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# Hunger in Brazil: Notes on the narratives in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper during the 2020 pandemic period

## *A fome no Brasil: notas sobre as narrativas no jornal Folha de São Paulo no período pandêmico de 2020*

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### ABSTRACT

#### Objective

This survey aims at reviewing the journalistic narratives of the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (digital edition) about hunger in Brazil during the 2020 pandemic period. It is known that journalism plays an important role in keeping the public informed and in helping to contribute to the shaping of society's opinion. Despite hunger being a structural phenomenon in this country, little is published in the mainstream media discussing the magnitude of the problem and the articulation of measures taken in the three government spheres (federal, state and municipal), to ensure access to food to the most vulnerable populations.

#### Method

News excerpts addressing hunger as the main topic were selected from *Folha de São Paulo* daily newspaper and were highlighted based on reading keys (n=11, published between March and December 2020).

#### Results

In all the selected articles, the newspaper addressed the cause of hunger from the perspective of the pandemic (passing event and manifestation). Issues linked to the economic and social crisis experienced in the country were not emphasized. This form of covering hunger in news articles can enhance the idea that the poor are the result of the currently spreading fatality.

**Conclusion**

Finally, from these first results we could infer that the newspaper, when addressing hunger in Brazil in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, sought to construct a biased reality that hunger was derived from the health crisis, at the same time that it presents the hungry people narratives as a discursive strategy to sensitize the reader to Folha de São Paulo intentions.

**Keywords:** Communications media. Feeding in the urban context. Food deprivation. Food insecurity. Human right to adequate food. Journalism.

**RESUMO****Objetivo**

*A nota tem como objetivo examinar as narrativas jornalísticas do jornal Folha de São Paulo (digital) sobre a fome no Brasil, no período pandêmico de 2020, uma vez que se compreende que as narrativas jornalísticas têm um papel importante na formação de opinião da sociedade. Apesar da fome ser um fenômeno estrutural no país, pouco se vê nos grandes meios de comunicação o debate sobre a magnitude dos problemas e articulação de medidas governamentais nas três esferas de gestão (federal, estadual e municipal), que possam assegurar o acesso à alimentação adequada e saudável dos mais vulneráveis.*

**Método**

*Foram selecionadas notícias na Folha de São Paulo que tratavam da fome como pauta principal, sendo analisadas com base em chaves de leitura (n=11, divulgadas entre março e dezembro de 2020).*

**Resultados**

*Em todas as matérias selecionadas o jornal abordou a causa da fome a partir da perspectiva da pandemia (acontecimento e manifestação passageira). As questões vinculadas à crise econômica e social vivenciada no país não foram enfatizadas. A forma de acionar os famintos nas matérias pode reforçar a ideia de que os pobres são fruto da fatalidade que se propaga.*

**Conclusão**

*Por fim, os resultados iniciais permitem inferir que o jornal ao editar a fome no Brasil, no primeiro ano da pandemia de COVID-19, procurou construir uma realidade enviesada de que a fome é derivada de uma crise sanitária ao mesmo tempo que apresenta as narrativas dos famintos como estratégia discursiva para sensibilizar o leitor em relação às suas intenções.*

**Palavras-chave:** Meios de comunicação. Alimentação no contexto urbano. Privação de alimentos. Insegurança alimentar. Direito humano à alimentação adequada. Jornalismo.

**INTRODUCTION**

Hunger is a permanent feature in peripheral countries like Brazil and, in different proportions, in central countries. In this scientific note, the concept of hunger is understood as a condition derived from factors that include political choices and territorial conflicts, climate variability and economic slowdowns, processes intrinsic to the historical development of capitalism [1,2].

However, even though there are limitations in terms of precision of any indirect indicator, the *Escala Brasileira de Insegurança Alimentar* (Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale) is used to produce data on the degree of family food security in the household [3] and hunger represents the maximum expression of severe food insecurity; in this framework a significant reduction of available food quantity, including among children, occurs and/or disruption in eating patterns when someone in the household goes the entire day without eating due to lack of money to buy food [4].

The hunger scenario in Brazil derives from the neoliberal economic model associated with social inequality causing poverty and unemployment. However, in the 2000s, the positive socioeconomic

situation led to a reduction in unemployment [5] and poverty [6] and an improvement in the population's living conditions, culminating, in 2014, with the country's removal from the United Nations' Hunger Map [7].

Nevertheless, in recent years, a reversal condition developed with a growth of Brazilians going hungry [4,6]. From 2015 onwards, there was an increase in unemployment among the Brazilian population aged 14 or over, together with an increase in the number of families in extreme poverty (monthly income of up to R\$ 89,00 per person) [8]. In 2020, 19.1 million people were hungry in Brazil and 116.8 million Brazilians did not have full and permanent access to food [4]. In 2022, the number of starving people increased dramatically to 33.1 million, that is, there were millions of people who went hungry every day [6].

