

## **Between politics, media, and health: How Jornal Nacional and Jornal da Record mediated the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic**

### **Entre política, mídia e saúde: a mediação da politização da pandemia de covid-19 pelo Jornal Nacional e Jornal da Record**

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**Abstract:** *From the outset, the COVID-19 pandemic has been a public health and political issue, impacting population attitudes and behaviors. In Brazil, its politicization by former President Bolsonaro exacerbated this dynamic, influencing both information consumption and individual actions regarding the disease. This study analyzes the mediation of media exposure, highlighting the role of the country's main television news programs, Jornal Nacional and Jornal da Record, in shaping perceptions and behaviors towards COVID-19. The results indicate that part of the political influence on the pandemic was mediated by exposure to the newscasts, underscoring the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between health, politics, and media.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19; politicization; TV news; mediation.

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**Editors:** Eliza Casadei  and Gabriela Almeida 

**Resumo:** Desde o início, a pandemia de covid-19 se configurou como um problema de saúde pública e político que impactou atitudes e comportamentos da população. No Brasil, a sua politização pelo ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro exacerbou essa dinâmica, influenciando tanto o consumo de informações quanto as ações individuais em relação à doença. O estudo analisa a mediação da exposição midiática, destacando o papel dos principais telejornais do país, Jornal Nacional e Jornal da Record, na formação de percepções e comportamentos em relação à covid-19. Os resultados indicam que parte da influência política na pandemia foi mediada pela exposição aos telejornais, sublinhando a necessidade de uma compreensão abrangente das interações entre saúde, política e mídia.

**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19; politização; telejornais; mediação.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged simultaneously as a public health and political problem (YAMEY; GONSALVES, 2020). In 2020, studies demonstrated how speeches by national leaders affected the perception of the disease (BAEKGAARD et al., 2020; BOL et al., 2020) and how political polarization influenced behaviors in response to the virus, such as refusal to social distancing and resistance to vaccination (GOLLWITZER et al., 2020; LEVIN et al., 2022; TUNG; CHANG; LIN, 2022).

This political dimension also manifested from a communicational perspective. The current polarized environment has brought back a scenario of selective exposure to media outlets (IYENGAR; HAHN, 2009; STROUD, 2011; LEVENDUSKY, 2013). It was therefore no surprise that many news outlets provided coverage of COVID-19 aligned with their audiences' political preferences (ALLCOTT et al., 2020; PEREIRA; NUNES, 2020; ROMER; JAMIESON, 2021; ARAÚJO; GUAZINA, 2024).

In Brazil, former president Jair Bolsonaro downplayed the severity of the pandemic, politicized its response, and encouraged the public to interpret a public health issue through ideological lenses (ABRUCIO et al., 2020; BARBERIA; GÓMEZ, 2020; BURNI; STOCKEMER; HACKENESCH, 2023). This impacted both the pursuit of information (PEREIRA; NUNES, 2020; ROSSINI; KALOGEROPOULOS, 2025) and behaviors, reducing cooperation with mitigation measures (GRAMACHO; TURGEON, 2021; AJZENMAN; CAVALCANTI; DA MATA, 2023; GRAMACHO et al., 2024).

All these studies highlight the political dimension of COVID-19, emphasizing how attitudes and behaviors regarding the pandemic were influenced by the positions of political elites. Research such as that by Araújo and Guazina (2024) focuses on media coverage. This article aims to connect these two dimensions by analyzing the significant role of the media in shaping public opinion during this public health crisis. We argue that part of the effects of political variables, such as ideology and party

preference, regarding the pandemic were mediated by the media sources people used. In other words, media outlets had a direct and indirect effect by reinforcing certain political beliefs, which in turn led people to reject methods of combating COVID-19.

Theoretically, the article discusses two models that help to understand the effects of political mediation in public health: the Reinforcement Spiral Model (RSM) (SLATER, 2007; 2015; SLATER; SHEHATA; STRÖMBÄCK, 2020) and the Ideological Spiral Model in Health (IHSM) (YOUNG; BLEAKLEY, 2020). The RSM demonstrates how the interaction between media and political attitudes shapes social identities, ideologies, and behaviors, also affecting media consumption. The IHSM follows the reinforcement spiral model and explores the connection between political communication and health in crisis contexts, such as a pandemic. It links the actions of former President Bolsonaro in politicizing the disease, which encouraged the population to associate their political-affective loyalties with processing information about the public health crisis.

