

## "The sovereignty of the region and its wealth is what really is at stake"<sup>1</sup> Amazon fires in Jair Bolsonaro's discourse on Twitter

### "Soberania da região e suas riquezas é o que, verdadeiramente, está em jogo": as queimadas na Amazônia e o discurso de Jair Bolsonaro no Twitter

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#### Abstract

This article analyzes how the event reported by the media as the "Day of Fire", as it becomes a media event, in a context of deep mediatization, is discussed by Jair Bolsonaro in his official Twitter account. It is understood that the discussion of this media event is part of a dispute of symbolic and persuasive power, transcending the media vehicles and conflicting with other sources of information, lived experiences, and interests of specific social groups, influencing the construction of a mobilizing narrative, which guides Bolsonaro's discursive practice in the public opinion dispute. To this end, a thematic content analysis was applied to publications gathered from the account @jairbolsonaro between July 4<sup>th</sup> and September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Next, two different discourse archetypes were constructed – one using elements of risk communication and the other using elements of populist communication – in order to understand and identify the characteristics and patterns of proximity among the tweets. Based on these two communication models and the political-social context surrounding this media event, we use Critical Discourse Analysis to interpret how Bolsonaro's discourse relates to the Brazilian socioenvironmental crisis here remarked. At last, we arrived at the conclusion that the discourse mediated through Bolsonaro's Twitter focuses on four main aspects: 1) it is *reactive* to the transformation of the socioenvironmental event "Day of Fire" into a *media event*; 2) it employs, as a strategy for the resumption of the public debate, a *populist construction* of two antagonistic political camps; 3) it seeks the *silencing* of non-capitalist ways of relating to the environment; and 4) it reveals a neoliberal populist discourse, which *neglects* a communication aimed at *the prevention and mitigation of the existing risk*.

Keywords: Keywords: Jair Bolsonaro; Amazonia; populist communication; risk communication; media event.

#### Resumo

Este artigo analisa como o acontecimento relatado pelos media como "Dia do Fogo", ao tornar-se um acontecimento mediático num contexto de profunda mediatização, é discutido por Jair Bolsonaro na sua conta oficial do Twitter. Entende-se que a discussão deste acontecimento mediático faz parte de uma disputa de poder simbólico e persuasivo, transcende os veículos de comunicação e conflitua com outras fontes de informação, experiências vividas e interesses de grupos sociais específicos, influenciando a construção de uma narrativa mobilizadora que orienta a prática discursiva de Bolsonaro na disputa pela opinião pública. Para esse fim, foi aplicada uma análise de conteúdo temática a publicações reunidas da conta @jairbolsonaro entre 4 de julho e 16 de setembro de 2019. Em seguida, foram construídos dois

<sup>1</sup> Original: "Soberania da região e suas riquezas é o que, verdadeiramente, está em jogo." <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1161972492421992448>. (Accessed: 1 July 2021)

arquétipos de discurso diferentes – um utilizando elementos de comunicação de risco e outro utilizando elementos de comunicação populista – com o objetivo de compreender e identificar as características e padrões de proximidade entre os tweets. Com base nesses dois modelos de comunicação e no contexto político-social envolvendo este acontecimento mediático, utilizamos a Análise Crítica do Discurso para interpretar como o discurso de Bolsonaro se relaciona com a crise socioambiental brasileira aqui destacada. Por fim, chegamos à conclusão de que o discurso mediado através do Twitter de Bolsonaro se centra em quatro aspectos principais: 1) é reativo à transformação do acontecimento socioambiental “Dia do Fogo” em um acontecimento mediático; 2) emprega, como estratégia para retomar o debate público, uma construção populista de dois campos políticos antagônicos; 3) busca silenciar formas não capitalistas de relação com o ambiente; e 4) revela um discurso populista neoliberal, que negligencia uma comunicação voltada para a prevenção e mitigação do risco existente.

Palavras-chave: Jair Bolsonaro; Amazônia; comunicação populista; comunicação de risco; acontecimento mediático.

## Introduction

The latest United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC, 2023) states that “[g]lobal warming will continue to increase in the near term (2021-2040) mainly due to increased cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in nearly all considered scenarios and modelled pathways” (p.12), representing climate impact and risks to ecosystems and humans in every region in the world.<sup>2</sup> Since greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions, global warming, climate impact, and risks are directly related, the higher the GHG emissions scenario is, the higher the probability that global temperature levels will increase and promote climate and interrelated non-climate hazards (Ibid.). Previous IPCC reports have already stated that climate change at these levels is related to three main aspects: 1) it has anthropogenic origins; 2) it is already causing extreme weather and climate conditions in all regions of the world; and 3) it urgently demands that net emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> be zeroed, together with drastic reductions in emissions of other greenhouse gases (IPCC, 2021).

In the Brazilian context, the Climate Observatory points to the increase in greenhouse gas emissions since 2018. These emissions, (2,290,231,858 CO<sub>2</sub>e (t) GWP-AR5)<sup>3</sup> (SEEG, 2023)<sup>4</sup>, which have been measured since 2006, reached the highest rate (2,422,625,065 CO<sub>2</sub>e (t) GWP-AR5) in 2021, a period that coincides with Jair Bolsonaro's third mandate year in the Brazilian Presidency. Since the beginning of the historical cycle of measurement of these values (1990-2020), two categories represent the absolute majority of the sources of greenhouse gas emissions in Brazil: in the first place, “Forest and Land Use Change”; and secondly, “Agriculture and Livestock”. This data also dialogues with the increase in deforestation in the Legal Amazon (INPE, 2021)<sup>5</sup> and the increase in soybean harvest (IBGE, 2021)<sup>6</sup> and agricultural and livestock exports (Brazil, 2021)<sup>7</sup> in this same period.

We therefore consider relevant the study of the discourse – or lack thereof – of the then-president about the socioenvironmental event that became known as the “Day of Fire”, characterized by large-scale wildfires, orchestrated by rural producers (Braga & Marinho, 2022), which hit the Amazon region in August 2019. This

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_SYR\\_SPM.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf) (Accessed: 22 May 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Data presented in carbon equivalent (CO<sub>2</sub>e) in GWP metric (global warming potential) according to conversion factors presented in the IPCC's 5th report and measured by the Climate Observatory's System of Estimates of Emissions and Removals of Greenhouse Gases (SEEG).

<sup>4</sup> [https://plataforma.seeg.eco.br/total\\_emission#](https://plataforma.seeg.eco.br/total_emission#) (Accessed: 22 May 2023).

