

Spotlight: Eyes on COVID-19 – COVID February 2021

War of Images and Messages

by **Esther Imperio Hamburger** | Feb 17, 2021

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Left: 01/24/2020 Buiding Huoshenshan Hospital, Wuhan Photo credit: Getty images (access 01/21/2021) Right: 04/21/2020 Enlarging Tarumã Public Cemetery, Manaus Photo credit: APUD Michael Dantas/AFP

My father was born in 1933 in Berlin in a Jewish family. I was born in Brazil and grew up during a military regime, one of the many Cold War South American dictatorships that counted on United States support. When I was 10, my parents were arrested, persecuted and tortured, causing my mother to have a nervous breakdown. She was 38 with five kids, the youngest ten months old.

Liberal cosmopolitans, my parents have engaged in science and education to make Brazil an inclusive and imaginative democracy. In 2016, when Donald Trump was elected in the United States, my father doubted his political wisdom. The discriminatory and flamboyant discourse was familiar: attacking otherness in order to reinforce national pride and purity, and to get media reverberation. He did not live to see Trump's close fan and follower become the president of Brazil.

These personal vignettes keep me attuned to the ways in which the Covid-19 global sanitary crisis interplays with the already ongoing transnational crisis of democracy, and to the role images play in this dynamic. In their social media, far right populist presidents circulate short videoclips in which they deny the emergency, refuse to wear masks, recommend non-approved medicines and engage in social contact. In doing so, they make fake news official, as if the invested position of power allows them to decide what is true and what is not.

Denial favors chaos and death. It is not a coincidence that since April 2020, and at least until early February 2021, the United States has ranked first in World Health Organization (WHO) **pandemic metrics**, including the number of cumulative cases and deaths, as well as the number of cases and deaths in the last 24 hours. Since last January, Brazil follows closely, especially in cumulative number of deaths, and deaths in the last 24 hours (note that WHO tables fluctuate and therefore comparisons might change).

Roughly one year after WHO declared an international public health emergency, the pandemic has been thought of mostly from medical, economic or political science perspectives. Nonetheless, the torrent of images transnationally produced and circulated are key to

understanding how they contribute to shape public opinions around the world, whilst previous ongoing shifting power relations move on.



**Influencer Whindersson Nunes raises money to help Manaus with SOS AM
(Credit:Instagram and Twitter)**

The first images I recall show an impressive Chinese work of engineering: the building of an entire hospital in Wuhan in just ten days, specifically devoted to patients with the new disease. In a perverse way, images of mass graves dug in a public Manaus cemetery in Brazil mimic the Chinese image, but each carry very different meanings.

Both pictures were taken from above, probably with remote-control drones: We look at them from a sort of divine point of view. While the first one shows dozens of bulldozers of various colors in a sort of frenetic and industrious pattern, the second shows a lonely bulldozer excavating a big mass grave—perhaps because it is unable to dig individual graves fast enough to cope with the accelerated demand. Seen from above, the bulldozers in the two pictures look surprisingly alike. They are conventional, not too modern, and from a distance, seem miniscule— insects, tadpoles or sperm. One suggests initiative, digging foundations of a new building, while the other signals defeated, a lonely machine unable to provide the victims of the disease and their families, with proper funerals.

The Chinese image shows the reaction of a giant Northern hemisphere bi-millennial country, the most populated in the world, where the pandemic originated. It suggests a tough government effort of combat the virus. The second picture is of a municipal cemetery in a country below the equator, in the heart of the rain forest. It shows devastation, fragility, calls for help—and solidarity.

China and other Eastern countries, such as Taiwan, Thailand and South Korea, were more prepared to face this pandemic due to previous experiences with viruses such as SARS. It seems that they did not have to deal with shortage of basic materials such as alcohol, masks, breathing machines, chemical inputs to fabricate tests and vaccines.

Furthermore, their population is already experienced in the need to wear masks and practice social distancing during pandemics.

With the imagetic register of the hospital building, China responded to international accusations for being slow to acknowledge what was then an epidemic. Then China shut down. At least in this southern part of the world, images from China became rare, but its presence is felt through their vaccines, whereas Western help is scarce.

Scientific knowledge about the possible new outbreaks of animal virus' infecting humans was widespread in universities, political venues and the media, including film. Nonetheless most Western governments did not invest in preventative strategies to deal with possible outbreaks. Moreover, while denying the ongoing crisis, ultraliberal forces seem to attempt to turn intense flux of images, messages and news into a kind of shield against the true need for a common humanitarian effort to save lives.

In Brazil, a systematic campaign is underway to **undermine the use of masks** and official efforts by state and municipal governments to promote social distancing. Politicians and federal government officials repeatedly encourage crowded parties and demonstrations. This campaign speaks to a population—elite and politicians included—who has never worn masks before, who listen to anti-vaccine campaigns, and who many times live in crowded small houses or shacks where social distance is hard to achieve.