The pandemic scenario, with social isolation measures, worsened this situation, enhancing the trend of global economic recession; in addition, this situation occurred in parallel with the dismantling of public policies, such as food and nutritional security programs, followed by the expansion of fiscal austerity measures that have been dragging on since the 2015 political-economic crises [9,8]. However we can observe in some mainstream media outlets that the narratives on hunger are associated predominantly to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bourdieu [10] argues that journalism contributes to the construction of social reality and plays an important role in shaping society's opinion. Reality, as well as knowledge and prescriptions about hunger are also edited [11]. And according to Patez et al. (p. 34, our translation), "[...] discourses can socially interfere in a problem, for example, social discrimination and inequality that may be related to power relations" [12]. Another fundamental issue is the understanding that speeches can be based on "[...] ideological guidelines and be used to sustain and reproduce an existing social reality" (p. 34, our translation).

The media is understood in this text as a field of production and consumption of symbolic goods, that is, goods that imply an act of decipherment, of mental appropriation [13]. The media discourse is constructed from "communicative strategies that are understood as discourse organizing attitudes which resort to linguistic forms to pursue the media objectives" (p. 2, our translation) [14].

In this scenario, we sought to examine the journalistic narratives printed in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (digital edition) about the causalities of hunger in Brazil in the 2020 pandemic period. To be able to know and understand the narratives constructed or (re)constructed around the hunger through the media can help understanding how the media mobilizes society with regard to this problem.

## METHODS

Our survey is part of a qualitative approach and its empirical focus is based on the articles published on the topic in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (digital edition); this news paper is considered one of the main Brazilian newspapers, distributed in almost all regions of the country and top-rated in 25 of the 27 States in the country considering the monthly averages in 2020 [15].

The news survey was carried out by three surveyors trained for this purpose. The term "hunger" was used in the search engine of the digital version of the newspaper, selecting articles published between March and December 2020. The headlines were read in full to assess eligibility. The following inclusion criteria were adopted: journalistic genres with informative content and direct thematic reference, that is, which had the theme of hunger as the main topic in the sections

“Market”, “Authors”, “Everyday Life”, “Health” and “Editorial.” These sections were previously selected because they usually publish informative content.

Among the news selected, one belonging to the interview genre was included for analysis, due to its informative nature. For Morin (p. 115, our translation), “An interview is a personal communication with an information objective in mind” [16] and, Abreu [17] points out that the interview is nested in the informative journalistic genre.

The data collected were entered in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and the articles were reviewed based on their context, speakers and interlocutors and guided by the reading key on causality from the perspective of Bonfim [18]; in other words if the newspaper narrated the famine as just an event, a manifestation without pointing out or discussing the causes. The author highlights that one ought to be attentive to the attribution [by newspapers] of temporary causes or as something inherent to reality.

This study was carried out in accordance with Resolution n°. 466/2012 of the National Health Council of Brazil and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Hospital Universitário Pedro Ernesto under Opinion n°. 5,175,238 and CAAE: 52763221.6.0000.5259.

## RESULTS

The research analysis corpus was delimited into 11 subjects in the “health” (4) and “everyday life” (7) sections (Chart 1). It was observed that during the period from May to December, with the exception of July, there was no news about hunger as a central topic.

Seven journalists were identified in the newsroom who did not seem to vary the narratives in the different reports. Without ignoring individual profiles, the analytical approach adopted focused on the voices that represent *Folha de São Paulo*. By directing the analysis to the vehicle as a whole, space is opened to understand how the newspaper’s collective identity is manifested through these contributions, offering a perspective that goes beyond the individual characteristics of the authors.

This methodological choice allows an understanding of the role played by the publication and the way in which its diverse voices collaborate to shape the journalistic narrative about hunger in this press vehicle.

In all the selected articles, the newspaper addressed the cause of hunger from the perspective of the pandemic (passing event and manifestation). In one of them (FS11), hunger, when linked to the health crisis, was called an epidemic, a term coined by Josué de Castro in his book *Geography of Hunger*, that is, a conjunctural hunger characterized by nutritional manifestations that affect temporarily a large mass of people. However, a reinterpretation of this author is made by Vasconcelos [19] who pointed out the importance of superimposing the complexity of the problem in the face of the vicissitudes of the contemporary scenario within the framework of ensuring the human right to food and ecological sustainability.

Issues linked to the economic and social crisis experienced in the country were not emphasized. In the articles, a narrative is constructed that social isolation as a restrictive measure to prevent spreading of the new coronavirus is the main cause of hunger that affects, in particular, the population living in risk areas and subnormal clusters, that is, in *favelas* (shantytowns) and similar places. The health crisis is linked to unemployment growth and a decrease in income, with a consequent increase in food and nutritional insecurity.