<sup>5</sup> [http://terrabilis.dpi.inpe.br/app/dashboard/deforestation/biomes/legal\\_amazon/rates](http://terrabilis.dpi.inpe.br/app/dashboard/deforestation/biomes/legal_amazon/rates) (Accessed: 22 May 2023). It should be noted that the term Legal Amazon does not refer to the totality of the Amazon Rainforest, but rather to a specific area, comprised by nine states, which are subject to specific environmental-protection policies and regulations.

<sup>6</sup> <https://sidra.ibge.gov.br/tabela/6588> (2018-2020) & <https://biblioteca.ibge.gov.br/index.php/biblioteca-catalogo?view=detalhes&id=76> (1977-2017) (Accessed: 21 Jan. 2021).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.br/produtividade-e-comercio-exterior/pt-br/assuntos/comercio-exterior/estatisticas/balanca-comercial-brasileira-acumulado-do-ano> (Accessed: 27 Jan. 2021).

event presents, at the same time, elements that we consider relevant for thinking the global climate debate, as well as characteristics of what we present as a “media event” (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Couldry, 2003; Couldry & Hepp, 2018), in the current sociotechnical context of network communication (Cardoso, 2009). Thus, based on the “Day of Fire”, the main goal of this article is to understand how this event, when constituted as a media event, mobilized and was mobilized in the discourse of then-president Jair Bolsonaro on his Twitter account. As research goals, we thus aim to identify the main themes brought to light by Bolsonaro on the socioenvironmental issue; to understand the main dimensions of his discourse based on the theoretical frameworks of risk communication and populist communication; and, ultimately, taking these results into account, and through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), to understand how the discursive structure here analyzed, and the ideology contained therein, relate to this socioenvironmental and media event.

Inspired by a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, we have sought to build an eclectic methodological model, anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 2013), which allows us to perceive the main ideological features present in the discursive performance of Jair Bolsonaro in the context of the 2019 Amazon rainforest fires, especially concerning the “Day of Fire”. Complementary to and preceding the CDA, we conducted a thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011) and a bivariate statistical analysis.

To delimit an analysis period “before” and “after” the event<sup>8</sup> – the “Day of Fire”, which took place between August 10 and 11 –, we used as an initial analysis milestone the day when the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) alerted to the increase of the deforestation rate in Legal Amazonia, on July 4, 2019.<sup>9</sup> We consider this date as an important alert from the Brazilian scientific community to the Federal Government about the need to contain the risks of deforestation and fires in the region and, therefore, relevant for the analysis of the timeframe that precedes the “Day of Fire”. We thus delimited the end of our analysis to September 16, 2019, in order to obtain an isonomic temporal sample between the period “before” and “after” the event. Finally, in this period, we find it relevant to mention the dismissal of the then director of INPE, Ricardo Galvão, on August 2, after a series of clashes with the federal government, including Jair Bolsonaro himself, involving the above-mentioned deforestation data released by the Institute.<sup>10</sup>

## **Network communication, media event, and the socioenvironmental issue**

### *The “Day of Fire” in the context of network communication*

The “Day of Fire” was the name given to a series of large-scale fires, orchestrated by rural producers (Braga & Marinho, 2022), that hit the Amazon region in August 2019. According to INPE, 1,457 fires were counted between August 10 and 11, compared to 101 fires counted the day before (Pontes, 2020). The name of this event was coined by the journalist Adécio Piran (2019) in a report to the newspaper *Folha do Progresso* and popularized by the journalist Fabiano Maisonave (2019), in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*.

Starting from the broadcasting of the “Day of Fire” in the two printed newspapers, we observe the development of the event in different media, culminating in the hashtag #PrayForAmazonia, which became the most commented subject on Twitter in the world (BBC News, 2019), also appearing in the headlines of traditional media, such as TVs, newspapers (printed and online) and radios. The script of the mediatization of the event we analyze here leads us therefore to contextualize it within the theoretical framework of

<sup>8</sup> As we will see ahead, these timeframes – “before” and “after” the event – are important aspects to be considered in risk communication analyses.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.inpe.br/noticias/noticia.php?Cod\\_Noticia=5147](http://www.inpe.br/noticias/noticia.php?Cod_Noticia=5147) (Accessed: 1 July 2021).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49256294> (Accessed: 22 May 2023).

network communication (Cardoso, 2009), as a model integrating different modes of communication, without replacing them.

In this sense, the mediation of the event occurs through both mass communication (through the so-called traditional media), and mass self-communication, mediated one-to-many communication, and mediated interpersonal communication (Cardoso, 2023). As our object of analysis is the set of tweets published by Jair Bolsonaro on the issue, our investigation focuses mainly on mass self-communication (Castells, 2007) processes, recognizing, however, the theoretical premise that this is not an isolated form of mediation, but it is integrated with the others.

In this context, as Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue, the internet has intensified and deepened the process of constructing social reality from the mediated experience, in which digital platforms are means as relevant as traditional media, both in the production process and in the distribution of content (Boczkowski & Mitchestein, 2021). The connectivity provided by these media allows for a social curation of content (Villi, 2019) and this networked distribution influences traditional media and complexifies the social process of constructing meanings and representations. This phenomenon “illustrates the networked distribution of media content by adding qualitative judgment and imbuing the content with personal and social significance” (Villi, 2019, p. 4).

According to data from the report Social Media Usage in Brazil (Statista 2021a), Twitter has about 17 million users in the country (Statista, 2021b). It is thus relevant to Brazilian society in terms of social curation (Villi, 2019), being an environment in which politicians and other specialized sources communicate, as well as journalists and opinion makers. The spread of content and messages from this network permeates both instant messaging applications (such as WhatsApp) and traditional media, in the process of network distribution understood also as a practice of “spreadability”, which creates value and meaning for the shared content (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 3-4).

#### *The “Day of Fire” as a media event*

From the transformation of the theoretical framework of the concept of “media event”, which we approach here from the English-language research tradition (Ytreberg, 2017), we frame the “Day of Fire” as both a socioenvironmental event and a media event. On the one hand, it is a pre-planned event by actors external to the media, who covered and broadcasted it widely, interrupting their media routine (Dayan & Katz, 1992); on the other hand, it is not a celebratory event, which, within a Durkheimian perspective, is presented as a driver of social integration, as the authors of the seminal book on the subject – *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (ibid.) – define the concept.

Rather, here we understand the “Day of Fire” as an event that reveals and highlights the pressing socioenvironmental conflicts in the region. In this sense, we echo Couldry (2003) in his redefinition of the concept: “[m]edia events may also, by their scale, provide opportunities for underlying conflicts to be expressed or negotiated, including conflict over the underlying inequality of symbolic power on which the media's authority to narrate those same events is based” (p. 71).

