



Defending Vaccines Through Information Integrity: Brazil's Pioneering Strategy to Tackle Disinformation about Public Health Policy

A Case Study on the Governmental Task Force to Counter Disinformation
about the National Immunization Program and Public Health Policies

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Technical File

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Executive Summary

Over the past years, Brazil has faced significant challenges related to increased vaccine hesitancy and decreased vaccination rates. This trend of vaccine hesitancy, initially centered around the Covid-19 vaccine, has had a ripple effect on other essential immunizations. Anti-vaccine discourses, fueled by disinformation, are now affecting the acceptance of other crucial vaccines, posing a significant risk to public health¹. In 2021, the country recorded its lowest vaccination coverage in 20 years, with critical vaccines like BCG seeing a dramatic 38.8% decrease between 2015 and 2021². This scenario has raised concerns about the potential resurgence of previously eradicated diseases, such as measles and poliomyelitis³.

In response, the then newly-elected Brazilian Federal Government launched the “Health with Science” (Saúde com Ciência) program. To coordinate the program, the Governmental Task Force to Counter Disinformation about the National Immunization Program and Public Health Policies⁴ (Comitê de Enfrentamento da Desinformação sobre Programa Nacional de Imunização e Políticas de Saúde Pública) was established in October 2023.

This initiative aims to restore credibility in public health policies and trust in vaccines, with the operational objective of promoting vaccine confidence and reducing hesitancy. The Task Force's expected results include (1) ensuring the population, particularly hesitant groups, has access to reliable vaccine information, leading to broader vaccination coverage, and (2) holding accountable stakeholders who articulate and financially benefit from anti-vaccine discourses, thereby reducing disinformation narratives about vaccines.

¹ Discurso antivacina na pandemia afetou outros imunizantes, diz OMS, CNN. April 2023. Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/saude/discurso-antivacina-na-pandemia-afetou-outros-imunizantes-diz-oms/>.

² Taxa de vacinação infantil cai e Brasil volta a patamar de 1987, COFEN. May 2022. Available at: <https://www.cofen.gov.br/taxa-de-vacinacao-infantil-cai-e-brasil-volta-a-patamar-de-1987/>.

³ Queda nas taxas de vacinação no Brasil ameaça a saúde das crianças, Instituto Butantan. March 2022. Available at: <https://butantan.gov.br/noticias/queda-nas-taxas-de-vacinacao-no-brasil-ameaca-a-saude-das-criancas>.

⁴ More information about the Task Force is available at: <https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/assuntos/comite-de-enfrentamento-da-desinformacao#:~:text=O%20Comit%C3%AA%20de%20Enfrentamento%20da,%2DGeral%20da%20Uni%C3%A3o%3B%20C%20ontroladoria%20>.

The Task Force's approach is pioneering in its comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategy, differentiating it from other international public policy models against disinformation. The Task Force operates through five strategic pillars, further explained below.

- 1. Analysis and Research:** Focused on identifying anti-vaccine narratives and enhancing digital public debate monitoring. Under this pillar, the “Technical Chamber for Communication Strategies” (Câmara Técnica de Estratégias de Comunicação) was created to quickly and consistently identify and analyze disinformation narratives about public health. This Technical Chamber has become instrumental in identifying and responding to emerging disinformation narratives and the threats posed by them.
- 2. Strategic Communication:** Focused on establishing a centralized, reliable source of health information and promoting positive vaccine narratives. As part of the launch of the Health with Science program, an impressive 21 million users were reached in just one month. The accompanying [gov.br/saudecomciencia](https://www.gov.br/saudecomciencia) portal has become a hub of scientific knowledge, with official content produced based on technical, scientific-based information from the Ministry of Health in accessible language. A sophisticated risk-based contingency plan was also implemented, demonstrating the Task Force's commitment to swift and targeted responses to disinformation.
- 3. Investigation and Accountability:** Focused on producing technical information to counter anti-vaccine disinformation and taking legal action against prominent disseminators of such content. It has made significant strides in developing legal mechanisms to hold disinformation spreaders accountable. Notable successes include obtaining court injunctions for the removal of false publications associating Covid-19 vaccines with AIDS⁵, and actions by the National Consumer Protection Authority (Senacon) to remove misleading

⁵ AGU obtém liminar para remoção de publicações que associam vacinas da covid-19 à AIDS, AGU. December 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/agu/pt-br/comunicacao/noticias/agu-obtem-liminar-para-remocao-de-publicacoes-que-associam-vacinas-da-covid-19-a-aids>.

content and products containing chlorine dioxide sold for “vaccine detox” from digital marketplaces.

