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COMMENT

The politics of (mis)trust: reframing science communication in a polarized Brazil

Commentary on

Science communication in changing political winds

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed tensions between science, politics, and public trust in Brazil. Amid the rise of far-right populism, denialist narratives, and disinformation, scientific evidence became entangled in ideological disputes. Drawing on studies of media coverage, social media dynamics, and public perception of science, this commentary argues that traditional deficit-model approaches are insufficient in polarized contexts. Rebuilding trust requires rethinking science communication as a democratic and culturally embedded practice, grounded in dialogue, empathy, and participation. Strengthening institutional communication, engaging diverse actors, and recognizing multiple knowledge systems are essential to restoring public relevance and legitimacy of science.

Keywords

Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in science communication; Science communication in the developing world; Popularization of science and technology

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Brazil has not been immune to the conservative wave that has reshaped the global political landscape. In recent years, the largest country in Latin America and the world's tenth-largest economy [International Monetary Fund, 2025] has become a prominent example of the rise of the far right — a trend that was solidified with the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president in 2018 and began to lose momentum in 2022, when he failed to secure a second term. Under a platform marked by authoritarianism, rejection of democratic institutions, and the delegitimisation of scientific knowledge, the country entered a deeply polarised political cycle, permeated by hate speech, denialism, and conspiracy theories.

There could hardly have been a more tragic moment for this political configuration to take hold. Just one year after Bolsonaro's inauguration, Brazil was severely impacted by the greatest public health emergency of the century. The overlap between these two events — the rise of the far right and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic — produced a devastating combination, the effects of which on public health, trust in science, and Brazilian democracy remain both visible and deeply felt [Malta et al., 2021].

Throughout the health crisis, the Bolsonaro administration systematically adopted a science-denying stance, ranging from refusing to acknowledge the severity of the disease to actively sabotaging containment measures recommended by public health authorities [Paes et al., 2022]. The then-president repeatedly downplayed the risks of the coronavirus, calling it a "little flu" and claiming that his "athletic background" would protect him from the disease [Prata et al., 2020]. He discouraged mask use, ridiculed social distancing, and attended public gatherings in defiance of his own administration's health protocols [Mergulhão & Castro, 2021]. His opposition to evidence-based measures led to direct conflicts with his own health ministers. Two of them resigned within the first months of the pandemic, both citing disagreements with Bolsonaro's insistence on promoting ineffective treatments and rejecting recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the scientific community.

One of the most emblematic facets of this denialism was the government's persistent promotion of drugs with no proven efficacy against COVID-19, such as hydroxychloroquine (used to treat malaria), along with antibiotics and antiparasitic medications, in what became known as the "COVID kit" [Furlan & Caramelli, 2021]. Even in the face of robust evidence discouraging the use of these drugs [Sansone et al., 2024], the federal government funded campaigns, pressured Health Ministry staff, and coordinated disinformation[1] networks to sustain this narrative. Documents, investigations, and testimonies gathered by a parliamentary inquiry confirmed the existence of a deliberate strategy to promote so-called herd immunity through natural infection, completely disregarding the international scientific consensus, which prioritised vaccination, mask use, and social distancing as the main methods of controlling the disease [Dias, 2022].

Another central aspect of the government's anti-scientific actions was its direct interference in vaccine procurement, aimed at delaying, obstructing, and sabotaging acquisition efforts. While many countries were swiftly negotiating contracts with pharmaceutical companies, the Brazilian government ignored repeated offers — such as those from Pfizer — and adopted a hostile stance toward CoronaVac, a vaccine developed in Brazil in partnership with a Chinese laboratory [Ribeiro, 2021].

1. In this commentary, we draw on the definitions proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan [2017] regarding disinformation and misinformation. Although both terms refer to false or inaccurate information, the former is characterized by being deliberately created with the intent to mislead or cause harm.

Bolsonaro's rhetoric about the vaccine was derogatory, raising unfounded doubts about its safety and efficacy. This position not only delayed the start of vaccination in the country but also fuelled anti-vaccine movements, eroded public trust, and turned a fundamental public health tool into yet another element of political and ideological dispute. By turning public health into a political battlefield, the government decisively worsened the pandemic's impacts, putting millions of lives at risk and further weakening Brazil's scientific and health institutions. By the end of Bolsonaro's term on 31 December 2022, Brazil had recorded nearly 694,000 deaths from the disease [Worldometer, 2025].

Brazilian media coverage both reflected and, in part, amplified this crisis. A comparative study of newspapers from four countries showed that in *Folha de S. Paulo* — one of Brazil's largest and most influential newspapers — political issues received more attention than scientific topics throughout the pandemic [Neves & Massarani, 2022]. Jair Bolsonaro was the most frequently mentioned figure in the coverage, ahead of terms directly related to the disease itself. While science reporting followed a logic of public clarification, news coverage was often overshadowed by ideological disputes and partisan polarisation.