In this sense, the media coverage of these events reaches several fields of society, acting as a guiding function and exercising a kind of institutional power through the representation of reality in the process of news production. The latter is, in turn, influenced by several structures internal to the making of journalism, with effect on the mediation of the development of events and the narrative direction to be adopted (Neto, Cardoso and Telo, 2021). We understand, therefore, that the coverage of media events, through the discourses of the media, is part of a relationship of symbolic and persuasive power, exercised by

communication vehicles, which conflicts with the presence of other sources of information, lived experiences, and interests that come from engagement in specific social groups, that, together, contribute to the formation of the public's understanding of the subject under discussion (Van Dijk, 2017).

In this context and in that of network communication, we argue therefore that the "Day of Fire" presents dual relevance for thinking about the global climate debate: 1) from the perspective of its material characteristics; and 2) from what we have presented here as a "media event" in a context of "deep mediatization" (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). As a material – socioenvironmental – event, as we will detail below, the fire spread around the main area of expansion of the country's agricultural frontier; as a media event, in this context of "deep mediatization", we understand it as an event that is "able to bind people from different social and cultural backgrounds into a complex process of communication" (Couldry & Hepp, 2018, p. 116), which includes the contemporary phenomena of datafication and algorithmic communication (Ibid.). It is therefore an event that "accompanied the complexity of contemporary social relations, mainly, the interface with the internet" (Braga & Marinho, 2022, p. 16, own translation), which in turn influences and is influenced by the very discourse of the actors involved. We focus on the discourse of one such actor, the then-president, who, faced with the media event, not only needs to position himself on the issue but also modulates his discourse to be effective in the exercise of power.

#### *The "Day of Fire" as a socioenvironmental event*

In the article of August 5<sup>th</sup>, previous to the "Day of Fire", we read in the newspaper *Folha do Progresso* the following passage:

The newspaper *Folha do Progresso* spoke this weekend with one of the [farmers] leaderships. They want August 10 to call the attention of government officials to the fact that the increase in production in the region occurs without government support. "We need to show the president that we want to work, and the only way to clear up our pastures is to cut down [trees] and to use fire," he argued. (Piran, 2019, own translation).

The passage reports, therefore, on the premeditation of the event as a strategy to gain visibility employed by rural producers in the region. In the context exposed in the article's introduction, we argue that this composes a broader macro-political and economic process in the country, given the location of the fire outbreaks that appeared during the "Day of Fire": the perimeter around the highway BR-163 in the state of Pará, a highway connecting the Amazon to the southern and central-western regions of Brazil (Braga & Marinho, 2022), now the main area of expansion of the agricultural frontier and socioenvironmental and territorial conflicts in the country.

Therefore, we base our analysis on critical conceptions, which, in addition to contesting the ideals of development that legitimize socio-economic projects such as the one involved in the "Day of Fire", also recognize other ways of life that distance themselves from the essentially exploitative extractivism experienced under capitalism.

In this sense, Eduardo Gudynas (2011) brings forth different theoretical and practical conceptions that encompass what he calls "alternatives to development" – as opposed to what would be alternative proposals for development. Among these, we highlight the idea of relational ontologies, which challenges the conceptions about nature, politics, culture, and so forth, centered on an organization of political agencies anchored in a Western ontology that fragments these fields, and thus "explains the reasons why it is not possible to follow similar ideas of progress, that are based on the appropriation of Nature" (Gudynas, 2011, p. 50, own translation).

Similarly, anthropologist Mauro Almeida (2016) exposes how economic development, as synonymous with capital accumulation, "inevitably feeds on the destruction of natural and social diversity" (p. 19, own

translation). It is in this sense that we also adopt geographer David Harvey's (2004) critique of "accumulation by dispossession", a practice that represents the main mechanism through which neoliberalism, rather than generating wealth and income, has maintained the "accumulation practices which Marx had treated of as 'primitive' or 'original' during the rise of capitalism" (Harvey, 2005, p. 159).

It is based on these multidisciplinary theoretical assumptions that we ground our critical thinking about the agricultural productivism to which the "Day of Fire" is related, and which thus constitutes the background for the Critical Discourse Analysis developed in this research.

### **Risk communication and populist communication archetypes**

Considering the context set out in our introduction, and the cyclic nature of GHG emissions, both influencing and influenced by the increase in forest fires globally, we understand that there is an increasing need for efficient risk communication and risk management – one that establishes a trust-based relationship between the population and the authorities providing the information, i.e., a communication in which the source of information enlightens the population about the risk, pays attention to the facts and conveys them in a clear and accessible way.

Also, we identified in the literature on Jair Bolsonaro's campaign and government, a pattern that relates the then-president's ultra-right discourse and politics (Bianchi et al., 2021; Mudde, 2021) to populism (Da Silva and Rodrigues, 2021; Cesarino, 2020; Neto, 2019). Therefore, we consider it important to understand whether this discursive pattern holds in the face of an event such as the "Day of Fire".

To analyze Bolsonaro's discourse related to the event presented in the previous section, we thus constituted two archetypes of communication models potentially involved in the discursive strategy of the then-president on his Twitter account, the first associated with the main features of risk communication and the second based on the main aspects identified in populist communication. We thus sought to identify which elements, of each communicational archetype, are present in Bolsonaro's discourse about the Amazon fires in the analyzed period and to explore whether or not there is a convergence between these two communication models.

#### *Risk communication*

Risk communication aims to inform people about potential future harms and dangers so action can be taken to mitigate them (Seeger et al, 2003; Seeger, 2006). It is an interactive process of exchanging information and opinions among individuals, groups and institutions, which often involves messages about the nature of the risk, or expresses legal and institutional concerns and opinions about its management (National Research Council, 1989). It is also a form of preventive and mitigating communication, occurring in all phases that comprise risk management – before, during and after an event (SEDEC/UFRGS, 2016).

There are notable similarities between risk communication and crisis communication, including Reynolds and Seeger's (2005) effort to propose a model that integrates both. However, while risk communication works around an expected risk, crisis communication is carried out when an unexpected situation arises (Jesus, 2013). Considering the cyclical nature of forest fires in the Amazon, which occur every year in the same period, as well as the announcement of the "Day of Fire" by its perpetrators, we argued that this was an expected and announced risk. We therefore chose to present an archetype based on risk communication, considering its pedagogical characteristics in the period before the disaster, the distribution of reliable

information at the time of the disaster, and the dissemination of information that contributed to increasing the culture of risk reduction in the period after the disaster.

According to Beck (1992), the media are key mediators of communication between the public, the scientific community, and the political and administration spheres on risks. They therefore take recourse in the exercise of citizenship to attend, monitor and evaluate other actors involved in risk management (scientists, politicians, civil society, government agencies, etc.) (Bach and Bernet, 2015).