4. Institutional Cooperation: Focused on fostering partnerships with external institutions and elevating the fight against disinformation to a high-level priority. Under this pillar were forged collaborations with major social media platforms to disseminate accurate information. These partnerships have been crucial for extending the reach of public health messages, particularly during the launch of the Program “Health with Science”⁶.

5. Training and Capacity Building: This pillar focuses on equipping key stakeholders with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify and combat vaccine disinformation effectively. It initiated an ambitious plan to train 400,000 health professionals across the country. This effort extends beyond health workers to include legal consultants, communication advisors, and prosecutors, creating a comprehensive net of defense against vaccine disinformation.

By combining these innovative elements into a cohesive strategy, Brazil is positioning itself as a global pioneer in the fight against disinformation. According to recent data from the Ministry of Health, vaccination coverage for eight vaccines in the childhood immunization schedule increased from January to October 2023, marking a significant reversal of the downward trend that had persisted since 2016⁷. Data from UNICEF and the World Health Organization also support the evidence on the (re)growing trend of child vaccination in the country, which managed to leave the list of the 20 countries with the most unimmunized children in the world⁸.

⁶ More information about the program “Saúde com Ciência” is available at: <https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/saude-com-ciencia>.

⁷ Brasil reverte tendência de queda nas coberturas vacinais e registra aumento de oito imunizantes do calendário infantil em 2023, Secretaria de Saúde do Distrito Federal. December 2023. Available at: <https://www.saude.df.gov.br/web/guest/w/brasil-reverte-tend%C3%A2ncia-de-queda-nas-coberturas-vacinais-e-registra-aumento-de-oito-imunizantes-do-calend%C3%A1rio-infantil-em-2023#:~:text=%E2%80%9CTodos%20n%C3%B3s%20alcan%C3%A7amos%20juntos%20o,%2C5%25%20em%20n%C3%ADvel%20nacional>.

⁸ Brasil avança na imunização infantil e sai da lista dos países com mais crianças não vacinadas no mundo, revelam UNICEF e OMS. July 2024. <https://www.unicef.org/brazil/comunicados-de-imprensa/brasil-avanca-na-imunizacao-infantil-e-sai-da-lista-dos-paises-com-mais>

The success of this strategy is attributed to multi-strategic planning, including local adaptation measures such as extended immunization hours, outreach to unvaccinated populations, and initiatives like school-based vaccination programs. These measures are supported and strengthened by the Task Force's efforts in countering vaccine disinformation and restoring confidence in the national immunization program. It is worth noting that this strategy not only tackles immediate challenges in public health, but also establishes a model that could be adapted to and implemented to tackle disinformation related to other policy areas, as well as leveraged by countries facing similar challenges in safeguarding public health and strengthening democratic discourse.

1. Introduction and Context

In recent years, the global landscape of public discourse has been significantly altered by the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation. This phenomenon has led to far-reaching consequences, including the erosion of public discourse grounded in shared facts (Mounk, 2018), a resurgence of anti-scientific beliefs (Motta et al., 2021), and even the incitement of violence (Banaji et al., 2019). Brazil, particularly during the administration of former president Jair Bolsonaro (2018-2022), experienced an acute manifestation of this trend, characterized by scholars as a period of "digital populism" (Sair, 2020) and "programmatic obscurantism" (de Castro Azevedo & Lima, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated this issue, with the World Health Organization (WHO) describing it as an "infodemic" - an overabundance of information, including false or misleading content, making it difficult to identify trustworthy sources. In Brazil, the pandemic quickly became politicized, reflecting broader societal divisions. Vaccination, in particular, emerged as a contentious issue, with misinformation spread by influential figures contributing to reduced adherence to public health measures (Alvarenga & de Jesus, 2020; Ferreira, 2020) and hesitancy towards the Covid-19 vaccine.

Such a trend of vaccine hesitancy, initially focused on the Covid-19 vaccine, has had a ripple effect on other essential immunizations. As Barbosa, director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), explains, anti-vaccine discourses fueled by disinformation are now affecting the acceptance of other crucial vaccines, posing a real risk to public health⁹. In Brazil, the consequences of this shift became apparent in the aftermath of the pandemic, with the country facing a broader issue of increased vaccine hesitancy across all immunizations.

In 2021, Brazil recorded its lowest vaccination coverage in 20 years¹⁰, which is particularly alarming and contradictory given the fact that the country has a world-referenced universal and capillarized health system - the “Unified Health System” (Sistema Único de Saúde - SUS). The situation worsened in 2022, with vaccine coverage falling to levels not seen since 1987. Especially worrisome was the dramatic 38.8% decrease in critical vaccines like BCG between 2015 and 2021¹¹. This steep decline in vaccination rates has raised concerns about the potential resurgence of previously eradicated diseases, such as measles and poliomyelitis¹².