The article analyzes data from a national survey with 2,771 internet users in Brazil, conducted between September and November 2020. The results confirm the influence of politicization on attitudes and behaviors related to COVID-19, but go beyond that: through structural equation modeling and mediation analysis, they reveal that a significant portion of this influence was caused by exposure to the country's two main television news programs — *Jornal Nacional* and *Jornal da Record*. These findings broaden the understanding of the dynamics between health, politics, and media during health crises, highlighting the important role of the media in shaping collective attitudes, both directly and as a mediator.

### **The reinforcement spiral model**

The Reinforcement Spiral Model (RSM), developed by Slater (2007; 2015; SLATER; SHEHATA; STRÖMBÄCK, 2020), analyzes how the media maintain and reinforce attitudes and behaviors, integrating social

identity theory (TAJFEL; TURNER, 1979) into discussions on selective exposure (HART et al., 2013; 2019).

According to social identity theory, individuals identify with a group due to the psychological, emotional, and social benefits of orientation, protection, and social differentiation (TAJFEL; TURNER, 1979), valuing the “ingroup” in opposition to the “outgroup” (FERNANDES; PEREIRA, 2018). This preserves a positive social identity and distances threatening elements from group beliefs (HUDDY, 2001; 2013). Selective exposure is used in this process. Since the media are the primary source of information for individuals and an important factor in the development and maintenance of social and political identities (STROUD, 2011; LEVENDUSKY, 2013), this mechanism allows us to consume content and information that align with our beliefs, maintaining and psychologically reinforcing individual and group cohesion (SLATER, 2007).

Slater (2007) highlights that selective content choices help make attitudes more accessible and maintain group identity. People seek in the media content and experiences that reflect and validate their identities, preferences, and values. This continuous search feeds a persistent spiral, in which social identification is strengthened, leading to a cycle of interaction that solidifies both group identity and individual attitudes over time.

Initially, RSM studies explored impacts on public health. Slater et al. (2003) linked exposure to violent content with aggressive behavior. Bleakley et al. (2008) demonstrated that exposure to sexual content increases the likelihood of early sexual activity, a higher number of sexual partners, and less use of contraceptives. Slater and Hayes (2010) identified that exposure to programs that normalize the consumption of substances like tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol predisposes individuals to their use.

Subsequently, the RSM was used to understand political issues. Feldman et al. (2014) found a relationship between the use of conservative media and skepticism about global warming. Song and Boomgaarden (2017) analyzed how interpersonal networks affect media selectivity. Hoewe et al. (2020) demonstrated lower support for refugee entry among conservative

Fox News consumers. Hutchens, Hmielowski, and Beam (2019) observed that discussions among similar individuals generate positive feelings, while debates with opponents provoke adverse emotions, suggesting a connection between political discussions and polarization spirals.

## **Reinforcement spirals and public health**

Gollust, Nagler, and Fowler (2020) stated that the pandemic was both a public health crisis and a political-communicational issue. During this period, conflicting messages about COVID-19 response from political elites led media outlets to cover the public health crisis through partisan lenses (HART; CHINN; SOROKA, 2020; JAMIESON; ALBARRACÍN, 2020; MOTTA; STECUŁA; FARHART, 2020), causing people to adopt different beliefs and protective actions against the disease.

This situation exemplifies what Fowler and Gollust (2015) termed the politicization of health: when a political actor extends a health issue into the political realm, leading the public to interpret health matters from a partisan perspective. Studies demonstrate their practical effects. Kiviniemi et al. (2022), for example, found that Democrats perceived a higher risk regarding the virus and engaged in more preventive behaviors than Republicans. Clinton et al. (2021), in turn, indicated that partisan considerations outweighed public health concerns, resulting in criticism of social distancing, especially among Republicans. Partisan patterns affected mask usage (HOWARD, 2022; YOUNG et al., 2022) and support for policies restricting commerce and borders (GADARIAN; GOODMAN; PEPINSKY, 2021).

