

ARTICLE

# JOURNALISTIC NARRATIVES ABOUT THE “DAY OF FIRE”:

## a Luso-Brazilian perspective on the Amazon



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**ABSTRACT** – The “day of fire” in the Amazon refers to forest fires allegedly caused by farmers in the state of Pará, Brazil, in 2019. This article aims to identify and understand the strategies for constructing journalistic narratives about this event. *Folha de S.Paulo* (Brazil) and *Público* (Portugal) were the newspapers selected for the observation and analysis of the case. As data collection techniques/tools, an analysis grid was used (direct observation), and semi-structured interviews with journalists involved in the case coverage (indirect observation). The pragmatic analysis of the journalistic narrative was applied to the discursive analysis. The results show that, in the Brazilian newspaper, the conflict was structured with a beginning, middle, and end, and produced the sense that environmental crimes in the Amazon remain unpunished. In the Portuguese newspaper, the conflict ended in anticlimax and created the feeling that it was necessary to save the Amazon for the next generations.

Key words: Amazon. Journalistic narratives. Pragmatic analysis of the journalistic narrative. Brazil. Portugal.

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## NARRATIVAS JORNALÍSTICAS SOBRE O “DIA DO FOGO”: um olhar luso-brasileiro sobre a Amazônia

**RESUMO** – O “dia do fogo” na Amazônia refere-se aos incêndios florestais alegadamente provocados por agropecuaristas do Estado do Pará, no Brasil, em 2019. Neste artigo pretende-se identificar e compreender as estratégias de construção das narrativas jornalísticas sobre este acontecimento. Foram selecionados os jornais Folha de S.Paulo (Brasil) e Público (Portugal) para a observação e análise do caso. Como técnicas/instrumentos de recolha dos dados, recorreu-se a uma grelha de análise (observação direta) e entrevistas semiestruturadas com jornalistas envolvidos na cobertura do caso (observação indireta). Para a análise discursiva, operacionalizou-se a análise pragmática da narrativa jornalística. Os resultados revelam que, no jornal brasileiro, o conflito foi estruturado com começo, meio e fim, bem como produziu o sentido de que os crimes ambientais na Amazônia ficam impunes. Já no jornal português, o conflito terminou em anticlímax e produziu o sentido de que é preciso salvar a Amazônia para as próximas gerações.

**Palavras-chave:** Amazônia. Narrativas jornalísticas. Análise pragmática da narrativa jornalística. Brasil. Portugal.

## NARRATIVAS PERIODÍSTICAS SOBRE EL “DÍA DEL FUEGO”: una mirada luso-brasileña a la Amazonía

**RESUMEN** – El “día del fuego” en la Amazonía se refiere a los incendios forestales supuestamente provocados por agricultores en el estado de Pará, Brasil, en 2019. Este artículo tiene como objetivo identificar y comprender las estrategias para construir narrativas periodísticas sobre este evento. Folha de S.Paulo (Brasil) y Público (Portugal) fueron los periódicos seleccionados para la observación y análisis del caso. Como técnicas/herramientas de recolección de datos se utilizó una matriz de análisis (observación directa) y entrevistas semiestructuradas a periodistas involucrados en la cobertura del caso (observación indirecta). El análisis pragmático de la narrativa periodística se aplicó al análisis discursivo. Los resultados muestran que, en el diario brasileño, el conflicto se estructuró con un principio, un medio y un final, y produjo la sensación de que los crímenes ambientales en la Amazonía quedan impunes. En el diario portugués, el conflicto terminó en anticlímax y creó la sensación de que era necesario salvar la Amazonía para las próximas generaciones.

**Palabras clave:** Amazonía. Narrativas periodísticas. Análisis pragmático de la narrativa periodística. Brasil. Portugal.

### 1 Introduction

According to Brazilian police investigations, farmers from the State of Pará (Brazil), through a WhatsApp group, articulated to set fire to previously deforested areas of the Amazon. The action was to take place on a single day, August 10, 2019 (called by the organizers the “day of fire”), and the aim was to clear the pastures to show President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) that they “wanted to work” (Camargos, 2019). On that day, the flames took over the municipalities of Novo Progresso, Altamira, and São Félix do Xingu.

Later, the forest fires spread to other Brazilian biomes: Cerrado and Pantanal (Valente, 2019).

This article takes the “day of fire” in the Amazon as an event. Among the different possibilities of conceptualization, it sought, from the Chicago School (Dewey, 2012; James, 2004; Mead, 1934; Peirce, 1995), to perceive the event as an emergency that establishes meanings and breaks with the continuity of experience, because, by emerging in the present, it summons the past and repositions the future. Moreover, the event is inscribed in a context. It gains a new dimension to the extent that it is described and narrated by the media, even if it is not limited to the representation or the media report (França, 2012; Quéré, 2012; Simões, 2014). The journalistic narratives prove to be privileged instruments for understanding the “day of fire” in the Amazon since the discourse at play manifests the meanings produced by society about itself (Martins, 2005).

The following question was posed: what journalistic narratives about the “day of fire” in Amazonia were there, and how were they produced? The discussion will initially focus on the theoretical articulation between event, discourse, and narrative’s interface with journalism to answer that question. Then, the methodological procedures adopted in this case study will be explained, aiming to highlight a Luso-Brazilian perspective based on *Folha de S.Paulo* (Brazil) and *Público* (Portugal) newspapers. Finally, the journalistic narratives produced about the “day of fire” in the Amazon will be presented and discussed based on the movements (figure 1) pointed out by Motta (2007).

This paper is expected to contribute to studies on media and discourse by detailing the methodological options for the application of the analysis of journalistic narratives. On this subject, it is paramount to understand the difference between the concept of discourse, the discipline (discourse analysis), and the analysis technique. The concept of discourse applies both to its strict linguistic-textual description and to the ideological formations that organize the subject’s knowledge and experience. Several authors contributed to studies on discourse, so there is no single path for its theoretical-methodological apprehension. In the metaphor of Guimarães et al. (2020), discourse analysis represents an umbrella, whose structure (its stems) shelters different epistemological approaches. In addition, the analysis device has undergone constant changes over time, in line with the very nature of the discipline, which admits discourse

as a materiality in continuous movement and which can show new meanings according to the conditions of production. It is, therefore, an unfinished theory.