However, recent data from the Brazilian Ministry of Health offers a glimmer of hope. From January to October 2023, eight vaccines in the childhood immunization schedule saw increased coverage compared to 2022¹³. This increase includes crucial vaccines such as hepatitis A, poliomyelitis, pneumococcal, meningococcal, and yellow fever, which showed the largest gains. Data from UNICEF and WHO support the Ministry of Health’s evidence: the number of Brazilian children who were not vaccinated

⁹ Discurso antivacina na pandemia afetou outros imunizantes, diz OMS, CNN. April 2023. Available at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/saude/discurso-antivacina-na-pandemia-afetou-outros-imunizantes-diz-oms/>.

¹⁰ Brasil atingiu em 2021 menor cobertura vacinal em 20 anos, Agência Brasil. August 2023. Available at: <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/saude/noticia/2023-08/brasil-atingiu-em-2021-menor-cobertura-vacinal-em-20-anos>.

¹¹ Taxa de vacinação infantil cai e Brasil volta a patamar de 1987, COFEN. May 2022. Available at: <https://www.cofen.gov.br/taxa-de-vacinacao-infantil-cai-e-brasil-volta-a-patamar-de-1987/>.

¹² Queda nas taxas de vacinação no Brasil ameaça a saúde das crianças, Instituto Butantan. March 2022. Available at: <https://butantan.gov.br/noticias/queda-nas-taxas-de-vacinacao-no-brasil-ameaca-a-saude-das-criancas>.

¹³ Brasil reverte tendência de queda nas coberturas vacinais e registra aumento de oito imunizantes do calendário infantil em 2023, Secretaria de Saúde do Distrito Federal. December 2023. Available at: <https://www.saude.df.gov.br/web/guest/w/brasil-reverte-tend%C3%Aancia-de-queda-nas-coberturas-vacinais-e-registra-aumento-de-oito-imunizantes-do-calend%C3%A1rio-infantil-em-2023#:~:text=%E2%80%9CTodos%20n%C3%B3s%20alcan%C3%A7amos%20juntos%20o,%2C5%25%20em%20n%C3%ADvel%20nacional>.

decreased in 2023, and Brazil managed to leave the list of the 20 countries with the most unimmunized children in the world¹⁴.

This positive shift is attributed to strategic initiatives such as school-based vaccination programs, extended immunization clinic hours, and targeted outreach efforts, signaling a potential turnaround in Brazil's vaccination rates.

Recognizing that promoting information integrity about vaccines is key to tackling vaccine hesitancy, Brazil launched the “Health with Science” (Saúde com Ciência) program, and established in October 2023 the "Governmental Task Force to Counter Disinformation about the National Immunization Program and Public Health Policies"¹⁵ (Comitê de Enfrentamento da Desinformação sobre Programa Nacional de Imunização e Políticas de Saúde Pública) to coordinate it. This pioneering effort by the Brazilian government seeks to restore trust in vaccines and public health measures, with the ultimate goal of reversing dangerous trends in vaccination rates and protecting public health.

While the immediate focus of this pilot project is on vaccines, its broader objective is to develop strategies that can be adapted and expanded to other areas of public concern in the future. As a testing ground for innovative approaches to combating disinformation, the lessons learned and strategies developed here will be invaluable in addressing misinformation in other critical areas, such as climate change, electoral integrity, and education policy. Through this initiative, Brazil aims to position itself at the forefront of the global fight against disinformation, developing a model that can be adapted and implemented in various contexts to safeguard public health and strengthen democratic discourse. As we dive into the details of this pilot project, it becomes clear that the challenge of combating disinformation extends beyond merely correcting false information. It involves rebuilding trust in institutions, enhancing the

¹⁴ Brasil avança na imunização infantil e sai da lista dos países com mais crianças não vacinadas no mundo, revelam UNICEF e OMS. July 2024. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/brazil/comunicados-de-imprensa/brasil-avanca-na-imunizacao-infantil-e-sai-da-lista-dos-paises-com-mais>

¹⁵ More information on the Task Force is available at: <https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/assuntos/comite-de-enfrentamento-da-desinformacao#:~:text=O%20Comit%C3%AA%20de%20Enfrentamento%20da,%2DGeral%20da%20Uni%C3%A3o%3B%20Controladoria%2D>.

capacities of frontline workers, and the very foundations of public health policies.

