Institutional trauma across the Americas: Covid-19 as slow crisis

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Abstract
Building on theories of cultural trauma, this research examines institutional trauma engendered by the pandemic in relation to journalism and public health in the US and Brazil. The trauma stemming from Covid-19 marks a transformational crisis not only in terms of global public health but also collective confidence in institutions writ large. To probe these issues, this article takes advantage of a vibrant digital discussion among Americans and Brazilians hosted by three flagship newspapers in the two countries: The New York Times, Folha de S. Paulo, and O Estado de S. Paulo. The analysis reveals that both groups experience Covid-accelerated trauma that undermines Brazilians’ and Americans’ faith in foundational institutions’ ability to adequately respond to the pandemic. Comparing these interpretations of the Covid-19 crisis in the US and Brazil allows us to see how the acute health crisis triggered by the virus morphs into a form of institutional trauma, with deep implications for collective confidence in public health, journalism, and democracy.

Keywords
Bolsonaro, Brazil, Covid-19, crisis, cultural trauma, democracy, institutional trauma, journalism, pandemic, public health, Trump, US

Overview: Covid-19 as institutional trauma
In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic swept the United States and Brazil following the hotly contested elections of Donald J. Trump (2016) and Jair Bolsonaro (2018). The confluence
of these events accelerated already widening ideological divides in the US and Brazil. From this angle of vision, the parallels between the two largest democracies of the Americas offer an opportunity to probe how the slow crisis created by the pandemic results in “institutional trauma” that may ultimately be more damaging than the virus itself.

To examine these issues further, this research explores the interplay between the Covid-19 global health crisis and the institutional trauma engendered by its politicization. As the data show, both Americans and Brazilians express a profound sense of betrayal in relation to the institution of public-minded journalism, as well as in terms of their confidence in public health as a neutral institution above political interests. When combined with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, these crises culminate in interrelated forms of institutional trauma that deeply undermine Brazilians’ and Americans’ collective confidence in the state of their democracies.

To shed light on these connections, this research examines how these institutional traumas are framed by participants in three newspaper fora in the US and Brazil hosted by *The New York Times*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, and *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Discussants eagerly share their views in a vibrant digital multilogue that provides unusual insight into how Brazilians and Americans experience institutional traumas stemming from the pandemic. Analysis reveals the extraordinary and deleterious effects of Covid-19 on two key institutions: journalism and public health. Independent of cultural context, both groups’ descriptions of their views, fears, and frustrations point to a shared experience of Covid-triggered institutional trauma. For Brazilians and Americans, the ravages of the pandemic are not just to the physical body but also to the body politic indicated by degraded faith in foundational institutions including public-minded journalism, public health, and ultimately these institutions’ relationship with democratic governance.

**Theoretical framework and previous work**

It has been nearly two decades since the term “cultural trauma” was introduced into the social science lexicon by Alexander et al. (2004). The theory of cultural trauma clarifies the concept as a collection of discourses which encapsulate a collective narrative about the sources and character of suffering identified with a social group or social collectivity (Alexander, 2012). This collection of discourses can reference a historically distant discrete event or contemporary events, and can include a broader or narrower circle of people and groups in its sphere of moral concern (Zerubavel, 1993). Cultural traumas pose challenges to the identity of various collectivities and call for cultural and discursive responses. Typically, the elucidation of cultural traumas also entails the identification of victims and perpetrators, whether defined as individuals or groups. While most cultural traumas are backward-looking, some ongoing cultural traumas relate to unfolding existential threats such as pandemics and climate destabilization which generate narratives around potential suffering in the future (Demertzis and Eyerman, 2020).

Using the framework of cultural trauma, the sources, character, and consequences of large-scale suffering, treated as a culturally and narratively mediated phenomenon, have been subjected to detailed historical and sociocultural analysis. Beginning with detailed analyses of the cultural trauma associated with the Holocaust, as well as violence inflicted
on ethnic and minority groups by the state or its proxies (Alexander et al., 2004; Eyerman, 2001), the study of cultural trauma has branched out in a number of ways. Among the many concrete events which have formed the basis for cultural trauma narratives are wars, economic crises, and persistent forms of discrimination and mistreatment of groups (Alexander, 2012). This theoretical framework has given birth to important research into the narrative, cultural, and psychic dimensions of collective suffering in multiple places around the world and multiple historical periods.