Indeed this research does not align with the French nor the Anglo-Saxon traditions in the discipline of discourse analysis. However, it starts from the concept of “journalistic discourse” for the execution of discursive analysis. For Carlson (2016), discourses comprise a territory of fragmentary utterances expressed by a range of actors that shape and constrain meanings, identities, and conceptual boundaries. Therefore, the journalistic discourse does not represent a stable entity, but rather a set of institutionalized practices inserted in a web of discourses, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting, that generate social meanings. Making sense of this discursive environment requires attention to the conditions of journalism, the actors involved and the interpretive processes at work.

According to Motta (2013), journalistic narratives reveal themselves in the way everyday news deal with time and organize it, since, in journalistic reporting, time is diffuse, anarchic, and inverted. Therefore, the narrativizing look reconfigures the reports as thematic units, that is, intrigues with the beginning, middle, and end of a single story. In dialogue with *Temps et récit* (1989), by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, which offers innovation at the level of discourse by presenting an epistemological path for the invention of intrigue, Motta (2004, p. 15) states that:

the news is partial fragments of stories, of characters and actors of human dramas and tragedies told and retold daily, punctuated with gaps and gaps in meaning that need to be permanently negotiated by the receiver in the act of reading. The news diffusely condenses conflicts, tensions, terror, and pity. It is the receiver of the fragmented news who will connect the parts, weave the ties of temporal significance, fill in the gaps, reconfigure the indeterminacies, articulate past, present, and future, assemble the crossed puzzles of intrigue and meanings through creative acts of reception. It is in the imaginative interpretation of the reader or listener that the journalistic narrative gains narrativity and consistency, gains moral and ethical contours, and reconfigures significant stories regardless of the identity or intrinsic qualities and styles of the text. The reader does this because he needs and seeks to temporally link the fragmented news episodes with the diffuse stories of his life, continually replacing the act of reception in culture, time, in the world of life.

Accordingly, Carvalho (2012) states that journalistic narratives reveal the context in which human action develops, as it is possible to verify the ontological and ideological assumptions that

guide the production of news, that is, the marks of the social, the cultural, political, and economical. When re-appropriated in the act of reading, journalistic narratives provide rational explanations for reality. Therefore, time is a fundamental dimension, as telling a story is not limited to updating the events described. These will only make complete sense as they are picked up and constructed from intrigue.

The concept of “narratives” is not operated from the point of view of literary journalism. Moreover, unlike the analysis of naturally occurring conversations (Mykietiak, 2015), it highlights the production and sharing of social meanings over time. Journalistic texts matter as a whole. That is precisely one of the challenges posed by the analysis of journalistic narratives because, to some extent, each text bears its own meaning and structure. This study involves, through the movements proposed by Motta (2007), demonstrating how and why certain meanings were produced in a certain period.

We also highlight the social relevance of this research. As a socially constructed discourse, journalistic discourse exposes society’s values since it is embedded in society (Lewis, 2019; McNair, 1998; Schudson, 2011). Herzog (2016) argues that discursive analysis’s sociological nature contributes to the examination of material practices and realities, overcoming the empirical pitfall of the normative approach. It is not about prescribing how social reality should be but about grounding, anchoring, or justifying its normative claims. Therefore, besides perceiving the marks of the journalistic production conditions, looking at two reference periodicals offers clues about the understanding of the Luso-Brazilian society about the Amazon and the environment at large. As it is known, the emission of greenhouse gases affects the whole world without distinction, so it is important to understand how, in both countries, the discourse on environmental problems is constructed, especially because they are both particularly vulnerable to climate change (A. Carvalho, 2011; Carvalho et al., 2014; Carvalho & Loose, 2018).

## **2 From the event to the journalistic narratives**

To conceptualize the event, we resort to the legacy of the Chicago School (also known as pragmatism), a philosophical tradition originally from the United States of America that, very broadly, seeks to understand the world inseparably from the action within

it. Originally published in 1878, Peirce (1995) was one of the first to reflect on the action of thought as a stopping point when doubt becomes a belief and also as a starting point when more doubt and reflection spring from the application of the belief.

In 1907, James (2004) further explored the ideas of Peirce (1995) by focusing on materiality and adequacy, facts, action, and power, establishing pragmatism as a method and as a theory of what is meant by truth. In 1916, Dewey (2012) consolidated a radically empirical approach to philosophy, insisting on the need to observe future consequences from ideas (perceived as the action within the flow of experience) and not from objects. To this philosopher, knowledge is related to something done in the physical world. Dewey's (2012) approach influenced Mead (1934), to whom the development of the individual (self) is closely linked to the development of language. That is, language is part of social behavior.

The pragmatist heritage was essential to Louis Quéré's reflections about the event. To Lage & Salgado (2011), Quéré explained that people are constantly confronted with unanticipated occurrences, so they need to organize their behavior, that is, react to what is beyond their control. Given this power of affectation, events become important elements for organizing experience. Simões (2014) agrees, stating that the event bears the elements for its understanding, so it cannot be explained by causes and consequences in the world nor by foreign factors to it. There is a temporal dimension since the event constructs and illuminates meanings, highlighting a hermeneutic power. According to França (2012), the event causes rupture and disorganization, which then introduces a difference and breaks with the notion of linear time. It means that the event takes place in the realm of experience and is transformed into discourse from the power of affecting people and the ability to interfere in the framework of normality, raising expectations. Therefore, the event's potential lies in the identification, through it, of tendencies that point to the preservation and/or renovation of social life.

The journalist has an active role in the construction of the event. As a professional, he is bound to a specific organizational structure (the newsroom), whose interests and criteria of discursive production – for example, the news values (or newsworthiness criteria) – go through power relations, selection, and framing (Neveu, 2005). Therefore, the journalistic discourse has its own characteristics, such as objectivity – in the sense of permanent movement toward

a real external objective, whose existence does not depend on people's will – and singularity – to the extent that it activates the sense, contradicts the regularity and surfaces as new and unique, sealing the verbal contract (França, 1998) –, as well as authorship and ideology – because it communicates not only facts but a way of understanding these facts so that they make sense and balance the social forces (McNair, 1998). Thus, the event is the outcome of a strategic apprehension made by the journalist, according to the medium in which it is inserted, i.e., the discourse is not unattached to time; rather, it is related to the sense to which the newspaper intends to enunciate. Neveu & Quéré (1997) believe that public events derive from the routine activities, practices, and strategies of several interested social stakeholders, including journalists, their information sources, and the media.