The success of this initiative could have far-reaching implications, not only for Brazil's public health landscape but for global efforts to counter the pernicious effects of disinformation for public policy in the digital age. By addressing the root causes of vaccine hesitancy and developing effective strategies to combat misinformation, Brazil's approach could serve as a model for other nations grappling with similar challenges, ultimately contributing to improved public health outcomes worldwide.

2. Government Action

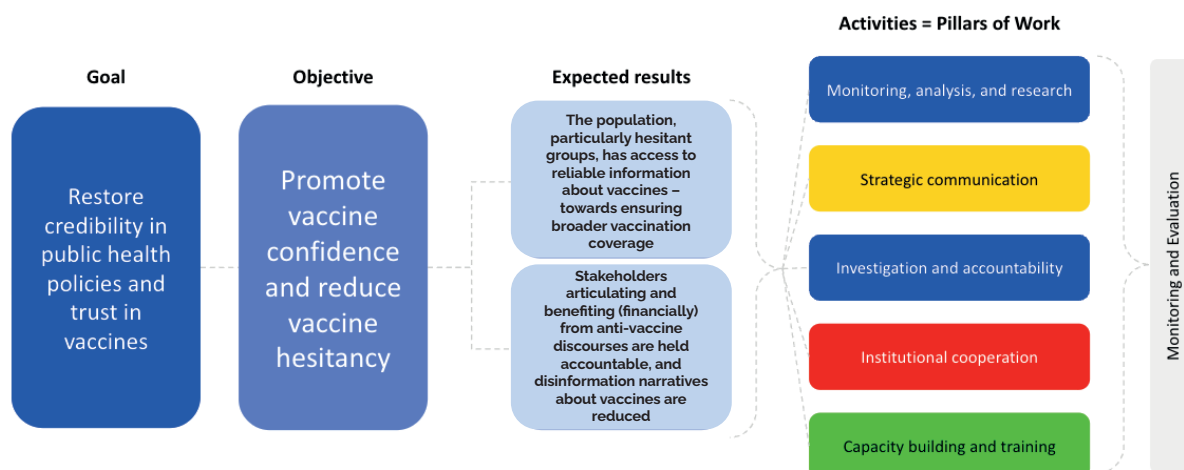
The Governmental Task Force to Counter Disinformation about the National Immunization Program and Public Health Policies was established by Decree No. 11.753 from October 25, 2023¹⁶, as a direct response to growing concerns about the impact of disinformation for public health policies. The Task Force is an inter ministerial committee comprising: Secretariat of Social Communication of the Presidency of the Republic (Secretaria de Comunicação Social da Presidência da República - SECOM), Ministry of Health (Ministério da Saúde - MS), Attorney General's Office (Advocacia Geral União – AGU), Office of the Comptroller General (Controladoria-Geral da União – CGU), Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Inovação - MCTI), and Ministry of Justice and Public Security (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública - MJSP). The Secretariat of Social Communication of the Presidency of the Republic, represented by its Secretariat of Digital Policies (Secretaria de Políticas Digitais - SPDIGI) coordinates the Task Force - which means it is directly under the structure of the Presidency of the Republic.

In addition, the Secretariat of Institutional Relations (Secretaria de Relações Institucionais - SRI) is a guest member of the Committee. The Ministry of Education has also been invited to join this collective effort, recognizing the

¹⁶ Full administrative order “Decree No. 11.753” is available at: <https://www.in.gov.br/web/dou/-/portaria-n-123-de-4-de-setembro-de-2024-582596119>.

crucial role of a broad, intersectoral approach in combating disinformation. The inclusion of these diverse ministries and governmental bodies underscores the comprehensive nature of the initiative.

The Task Force operates on a comprehensive strategic framework built around five main pillars of action, as shown in the following image and further delineated below.



1. Analysis and Research

The Analysis and Research pillar aims to identify anti-vaccine narratives, enhance the monitoring of digital public debates, and conduct research on overcoming vaccine hesitancy. To operationalize these goals, the government established a “Technical Chamber for Communication Strategies” (Câmara Técnica de Estratégias de Comunicação) through Resolution No. 1 from July 30, 2024.

This Technical Chamber, which meets biweekly, serves as the epicenter for monitoring disinformation narratives and proposing strategic communication actions against them. Its responsibilities range from analyzing relevant disinformation narratives to preparing reports for the Task Force proposing communication action plans. To support its work, the Technical Chamber relies on multiple information sources, such as regular reports from “FSB Inteligência” that provide both qualitative and

quantitative data to the Ministry of Health and offer insights from monitored social media platforms (while adhering to legal data protection guidelines).