**Chart 1** – News from the (digital) newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* that are part of the analysis corpus (2020).

Nº	Month	Section	Author	Who writes?	Title of the article	Causalities
FS1	Mar	Health	Emílio Sant'anna	Journalist reports on the State of São Paulo. Since 2010 he has been a reporter for the <i>Cotidiano</i> section, where he was also assistant editor.	Diary of deprivation: I cried, I cried, I really cried, you know?	Hunger resulting from unemployment caused by the pandemic.
FS2	Mar	Daily	Fernando Canzian	(Special reporter) Editorial secretary, political editor, of the Panel, of the "TV <i>Folha</i> " program on TV Cultura and correspondent in NY and Washington. Winner of four Esso Press awards.	In the <i>favelas</i> , dwellers go hungry and start taking to the streets.	Hunger resulting from physical isolation adopted as a strategy to control the coronavirus pandemic.
FS3	Apr	Daily	1 - Artur Rodrigues 2 - Lalo de Almeida	1- Reporter in São Paulo for the Politics section focusing on investigations. At <i>Folha</i> since 2014, he also worked as editor of <i>Cotidiano</i> . 2- Photojournalist. He has worked at <i>Folha</i> for 28 years where he has been developing internationally award-winning multimedia narratives.	Homeless people trick their stomachs with water and wait hours in the sun for food.	Hunger resulting from the decrease/insufficiency of food donations during the pandemic.
FS4	Apr	Daily	1 - Artur Rodrigues 2 - Lalo de Almeida	1- Reporter in São Paulo for the Politics section focusing on investigations. At <i>Folha</i> since 2014, he also worked as editor of <i>Cotidiano</i> . 2- Photojournalist. He has worked at <i>Folha</i> for 28 years where he has been developing internationally award-winning multimedia narratives.	Quarantine in São Paulo reduces the diet of children in the suburbs to rice.	Hunger resulting from physical isolation adopted as a coronavirus pandemic control strategy.
FS5	Apr	Health	Arthur Rodrigues	1- Reporter in São Paulo for the Politics section focusing on investigations. At <i>Folha</i> since 2014, he also worked as editor of <i>Cotidiano</i> .	Delays in aid actions and invisibility of groups worsen hunger.	Hunger resulting from physical isolation adopted as a coronavirus pandemic control strategy. Hunger resulting from the delay in emergency aid (pandemic).
FS6	Apr	Health	1 - Artur Rodrigues 2 - Lalo de Almeida	1- Reporter in São Paulo for the Politics section focusing on investigations. At <i>Folha</i> since 2014, he also worked as editor of <i>Cotidiano</i> . 2- Photojournalist. He has worked at <i>Folha</i> for 28 years where he has been developing internationally award-winning multimedia narratives.	Without food, foreigners in São Paulo skip meals and return to their countries.	Hunger resulting from physical isolation adopted as a coronavirus pandemic control strategy led to work discontinuation (self-employed, micro-entrepreneurs).
FS7	Apr	Health	1 - Arthur Rodrigues 2 - Lalo de Almeida	1- Reporter in São Paulo for the Politics section focusing on investigations. At <i>Folha</i> since 2014, he also worked as editor of <i>Cotidiano</i> . 2- Photojournalist. He has worked at <i>Folha</i> for 28 years where he has been developing internationally award-winning multimedia narratives.	In the vacuum of public actions, volunteers carry out a 'war operation' to donate lunch boxes in São Paulo.	Hunger resulting from physical isolation adopted as a coronavirus pandemic control strategy. Hunger resulting from the delay in emergency aid (pandemic).
FS8	Apr	Daily	Thaiza Pauluze	Reporter in São Paulo. At <i>Folha</i> since 2017, she writes about public security policy, violence and human rights in <i>Cotidiano</i> .	Waiting for government aid against coronavirus, single mothers overcome hunger by waking up later.	Hunger resulting from unemployment caused by the pandemic. Hunger resulting from the delay in emergency aid (pandemic).
FS9	Jul	Daily	Waleska Borges	Reporter covers Rio de Janeiro topics in <i>Cotidiano</i> . Graduated in journalism from <i>Centro Universitário de Barra Mansa</i> , she has been a collaborator at <i>Agência Folha</i> in Rio de Janeiro since July 2020.	Former homeless man serves lunch to those who live on the sidewalks in Rio de Janeiro.	Hunger resulting from the decrease in informal work resulting from the pandemic.
FS10	Sep	Daily	Júlia Barbon	She is <i>Folha's</i> correspondent for Latin America, based in Buenos Aires. At the newspaper for almost 10 years, she was also a city reporter in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.	Four in ten Brazilian families live in food insecurity, says IBGE.	Hunger resulting from the economic crisis and unemployment (2017/2018 and pandemic).
FS11	Oct	Daily	Emílio Sant'anna	Journalist reports on the State of São Paulo. Since 2010 he has been a reporter for the <i>Cotidiano</i> section, where he was also assistant editor.	Today we face the return of a state of epidemic hunger in Brazil', says historian.	Epidemic hunger.