Ballart et al. (2016) suggest that society's perception of forest fire risk largely determines the response in emergencies, as well as public support for forest management policies and for the actions that fire management and prevention services take in the area. Therefore, it is expected that heads of State use their main online interaction mechanisms to communicate to the population information related to the risks to which society, as a whole, is exposed. This is the reason why we decided to analyze the official Twitter account of Jair Bolsonaro, measuring and coding the various characteristics of risk communication (Table 1) in the speech of the then-president.

Table 1: Risk communication analysis framework

<b>Risk Communication</b>	<b>Features</b>
	Acknowledges the existence of the disaster
	Presents educational information and enlightens the public about the disaster
	Presents factual information about the disaster
	Conveys trust and empathy to the people affected by the disaster
	Presents ongoing measures aimed at risk mitigation
	Corrects misunderstandings about the disaster
	Provides precautionary measures and tools to do so
	Promotes risk reduction culture

Source: Compilation on the basis of Seeger (2006)

### *Populist communication*

Regarding the theoretical framework of populism, we adopt in this paper the ideational definition of the term (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2004), according to which populism is a "thin-centered ideology" that divides society into two antagonistic political camps – a "pure people" versus a "corrupt elite" – and on the basis of which politics should express the alleged "general will" of the people.

Considering the focus of our work on what we define as a media event, we also point out the relevance of approaching the phenomenon as a political style (Moffitt, 2016), defined as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life" (p.7). In particular, given that the analysis employed pays special attention to Jair Bolsonaro's *performance* in

relation to the 'Day of Fire' and to Twitter as its central media *stage*, key aspects of communicational populism (Cardoso, 2023; Moffitt, 2016) are to be understood as indeed performative.

However, although we agree that “[w]hat is ‘on the surface’ when it comes to populism matters” (Moffitt, 2016, p.154), understanding the phenomenon exclusively from this definition is insufficient to address the centrality of this research – understanding the ideological and discursive structures that permeate the “Day of Fire” when it turns into a media event.

We therefore reinforce that “these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive” (Kefford et al., 2005, p.5). Moreover, by understanding populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004), we acknowledge that the ideologies combined in the discourse assume their own characteristics and performances, thus bringing important added-value in terms of analysis, when aiming to understand the ideological structures themselves.

Finally, focusing on the digital realm, we understand that technologies can be used to aggregate individuals and amplify messages, in an “elective affinity” between populism and online social networks, which, enhanced by the aggregation logic embedded in their algorithms, constitute a suitable channel for populist appeals (Gerbaudo, 2018). In this sense, Bolsonaro also presents his Twitter account as a direct channel between leader and people, allegedly exempt from mediation mechanisms and their power structures.<sup>11</sup>

For the constitution of the archetype of populist communication (Table 2) in Bolsonaro's tweets, we drew on the conceptualization and operationalization of key messages and populist style elements gathered by Ernst et al. (2019).

Table 2: Populist communication analysis framework

	<b>Features</b>
<b>Populist Communication</b>	Establishes in-group and out-group
	Holds third parties responsible for the disaster
	Establishes conflict with institutions and other actors relevant to the disaster
	Reinforces an idea of a people or nation
	Presents the leader as the protagonist of problem resolutions
	Presents crisis or negativist rhetoric
	Presents colloquial or intimate language
	Presents assertive and absolutist tone

Source: Compilation on the basis of Ernst et al. (2019)

## Methods

<sup>11</sup> Whether or not these relations are indeed direct is, however, questionable. Some arguments reject this idea, presuming that algorithms interfere in the relationships we establish through networks and online platforms (Pariser, 2011), or platform control by large corporations, whose political-economic interests are present in this relationship (Fuchs, 2012). This paper, however, will not be able to expand on this issue.

In order to analyze Jair Bolsonaro's discourse on the socioenvironmental and media event discussed here, based on the mixed methods approach, we constructed a convergent research design (Creswell, 2014). Firstly, 379 tweets were collected from the Twitter account @jairbolsonaro between July 4 and September 16, 2019, corresponding to the period *before*, *during*, and *after* the "Day of Fire". These tweets were gathered by MediaLab (CIES-Iscte) through the open-source software Twint and composed our initial research universe.

Next, a thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011) was applied to this material, in which each tweet was coded according to the following dimensions, determined *a priori*: 1) generalist themes about the environment ("Environmental-related issues"); 2) specific references to the Brazilian National Institute for Space Research (INPE) and physics engineer, Ricardo Galvão, former director of INPE, dismissed by the Bolsonaro government in 2019 for alerting to the increase in deforestation in the Amazon; 3) generalist issues related to the Amazon ("Amazon-related issues"); and 4) wildfires in the Legal Amazon ("Amazon fires specific issues" in the legal and administrative area of the Amazon Rainforest subject to environmental protection measures).

From the initial 379 tweets, 64 constituted our corpus of analysis and were coded according to one of the above-mentioned dimensions, while 315 tweets didn't relate to our research topic. These 64 tweets were, ranked as follows: "Amazon-related issues" (41%; 26 tweets); "Environmental-related issues" (38%; 24 tweets); and "Amazon fires specific issues" (22%; 14 tweets). No statement on the alert of deforestation released by the INPE nor on the dismissal of its then-president was found in the analyzed period.

In the second stage of our content analysis, a new categorization was then applied to the previously-coded sample of 64 tweets. The categories used in this process were inductively identified in the analysis itself, based on Bardin's (2011) comment on categories that may "emerge directly from the text" (p.179). These are: 1) "Sovereignty and geopolitics"; 2) "Economic development"; 3) "Positive agenda"; 4) "Attack on the press"; 5) "Disparagement of institutions"; 6) "Attack on local opponents, activists, and peoples"; and 7) "Resolute action". The absolute and relative frequencies of these categories were analyzed in order to understand the thematic construction of the discourse. Finally, we distributed this corpus of analysis of 64 tweets in three different temporal groups, in order to distinguish the percentage of tweets published "before", "during", and "after" the "Day of Fire".

Then, a third stage of analysis was performed on the 14 tweets referring to the dimension "Amazon fires specific issues", aiming to identify the elements of risk communication and populist communication that were present or absent in Bolsonaro's discourse on the fires in the region. For this purpose, in each of the tweets of this corpus of analysis, we sought to identify the characteristics of the archetypal frameworks relating to the respective communication models, with eight characteristics each (Tables 1 and 2), categorized at this phase of the research as present (1) or absent (0). In this process, it was possible to identify three main patterns of proximity among the analyzed tweets, which we will comment on in the next section.