On social media, the scenario was equally concerning. An analysis of more than 3.8 million public posts on Facebook and Instagram revealed that the vaccine debate was largely dominated by political actors, celebrities, and media outlets — not by scientific institutions or health authorities [Carvalho et al., 2022]. President Bolsonaro, for instance, was the profile with the most comments about vaccines on Instagram during the analysed period, surpassing the Ministry of Health, the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), and the Butantan Institute — two of Brazil's leading public health research institutions. The very notion of "scientific authority" was undermined, losing ground to voices that mobilised symbolic capital rather than epistemic legitimacy.

Even institutions traditionally valued by the Brazilian public — such as Fiocruz and the Brazilian health system (SUS, in Portuguese) — struggled to achieve significant digital engagement. Meanwhile, influencers and celebrities were able to generate millions of interactions with just a few pro-vaccine posts. These dynamics reveal a significant shift: social and cultural prestige began to matter more than scientific legitimacy in the battle for public attention and trust.

The *vachina* episode — a derogatory term combining "vaccine" and "China" used to refer to one of the vaccines negotiated by Brazil with a Chinese laboratory — symbolises this reconfiguration of the public sphere. A vaccine developed through international scientific cooperation and produced by Brazilian research institutions became the target of disinformation laced with xenophobic and ideological undertones. Rather than promoting rational dialogue, public communication came to be shaped by memes, emotions, and resentments.

The response from the scientific community and segments of civil society, while reactive, was nonetheless significant. Institutions such as Fiocruz and Butantan intensified their presence on social media, campaigns like "Todos pelas Vacinas" (All for Vaccines) sought to coordinate diverse voices, and fact-checking initiatives worked to curb the spread of disinformation [Massarani et al., 2021]. Communication efforts by scientific institutions even appear to have contributed to increased public recognition: a 2022 survey revealed that the number of Brazilians who reported knowing of a scientific research institution in the country had tripled

compared to the previous survey conducted three years earlier, before the pandemic [Massarani et al., 2022].

Still, the results were limited when compared to the speed, scale, and reach of false narratives. This scenario underscores the limitations of the deficit model in public science communication. The belief that simply providing accurate information would suffice to change public perceptions and behaviour proved ineffective in an environment marked by institutional distrust, widespread intolerance, and the construction of ideological narratives.

The pandemic revealed that the challenge is not only about access to information, but also about symbolic belonging, contested meanings, and cultural mediations. In the case of vaccines, Brazilians who hold conservative views on gender equality are more likely to believe that vaccines are unnecessary. Those who oppose state intervention in the economy — a position aligned with liberal ideology — also tend to downplay the importance of vaccination [Castelfranchi et al., 2025].

The findings are consistent with a series of studies that critically assess the deficit model in science communication. The study by Drummond and Fischhoff [2017] is particularly illustrative. In the United States context, for issues already polarised along political or religious lines, more educated individuals tend to hold even more extreme beliefs. Similarly, Yao and colleagues [2022] tested the deficit model in two comparative cases: one on climate change — a complex and politicised issue — and the other on the water-energy-food (WEF) nexus, a more recent scientific concept, less subject to ideological influence. The results indicate that the deficit model and the link between knowledge and attitudes are valid in the case of the WEF nexus, where fewer confounding variables are present, but not in the case of climate change, which is deeply intertwined with social, economic, and political factors.

As Kahan [2015] points out, especially on topics surrounded by narrative disputes and controversies, individuals' opinions about risks and safety are more closely related to their commitments to different social groups than to their level of scientific literacy. In such cases, "what do you believe" about a social risk actually means "who are you" or "whose side are you on". In other words, traditions, beliefs, and values shaped by personal and social trajectories are just as relevant as education or scientific knowledge in shaping opinions about science — and must be considered when designing science communication and education strategies. This is important to consider for building bridges and connections, not just for conveying information correctly or appropriately.

In light of this, science communication in Brazil — and in other contexts marked by polarisation and disinformation — must be rethought. This task involves re-examining the roles and actions of all stakeholders in the field. On the one hand, it is essential to invest in strengthening public science and health institutions, equipping them with trained teams and communication strategies aligned with the dynamics of social media [Instituto Nacional de Comunicação Pública da Ciência e Tecnologia, 2023]. Although the commitment of these institutions to engage with non-academic audiences has grown globally in recent years — especially as a way to enhance visibility and public support [Entradas et al., 2020] — public science communication remains far from institutionalised, often depending on available resources and administrative will. Supporting researchers engaged in communication efforts is also essential, including through the formal recognition of such activities in career advancement processes.

On the other hand, it is crucial to improve the training of both scientists and communicators. This training must include competencies related to digital culture, viral dynamics, and the emotional dimensions of discourse, particularly the ability to distinguish between polarised and non-polarised discourses, that is, those that activate values, traditions, and emotions, and those that do not. As demonstrated, scientific expertise alone is no longer sufficient to ensure effective and engaging communication about science and health online. In this environment, consumer attention is fiercely contested by a wide array of content producers. To stand out amid a flood of information (and disinformation), one must also understand how platforms, algorithms, and their specific interaction protocols operate.