In the last few years, a number of catastrophic events have occurred and their consequences fruitfully interrogated with this theoretical lens. For example, regarding natural events, the last two decades have witnessed extraordinary natural disasters including but not limited to storms, earthquakes, floods, heatwaves, fires, volcanic eruptions, and plagues. Natural events, such as Hurricane Katrina, and their aftermath on collective identities and understandings have been treated as cultural trauma (Eyerman, 2015). In addition to natural disasters, environmental crises precipitated by human activity are also increasingly recognized as generating shared cultural trauma (Brulle and Norgaard, 2019). Other events, including terrorist attacks and political violence also benefited from this theoretical orientation (Robinson, 2017), as have other types of historical events and processes (Demertzis and Eyerman, 2020). Cultural trauma ensuing from these diverse events has the potential to change communities’ identity processes as a result of both the initial event and its aftermath.

This research builds on this body of theory by introducing the concept of institutional trauma as a vehicle through which to understand the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on institutions fundamental to healthy democracies. Building on Beck’s concept of the risk society (2000), Abrutyn (2022) argues that institutional responses to Covid-19 constitute a form of cultural trauma, given the degree to which they have permeated every life realm and impacted normal social activity. Abrutyn’s claim invites us to tease apart the ways in which the trauma of Covid-19 differs from previous traumatic events on which there is clearer consensus on the starting points and endpoints of the initial trauma, thus bounding the trauma temporally. By contrast to temporally bounded crisis events, to date there is no clear consensus as to when the pandemic began or when it will end. Nor is there any consensus on how institutions have changed or will change in response to the long tail of the pandemic. For this reason, the Covid-19 pandemic opens the door to our recognition of a new form of cultural trauma generated by a slow crisis that is more difficult to pin down both during its duration and in its aftermath.

This article takes the theory of cultural trauma in a new direction by applying the lens of cultural trauma to both the virus itself and the domino effects on societal institutions attempting to grapple with it in order to introduce the concept of “institutional trauma.” Institutional trauma stems from the politicization of the institution in the eyes of the public or stakeholders. When institutional response to crisis becomes politicized, lines are drawn between culpable actors and victims in ways that pit groups against one another. The resulting trauma becomes embedded in the collective psyche as a form of collective damaged trust in the institution. In this way, when institutional trauma occurs, it extends far beyond technical or functional dysfunction that may be remedied without long-term loss of trust in the institution and the role it plays to serve its constituents in a functioning democratic society.
The concept of institutional trauma is historically situated in a larger period marked by diminished trust. The Covid-19 pandemic has intersected with a marked deterioration in institutional trust across advanced economies, not only in terms of the virus as an existential threat but also as a litmus test of institutions’ ability to respond to protect public health, the economy, and even democracy (OECD, 2021). Given the ongoing nature of the crisis that we are still experiencing, the Covid-19 global pandemic has given rise to deep questioning of institutional response to this global health crisis. As the ripple effects of the Covid-19 crisis continue to grow, there is increasing collective questioning of democratic institutions and their handling of the pandemic. As a result, institutional trauma results from collective understandings of culpability, blame, and other demarcations between those responsible for harm and those harmed by the crisis. Like other long-term threats to health and well-being, the Covid-19 pandemic has a long tail, with many secondary effects, and therefore provides fertile ground for examining collective faith in state-sponsored public health and journalism as apolitical institutions.

The politicization of the pandemic has heightened the perception that many existing governments, large private bureaucracies, and citizenries are incapable of marshalling the discipline and resources to stem these threats through institutional means. There is a twin perception that not only are these institutions failing in their duty, but also that they are being politicized, undermined, and weaponized by political actors without regard for the public good. This multi-layered menace provokes a generalized trauma expressed as the widespread perception that institutions are failing their constituencies. This institutional trauma has been given expression through a number of discourses and narratives, all of which refer to the decline of institutional capacity, giving rise to what I call institutional trauma. In these narratives of institutional trauma, many different sets of actors are represented as culpable for mishandling institutional responses. These narratives focus on institutional social actors as perpetrators rather than viewing the damages of the virus as acts of God or the natural world.