Additionally, the Brazilian Institute of Information in Science and Technology (Instituto Brasileiro de Informação em Ciência e Tecnologia - Ibict) contributes to the Chamber's work through research made possible through its Protocol of Intentions for promoting information integrity¹⁷. This collaboration, involving key research and funding agencies, aims to position science at the center of the disinformation debate. The Ibict-led initiative, known as the Poliedro network, focuses on developing highly qualified human resources, creating a scientific research network, fostering continuous policies between public and academic sectors, and establishing a data platform on digital public debate.

2. Strategic Communication

The Strategic Communication pillar is built upon three fundamental objectives: establishing a centralized and reliable source of health information, implementing a risk-based contingency plan, and promoting positive vaccine narratives.

At the heart of this strategy is the "Saúde com Ciência" (Health with Science) program, which serves as a cornerstone for disseminating accurate health information¹⁸. The launch campaign for this program has been remarkably successful, garnering over 500 mentions on social networks and reaching an impressive 21 million users in just one month (October-November 2023). The accompanying [gov.br/saudecomciencia](https://www.gov.br/saudecomciencia) portal has become an active hub of scientific knowledge, with over 100 published articles providing reliable and science-based information about vaccines and public health, which has attracted over 385,000 page views in less than one year (October 2023-August 2024). This centralized platform also plays a crucial role in

¹⁷ Ibict assina Protocolo de Intenções para a promoção da integridade da informação, MCTI. May 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/ibict/pt-br/central-de-conteudos/noticias/2024/maio/ibict-assina-protocolo-de-intencoes-para-a-promocao-da-integridade-da-informacao>.

¹⁸ More information about the program "Saúde com Ciência" is available at: <https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/saude-com-ciencia>.

combating misinformation, making available a channel for users to submit potential disinformation content for analysis¹⁹.

To address the dynamic nature of disinformation, the Task Force has developed a classification methodology stratified by risk levels. This plan, ranging from "Low risk" to "Emergency" (risk of rupture), provides a structured approach to categorizing disinformation narratives of varying complexity and reach. The level of complexity of the narrative, the stakeholders involved and the impacts on public health are assessed; allowing to draw action plans suited to the relevant audiences, and using appropriate channels and language.

The promotion of positive vaccine narratives forms the third pillar of the communication strategy. The #TáTranquiloTáVacinado campaign exemplifies this approach, leveraging the influence of digital personalities to amplify pro-vaccination messages. The collaboration with 24 influential figures, including renowned health professionals and celebrities, has significantly extended the reach of accurate vaccine information. Notable participants such as Margareth Dalcolmo, Drauzio Varella, and popular figures like Felipe Neto and Xuxa have lent their voices to the cause, creating a powerful network of health ambassadors. Public notable institutions, as well as professionals' associations, such as Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Federal Council of Nursing (Conselho Federal de Enfermagem - COFEN), Brazilian Society of Immunizations (Sociedade Brasileira de Imunizações - SBim), and the National Council of Health Secretariats (Conselho Nacional dos Secretários de Saúde - CONASS) have also participated in these efforts.

Despite these efforts, the potential reach of disinformation narratives still outpaces that of official governmental health-related publications, underscoring the need for continued vigilance and innovation in communication strategies. Looking ahead, the Strategic Communication team is planning a series of initiatives to further strengthen their impact. These include partnering with social media platforms for targeted events,

¹⁹ Envie conteúdos para análise, Saúde com Ciência. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/saude-com-ciencia/envie-conteudo-para-analise>.

organizing viral campaigns with influencers, and conducting workshops in universities and major cities across Brazil.

3. Investigation and Accountability

The Investigation and Accountability pillar focuses on two primary goals: producing technical information to counter anti-vaccine disinformation and taking legal action against prominent producers and disseminators of anti-vaccination content. This multi-faceted approach involves several key institutions working in concert to protect public health and combat disinformation about public policies.

At the forefront of this effort is the National Attorney's Office for the Defense of Democracy (Procuradoria Nacional de Defesa da Democracia - PNDD) within the Attorney General's Office (Advocacia-Geral da União - AGU). The PNDD, a recently established structure, operates both judicially and extrajudicially to safeguard information integrity and the legitimacy of public policies. One of their notable successes includes obtaining a court injunction for the removal of false publications which associated Covid-19 vaccines with the contraction of AIDS²⁰. This action not only resulted in the removal of the offending content but also prohibited the responsible parties from posting further false information on the subject. The injunction's scope extended to 20 additional vaccine-related misinformation posts.