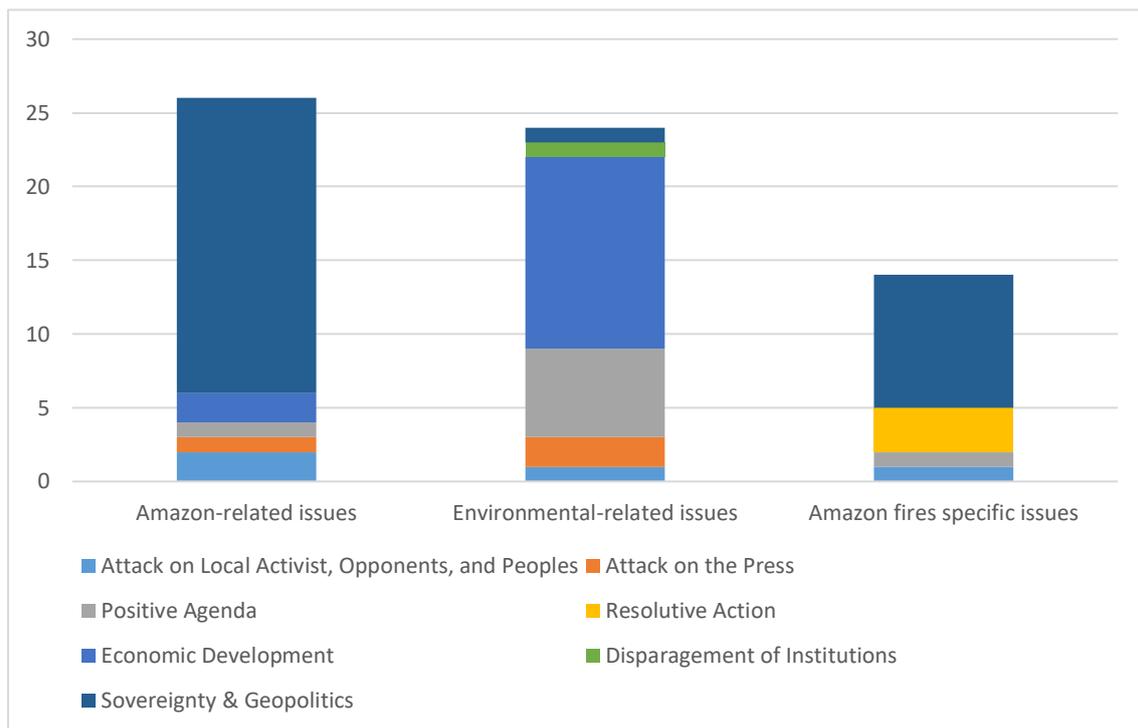
Finally, the fourth phase of our analysis constituted the development of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This qualitative procedure was built on a sample selected from the 14 tweets coded as "Amazon fires specific issues". From this group, one out of every two tweets belonging to the proximity patterns found in our previous research stage was selected for the development of CDA, using as a criterion of choice the engagement rate presented by the tweets (opting for the highest values).

To develop the Critical Discourse Analysis, here drawn from Van Dijk's (2013) socio-cognitive theoretical-methodological approach, we sought to respond to the following topics of analysis, based, in turn, on Ramalho and Resende's (2011) suggestion of research operationalization: sociopolitical contextualization of the selected tweets; interdiscursivity presented in these statements; representation of social actors illustrated in the publications; grammatical and performative style employed in the discourse; and ideological presumption presented by the tweets. Beside these topics of analysis, the results of the previous research stages here described were also taken into account in the development of CDA. In the discussion section, we address the dialogue between these results and the inferences brought to light through Critical Discourse Analysis.

**Results**

By cross-referencing the discourse dimensions and the thematic categories listed above, we arrive at three main indexes: "Amazon-related issues", "Environmental-related issues", and "Amazon fires specific issues" (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Descriptive analysis of the frequencies of the indexes identified in the tweets



Source: Authors' compilation

The analysis of the relative frequencies of the "Amazon-related issues" index indicates the predominance of the theme "Sovereignty and geopolitics" (77%), followed by the themes "Economic development" and "Attack on local opponents, activists, and peoples" (8% each). In the second index, "Environmental-related issues", we observe a greater recurrence of the "Economic development" theme (54%), followed by the themes "Positive agenda" (25%) and "Attack on the press" (8%). Finally, in the "Amazon fires specific issues" index there is, as in the first case, a greater predominance of the theme "Sovereignty and geopolitics"

(64%), followed by the themes "Resolutive action" (21%), "Positive agenda" and "Attack on local activists, opponents, and peoples" (7% each).

Regarding the temporal distribution of Jair Bolsonaro's publications on his official Twitter account, we observe that 25% of the pronouncements related to the theme of this research occur before the key event under analysis, rising to 75% after the beginning of this event. No publications related to the general theme of this research were made by then-President Jair Bolsonaro during the "Day of Fire" (Graph 2).

Graph 2: Temporal distribution of all codified tweets



Source: Authors' compilation

In the period classified as occurring "before" the event, 81% of the publications on the environmental theme ("Environmental-related issues") are generalist and 19% refer to the Amazon region ("Amazon-related issues"), without, however, reporting on the problem of deforestation and wildfires that had already ravaged the region ("Amazon fires specific issues"), even after warnings from INPE on the need to pay attention to the Amazon biome.

Finally, we indicate that this scenario changed eleven days after the "Day of Fire", when Bolsonaro makes his first publication about the wildfires in the region, on the same day that the hashtag #PrayForAmazonia reaches the highest number of publications on Twitter worldwide, resulting in the concentration of all the publications on fires in the region in the period "after" the event under analysis (Graph 3).

Graph 3: Temporal distribution of the tweets codified as "Amazon fires specific issues"

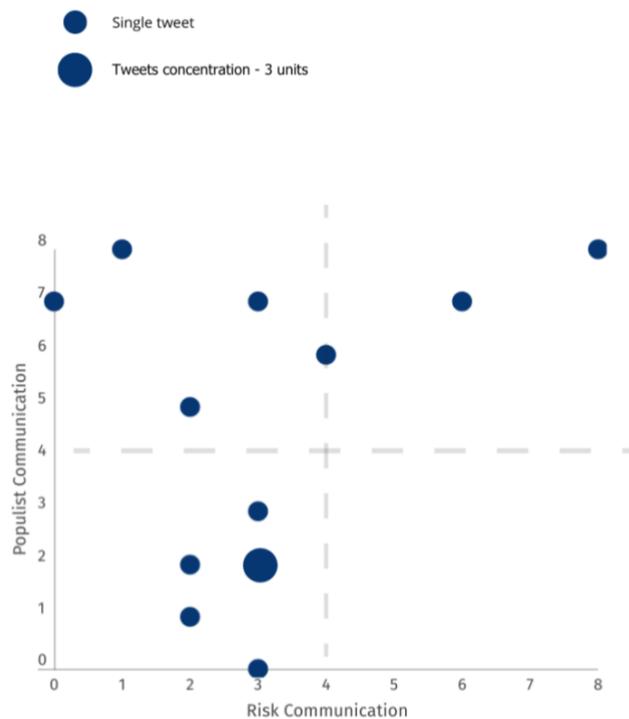


Source: Authors' compilation

After performing the content analysis and observing the temporal distribution of Bolsonaro's tweets, we turned to the next stage of the research, applied to the 14 tweets coded as "Amazon fires specific issues", in order to identify the elements of risk communication and populist communication present or absent in Bolsonaro's discourse.

