling with writing about disasters, deaths, or vaccine delays".

However, despite its size and resources, according to our research, *Folha* still lacks structure regarding ongoing strategies that directly or indirectly contribute to the goal of combating disinformation, which as discussed above, is bound up with online violence against journalists. It was unclear what tangible changes had been made in processes and whether they had been adequately communicated internally. Under the condition of anonymity, some interviewees acknowledged that they could not explain how these protocols worked or how they could monitor real-time attacks. Although these improvements taken by *Folha´s* leadership helped to mitigate the problem to some extent, the newsroom staff remain hungry for incident reporting conduits and alert response systems.

4. Conclusion

Both *Folha de S. Paulo* and Tapajos de Fato newsrooms in Brazil expressed ambivalence about the ability of professional journalism and independent journalists to inoculate people against disinformation narratives without any sense of what is fraudulent, acritical, fabricated or hyper-partisan.

Some interviewees felt that trying to clamp down on disinformation was like "spinning the wheels of a car". Others shared that they were starting to believe the job is no longer worth it since their profession has become discredited and labelled (often falsely or ignorantly) as biased, or dismissed as 'fake news'. "I am skeptical. I think journalists combating disinformation are essentially preaching to the choir. I think the people who are truly affected are insulated," one of *Folha de S. Paulo's* editors said.

This is a view shared by some on the Tapajós de Fato team. One interviewee told us:

> *It's really about bursting this bubble. So it's tough to combat disinformation when people aren't looking for this type of content; they aren't looking for this type of journalism. I think this is the main problem today. The other is internet access. Those who live in the urban city do not search for information; imagine those who live in vulnerable territories without internet access.*

Nevertheless, the outlets and most of their staff persist — doing whatever they can to defend facts and public interest journalism. In the Amazon region, efforts are made to build deep ties with community organizations to expand engagement, João Paulo Serra de Souza from Tapajós de Fato explained:

> *We don't just talk about communication; we show that these places face problems, and sometimes, they know about these problems and need to figure out what they can do besides being organised as an association, a collective group. It is exciting for us to show the importance of communication in this process and to encourage them.*

Despite increasing hostility and a reduced team, Tapajós de Fato continues to access and gain recognition and respect for its journalistic work from various traditional communities and territories within the Amazon. This recognition is a crucial factor in enabling the production of investigative reporting in the region and fostering participatory projects with local communities. Such collaborations are made possible by the team's deep-rooted connection to the region, and by their clear editorial stance: a commitment to defending Indigenous territories and traditional communities while critically addressing the development paradigm.

However, for a fledgling and vulnerable news website such as Tapajós de Fato, the absence of financial stability, and a dearth of grants to provide safety and technical support and training makes it hard to continue their work to promote critical thinking about health, climate and land stewardship disinformation.

By contrast, the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* is widely recognised as one of the national media outlets with the most significant capacity, in terms of human and financial resources, to systematically monitor and counter disinformation in Brazil and its repercussions on politics and daily life. The expansion of its fact-checking team (the Checamos project), the creation of an editorial division to explore the potential uses of AI in the newspaper's operations, and the investment in diversifying formats and content are examples of *Folha's* continued commitment to experimenting with different strategies that can help enhance readers' trust in the newspaper's work and reinforce the credibility of Brazilian journalism.

The significant investment in multimedia content and various audience engagement strategies via social media and apps like WhatsApp seems to mitigate the feelings of "spinning wheels" and "preaching to the choir" that some journalists expressed. However, *Folha's* extensive list of initiatives, which serves as a valuable reference for journalism in Brazil and worldwide, is not without contradictions and dilemmas. The fact that a tobacco company funds the Checamos project is one such example. Additionally, operating as a subscription-based newspaper in a country where less than 1% of the population has a journalism subscription presents challenges regarding the potential of its reporting to prevent or counteract waves of disinformation effectively. In a toxic information ecosystem, democracy can deteriorate behind a paywall. However, Folha tries to mitigate this effect by allowing subscribers to forward up to seven stories per day via email or WhatsApp to not subscribers.

Interview being conducted by the Tapajós de Fato team with the women artisans of the Vila Brasil community. The craftsmanship of this community is unique and recognized throughout the state, as well as being sold nationally and even internationally. Photo: Thayane Guimarães.

What needs to change?