It is worth noting that the PNDD's approach is strategic and judicious, recognizing the delicate balance between freedom of expression and public health concerns. Their legal arguments emphasize that while freedom of expression is a fundamental right protected by the Federal Constitution, it is not absolute and cannot be used to undermine other fundamental rights such as health and life. This nuanced approach has found favor with the judiciary, as evidenced by the court's recognition that allowing such false publications to remain online could concretely harm Brazil's vaccination coverage and reduce immunization efficacy.

²⁰ AGU obtém liminar para remoção de publicações que associam vacinas da covid-19 à AIDS, AGU. December 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/agu/pt-br/comunicacao/noticias/agu-obtem-liminar-para-remocao-de-publicacoes-que-associam-vacinas-da-covid-19-a-aids>.

Complementing the PNDD's efforts, the National Consumer Protection Authority (Secretaria Nacional do Consumidor - Senacon) has been actively involved in administrative measures to combat disinformation. Senacon has focused on removing misleading content and products from digital marketplaces, particularly targeting the sale of chlorine dioxide, often falsely promoted as a cure for various conditions including autism and as a "vaccine detox". Senacon's comprehensive action covered three main digital spaces: e-commerce platforms, direct sales websites, and Facebook groups²¹.

Collaboration with tech giants forms another crucial aspect of this pillar. Senacon has established a communication channel with Meta to facilitate the rapid removal of disinformation content on Facebook, often within 24 hours. This partnership demonstrates the potential for effective cooperation between government agencies and social media platforms in combating the spread of harmful misinformation.

Leveraging these experiences, the Task Force has consolidated a groundbreaking process for judicial accountability. This enhanced process clearly delineates the responsibilities of each government body involved in combating disinformation related to public policy, resulting in a more streamlined, efficient, and targeted approach to holding those who propagate false information about public health policies accountable.

The improved disinformation accountability flow facilitates both communication and legal action, addressing two key short- to medium-term priorities: first, the consolidation and awareness of the accountability flow involving the Legal Counsel of each Ministry; and second, the establishment of direct communication and accountability channels. This accountability flow was developed based on the experiences from the crisis room operations during the Rio Grande do Sul case (when floods struck the state and led to a climate and humanitarian crisis), providing various options for action depending on the nature of the disinformation:

²¹ More information on Senacon's work is available at: <https://www.gov.br/mj/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/senacon-notificacao-plataformas-de-e-commerce-por-venda-ilegal-de-dioxido-de-cloro-para-fins-medicinais>.

- PNDD/AGU: Evaluates whether further measures are needed or whether the case should be archived. It can also take extrajudicial measures to remove content from platforms or seek a right of reply through judicial channels.
- Senacon: In cases involving consumer rights, it uses extrajudicial measures based on the Consumer Defense Code.
- CGU: If the disinformation involves public servants, the CGU applies administrative measures to hold them accountable.

By creating this structured flow of accountability, the Task Force has significantly enhanced its ability to swiftly and effectively respond to disinformation threats. Each ministry and agency now understands its role within the legal framework, ensuring decisive action and a unified response to disinformation that threatens public health policies.

4. Institutional Cooperation

The Institutional Cooperation pillar's primary objective is to foster partnerships with external institutions and raise awareness about the urgency of disinformation about public policies. At the heart of this cooperative effort are the monthly meetings that bring together all members of the Task Force. These regular gatherings, documented in publicly available minutes on the government's website²², ensure continuous collaboration and alignment among various stakeholders. This transparency measure not only demonstrates the government's commitment to the cause but also allows for public scrutiny and engagement.

A key component of cooperation with public institutions is the annual Hackathon for the popularization of science, first held in October 2023 during the National Science and Technology Week (SNCT). This event, organized in partnership with public high schools from the Federal District, brought together around 40 students to brainstorm innovative solutions

²² Minutes from Task Force's meeting are available [here](#).

and strategies for tackling vaccine disinformation. The hackathon, which will be held annually in collaboration with the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MCTI), serves as an important tool for engaging younger generations and fostering critical thinking about public health and disinformation.

In addition to initiatives in cooperation with the educational sector like the hackathon, a cornerstone of the Institutional Cooperation strategy is the active partnerships forged with major social media platforms - more specifically, Kwai, TikTok, YouTube and Meta. These collaborations have been particularly crucial for disseminating accurate information, especially during the launch of the “Health with Science” program in October 2023.