In this context, Young and Bleakley (2020) applied the RSM within a model of ideological spirals in health (IHSM) to interpret behaviors during the pandemic. With the politicization of COVID-19, political identities influenced sources of information and shaped how people interpreted data, creating a spiral where these identities led to selective exposure — further reinforcing those same identities. This cycle resulted in different levels of understanding of the disease, polarized opinions, and

made coordinated actions more difficult (ROOIJ; STECUŁA; PICKUP, 2022; YOUNG et al., 2022).

Cohen (2015) demonstrated that presidents can adopt divisive rhetoric among groups to influence public opinion. In the realm of public health, this is what Lasco and Curato (2019) called “medical populism”: a political style that polarizes, sensationalizes, and simplifies complex issues of public health during health crises. In pandemic situations, leaders and political elites may amplify threat perceptions, which could increase the effects of the reinforcement spiral.

These characteristics are evident in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Bolsonaro fostered a polarizing stance between “us” and “them,” challenged trust in scientists and experts (LASCO; CURATO, 2019; LASCO, 2020), spread conspiracy theories by making false statements (CAPONI et al., 2021), questioned vaccines (LARSON et al., 2018; DANIELS, 2021; SABAHELZAIN; HARTIGAN-GO; LARSON, 2021), and promoted divisive narratives (RENNÓ; AVRITZER; DELGADO, 2021).

According to Pereira and Nunes (2020), the preference for online information explains how Bolsonaro was able to influence the opinions of his supporters in favor of his negationist positions. Other studies show that his supporters watch *Jornal da Record* — aligned with Bolsonaroism (PORTO; NEVES; LIMA, 2020) and Evangelicals (NICOLAU, 2020) — which covered the pandemic favorably toward the former president’s views (ARAÚJO; GUAZINA, 2024). This resulted in a cycle where choices reinforced media behaviors and attitudes, strengthening identities and patterns of media selection (YOUNG et al., 2022).

The IHSM helps to understand this complex scenario, in which the pandemic amplified ideological-party influence on public health issues (ROOZENBEEK et al., 2020; STECUŁA; PICKUP, 2021; FALCONE et al., 2022; FREEMAN et al., 2022). Based on these discussions, we analyze the impact of exposure to *Jornal Nacional* and *Jornal da Record* on adherence to preventive measures, prioritization of economic versus health concerns, and support for government management during the

crisis, investigating the mediating effect of media exposure on political identities and their behavioral impacts during the pandemic.

## Data description

The analyzed data come from a nationwide online opinion survey conducted with 2,771 Brazilian internet users<sup>1</sup> between September 23 and October 2, 2020<sup>2</sup>.

## Dependent variables<sup>3</sup>

*Measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.* The respondents evaluated statements about the COVID-19 pandemic on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)<sup>4</sup>. To summarize these responses into a single indicator, we used polychoric factor analysis — an appropriate technique for ordinal variables, such as agreement scales<sup>5</sup>. The extracted factor explained 81% of the variance among the items. The sum of the responses to the statements resulted in an index ( $M = 25.3$ ;  $SD = 4.5$ ;  $\min = 6$ ;  $\max = 30$ ;  $\alpha = 0.84$ ) that summarizes overall agreement with prevention measures.