Statements like "Hebert [...] spent the last few months selling water cups at the traffic lights on Avenida Giovanni Gronchi, in Morumbi, south of São Paulo. With no displacements in the city, he has no one to sell to" (FS1), "In Nazzali, *Folha* found people who had already been laid off and consequently lost, from one moment to the next, a large part of the income they used to bring home, many times on a weekly or daily basis" (FS2) and "Quarantine in São Paulo reduces the diet of children in the suburbs to rice" (FS4) are examples of how *Folha de São Paulo's* journalists reported

on hunger during this period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, associating it to unemployment and loss of financial resources.

It is worth noting that despite the recognized worsening of the health of the socioeconomic vulnerable population groups resulting from the health crisis, the Brazilian government resisted adhering to stricter protection strategies against the pandemic [20]. In May 2020, the National Health Council recommended the implementation of more restrictive physical distancing measures in those municipalities with an accelerated occurrence of new cases of COVID-19 and with service occupancy rates reaching critical levels. And, only in January 2021 did the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 begin and by April 19, 2021, only 12.59% of the population had taken one dose of vaccine and 4.78%, two doses. This, among other factors, contributed to the failure of an early control the pandemic in the country [ 21].

Linking unemployment and lack of income primarily to the pandemic disguises jobs precariousness and unemployment as evident expressions of social issues in contemporary times and that were present in the country before the pandemic [22]. This suggests that the newspaper publishes a reality arguing that people's difficulty in reacting to the crisis is due to their economic incapacity this being the main cause of the lack of access to food. This significance is enhanced by the lack of information in the news about the dismantling of food insecurity social policies, such as the extinction of the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security [21] among others, also due to the continuous devaluation of the local currency (Real), compensating for the fall in international prices as one of the causes of persistent food inflation in 2020 [23].

With regard to food and nutrition policies, the unavailability of free school meals due to school shut down was reported: "With no fixed income, Rosangela da Silva, 36, found herself with five more mouths, who previously ate their meals at school [...]" "Sometimes we find stale bread at the bakery," she says (FS4). But in these statements, as in others found in the articles, the statements of individuals in vulnerable situations are prioritized, as also observed by Rigaud *et al.* [24]. When vulnerable people who suffer from hunger are mentioned, it is in order to exemplify or testify to situations of poverty and precariousness in the face of the violence that plagues them. In the reports, there was no debate, for example, about how much food insecurity puts the nutritional status and health of these people at risk, which in turn makes people vulnerable to worse prognoses in terms of exposure, risk and severity of diseases [21]

This form of covering hunger in news articles can arouse in the readers more feelings of pity than indignation and enhance the idea that the poor are the result of the currently spreading fatality [25]. Although the narratives expose a condition of structural violence, which is "a process that works slowly like misery in general, hunger in particular, and that erodes and ultimately kills human beings" (p. 145, our translation) [26], they construct a way of understanding the reality claiming that the cause of hunger was defined more by the socioeconomic consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on daily life than by structural causes. *Folha de São Paulo*, by portraying the daily suffering of people during the pandemic with respect to hunger, demonstrates interest in the dimension of poverty and becomes credible to the public.

This way of understanding reality that gives meaning to the world is called symbolic power by Bourdieu [27] and is present in the society structure. It is an "invisible power which can only be exercised with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they exercise it" (p. 7, our translation) [27], producing integration and consensus, thus reproducing

the social order. However, as subjects are not passive in the construction of the world, it is important to develop the ability to reflect on the communication process and the construction of reality [11].

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

These initial results allow us to infer that the newspaper, when covering hunger in Brazil, in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, constructed a biased reality claiming that hunger is derived from a health crisis, at the same time that it presents the narratives of the hungry as discursive strategy to sensitize the reader to the newspaper's objectives. This way of narrating hunger contributes to turning the mediocre experience of these hungry bodies a natural occurrence and enhances the idea that there is no need to do anything about it, because naturally with the end of the COVID-19 pandemic comes the end of hunger.

It is recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening of hunger in Brazil together formed a major humanitarian tragedy. However, it is believed that it is only viable to think about the actual management of this condition by dissociating hunger from an event or manifestation resulting from a social calamity, understanding it in its complexity as an expression of the violation of the *Direito Humano à Alimentação Adequada* (Human Right to Adequate Food).

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