The partnership with Kwai included the creation of a dedicated page featuring official content from the Ministry of Health. Between October 24 and 30, 2023. TikTok, on the other hand, supported the initiative by developing a search banner that directed users to vaccination-related information, reaching 1.68 million views. Additionally, TikTok hosted a special page on its platform and provided notifications to raise awareness about vaccination.

On YouTube, special content featuring conversations of Health Ministry Nisia Trindiade with influencers like Dr. Drauzio Varella, “Manual do Mundo” and “Manual do Homem Moderno”, was part of the strategy, resulting in 439,000 views for educational videos on vaccines. Finally, Meta platforms, such as Facebook, engaged users with chatbots, and other interactive methods, leading to substantial engagement numbers, contributing to further public awareness.

5. Training and Capacity Building

The Training and Capacity Building pillar represents a comprehensive effort to equip key stakeholders with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively combat disinformation about public health policies. This initiative encompasses a wide range of professionals, from healthcare workers to

legal experts, as an effort to both capillarize and elevate the fight against disinformation about public policies to one of the highest institutional priorities of the Federal Government.

At the forefront of this effort is an ambitious plan to train 400,000 health professionals across the country on disinformation combat. This initiative, included in the Government's Multi-Year Plan (Plano Plurianual - PPA) 2024-2027 under indicator 10595 of specific objective 0451²³, aims to create a more resilient and informed workforce capable of acting as knowledge multipliers in their respective areas. The program's initial focus is on Community Health Agents (Agentes Comunitários de Saúde - ACS), Endemic Disease Control Agents (Agentes de Combate às Endemias - ACE), and nursing professionals, which represent the professionals who are directly in contact with the population for vaccination campaigns and actions and, therefore, can be seen as a source of trustworthy information.

The goal of the training is to go beyond merely providing technical and theoretical information to these health professionals. It focuses on developing critical communication skills and conflict management techniques, crucial for effectively countering disinformation. The program aims to strengthen the role of health professionals as trusted authority figures capable of positively influencing citizens' health decisions. By adapting the training to specific needs, as seen with the ACS who work directly in communities, the initiative promotes an integrated network to combat disinformation.

Complementing the health professional training is a targeted initiative for legal consultants (Consultorias Jurídicas) and Special Communication Advisors (Assessorias de Comunicação) within various ministries. This training is designed to bolster the Federal Government's capacity to address disinformation about public policies, particularly in relation to the National Immunization Program and public health policies. The program aims to consolidate effective practices for investigating and holding accountable

²³ More on the Government's Multi-Year Plan, in English, is available at: <https://www.gov.br/planejamento/pt-br/assuntos/planejamento/plano-plurianual/paginas/paginas-ppa-2024-2027/ppa-2024-2027-english>.

those spreading false information, and to disseminate these practices to the technical areas of ministries conducting such actions.

The Task Force has also extended its training efforts to prosecutors. On May 21, 2024, an "Interinstitutional Dialogue for Confronting Disinformation on Public Health" was held in partnership with the National Council of the Public Ministry (Conselho Nacional do Ministério Público - CNMP)²⁴. This event brought together over 50 participants from various regions of Brazil, demonstrating the high interest and relevance of the topic. The meeting included key members of the Task Force, involving representatives from essential bodies such as SECOM, Ministry of Health, Senacon, CGU, and PNDD/AGU.

These diverse training initiatives, while still in various stages of planning and implementation, represent a robust and forward-thinking approach to building capacity across multiple sectors. By equipping health professionals, legal experts, communication advisors, and prosecutors with the necessary skills and knowledge, Brazil is creating a comprehensive defense against public health disinformation.

Main Challenges

Over the past year, the Task Force has faced significant challenges both internally and externally. These obstacles highlight the complex nature of combating disinformation in the modern digital landscape and the delicate balance required in implementing such policies within a democratic framework.

Internally, the Task Force grapples with resource-related issues, as it does not hold a specific budget of its own to execute the planned actions. Alongside, externally, the Task Force's work faces a complex landscape of

²⁴ Minutes from this event are available at: https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/assuntos/comite-de-enfrentamento-da-desinformacao/atas-de-reuniao/21-05-2024_relatoria-seminario.pdf/view.

resistance and scrutiny. This resistance manifests in various forms, including a significant number of Freedom of Information Act (Lei de Acesso à Informação - LAI) requests directed at different ministries that compose the Task Force, as well as a certain distrust expressed by the media.