- 1 The sample followed quotas for age, gender, region, and social class based on data from the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD) of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The survey was conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Research and Data Analysis (IBPAD), using participants from Netquest's online panel. Netquest is the only research company in Brazil certified with ISO 26362 for online panels.
- 2 The data were kindly provided by the Center for Research in Political Communication and Public Health (Survey on Information and the COVID-19 pandemic, CPS - UnB) at the University of Brasília (UnB), headed by Prof. Wladimir Gramacho, to whom we are immensely grateful. The research was funded with resources from the COPEI-DPI/DEX Call No. 01/2020, from UnB and IBPAD.
- 3 A detailed description of the data as well as the complete estimates of the statistical models can be requested from the first author of the article via email: <insertir>.
- 4 The included statements were: "I am bothered by going to crowded places" ( $M = 4.25$ ;  $SD = 0.92$ ), "avoiding public transportation reduces infections" ( $M = 4.16$ ;  $SD = 0.91$ ), "closing schools was a correct measure" ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ), "closing businesses was a correct measure" ( $M = 3.91$ ;  $SD = 1.15$ ), "without quarantine, it would have been much worse" ( $M = 4.36$ ;  $SD = 0.99$ ), and "I have disinfected my hands more frequently" ( $M = 4.40$ ;  $SD = 0.82$ ).
- 5 Factor analysis is a statistical technique used to combine many related variables into a single factor, reducing the amount of information analyzed. In our case, it allowed us to transform six statements about the pandemic into a single index of preventive attitudes.



*Social distancing or economic prioritization.* The participants indicated their position on a scale from 1 (prioritize life with distancing) to 7 (prioritize the economy and avoid restrictions) ( $M = 3.4$ ;  $SD = 2.18$ ).

*Evaluation of the government in combating the pandemic.* Assessment of Bolsonaro's government in handling COVID-19 on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) ( $M = 2.72$ ;  $SD = 1.47$ ).

### **Independent variables**

*Media exposure.* The participants indicated how frequently they sought information about the pandemic from *Jornal Nacional* ( $M = 3.17$ ;  $SD = 1.51$ ) and *Jornal da Record* ( $M = 2.86$ ;  $SD = 1.40$ ).

*Party preference.* Participants were asked which political party they preferred. Only two responses exceeded 2%: PT (Labors Party) (8.14%) and "Bolsonaro's party" (8.45%).

*Level of concern about COVID-19.* Participants were asked about their level of concern regarding COVID-19: not concerned at all (4.2%), somewhat concerned (23.5%), quite concerned (38.6%), and very concerned (33.6%).

*Level of information about COVID-19.* The variable format from Gramacho et al. (2021) was used, and a knowledge index was created based on 15 true or false questions, such as "Taking chloroquine cures COVID-19" (false). The total score (0 to 15) had a mean of 10.9 ( $SD = 2.3$ ;  $\alpha = 0.63$ ).

*Political awareness.* Participants were asked about their knowledge of mayoral candidates in the 2020 elections: 27.3% did not know any; 15.5% knew of one candidate; 20.6% knew of two candidates; and 36.6% knew of three or more.

*Sociodemographics.* The following variables were incorporated: gender, age, education level, and religion.

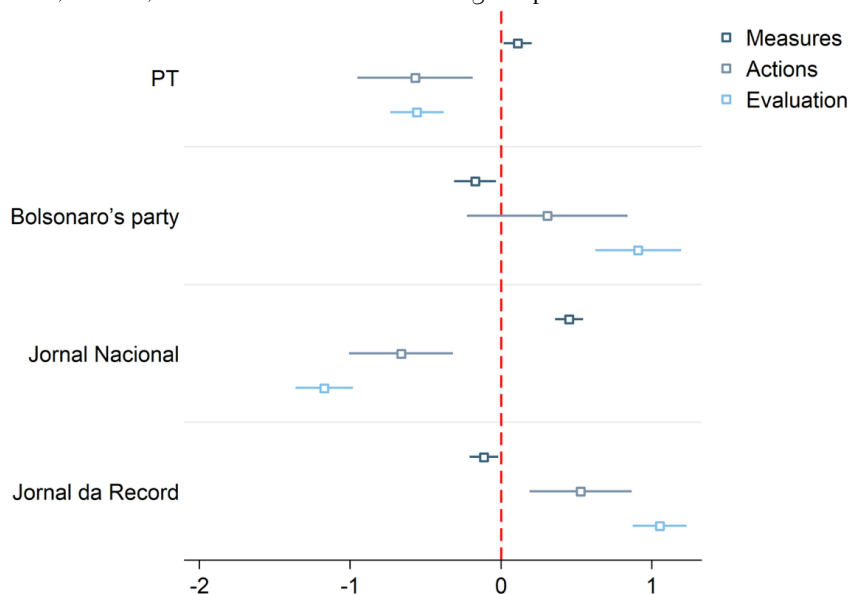
### **Data analysis**

To examine the mediating role of watching TV news, we adopted a three-step mediation approach, as proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986)

and Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010). This method allows decomposing the total effects into direct and indirect components, and is particularly suitable for investigating how communication variables, such as exposure to TV news, function as intermediary mechanisms in political influence processes.