After classifying as either present (1) or absent (0) each of the attributes listed in the risk communication and populist communication archetypes (Tables 1 and 2), each tweet presented what we considered a value of approximation to one or the other communication model, according to the distribution presented in Graph 4. For the purposes of systematization of the analysis, we considered values from 0-3 as low incidence of a given communication type; 4, as medium incidence; and from 5-8 as high incidence of risk or populist communication elements.

Graph 4: Distribution of tweets according to the relationship between risk communication and populist communication



Source: Author's compilation/ Infogram MediaLab (CIES-Iscte)

As observed in Graph 4, we infer that 50% of the tweets published by Bolsonaro about the wildfires which hit the Amazon region in the period presented a high incidence of elements characteristic of populist communication, while the other half presents a low incidence. Regarding the occurrence of characteristics common to risk communication, we observe that 79% of tweets present a low occurrence, 14% high occurrence, and 7% present a medium incidence of those elements.

We also observed three main patterns of proximity among the analyzed tweets, illustrated by the quadrants in which Graph 4 is divided: 7 tweets present a low incidence of characteristics relative to both communication models; 5 tweets present a low or medium incidence of risk communication elements and high incidence of characteristics common to populist communication; and, finally, 2 tweets present high incidence of elements from both communication models.

### Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and discussion

From the CDA developed on the tweets referring to the dimension "Amazon fires specific issues", we highlight two main contextual points: the worldwide popularization on Twitter of the hashtag

#PrayForAmazonia and the holding of the 45<sup>th</sup> G7 Summit, whose discussion agenda included the issue of wildfires in the Amazon region, proposed and led by French President Emmanuel Macron.

Considering the exposed data on the temporal distribution of Bolsonaro's tweets – such as the absence of publications referring to the wildfires until August 21, 2019, ten days after the so-called "Day of Fire" –, we infer that the publications of the then-Brazilian president did not seek to respond proactively to the socioenvironmental risk that afflicted the region, but rather had the goal of regaining control of the public debate on the topic that, until the moment he started his publications, had been focused on criticizing Bolsonaro's administration.

We also understand that Bolsonaro's publications on his Twitter account, by disregarding the stages of "risk reduction" and "disaster monitoring" – *before* and *during* the event, respectively – do not meet the purpose of effective risk communication. This consideration is also supported by the percentage of tweets referring to the theme "Amazon fires specific issues" that present a low incidence of risk communication elements (79%). In this sense, from these data, we also understand that Jair Bolsonaro's publications aimed to respond more to the international repercussions of the event in civil society (indicated by the prevalence of the hashtag #PrayForAmazonia on Twitter) and to the international political agenda guided by criticism against his administration (led by the French president), than to the socioenvironmental disaster itself.

Thus, we interpret that Bolsonaro's publications on Twitter constitute an answer to the transformation of the socioenvironmental event of the "Day of Fire" into a media event that, encompassing different sectors of society – in this case, representatives of international politics, the scientific community and the 'common citizen' –, integrates and influences the power relations permeating the event, demanding responses or practical actions from the actors involved.

We also observed, through the CDA interdiscursivity analysis, the emphasis Bolsonaro puts on a militaristic discourse: in his tweets, the forest is translated as 'national territory' and the armed forces, in this sense, are allegedly its main protectors, either by fighting the fire (e.g., Image 1), or by exercising the defense of national sovereignty (e.g., Image 2), the latter being the prevalent theme. We argue that, in order to regain control of the public debate over the wildfires, as we mentioned above, Bolsonaro used this interdiscursivity feature to impose his agenda on the region. Accompanying this finding, we reiterate the prevalence of the category "Sovereignty and geopolitics" in the discourse dimensions "Amazon-related issues" and "Amazon fires specific issues", as observed in the previous section.

Images 1 and 2 also show how the performative style employed contributes to this interdiscursivity in different ways. The video shown in Bolsonaro's tweet found in Image 1, for example, uses instrumental background music in a rising, emotive, and heroic tone and presents the Amazon rainforest flown over by a military plane as its *mise-en-scène*, reinforcing the emphatic text – marked by the exclamatory mode employed – on "the action of the C-130 Hercules aircraft", which, in turn, is reiterated by a shot from the viewpoint of the aircraft itself at the precise moment it starts releasing water to fight the fire. On the other hand, the second video in Image 2 presents a civilian, journalist Boris Casoy, in an attempt at converging traditional and new media, speaking in a mild, but assertive tone, as a way of legitimizing the argument of national sovereignty, which, as we have seen, composes the military interdiscursivity identified in this stage of research.

Image 1: "Check out the action of the aircraft C-130 Hercules, from our Air Force, fighting the wildfires in the Amazon, departing from Porto Velho (RO)! Via @DefesaGovBr." (own translation)



Source: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1165375073445928967>

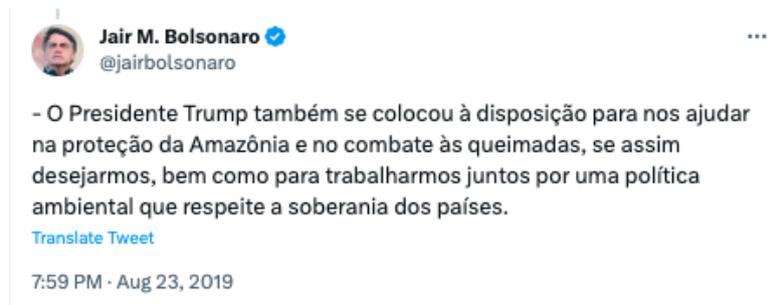
Image 2: "The fire that burns the most is that of our sovereignty over the Amazon. Watch, comment, and SHARE." (Own translation)



Source: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1164958699947012097>

Related to this, we observe that, as a strategy for changing the direction of the international discussion on the subject, Bolsonaro also invests in the construction of two antagonistic political camps: on one side, the countries attacking Brazilian sovereignty and the local organizations which allegedly act under the interests of those countries; on the other side, his government, with the support of the Brazilian armed forces, and countries whose ideological orientation is aligned with them (e.g. the United States of America, under Donald Trump's government – Image 3).