According to Motta (2007), a thematic collection of news can be organized as a singular story to associate antecedent and subsequent events and to demarcate beginnings, means, and ends. So, journalistic narratives represent reality and are presented as actions developed according to cultural strategies in context since the news is produced in a specific environment (or around this environment): the newsroom. Each journalistic text possesses a unity in itself. However, by integrating the separate news items into a meaningful, cohesive whole, a unique story is obtained. For Feldman et al. (2004), a story consists of a subset of the narrative, distinguished by a beginning and an end, that is, a story leads from one specific place to another. The narrative unites the stories into a meaningful whole and can be constructed from different sources, such as interviews and documents.

### **3 Methodological procedures**

The “day of fire” was acknowledged as a case since the proposal was to conduct an in-depth empirical analysis of a contemporary phenomenon. In line with Yin (2014), case studies should produce knowledge within the context of the real world, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident. Orozco & González (2012) highlight the comparative purpose of case studies, as they tend to capture other elements of the broader context without necessarily representing them. The “day

of fire” represents a case study because, through the journalistic discourse, it reflects a perspective of the Luso-Brazilian society on the Amazon.

The Portuguese language newspapers *Folha de S.Paulo* (Brazil) and *Público* (Portugal) were selected from a non-random sampling process by typical cases. The international comparison aimed at characterizing a Luso-Brazilian perspective, given the prominence of the two periodicals in their respective national landscapes in the daily newspaper sector<sup>7</sup>. Also, their institutional similarity (both have editorial and style guides, and their content on websites since 1995) and their current marketing strategy to offer joint digital subscriptions (Carvalho & Dávila, 2020) and to republish each other’s content (*Folha de S.Paulo*, 2021). Although one cannot admit a “deterritorialized” or trans-local Portuguese-speaking journalistic community (Novais et al., 2013), *Folha de S.Paulo* and *Público* represent, to some extent, a foreign view of the Amazon. That is due to the disengagement of the forest from the other Brazilian political-economic centers, Latin America, and Europe (Paes Loureiro, 1995).

The “day of fire” was analyzed in *Folha de S.Paulo* and *Público* between August 2019 and September 2020. That allowed the composition of a corpus of 60 texts from the Brazilian newspaper and 61 from the Portuguese newspaper (among news, reports, interviews, and opinion articles). According to the stages of the investigation procedure proposed by Quivy & Campenhoudt (2005), amongst others, the techniques and data collection instruments involved direct observation<sup>2</sup> (which allowed the collection of information without interaction with the subjects, through the analysis grid) and indirect observation (through in-depth semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup>).

The analysis grid, which did not aim to produce quantitative information but to describe the corpus, observed the following questions: 1) What was the main nature of the journalistic text (information, opinion, interpretation, entertainment, or assistance)? 2) Were there any corrections in the texts? 3) Which tags were related to the texts? 4) To which section were the texts assigned? 5) Was there any information about the origin or location of the texts? If so, which ones? 6) Who were the authors of the texts (byline)? 7) Which news sources, if any, were quoted in the texts? 8) Were news agencies quoted? If so, which ones? 9) Were there any visual elements? If so, which ones? 10) When there were photographs, what was their content? 11) When there were photographs, who were the



photographers? 12) Which frames were produced by the texts? 13) Which information/data was frequently repeated, if any?

The information collected through direct observation allowed the composition of a sample of interviewees: the editorial secretary Vinícius Mota and the journalist Phillippe Watanabe (who bylined the most texts about the “day of fire”) from *Folha de S.Paulo*; the journalist and university professor and researcher Joaquim Fidalgo, one of the founders of *Público*, and the journalist Ricardo Cabral Fernandes, who worked temporarily at the newspaper and covered the subject. According to Noor (2008), the semi-structured format of an in-depth interview offers enough flexibility to approach different interviewees in a particular way that still covers the same areas of data collection. Guion et al. (2011) argue that in-depth interviews are suitable for situations in which one wants to ask open questions that elicit a depth of information from relatively few people, as there is an accessible and discovery-oriented posture. The main features of this data collection technique are open-ended questions, semi-structured format, search for understanding and interpretation; and recording of responses, usually on audio and supplemented with written notes (i.e. field notes).

Qu and Dumay (2011) agree that the focus on the interview guide, which incorporates a series of broad themes to be addressed during the interview, helps to direct the conversation toward the topics and questions about which one wants to learn. The semi-structured format of the in-depth interview is advantageous for its flexibility and accessibility, as well as its ability to reveal important and often hidden facets of human behavior. Because it is based on human conversation, it becomes not only possible but highly effective and convenient to collect information so that the person modifies the style, pace, and order of questions to evoke the most complete responses from the interviewees. Also, it allows interviewees to provide answers in their own terms and using their own language – which ultimately reveals the way they perceive the social world under study. At the outset, the open-ended interview script incorporated broad themes from the interviewees’ training and their career path to the practices, routines, decisions, and challenges associated with the coverage of the ‘day of fire’.

For the discursive analysis, narrative analysis was conducted, as it favors the temporal sequence of an action, as well as the relationships between assumptions or causes and consequences.

Carvalho (2000) states that, by default, the narrative analysis seeks to build and give meaning to a story as a whole from fragments of discourse. Therefore, this form of analysis refuses to split such a structure into smaller parts (for example, themes), as well as considers that a story has at least three characteristics: 1) the events are structured in a temporal sequence; 2) there must be a logical coherence in the story, that is, the events must be related by an idea or organizing principle; 3) a story involves a change in a given situation, through a series of events.