It has long been known that internal communication is one of the most significant challenges large newsrooms face in Brazil and beyond. A lack of awareness among *Folha's* reporters and editors about the strategies developed to address disinformation highlights the need for better systematisation of these initiatives and more effective sharing of information among staff — an effort that could inspire new partnerships between teams and impactful journalistic projects.

In the context of intense attacks on Brazilian journalism, the legal and psychological support that *Folha* provides to its employees is essential. However, several interviewees stated that they were not familiar with the newsroom's security protocols, indicating that this should also be a point of focus for the company.

Finally, journalists we interviewed highlighted the significant challenges of covering specific topics and regions in Brazil due to physical distance and the logistical difficulties in investigating sensitive issues in remote areas, such as the Amazon.

The vast differences between the two media outlets analysed in this study — whether in terms of size, operations, funding, editorial approach, or the journalistic products developed and audiences reached — suggest that a promising path to help strengthen Brazil's journalistic ecosystem may lie in fostering partnerships that leverage the strengths of each.

What can we learn from the Brazilian public about effective disinformation combat?

Our national opinion poll revealed that the majority (58%) of Brazilian adults were highly concerned about encountering false or misleading information. This finding indicates an opportunity for targeted editorial interventions that address this heightened concern. But it also highlights the need to help the sizeable minority that is not so concerned understand what is at stake.

Complicating these efforts is our finding that 74% of Brazilian adults had encountered attacks on journalists or news outlets that seemed intended to undermine their credibility. This signals significant exposure to smears designed to undercut trust in factual reporting and informed commentary.

Perhaps this helps explain why a quarter (25%) of Brazilian adults did not consider political attacks on journalists a significant threat to media freedom.

So, in addition to media and information literacy interventions, meaningful community engagement, and investigative reporting focused on exposing disinformation campaigns, their instigators and their vectors, editorial efforts that help people understand the risks at the intersection of democracy, media freedom and disinformation are essential.

5. Recommendations for action

The following recommendations directed at differentiated responders to disinformation in Brazil are designed to support more effective editorially-led counter-disinformation efforts.

NEWS PRODUCERS SHOULD:

1. **Continuously improve safety and security protocols, and frequently communicate them to help mitigate the intertwined digital, physical and psychological impacts of disinformation-laced attacks on outlets and individual journalists.**

2. **Deploy 'active listening' techniques through in-person community gatherings such as 'discussion circles' that can help facilitate deeper understanding of complex and potentially polarizing issues prone to infection with disinformation discourse (e.g., climate change, deforestation, racial and gender justice, the rights of traditional landholders, health, vaccinations and 'free speech').**

3. **Experiment with 'radical collaborations' involving grassroots community organizations, civil society organizations, social movements, and competing news organizations. Such collaborations can expand capacity for counter-disinformation work, and strengthen connections with the communities they serve, thereby building trust.**

4. **Partner with experts in digital forensics to plug gaps in research and computational journalism capability that can advance investigations into disinformation actors, networks and narratives.**

5. **Avoid toxic partnerships that can undermine credibility and undercut trust in counter-disinformation work, such as Big Tobacco sponsorship of fact-checking teams.**

6. **Go beyond fact-checking to investigate Big Tech companies whose technologies and platforms are disinformation vectors which profit from engagement with such content. This work should also involve monitoring and critically assessing efforts to regulate Big Tech and the companies' compliance.**

7. **Review editorial policies to avoid the pitfalls of 'bothsidesism' or false balance. The truth isn't necessarily neutral but misguided interpretations of objectivity can lead to the kind of false equivalency which sees falsehoods being given the same weight as facts.**

8. **Adapt content distribution mechanisms to ensure remote and marginalized communities with low internet connectivity and a high susceptibility to disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories, such as those in the Amazon, can still be reached.**

9. **Practice transparency and explain the central role of public interest media to democracy. Demystifying editorial processes and helping audiences to understand the risks of targeted attacks on journalists and news outlets in the context of disinformation campaigns may help to mitigate the effects of smears.**

10. Consider adopting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies and training programs as counter-disinformation strategies, recognizing that audiences are more likely to trust and respect outlets that reflect their diversity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION FROM ENTITIES THAT SUPPORT COUNTER-DISINFORMATION WORK

1. Governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society organizations should collaborate to ensure the safety and security of small editorial teams risking their lives in the Amazon region –- the frontline of the struggle against climate-related disinformation.