First, we needed to confirm whether political preferences truly influenced how people viewed the pandemic. This is the starting point of the analysis, as without this initial relationship, it would not make sense to explore a mediating effect. To do this, we estimated cross-sectional models using linear regression with ordinary least squares, a more robust technique for identifying the correlations between variables. The graphs in Figure 1 show the estimation results for the variables of party preferences and TV news. All variables were normalized to the range of 0 to 1 to enable direct comparison of effects.

Figure 1 – Effects of party preferences and media exposure on support for measures, actions, and assessments in combating the pandemic



Source: CPS - UnB (2020).

The estimated coefficients follow the expected direction in all models (except for the “Bolsonaro party” variable in the measures model) and demonstrate statistical correlation between the indicators of interest. The results confirm previous research showing that left-wing individuals were more likely to adhere to pandemic mitigation measures than right-wing individuals (BARBIERI; BONINI, 2021) and conservatives (BROSOWSKY et al., 2021; NEWMAN; SCHNEIDER; STONE, 2022). PT supporters prioritized public health and critically evaluated the government’s management, while Bolsonarists did the opposite. Viewers of *Jornal Nacional* were more supportive of the measures to combat the pandemic, prioritized health over the economy, and assessed Bolsonaro negatively, whereas the audience of *Jornal da Record* displayed an opposite stance.

The second step tested the association between independent variables and potential mediators: the TV news programs. We verified whether respondents’ political preferences predicted their media consumption patterns — a key assumption for mediation, since a mediator only transmits effects if it is influenced by the independent variable. In other words, for TV news programs to function as mediators, they need to be influenced by a political variable. It would not make sense to claim that they explain attitudes and behaviors if the audience watched them regardless of their ideology.

To examine the potential mediating effects of *Jornal Nacional* and *Jornal da Record*, we used the medsem package in Stata 14, developed by Mehmetoglu (2018) for structural equation modeling and mediation analysis. Its routine employs both the criteria established by Baron and Kenny (1986), following the recommendations of Iacobucci, Saldanha, and Deng (2007), and the methods developed by Zhao, Lynch, and Chen (2010) for more precise testing of indirect effects.

Thus, we demonstrated the relationship between causal variables (PT and Bolsonaro’s party) and mediating variables (*Jornal Nacional* and *Jornal da Record*). This link was evidenced by <author> using the same dataset as this article: PT supporters tend to consume more *Jornal*

*Nacional*, which offered a critical coverage of Bolsonaro's government, while Bolsonaroists prefer *Jornal da Record*, which had a more favorable editorial line toward the former president. Next, we examined how the media variables affected the results of the dependent variables in each model, which can again be seen in the results of Figure 1.

Finally, in the third step, we investigated whether TV news consumption maintained a significant association with attitudes toward the pandemic, even after controlling for the direct influence of political variables. This is the crucial step to demonstrate that part of the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable occurs indirectly through the mediator. We wanted to verify whether, in addition to the direct political influence, TV news consumption still explained attitudes — that is, whether part of the effect of the political variables “passed through” the media. The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 1. Since the preference for Bolsonaro's party did not reach statistical significance in the measures model, we did not estimate its effect.

The results of the mediation models demonstrate that the effects of party preferences were indeed mediated by exposure to TV news programs. In other words, part of the effects of political variables were caused by media variables or only occurred through them. The results also reveal that the main Brazilian TV news programs exercised differential influence on the relationship between political preferences and attitudes during the pandemic, with *Jornal Nacional* acting as a significantly stronger mediator of effects among PT supporters than *Jornal da Record* among Bolsonaroists.