Other external challenges that underscore the complexity of its mission are attacks targeted at research projects on health and vaccine disinformation funded by public bodies which participate in the Task Force. These attacks, reportedly promoted by far-right political figures, allege “misuse of public resources to censor divergent ideas”. They involve claims before the National Congress and the General Accounting Office (Tribunal de Contas da União - TCU). As an example, Health Secretary Nísia Trindade has been called to testify in public hearings to address questions about the inclusion of the Covid-19 vaccine in the National Immunization Program (PNI). This highlights the resistance against the promotion of vaccination-related information integrity actions within the National Congress, which gives visibility to narratives that question the efficacy of vaccines, ultimately undermining public confidence and discouraging vaccination efforts across the country.

These incidents reveal the sensitive nature of policies aimed at combating disinformation and promoting information integrity, not only because they are tangible to intrinsic aspects of democracy but also because they challenge both political and economic interests. They collectively demonstrate the delicate balance the Task Force must maintain between combating disinformation and respecting democratic principles of transparency and free speech. Additionally, they illustrate the complex and delicate nature of implementing a public policy of this magnitude in the realm of combating health disinformation, and reveal the context of "defensive democracy" in which the state finds itself (Loewenstein, 1937), necessitating the development of self-defense mechanisms to continue implementing public policies that face strong resistance from certain sectors.

3. Relevance for Policy-Makers

Brazil's comprehensive strategy to combat disinformation about public health and vaccination stands out as a pioneering effort with potential global implications. The early results of this comprehensive approach are promising. As mentioned above, there has been a notable increase in vaccination coverage rates²⁵, which suggests that the multiple efforts being led by the government – including the Task Force – have proved valuable to reduce vaccine hesitancy.

As explained in detail, at the heart of the Brazilian approach is the establishment of a high-level Task Force within the Presidency, supported by a robust legislative framework. Placing the Task Force at the highest level of government underscores the political commitment to addressing disinformation and provides the necessary authority and visibility to drive change. Unlike many single-sector strategies seen elsewhere, Brazil's initiative integrates multiple governmental bodies and sectors, fostering a comprehensive and coordinated response that enhances the effectiveness of its strategies.

One of the most innovative aspects of Brazil's approach is the development of an operational flow to counter public policy disinformation. This systematic process for identifying, addressing, and counteracting misinformation is being piloted in the health sector with the goal of expansion to other areas. Crucially, this includes legal mechanisms for accountability, such as prosecuting those spreading harmful falsehoods about public health. This approach is not only creating jurisprudence for tackling disinformation but also sending a strong message about the serious consequences of spreading harmful misinformation.

Additionally, the emphasis on capacity-building initiatives for key institutional partners, including health workers, sets Brazil's strategy apart.

²⁵ Brasil reverte tendência de queda nas coberturas vacinais e registra aumento de oito imunizantes do calendário infantil em 2023, Secretaria de Saúde do Distrito Federal. December 2023. Available at: <https://www.saude.df.gov.br/web/guest/w/brasil-reverte-tend%C3%Aancia-de-queda-nas-coberturas-vacinais-e-registra-aumento-de-oito-imunizantes-do-calend%C3%A1rio-infantil-em-2023#:~:text=%E2%80%9CTodos%20n%C3%B3s%20alcan%C3%A7amos%20juntos%20o,%2C5%25%20em%20n%C3%ADvel%20nacional>.

By focusing on education and empowerment, the initiative expects to create long-term resilience within communities and institutions. This approach equips frontline workers with the tools and knowledge to effectively combat disinformation at the grassroots level, a crucial factor in creating sustainable change.

Alongside, the interministerial nature of the Task Force allows for a multifaceted approach that spans from diverse communication actions to judicial accountability. This creates a comprehensive framework for addressing cases of disinformation that directly impact public policies, such as the sale of chlorine dioxide for "vaccine detox", and the identification of ecosystems promoting false claims like "vaccines cause AIDS".

By combining these innovative elements into a cohesive strategy, Brazil is positioning itself as a global pioneer in the fight against disinformation. The approach not only tackles immediate challenges but also establishes a model that could be adapted and implemented by other policy areas and countries. The integration of different fronts, building institutional resilience, leveraging existing tools across various areas of government, and forging partnerships between different branches of power all contribute to a robust and replicable framework.

As the global community continues to grapple with the challenges posed by disinformation, Brazil's innovative and comprehensive approach offers a valuable model for study and potential replication. Of particular relevance for policymakers across the world, Brazil's initiative highlights the importance of high-level governmental commitment and cross-sectoral collaboration, the value of establishing systematic processes for identifying and countering disinformation and the crucial role of capacity-building and education, particularly for frontline workers. By addressing the issue from multiple angles and with a strong institutional backbone, this initiative demonstrates a path forward in the complex battle against the spread of harmful misinformation.

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