For Riessman (2008), attention to action sequences distinguishes narrative analysis from other qualitative analysis techniques. This is because the narrative consists of a discrete unit of discourse and its analysis depends on how events are related in sequence, to communicate meaning. Freeman (2015) adds that the core of the idea of narrative as a mode of understanding lies in its retrospective dimension, that is, in the fact that narratives always and necessarily involve looking back from some present moment and seeing, in the movement of events, episodes that are part of a larger whole. Narrative understanding embraces the historical nature of human reality, given that looking back does not impede knowledge, but rather an incursion, a path to dimensions of meaning that cannot be found in any other way. More than understanding "what happened when", as in the historical chronicle, the movement of looking back seeks to understand "how events and experiences can be related to each other.

Labov (2006) states that narrative analysis rarely allows to "prove", since it is essentially a hermeneutic proposal, in which the continuous involvement with the discourse, from the perspective of the speaker and the audience, promotes the exchange of information and experiences in order to deepen the understanding of what are language and social life. For the author, the narrative consists of a specific choice of technique to report past events. Therefore, he explains that the temporal junction is what, fundamentally, distinguishes the narrative from other forms of reporting the past.

Earthy and Cronin (2008) point out that narrative analysis is not a homogeneous entity and, within its broad competence, several models help to understand the social production of history. That's why the pragmatic analysis of the journalistic narrative (Motta, 2007) was selected. This technique proposes six movements (figure 1):

1) Reconstitution of the plot or journalistic event, whose objective is to connect the parts (the news fragmented by the daily editions of the newspapers) and to identify the thematic seriality, as well as the chronological narrative chain. The determination of the beginning and end of the new journalistic narrative, which will be recomposed by the analyst, is decided in a more or less arbitrary way, however, it must not dispense with rigor, coherence, and justification;

2) Identification of conflicts and functionality of episodes. The conflicts, as structuring elements of the narrative, make room for new actions, sequences, and episodes – which prolong and keep the narrative alive. Identifying the conflicts is what allows discerning and understanding the functionality of the episodes of the new plot articulated by the analyst: “Episodes are intermediate analytical units that report sets of relatively autonomous actions (motives) corresponding to the transformations in the course of history. They connect to the whole, in which they are significantly inserted. They must receive names to designate this functionality” (Motta, 2007, p. 150);

3) Construction of journalistic characters (discursive), whose recognition and functional dynamics are directly related to the identification of episodes. This is because the characters are actors who do things, that is, they act in the progression of the story;

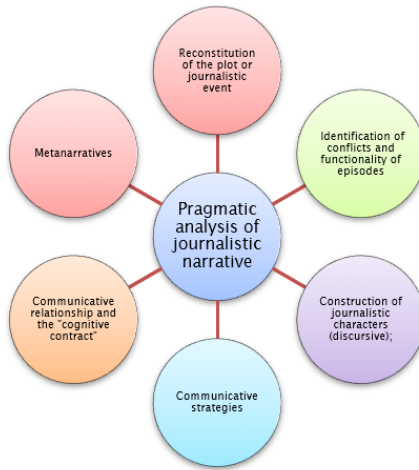
4) Communicative strategies, that is, the rhetorical devices intentionally used by reporters and editors. Here, there is a division into a) objectivation strategies (construction of real effects) and b) subjectivation strategies (construction of poetic effects);

5) Communicative relationship and the “cognitive contract”, which means observing the environment or the space-time situation where the news is produced, as well as identifying alleged violations of the implicit “cognitive contract” between journalists and their audience – which is inspired by objectivity and by the understanding of journalism as “the natural place of truth, the place of clear, exempt, precise text and without implicatures or assumptions” (Motta, 2007, p. 164);

6) Metanarratives (meanings of moral background or fable of the story), given that, if the news represents ruptures or transgressions in relation to some stable meaning, it is up to the analyst to identify, interpret and elucidate the new possibilities.

## Figure 1

*The pragmatic analysis of the journalistic narrative proposes six movements*



Source: Motta (2007)

## 4 Journalistic narratives about the “day of fire” in the Amazon

Based on the six movements proposed by Motta (2007), we offer the following pragmatic analysis of the journalistic narrative.

### 4.1 1st movement: reconstitution of the plot or journalistic event

In Folha de S.Paulo, the “day of fire” had a beginning, a middle, and an end. The event’s background dates back to January 2019, when President Jair Bolsonaro implemented a series of measures that undermined environmental supervision and control by Brazilian institutions. These include the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, Ibama) and the Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade (Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation, ICMBio). On August 5, the regional newspaper Folha do Progresso reported that a group

of farmers from the State of Pará was organizing a “day of fire”. Aware of the possible environmental crime, Ibama had no resources to stop the action. On August 10 and 11, flames took over the municipalities of Novo Progresso and Altamira. Throughout that month, the fire spread to various locations in the Brazilian and international Amazon, and a cloud of smoke hit the city of São Paulo.

Data from the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (National Institute for Space Research, Inpe) showed that the fires sprang from private property; in other words, they were not “natural”. Germany and Norway suspended the transfer of resources to the Amazon Fund. Through Twitter, French President Emmanuel Macron (2017-present) treated the case as an international crisis. There were protests in several world capitals against President Jair Bolsonaro, who had not taken immediate action to contain the forest fires. It was not until late August that Bolsonaro requested the support of the Armed Forces and issued a decree banning the use of fire in the Legal Amazon. In October 2019, the people involved in the “day of fire” were identified. However, none of them was held accountable. A year later, in August 2020, the deforested areas were fully transformed into pastures.

In Público, the narrative closed with an anticlimax, as, instead of a conclusive ending, the event simply disappeared. The “day of fire” in the Amazon started in July 2019, with the resignation of Ricardo Galvão, then president of the Inpe. President Jair Bolsonaro had accused the Institute of exposing false data on deforestation in the Amazon. Information similar to that of Folha de S.Paulo was exposed: the fact that the fires had spread beyond Brazil’s borders, that the smoke cloud had reached the city of São Paulo, and that Germany and Norway had suspended resources for the Amazon Fund.