São Paulo, Brazil. Portrait of Antonio Ednaldo da Silva close to a street dump in front of his house at the favela of Paraisópolis. Credit: Gui Christ/The National Geographic Society. Gui Christ was the third-place winner (tied) in the photo competition “Documenting the Impact of Covid-19 through Photography: Collective Isolation in Latin America,” curated in collaboration with ReVista and the DRCLAS Art, Culture, and Film program.

Absent images might be as significant as the reiterative presence of provocative performances of denial. The lack of national coordination, respect for technical expertise and threats of budget cuts have overstressed an otherwise robust (although not perfect) universal public health system (known as Sistema Único de Saúde, SUS) which includes family health teams specializing in homecare. Brazil has not promoted mass Covid-19 testing or made an effort at contact tracing. Nonetheless I can not imagine what would be the situation now without this stressed public system, even though pictures of its sometimes amazing work are hard to find.

Thanks to well-known Brazilian expertise in mass vaccination campaigns, and to the initiative of two solid public health research

institutions, State of São Paulo Instituto Butantan, and Federal government FioCruz Foundation, the country counts now with two vaccine contracts, one with Chinese Coronavac, and the other with Oxford-AstraZeneca. Although community, social movements and civic solidarity have been strong since the beginning, only recently this presence starts to be more aggressive in the front of the production of images. MC Fioti, for example adapted his erotic hit *Bum, bum, tan, tan* to salute the vaccine. His **performance**, shot on location, included Butantan Institute professionals.

Community initiatives have stepped into the breach, providing places for Covid patients with mild symptoms who do not need hospitalization, but who would contaminate family members if they stayed home. Rather than a public policy, this seems to have been initiated by local health facilities and/or local civic leaders. These **organizations** have also provided masks and food for **needy citizens**. When the federal government finally did step in with financial support, its political support increased.

This goes hand-in-hand with the fact that civil and community groups risk losing the media battle to the president and his supporters who are able to manipulate the media to their benefit by continually spreading provocative and consistent falsehoods. This is true with both traditional media outlets and on social media where constructive efforts of solidarity are lost for now in a daily war of images that set the social agenda.

Very recently, the collapse of Manaus' health system and the lack of a federal vaccination plan has **provoked a wave** of protests and **enlarged** an already strong effort of **civic solidarity**. The interruption of government unemployment assistance and government's inability to deal with the

pandemic have recently caused the president's popularity to go down and **opposition** in the **social media** to rise.

Nonetheless, candidates supported by the president have just won the elections for the heads of the Senate and Congress, even while people continue to die of Covid-19. This is because the agenda of the politicians is still dominated by the now-phantasmatic car wash anti-corruption operation. Many of these politicians, including the new congressional president, are defendants in the court case trying those involved in the scheme.



São Paulo, Brazil. Portrait of the sisters Aryelle and Aryanne de Jesus at the stairs that lead to their family’s house at the favela of Paraisópolis. Credit: Gui Christ/The National Geographic Society. Gui Christ was the third-place winner (tied) in the photo competition “Documenting the Impact of Covid-19 through Photography: Collective Isolation in Latin America,” curated in collaboration with ReVista and the DRCLAS Art, Culture, and Film program.

Trump's presence in the White House inspired and impacted Brazilian politics as I had never seen before. In the United States the disastrous handling of the pandemic favored a broad political alliance that managed to defeat Trump and reaffirm democratic values. But it is still not clear how Biden's election will reverberate in Brazil and what political consequences the bad handling of the pandemic will have. The question is how to undermine the popularity of provocative anti-human rights messages that—not unlike the virus—spread through our digital systems.

Social media platforms are powerful channels of interactive production and circulation of images, and messages. They reverberate, but they also feed the conventional media with provocative—and many times fake—de-constructive contents. It is not uncommon that television networks reproduce self-recorded videos the president circulates in social media. An emerging new agenda for a planet challenged by multiple environment troubles, and by social, race and ethnic inequalities has to further occupy the screens. Perhaps donations and solidarity have never been so strong, but also so invisible. Is it possible to use algorithms to empower the shared production of constructive and democratic knowledge?

This constructive and democratic knowledge has deep roots, sometimes going back 500 years. For example, after Europeans arrived in South America, native peoples have mastered the tactic of social distancing, which for them means hiding from contamination in the jungle. Already before COVID-19, in their potent reversed anthropologies, Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert in *The Falling Sky* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2018) and Ailton Krenak in *Ideas to postpone the end of the world* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2020 [2019]) diagnosed the

crisis of a whole way of life—Max Weber would hardly identify with what he called “the spirit of capitalism.”

I finish with a Shaman’s message, a work of counter-image, an appeal for whites to understand themselves as part of an environment inhabited by a multiplicity of visible and invisible, vegetable, animal, minerals, spiritual and material beings, in support of the Yanomami’s effort “to hold the sky.” The fast-paced style of both the text and images of this message attests that the **video** in itself suggests that it is possible to *live together*. That indeed is the power of image.

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