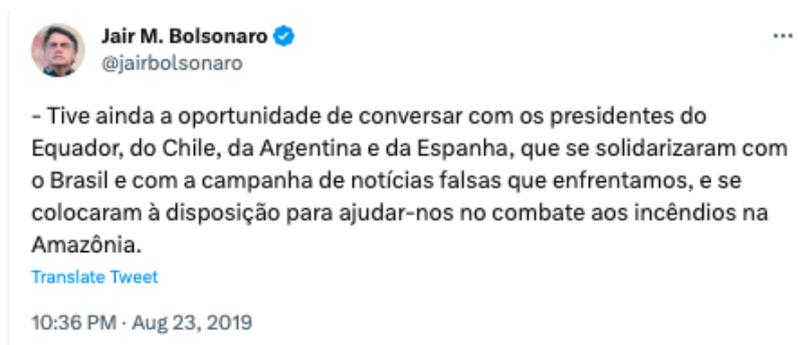
Image 3: "President Trump has also made himself available to help us protect the Amazon and combat wildfires, if we so desire, as well as work together for an environmental policy that respects the sovereignty of countries." (Own Translation)



Source: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1165035883306934272>.

From the observation of this mechanism, we infer that Bolsonaro relied, therefore, on populist strategy to achieve his goals within the framework of the media event under discussion. If the results presented in the previous section demonstrate that 50% of the publications enclose low incidence of populist communication elements, we explain the phenomenon by the fact, observed from the vantage point of critical discourse analysis of Bolsonaro's performative style, that despite not presenting populist style elements (Ernst et al., 2019), part of the analyzed publications nevertheless composed, through their content (Ibid.), the populist narrative described here (e.g., publications of institutional nature, directed to heads of State allegedly allied to the then-president, in which Bolsonaro assumes a formal and mild tone – for example, Image 4).

Image 4: "- I also had the opportunity to talk to the presidents of Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, and Spain, who showed solidarity with Brazil and the fake news campaign we are facing, and made themselves available to help us fight the fires in the Amazon." (Own translation)



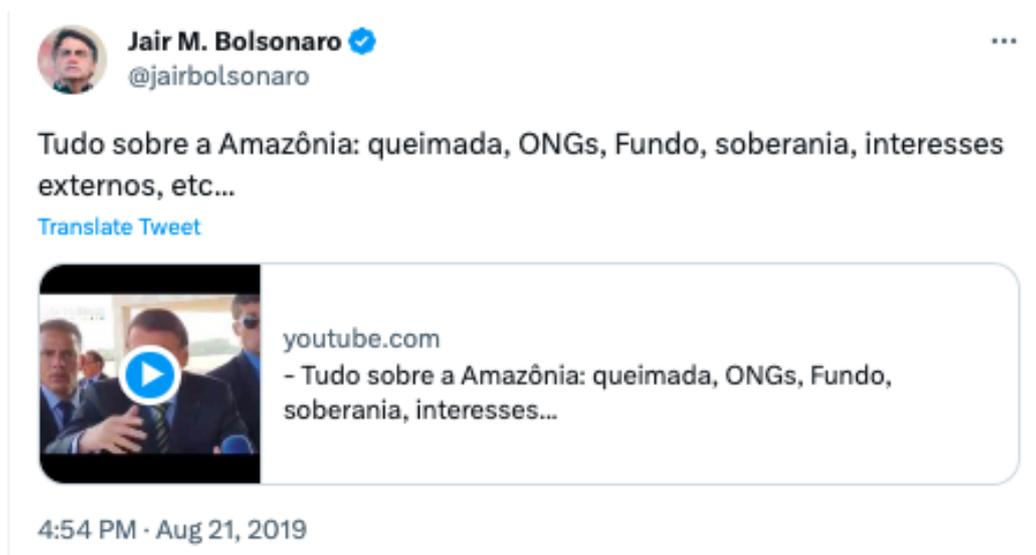
Source: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1165075251413311490>

When analyzing the possibility of convergence between the archetypes of risk and populist communication in Bolsonaro's discourse, we observe that only two of the tweets (13%) that make up the "Amazon fires specific issues" group present a high incidence of elements of both communication models. In developing Critical Discourse Analysis on the sample of this proximity pattern, however, we observe that these elements are generally portrayed at different moments in the conveyed discourse.<sup>12</sup> By combining both analyses, we therefore argue that the communication archetypes worked on in this research are preponderantly dissonant, and their co-presence is not common.

<sup>12</sup> This was made possible by analyzing the images and videos embedded in each publication.

When analyzing how Bolsonaro depicts the different actors that compose his discourse, we also observe a narrative that presents the Amazon as a territory of dispute where collective actors that speak out in favor of defending ecosystems are considered enemies of the people, namely scientists, indigenous communities, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (e.g. Image 5), evidencing the economic value of the region to the detriment of environmental preservation. The discourse assumes, therefore, that such social actors, portrayed as a morally corrupt "elite" standing against the interests of the "people", would be a threat to the "general will" of the nation, a rhetoric that also contains core elements of populism as previously defined (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Image 5: "Everything about the Amazon: fires, NGOs, Fund, sovereignty, foreign interests, etc. ...." (Own translation)



Source: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1164264512817696768>.

Within the scope of the critical discourse analysis of the ideological presumption of Bolsonaro's tweets, we identified the alignment of his pronouncements with neoliberal ideology and the conception of nature exclusively as an economic asset – which we also infer from the prevalence of the analytical category "Economic development", under the discursive dimension "Environmental-related issues".

In his tweets, we observe the perception of the Amazon biome as raw material to be protected (from external interests) and exploited.

Also, the main measure for preventing wildfires in the region mentioned by the then-president, along with the already commented role of the armed forces, was the need to offer economic alternatives to local populations, who, according to Bolsonaro, "for years have been awaiting economic dynamism proportional to the wealth that exists there" (Bolsonaro, 2019, Image 6).

Image 6: "A message to Brazil and the world on the Brazilian Amazon and the disinformation campaign built against our nation's sovereignty."



Source: <https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1165356474266247168>

From this matrix of arguments, we infer, finally, that the then-president delegitimizes other ways of life that are not embedded in the capitalist logic of production. In this sense, Bolsonaro disregards the report released by the Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) that reveals that the "loss of forest within the [Amazonian] ILs [Indigenous Lands]<sup>13</sup> was less than 2% in the period 2000-2014, while the average deforested area in the Amazon in the same period was 19%" (IPAM, 2015)<sup>14</sup>, data that goes against the argument presented by Bolsonaro for the prevention of wildfires.