According to President Jair Bolsonaro, there were no resources to fight the forest fires. The National Congress tried to articulate the resignation of the then Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles. At the end of August, the Armed Forces were sent in to contain the flames in the Amazon. Actor Leonardo DiCaprio announced the donation of five million dollars for projects to preserve the Amazon, particularly in areas affected by forest fires. In February 2020, Greenpeace criticized the Brazilian government’s actions. In response, Bolsonaro called the non-governmental organization (NGO) “rubbish”.

## 4.2 2nd movement: identification of conflicts and functionality of the episodes

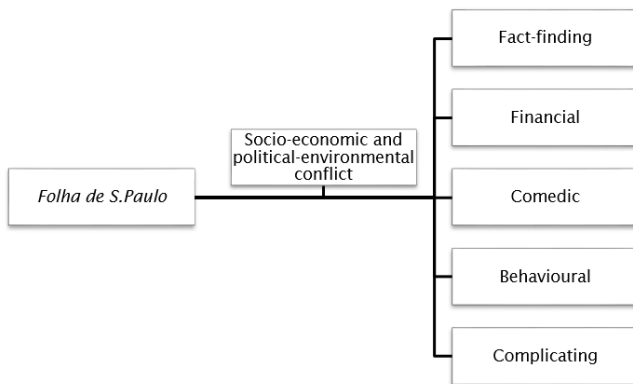
In Folha de S.Paulo, the main conflict had socio-economic features because it showed that the farmers' motivations for causing the forest fires were in line with Jair Bolsonaro's exploitative policy. It also had political-international features because it highlighted the Brazilian president's opposition to the French president, Emmanuel Macron, the European Union (EU), and the actor Leonardo DiCaprio, whom Bolsonaro accused of funding the fires in the Amazon (figure 2).

The Brazilian newspaper also reported five secondary conflicts with the following functions: fact-finding (as some celebrities and Macron himself shared false images on social media about the “day of fire”); financial (as it revealed the concern of foreign investors and Amazonian businessmen); comedic (as it highlighted the memes about Bolsonaro's accusation against DiCaprio and also the most searched words on Google and Twitter about the case); behavioral (because it showed how forest fires affected the Japuira village of the Myky people, in the Menku Indigenous Land, in the State of Mato Grosso); and complicating (since the journalist Adécio Piran, who had anticipated the “day of fire” in the newspaper Folha do Progresso, received death threats and had to leave the city where he lived).

In Público, the main conflict had environmental characteristics since it explored the scale of the fires in burnt areas and international characteristics because it also echoed Bolsonaro's accusation against DiCaprio (figure 3). The Portuguese newspaper also produced five secondary episodes. However, their functions were: commotion (as it showed the reactions of readers, politicians, and celebrities to the loss of biodiversity); hostility (as it emphasized the disagreement between Jair Bolsonaro and Emmanuel Macron); political-economic (there were different positions within the EU because countries such as The Netherlands, France, and Ireland wanted to boycott exports from Brazil while Germany advocated for a diplomatic route so as not to jeopardize the trade agreement between the economic bloc and Mercosur); institutional (since President Jair Bolsonaro participated in some international forums, such as the 74th and 75th General Assemblies of the United Nations (UN), where he gave false information about the fires in the Amazon); and protest (since it showed the demonstration in the streets of several world capitals in favor of the Amazon and against President Jair Bolsonaro).

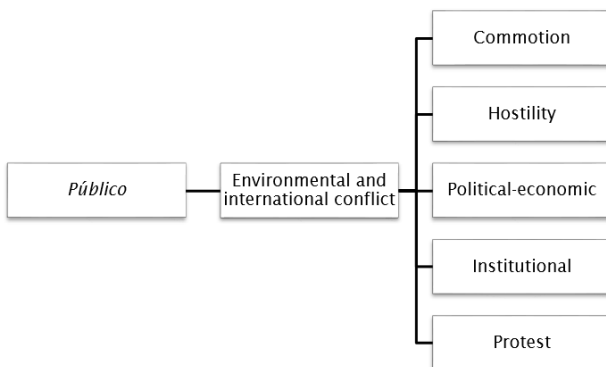
**Figure 2**

*Characteristics of the main conflict and functions of the secondary episodes in Folha de S.Paulo*



**Figure 3**

*Characteristics of the main conflict and functions of the secondary episodes in Público*



### **4.3 3rd movement: construction of journalistic characters (discursive)**

In Folha de S.Paulo, ten journalistic characters were constructed (figure 4): the “farmers, loggers and businessmen” who organized the “day of fire”; the Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters, namely, vice-president Hamilton Mourão and the then Minister of the Environment Ricardo Salles; the then President

of the United States of America, Donald Trump (2017-2021), and French President Emmanuel Macron, as Bolsonaro’s ally and enemy, respectively; actor Leonardo DiCaprio also as an opponent of the Brazilian president; foreign investors and Amazonian businessmen; indigenous peoples; and journalist Adécio Piran.

In general, Folha de S.Paulo referred to those responsible for the burning in an undetermined manner. First names were identified only in two texts published in September and October 2019, such as the merchant Ricardo de Nadai and the president of the Sindicato dos Produtores Rurais de Novo Progresso (Union of Rural Producers of Novo Progresso), Agamenon Menezes. However, no photographs of the two were recorded. More: according to police investigations, both were involved in the organization of the “day of fire” in the Amazon; however, in the journalistic event, the characters contributed little to the development of the story, since, especially Ricardo de Nadai, they did not provide information to Folha de S.Paulo. Consequently, little is known about the “farmers, loggers and businessmen” who caused the “day of fire”. These characters were cloaked in mystery, proved to be inaccessible to journalists, and remained unpunished by the Brazilian authorities.

The journalistic event went forward according to President Bolsonaro – more because of his pronouncements than, in fact, because of attitudes to contain the flames. Members of the government, namely Vice President Hamilton Mourão and the then environment minister Ricardo Salles, followed the Brazilian president’s stance of verbally attacking his opponents, mainly French President Emmanuel Macron and American actor Leonardo DiCaprio. The then US President Donald Trump was configured as a supporting actor in the story, since, although he stated on Twitter that he would help Brazil, he never took any action. Trump was invoked by President Jair Bolsonaro as an ally and as an opponent of Emmanuel Macron, but he did not act to move the story forward. The French president, on the other hand, was the person who drew the attention of international leaders (from the G7 onwards) to the environmental problem in the Amazon and, for this reason, suffered offenses from Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters (son of the Brazilian president, senator Eduardo Bolsonaro even shared, on Twitter, a video that called Macron an “idiot”).