For at least two decades, scholars and practitioners of science communication have been calling for the adoption of dialogical and participatory approaches that foster two-way engagement with diverse publics, allowing cultural and experiential knowledge to be acknowledged alongside scientific expertise ['A critical appraisal of models of public understanding of science: using practice to inform theory', 2009; Bubela et al., 2009; Wynne, 2006]. It also involves using narrative strategies and relatable storytelling to create emotional resonance and contextual understanding, rather than relying solely on abstract data. Moreover, communicators must learn to openly address uncertainty, recognise the values and concerns of their audiences, and build trust through authenticity, empathy, and transparency. This includes not only correcting misinformation but doing so in ways that respect the audience's perspectives and avoid confrontation, emphasising shared goals and promoting constructive dialogue. We recognise that none of this is new from an academic standpoint, but as practice has often proved ineffective, particularly in times of crisis, it is important to reiterate these principles.

Research on audiences, language, and communicative actors must also continue and be further strengthened. In this regard, work being developed in regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia has much to contribute, not only by expanding the geographical and cultural scope of science communication research, but also addressing pressing challenges often overlooked in Global North contexts. Collaboration between researchers and communicators — in sharing both knowledge and experience — is a key pathway for overcoming shared challenges.

In Latin America, a prominent example is the work of RedPOP (Network for the Popularization of Science and Technology in Latin America and the Caribbean), which aims to articulate regional cooperation in science communication. Scholars in the region also emphasise the importance of incorporating Indigenous worldviews into communication practices, as well as the need to revalue Latin America's scientific heritage in order to cultivate pride and trust in local science [Aguirre Rios & de Regules, 2022]. In this perspective, we also echo the critique made by Medvecky and colleagues [2023], who argue that efforts to decolonise science communication must go beyond merely expanding the definition of science to include other knowledges. Instead, they propose shifting from "science communication" to "knowledge communication", recognising that equating science with knowledge is itself a form of epistemic colonialism. According to the authors, truly pluralistic and participatory approaches must facilitate the coexistence and co-creation of diverse epistemologies, enabling communicators to foster local knowledge ecologies rather than reproducing global hierarchies rooted in Western scientific paradigms.

More importantly, science communication must be understood as a democratic practice. To address both local and global challenges, public and private institutions must not only inform

but also create opportunities for the participation of diverse actors in decision-making processes — including those involving science itself. This requires moving away from a hierarchical, one-way model and embracing collaborative, interdisciplinary, and intercultural approaches to the production and circulation of knowledge. Celebrities, artists, journalists, social movements, and educators should be regarded as strategic partners — not merely as amplifiers. Specific population groups must be the focus of targeted strategies that recognise their distinct trajectories, rather than assuming a generalised lack of scientific knowledge. An illustrative example is the communication plan developed by the Federation of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations of Mato Grosso to counter disinformation about COVID-19 vaccination in Indigenous territories [Camilo, 2021]. Recognising both the impact of disinformation and the cultural specificities of Indigenous communities, the initiative was grounded in intercultural dialogue and active engagement with Indigenous communicators. It involved the production of podcasts, radio programs in Indigenous languages, and the use of messaging platforms such as WhatsApp to reach communities in remote areas.

Another example is the science and health communication project carried out by the Sergio Arouca National School of Public Health of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (ENSP/Fiocruz) in Rio de Janeiro. Over two and a half years, the institution maintained direct engagement with residents of the Manguinhos favela complex, which surrounds its headquarters, through a WhatsApp group.[2] The exchanges — focused mainly on everyday issues of health, education, and social assistance — were used to produce an online newsletter, circulated within this and other groups, as well as a podcast that further developed these themes and incorporated the audio messages shared by the residents themselves. This open channel for dialogue fostered a sense of belonging that proved highly effective.

Importantly, we do not equate democratic practices with unrestricted freedom of expression; on the contrary, we believe that democratic communication should be grounded in ethical and evidence-based principles, which include actively countering disinformation and ensuring that harmful or false narratives do not gain legitimacy under the guise of open dialogue. In line with various authors [Sarlet & Siqueira, 2020; Silva & Silva, 2018], we maintain that freedom of expression, while a fundamental right, is not absolute. Unrestricted freedom of expression, particularly in digital environments, can facilitate the dissemination of disinformation, thereby undermining democratic values and the conditions for informed public deliberation. We recognise that reconciling these dimensions presents a complex yet necessary and urgent challenge.

The Brazilian experience during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a stark illustration of how science, when divorced from trust, cultural resonance, and democratic engagement, can lose its public meaning and influence. It reveals that the future of science communication depends not only on facts but on the ability to navigate complex social landscapes shaped by ideology, identity, and emotion. In a world where information is abundant, but attention and trust are scarce, rebuilding the legitimacy of science requires more than correction — it demands connection. Recognising communication as a core democratic practice, and not merely a tool for dissemination, is essential for strengthening the role of science in society and for facing the crises — epidemiological, environmental, and political — that still lie ahead.

2. Available at: https://intersetorialmanguinhos.ensp.fiocruz.br/o-manguinho/.

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