We also observed, when developing the CDA, that Bolsonaro omits from all tweets the actor 'rural producers', a category in which are inserted those responsible, and so far fined (Greenpeace, 2020), for the multiplication of fire outbreaks between August 10 and 11, 2019 – the "Day of Fire". We argue that Bolsonaro thus seeks to conceal the main cause of the increase in deforestation and fire outbreaks in the Amazon region: the expansion of the agricultural and cattle ranching frontier, which we in turn relate to neoliberal ideology and the practices of "accumulation by dispossession" that sustain it (Harvey, 2005).<sup>15</sup>

Finally, we point out that Jair Bolsonaro's Twitter posts about the large-scale fires that hit the Amazon region in August 2019 reveal a neoliberal populist discourse, in accordance with the ideational conception of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004). If on the one hand, the militaristic argument of protecting national sovereignty is used in order to resume the public debate on the wildfires within the dynamics proper to a "media event" (Couldry, 2003), on the other hand, this mechanism also contributes to the concealment of those truly responsible for the socioenvironmental crisis in the Amazon and, thus, to sustaining the political and economic power relations that prevail in the region. In short, Bolsonaro's posts

<sup>13</sup> Indigenous Lands are properties of the Union, in which indigenous peoples are granted permanent possession and *exclusive* usufruct of its natural wealth.

<sup>14</sup> [https://ipam.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/terras\\_ind%C3%ADgenas\\_na\\_amaz%C3%B4nia\\_brasileira .pdf](https://ipam.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/terras_ind%C3%ADgenas_na_amaz%C3%B4nia_brasileira.pdf). (Accessed: 21 Jan. 2022).

<sup>15</sup> This includes "the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations (...); conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights (...), suppression of rights to the commons; commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources) (...)" (Harvey, 2005, p.159).'

therefore act as a mode of operationalization of ideology (Thompson, 2011) – in this case, that of neoliberalism.

## Conclusion

Anthropologist Piero Leirner (2012), when discussing the relationship between the military and the Amazon region, shows that according to his interlocutors – the military working in the region –, the role of the army would be “just and only to dissuade the enemy from coveting the Amazon, coveting Brazil; dissuade the foreigner, dissuade the jungle”, concluding that “the jungle and the foreigner are equivalent, the other, potential enemy, indomitable” (Leirner, 2012, p.57, own translation).

We thus recognize this military logic as also present in Jair Bolsonaro's discourse that was analyzed in this research. Here, the Amazon fits exclusively as ‘national territory’ and as a ‘source of economic resources’ to be protected by the army, either in fighting the fire, or, mainly, in guaranteeing Brazilian sovereignty, making militarism a fundamental ideological component in Bolsonaro's discursive formation.

The understanding of nature only as raw material, as an economic asset to be exploited, and its spoliation as a *sine qua non* condition for development, demonstrates an ideological formation of neoliberal nature, which, combined with militarism, as visible in Bolsonaro's discursive performance, shifts the discussion from the preservation of the biome to the preservation of the Brazilian government's control over the territory and its related economic interests.

In this context, the media event acts as an *event*, in Pêcheux's (2015) definition of the concept, structuring and re-structuring the political discourse on the topic according to the development of events and public reaction, provoking tensions in a discourse that is more reactive to the dynamics of online communication than propositional in resolving the wildfires in the Amazon.

When exploring Bolsonaro's discourse on the Amazon fires, having as reference points the archetypes of risk communication and populist communication, one can also notice a barely null combination of both,<sup>16</sup> with a predominance of populist communication.

This observation indicates that the characteristics of populist communication tend to be an obstacle to the effectiveness of efficient risk communication. This is because communication that is based on the recognition of an effective risk, in resolute orientations and the prevention of future events, seeking a consensual convincing of the population, tends to contradict the strategies of populist communication, structured around the division of society between supposedly antagonistic groups and the establishment of conflicts.

To summarize, when interpreting Bolsonaro's discourse on the media event of the Amazon fires around the “Day of Fire”, four main aspects were identified:

- 1) The discursive performance of then-president Jair Bolsonaro in his Twitter account responds to the figuration of the socioenvironmental event of the “Day of Fire” as a media event, which integrates and influences the power relations that permeate the event.
- 2) From this configuration, Bolsonaro's discursive strategy on Twitter is directed towards the change of meaning in the international discussion about the Amazon fires, affirming the existence of two antagonistic political blocks: on the one hand, Bolsonaro's government and, allegedly, the interests of the local people, with the support of the Brazilian armed forces and other ideologically aligned countries; and, on the other

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<sup>16</sup> Since both tweets that show a high incidence of both elements display them in different moments of the video attached to each of them.

hand, countries that attack Brazilian sovereignty and local organizations that, allegedly, act for the benefit of external interests;

3) The alignment of Bolsonaro's pronouncements with neoliberal ideology and the conception of nature exclusively as raw material, to be exploited as an economic asset, acts to delegitimize other ways of life and relationships with the forest and the land that are not embedded in the capitalist logic of production, such as those of traditional peoples and communities. In this sense, we refer to Couldry (2003) on Braudel's writings: "Braudel asks whom we should listen to in interpreting events: the voices on the surface, or the voices who appear nowhere on the surface, the 'silent ones'?" (p.56);

4) Jair Bolsonaro's Twitter posts, then, reveal a populist neoliberal discourse, based on the militaristic argumentation of protecting national sovereignty, and whose goal it is to sustain the political and economic power relations that prevail in the Amazon region. Strategies related to risk communication, which, we argue, would compose a discourse more vocally suited to the context of wildfires, were thus neglected in the face of communication that preponderantly features populist key elements (Ernst et al, 2019). Neither communication archetypes are therefore convergent in the analyzed discourse, indicating incompatibility between them.

This research thus demonstrates the existence of articulation between populism, which instrumentalizes mass self-communication to perform its ideologic features, and neoliberal ideology which, supported by militaristic discursive elements, seeks to regain hegemony over socioenvironmental issues. We therefore suggest that the triad *digital media*, *populism*, and *neoliberalism* was fundamental to the dynamics of the discourse that permeated the "Day of Fire" as a media event, allowing a populist leadership, which has Twitter as its strategic arena, to dispute and seek control of public debate, navigating among other political actors, ordinary citizens and different media. Whether this pattern is maintained in the ideological structure of other ultra-right leadership discourses on socioenvironmental issues is something to be determined in future research.

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