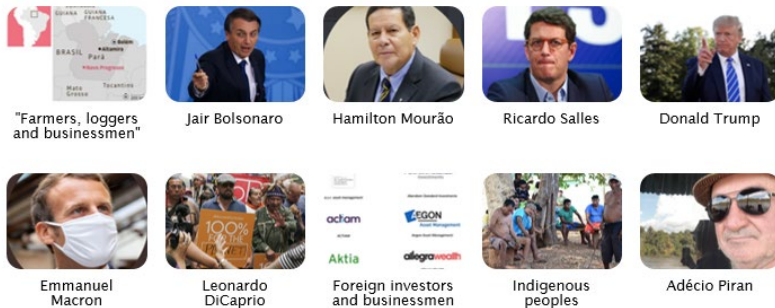
Foreign investors and Amazonian businessmen, as well as indigenous peoples, were also secondary and indeterminate characters, since while they were affected by the fires, they were not actively involved in the intrigue woven by President Jair Bolsonaro. Journalist



Adécio Piran was an important character for having reported, first hand, the organization around the “day of fire”, however, he was threatened by allies of the “farmers, loggers and businessmen”. Therefore, Adécio Piran also revealed himself as a secondary character.

### Figure 4

*Journalistic characters involved in the case, according to Folha de S.Paulo*



In Público, only five journalistic characters were constructed (figure 5): the President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro; the President of France, Emmanuel Macron; the then President of the United States, Donald Trump; the EU (namely, the government representatives of Germany, Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Portugal); and Greenpeace.

President Bolsonaro was the one who started the “day of fire” by creating conditions for the intentional burning of the forest to go unpunished, with the weakening of the environmental regulators (Ibama and ICMBio) and with the criticism and consequent dismissal of the then director of INPE, Ricardo Galvão. Even though he himself did not set fire to the Amazon biome, farmers and loggers in the southeast of the State of Pará, who were responsible for the alleged criminal act, did so on behalf of the Brazilian President. Instead of admitting to his involuntary involvement in the fires and/or demanding investigations to try to hold the alleged criminals accountable, Jair Bolsonaro began to attack NGOs, the American actor Leonardo DiCaprio and world leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron.

French President Emmanuel Macron was the character who antagonized Jair Bolsonaro, as he considered the fires in the Amazon

an international crisis (given that French Guiana is also part of the Pan-Amazon) and mobilized (unsuccessfully) the G7 to offer financial aid. Greenpeace was also an antagonistic character to the Brazilian President, mainly for the attempt to mobilize the European Parliament, in Brussels, so that actions would be taken to defend the Amazon rainforest.

Other supporting characters were EU Member States, namely Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Holland, Ireland, Luxembourg, and Portugal. In a way, all the leaders of these countries showed some concern for the termination of the trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur. Finland, France, and Ireland, pressured by national farmers, took advantage of Jair Bolsonaro’s disastrous conduct concerning the “day of fire” and blocked the trade agreement – which they had always opposed. Portugal, through Prime Minister António Costa, adopted a moderate position, out of respect for diplomatic relations with Brazil and European allies, asking for the forest fires in the Amazon and the trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur to be treated as different subjects.

### Figure 5

*Journalistic characters involved in the case, according to Público*



Jair Bolsonaro



Emmanuel Macron



Donald Trump



European Union



Greenpeace

### 4.4 4th movement: communicative strategies

In Folha de S.Paulo, the visual elements were important language resources that referred to the effects of reality. In other words, they consisted of objectification strategies. Satellite images, graphs, and

maps were used to emphasize the severity of the “day of fire” and counter Jair Bolsonaro and his allies’ arguments that the Amazon forest, because it is hot and humid, would not allow the spread of the fire. On the other hand, photographs served as strategies of objectification by identifying the journalistic characters involved in the event and the protests across the world’s main capitals and as strategies of subjectification, as they incorporated poetic effects to dramatize the case.

Several images published by the Brazilian newspaper showed records of the forest burning (by day and night, in the latter case highlighting the light/dark opposition) or the contrast between deforested areas side by side with the forest still standing. Little human presence in these images, and the lack of a record of someone setting fire to the forest, reinforced the dramatic effect of the conflict. As if, alone, the Amazon biome could not resist the flames because those who should protect it (Ibama and ICMBio) could not do so; President Jair Bolsonaro himself had made this environmental protection impossible.

Público used similar strategies. Photographs of the deforested Amazon forest and the protests in Lisbon and Brussels in front of the European Parliament reinforced the objectification strategies. It also reinforced the perception of time and space when it highlighted the time and place of the protests for the Amazon in Portugal. For example, August 23, 10 pm, Praça dos Restauradores, Lisbon; August 24, 5.30 pm, Praça dos Leões, Porto, and 7 pm, Casa Ninja, Lisbon; and August 26, 6 pm, Largo Camões, in Lisbon. Demonstrations showed that the Portuguese got involved in the “day of fire”, driven by the Brazilian community<sup>4</sup> living in Portugal. The subjectification strategies were mainly reflected in the gallery of illustrations produced by Público readers and in the discursive constructions of some journalistic texts, namely opinion articles, such as “*o céu nunca fica negro quando a Amazônia arde*” [the sky never turns black when the Amazon burns] and “*até os céus ficam de luto*” [even the skies are in mourning] describing the exuberance of the Amazon forest and/or emphasizing the drama of the fires.

#### **4.5 5th movement: communicative relationship and the “cognitive contract”**

Folha de S.Paulo has had different owners for over a hundred years and adopted different political stances (including support for the military coup of 1964). Only after 1983-1984 assumed its advocacy

for democracy in Brazil and gained political prestige (Albuquerque, 2019). About the “day of fire”, the newspaper made an effort to produce a narrative that not only opposed the conspiracy theories incited by President Jair Bolsonaro but did so based on reliable sources of information, such as Inpe. It also interpreted Bolsonaro’s false or inaccurate claims – for example, the journalistic texts that scrutinized the Brazilian president’s speech at the 74th and 75th UN General Assemblies and the “Bolsonômetro”, which measured the truthfulness of Bolsonaro’s speeches since his inauguration in January 2019. According to journalist Phillippe Watanabe in an interview for this research, referring to reliable sources of information, such as Inpe, NGOs, universities and/or research institutes, was Folha de S.Paulo’s strategy to lend objectivity to the journalistic event.