2. Funders supporting democracy and information integrity work in Brazil should invest in public interest media serving remote and marginalized communities.

3. Governments, intergovernmental organizations and civil society organizations should collaborate to boost public awareness about the value of public interest media and the importance of media freedom to security and development.

4. Efforts to mitigate the impacts of disinformation on public trust in facts and democratic institutions in Brazil should address the specific characteristics and modes of gendered disinformation which is used against women truth tellers, including those serving society through public interest media.

5. The Brazilian government should continue its globally significant role in holding Big Tech companies to account through legislative and regulatory efforts designed to address their role as disinformation vectors while respecting international freedom of expression standards.

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About the authors

Maria Cleidejane Esperidião (Ph.D) is a Senior Research Associate at ICFJ. From 2020 to 2023, she was the Executive Manager for the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji), where she led on press releases and advocacy efforts, monitored violence against journalism, supported projects tackling disinformation, and identified setbacks in government transparency and freedom of the press. Previously, she spent two decades as a senior national and international editor for South America's largest media company, Globo TV. She holds a PhD with distinction from Methodista University, in São Paulo, for her pioneering study of international news agencies. She was a fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2018. She is currently finishing her postdoctoral research on precarity and foreign correspondence at the University of Sao Paulo (USP).

Thayane Guimarães is a journalist with a master's degree in media studies from Fluminense Federal University. She is a Research Associate at ICFJ, working on disinformation and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in Brazil. She also currently manages educational programs and grants to support cause-driven media outlets in the country. Previously, she oversaw global programs supporting journalism and freedom of expression. She worked as a senior researcher in Democracy and Technology at the Institute for Technology and Society (ITS Rio). In 2019, she was selected as a fellow in the Open Heroines program, representing Latin American women working with civic technology, open data, and open government. Her research focuses on public security, disinformation, freedom of expression, digital rights, and political discourse.

Prof. Julie Posetti (Ph.D) is Deputy Vice President and Global Director of Research at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and Professor of Journalism at City, University of London. A multi award-winning feminist journalist, researcher and journalism educator, Posetti is co-author of The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists (ICFJ-UNESCO: 2022), Balancing Act: Countering Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression (UNESCO-UN Broadband Commission: 2020), and Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation (UNESCO: 2019). Professor Posetti serves on the board of the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM). She is also academically affiliated with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, and the Centre for Freedom of the Media (CFOM) at the University of Sheffield.

Nabeelah Shabbir is a British-Pakistani freelance journalist and Deputy Director of Research at ICFJ. At *The Guardian*, she shared a British Journalism Prize with the 'Keep it in the Ground' team in 2015. She has co-authored a series of reports for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. She is co-author of The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists (ICFJ-UNESCO: 2022) and the OSCE Guidelines for Monitoring Online Violence against Women Journalists (2023).

Waqas Ejaz (Ph.D) is a Senior Research Associate at ICFJ and a Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. His research focuses on news effects, journalism, political communication, and climate change communication. He has published extensively on climate news consumption, misinformation, fact-checking, and public attitudes toward digital platforms. His work often draws on survey data from multiple countries to explore audience attitudes and media effects in comparative contexts. He holds a PhD in Communication Science from Technical University of Ilmenau, Germany.

Kaylee Williams is a Research Associate at ICFJ. Additionally, she is pursuing a Ph.D student at Columbia Journalism School, where she studies technology-facilitated gender-based violence, with a particular emphasis on generative AI and nonconsensual intimate imagery. She previously served as a Research Fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics & Public Policy. She holds a MA in political science from Columbia University.

Nermine Aboulez is an Egyptian Research Associate at ICFJ. Additionally, she is a Ph.D. candidate in the Communication and Media Studies program at the University of Oregon, where she studies the concept of news virality, using violence against women in Egypt as a case study. She was the Arab regional lead in The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists (ICFJ-UNESCO: 2022).

DISARMING DISINFORMATION

BRAZIL

ICFJ's research for the Disarming Disinformation project focuses on the counter-disinformation efforts of emblematic news outlets, and public attitudes toward disinformation and public interest journalism in five countries. With primary funding from the Scripps Howard Foundation, it is part of a three-year global effort to empower journalists and student journalists to more effectively fight disinformation.