The mediation percentages varied depending on the dimension analyzed. In the case of adherence to health measures, 38% of the effect of PT preference was mediated by exposure to *Jornal Nacional* — a substantial value compared to the 11% mediation exerted by *Jornal da Record* among Bolsonaroists. In the assessment of government performance, the mediation by *Jornal Nacional* was 24%, compared to 18% for *Jornal da Record*.

Table 1 – Mediation effects of the media variables *Jornal Nacional* and *Jornal da Record* on party preferences

	Indirect effect	% Mediation effect
<i>Measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic</i>		
Jornal Nacional → PT	0.024***	38
	[0.012–0.037]	
Jornal da Record → Bolsonaro's party	-0.008**	11
	[-0.014 to -0.001]	
<i>Social distancing or economic prioritization?</i>		
Jornal Nacional → PT	-0.012	15
	[-0.021 to -0.003]	
Jornal da Record → Bolsonaro's party	-	-
	-	-
<i>Evaluation of the government in fighting the pandemic</i>		
Jornal Nacional → PT	-0.033***	24
	[-0.049 to -0.016]	
Jornal da Record → Bolsonaro's party	0.036***	18
	[0.022–0.050]	
Notes: Mediator → Measure		
95%CI in brackets **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.		

Source: CPS - UnB (2020).

This asymmetry can be interpreted in light of three main factors: the more consistent alignment of *Jornal Nacional* with scientific recommendations during the pandemic; its higher perceived credibility as a source of public health information, possibly influenced by different framing strategies of the crisis; and its reach and penetration among the audience. The strong mediation of *Jornal Nacional* among PT supporters is intriguing, as it contrasts with the well-known historical tensions between PT and *Globo* network, suggesting that in the context of a health crisis, informational needs may override traditional ideological alignments.

These findings offer significant advances in understanding the relationship between media, politics, and public health. First, they confirm the spiral of reinforcement model, demonstrating how political preferences and media consumption mutually reinforce each other. PT supporters who watched *Jornal Nacional* had their pro-health attitudes strengthened, which in turn kept them loyal to the newscast — a cycle of mutual influence. Second, they reveal that the strength of mediation varies depending on the type of attitude: it is higher for concrete behaviors (38% for adherence to measures) than for political assessments (24%), suggesting that the media has a greater impact on practical actions, whereas political judgments are more affected by party loyalty. Third, they highlight how health crises alter media consumption patterns. Despite historical tensions with *Globo*, PT supporters turned to *Jornal Nacional* as a trusted source during the pandemic, indicating that risk contexts can override traditional ideological alignments in the realm of information needs.

## Conclusion

Several studies have been published on the political dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly focusing on the controversial stance of political leaders. This article aimed to add a media perspective to this discussion. The results presented indicate that part of the effect of party preferences on the attitudes and opinions of Brazilians regarding COVID-19 was shaped by exposure to TV news programs. This shows how the impact of political variables on people's behavior is not disconnected from their communication ecosystem.

Finally, the limitations of our article must be acknowledged:

- the data are cross-sectional, while most studies using the reinforcement spiral model employ panel data — but there are exceptions (ZHAO, 2009);
- we are confident in the robustness of the results, but there are other techniques and statistical packages for mediation analysis (IMAI; KEELE; TINGLEY, 2010);

- after the data collection, the pandemic scenario changed, with an increase in deaths; adjustments in health policies based on new evidence; advances in vaccination against SARS-CoV-2 and its variants; and improvements in risk communication, which limit the generalizability of the results outside the 2020 context;
- the on-line collection excluded those who had no access to the internet.

Despite this, we believe that the article contributes to the literature on reinforcement spirals and media effects; provides a critical perspective on the interactions between politics, media, and health during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil; and offers a broader understanding of the complex social, political, and media dynamics surrounding the pandemic.

**Conflict of interests:** nothing to declare.

**Funding:** none.

**Authors' contributions:** Mundim P: data curatorship, formal analysis, writing – first draft, writing – review and editing. Amaral, I.: concept, formal analysis, writing – first draft, visualization.

**Research data availability:** The data will be available upon request.

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Received on: 04/09/2024

Accepted on: 05/06/2024