In Brazil, public funds are usually media companies’ main sources of funding (Mourão & Sturm, 2018). Only a newspaper not dependent on the government would have the material conditions to oppose the current highest representative of the national executive and head of state, on whom there were suspicions of involvement with militiamen in the state of Rio de Janeiro. In an interview for this study, editorial secretary Vinícius Mota stated that Folha de S.Paulo’s financial independence allows them to remain faithful to their mission to be critical, independent, and pluralistic. Mota also said that journalist Fabiano Maisonave, the newspaper’s correspondent in Manaus, Amazonas state, was key to exploring local information about the “day of fire”.

Meanwhile, *Público* built the case mainly around the international bias, which involved the clash between the Brazilian and French presidents, Jair Bolsonaro and Emmanuel Macron. University professor, journalist, and one of *Público*’s founders, Joaquim Fidalgo, said in an interview (to this research) that international news had always been dear to *Público* since its creation in 1990. Thus, the journalistic event was constructed based on the very nature of the periodical to focus on foreign affairs. It was also constructed for convenience since, according to journalist Ricardo Cabral Fernandes, in an interview for this study, the “day of fire” got more space in the periodical because it occurred in August when journalists and workers traditionally are on vacation. That might have been one of the reasons for the narrative to end in anticlimax: it received much attention at the beginning but lacked attention for the closing.

The discursive characters standing out were not the farmers from the State of Pará (who were not even contacted by *Público*) but those

involved in the secondary episodes. For Cabral Fernandes, the spatial distance between Brazil and Portugal made the narrative inconclusive. The Portuguese journalist's assessment may be correct, considering the geographical proximity's news value. Because it is physically distant from the Amazon, Público's discourse could not deepen the case's political and socio-economic issues and therefore did not conclude the event. It also built fewer characters than the *Folha de S.Paulo*. However, when assessing the news value by emotional proximity, the fact that the "day of fire" happened in Brazil explains the Portuguese interest, despite the organizational and editorial limitations. Perhaps another European newspaper would not show interest in the case since the greater number of Brazilian immigrants is specific to Portugal (besides the historical relations between both countries).

Some flaws in verification and understanding were observed, compromising the co-construction of the journalistic event in the Portuguese newspaper. For example, the name of the institution responsible for monitoring the outbreaks of fire in Brazil, Inpe, was mistakenly identified as "Centro de Pesquisas Espaciais do Brasil" and "Inep". The inaccurate reference to the Institute left doubts about whether the journalists actually accessed Inpe's database or relied only on information published by other media. Moreover, Inep refers to another Brazilian agency linked to the Ministry of Education, the Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira) – responsible for evaluating the Brazilian educational systems and the quality of education in the country.

Other misconceptions refer to the amounts offered by the G7 (in the same text, reference was identified to 20 million dollars and 20 million euros). Also, different dates were set for the "day of fire" (August 09 or 10, 2019); the emphasis on the erroneous idea of the Amazon as the "lung of the world", and the participation of activists from the decentralized left-wing media network *Mídia Ninja*. According to Público, the initiative came from "Media Ninja". In Brazilian Portuguese, media is written "mídia". However, in European Portuguese, the "i" spelling is wrong. It is impossible to know if the "correction" in the referred text was intentional, to spell the word in European Portuguese. However, it suggests that Público's journalists do not know the work of *Mídia Ninja* – which, regardless of being spelled "correctly", has its name.

#### 4.6 6th movement: metanarratives

Folha de S.Paulo’s journalistic discourse on the “day of fire” produced stable meanings, such as the Amazon fires being a serious environmental problem. Information scientifically attested by Inpe but discouraged by President Jair Bolsonaro, whose environmental policy aimed solely to exploit natural resources without respect for indigenous lands and conservation units. The environmental crime paid off for the farmers involved in the case since they were not held accountable. A year after the widespread burning, they achieved their goal of transforming large areas of the Amazon into pastureland for animal husbandry. The Brazilian periodical also reported various economic interests in the Amazon. Such is the case of investment funds to use the forest’s potential to fix carbon dioxide and/or to set up sustainable production chains with a view to the European consumer market, which is increasingly aware of climate change.

Furthermore, the hospitality and tourism sector exploits the exotic side of the forest. The idea of the Amazon as a “place of gunslingers” (Castro, 2005) was reiterated with the threats to the journalist Adécio Piran’s life. It emphasized that there are dangers in doing environmental journalism, especially in the Amazon and in independent ways, without the aegis of major newspapers.

Among the stable meanings produced by Público about the “day of fire”, the idea of the Amazon as a patrimony of humanity and that the Portuguese and Europeans, at large, are responsible not only for keeping the forest standing but also for leaving it as an inheritance for future generations stood out. The protests, the parties whose proceeds were donated to NGOs, the demand for companies to keep their production chains free of deforestation, and the possibility of boycotting leather produced in Brazil, were the main bargaining powers of the Portuguese and the Europeans identified in the journalistic event. Likewise, social media were consolidated as a space for commotion and disputes. On one side, artists and world leaders lamented the loss of biodiversity (albeit, in some cases, using images that did not correspond to the “day of fire”); on the other side, the Brazilian and French presidents, Jair Bolsonaro and Emmanuel Macron, insulted each other. At this summit, the Portuguese government did not take sides, as it sought to offer solidarity to the Brazilian people. However, it reaffirmed that the environmental clauses should be respected for the trade agreement between the EU and Mercosur to come into force.

## 5 Discussion

Folha de S.Paulo and Público constructed different narratives about the “day of fire”. Based on the movements proposed by Motta (2007), it was possible to understand how and why. The Brazilian newspaper produced the narrative that the “day of fire” was organized by farmers from the State of Pará who, in line with President Jair Bolsonaro, wanted to deforest large forest areas for farming and cattle ranching. The action was organized with the certainty that those involved would not be held accountable. One year later, the farmers were victorious, as those involved, identified by the Brazilian authorities, were not held accountable for the alleged environmental crime. They also achieved their goal of transforming part of the Amazon forest into pasture for cattle breeding.

In Público, one of humanity’s heritage, the Amazon forest, was at risk of being decimated, and the Brazilian government had done little to prevent such a tragedy. For the benefit of future generations, it was necessary to lobby world leaders to demand some accountability from President Jair Bolsonaro. The narrative of the Portuguese newspaper privileged the international aspects of the case. Consistent with its nature (pointed out in an interview by one of the founders of the newspaper, journalist Joaquim Fidalgo) to be aware of what is happening in the world and Brazil, in particular, given the large number of Brazilian immigrants in Portugal and the historical relationship between both countries. However, the narrative constructed by Público did not have a conclusion.

The different narratives about the case provide clues about the current (socially constructed) journalism and the social reality it constructs. Folha de S.Paulo made more resources available than Público to cover the “day of fire” (as could be expected since Público is geographically further away from the Amazon and to Folha, it was a national problem). Moreover, the first hired correspondents outside the city of São Paulo – like the journalist Fabiano Maisonave – and explored more graphic resources (as observed in the communicative strategies). Nevertheless, the event was built in both cases by the individual effort of two young journalists (around 30 years old) who did not travel from São Paulo and Lisbon to the state of Pará. Such an indirect understanding of the Amazon and the socio-environmental problems, not from field experience, consolidated two foreign views marked by spatial-temporal distance. Apparently, the journalistic practices and routines in Brazil and Portugal are increasingly similar

and bound to the newsroom, the official data, and the authorities’ statements. Therefore, they can hardly challenge the exploitative environmental policy of the Brazilian government.

Both newspapers consider President Jair Bolsonaro’s actions, which seem to favor large estates and illegal deforestation, to be serious. However, since the beginning of the 20th century, the Brazilian federal administration has appropriated the Amazon’s natural resources in a disorganized manner, for example, by building highways, hydroelectric power plants, and mining. Also, with no experienced enough journalists involved (when it comes to Amazon-related issues) to situate the event occurring in the present in a historical context and reassess its consequences, the importance of the Amazon in halting climate change becomes a fallacy. Data from Inpe, used by Folha de S.Paulo and Público as a source of information, were essential to understand the case. However, the numbers alone say little. It is imperative to confront data with lived experience to understand how people (especially the most vulnerable) suffer from alleged environmental crimes.

Differences in the narratives built by the two newspapers about the case were to be expected. As we mentioned, the news value of proximity cannot be ignored, so an extensive coverage by Público would not be expected. Surprisingly, however, the coverage by Folha de S.Paulo was not radically different: it produced practically the same number of texts and a similar level of investment. That reinforces the premise that the center-south of Brazil sees the Amazon as foreign as Portugal does. The organizational and editorial limitations demonstrated by Folha de S.Paulo and Público show precisely the difficulties in producing a skilled public discourse on environmental issues. The analyzed newspapers could barely challenge, in essence, the power relations that structure society and are implicit in the various forms of environmental degradation.

## 6 Final considerations

This article aimed to identify and understand the strategies for constructing journalistic narratives about “the day of fire” in the Amazon. Pragmatic analysis of the journalistic narrative (Motta, 2007) was used to examine the event, and convergences and divergences were found. Based on the six movements proposed by the author, it was possible to realize that Folha de S.Paulo and Público produced different



narratives about the “day of fire”, given the material conditions of each newspaper and the relevance itself (considering the news-value of proximity) that the event has for each of the newspapers.

The Brazilian newspaper produced a complete narrative highlighting the predatory actions against the Amazon forest, especially with the consent of President Jair Bolsonaro. On the other hand, the Portuguese newspaper followed the case at a distance, as expected, and did not provide a conclusive ending. While *Folha de S.Paulo*'s narrative highlighted the causes and people responsible for the flames, *Público*'s narrative emphasized the consequences of losing the Amazon forest for humanity. Such a position speaks better with the audience of the Portuguese newspaper, which is physically in another country. However, the organizational constraints of both newspapers make both the narratives they have constructed converge towards a similarly distanced ‘foreign gaze’ on the Amazon.

## NOTES

- 1 Data from the Instituto Verificador de Comunicação indicates that the average monthly overall circulation (digital and print) of *Folha de S.Paulo* in 2019 was 328.438 daily paid copies. In 2020, the number rose to 337.854. In 2021, it rose again to 366.089. Meanwhile, the Associação Portuguesa para o Controlo de Tiragem e Circulação reports that in 2020, *Público*'s digital circulation peaked in the third quarter selling 34.673 copies. This number was topped in 2021, when, in the second quarter, it registered a sales peak of 40.778 copies. See: [www.apct.pt](http://www.apct.pt)
- 2 According to the investigation procedure proposed by Quivy & Campenhoudt (2005), direct observation is the set of operations through which the analysis model is submitted to the test of facts and confronted with observable data. Therefore, it consists of an intermediate phase between the construction of the concepts and the examination of the data used. It must not be mistaken with direct observation as a method, which is based on visual observation and whose variants are participant observation of an ethnological type or non-participant observation.
- 3 Given the limitations imposed by the covid-19 pandemic, the journalists were interviewed via Skype on October 2 and 7 and December 15 and 17, 2020.

- 4 Data from the Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (Foreigners and Borders Service) show that Brazilians form the largest immigrant community in Portugal. In 2019, out of the 590.348 foreigners with regular residence, 151.304 were Brazilians. In 2020, out of the 662.095 regular immigrants, 183.993 were Brazilians. In 2021, among the 698.887 foreigners, 204.694 were Brazilians. The actual number of immigrants may be even higher, as the statistics disregard those who obtain Portuguese nationality. See: [www.sef.pt/pt/Documents/RIFA2021%20vfin2.pdf](http://www.sef.pt/pt/Documents/RIFA2021%20vfin2.pdf)

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