As the data show in this research, when Brazilians and Americans feel they can no longer trust bedrock institutions meant to undergird democracy, widespread institutional trauma insinuates itself into the fabric of society. In this way, the study introduces the concept of institutional trauma in terms of the perception of institutional dysfunction from the observers’ perspective. Nonetheless, the concept of institutional trauma could be fruitfully applied in future work to understand trauma to institutions from the point of view of members and stakeholders within that organization. Institutions that are politicized experience trauma on multiple levels, from both the original trauma and also the secondary effects of its politicization. Therefore, while it is beyond the scope of this study, the concept can be fruitfully applied to internal trauma wreaked on institutions by the ravages of the pandemic and its politicization, such as health institutions forcing medical personnel to engage in triage and to ration care.

Comparative case study design

From several months into the global pandemic in 2020 to the present, Brazil and the United States have led the world in number of deaths from the virus (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020–21). At the same time, the two largest
democratic countries in the American continents have also experienced deep ideological turmoil such that inevitably many facets of the pandemic, including governmental response, have become deeply politicized. Nonetheless, while scholars have examined the effects of the pandemic in isolation in Brazil or the US, very few of the analyses allow us to see parallels from a comparative perspective. Despite the global impact of the pandemic, the majority of existing studies of its societal impacts examines single populations largely within national case studies. While valuable, these approaches do not allow us to see the degree to which patterns may be local, national, or transnational in nature. In addition, notwithstanding the exponential growth of digital communication in BRIC countries, to date there is little comparative analysis of non-Anglophone populations, and even less research on the digital public sphere in nations like Brazil that have been most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. As no comparative cross-national research has focused on discourses politicizing the pandemic, we can say very little about the ways in which individuals across the Americas understand how the long tail of the pandemic is shaping our foundational assumptions about democratic societies.

This research allows for cross-national comparison and comparative case studies (Ragin, 2014) to understand Covid-19 as institutional trauma by examining a unique data set ideally suited to these foci. Drawing their constituencies from the two countries in real time, the data points in this study contain both intragroup discourses that participants use to define their own understandings of the implications of Covid-19, as well as intergroup discourses about the state of the pandemic-riddled world. As the findings will show, Covid acts as a catalyst in that participants are motivated to articulate their understandings of the impacts of the pandemic on their social worlds and political institutions. Participants detail beliefs and assumptions about their perceptions of the national and transnational threats posed by Covid-19. These discursive multilogues co-created by Brazilians and Americans provide an exceptional opportunity to analyze discursive patterns revealing a generalized loss of faith and distrust in the institutions undergirding democratic society: free and unbiased journalism, apolitical use of public health for the common good, and faith in democratic government. Therefore, the research allows us to see how ordinary Brazilians and Americans describe their experiences of institutional trauma vis-à-vis the politicization of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data and methods

Among the many interactional opportunities afforded by digital communications, digital newspaper fora hosted by global flagship papers have long stood out for the size and diversity of their user populations, as well as their capacity to attract national, expatriate, and international users (Robinson, 2008). The present research culls data from three newspapers of record from Brazil and the United States. The study takes advantage of naturally occurring discourse contained in three newspaper-affiliated digital spaces devoted specifically to Covid-19 hosted by The New York Times, Folha de S. Paulo, and O Estado de S. Paulo (with the S. standing for São); henceforth these will appear by the names used by many participants: NYT, Folha, and Estadão. The inquiry exploits a comparative case study design provided by simultaneous publication of YouTuber and TikTok-er Felipe Neto’s vlog commentary on the NYT published on the 15th July 2020.
In the vlog, Neto offers a wide-ranging critique of the Bolsonaro and Trump presidential administrations, including the claim: “Americans like to boast about being the world leader at everything but I’m certain that our leader, Jair Bolsonaro, is the worst Covid president in the world.” Within hours, Brazil’s leading papers run English and Portuguese transcripts of the vlog. The flagship left-of-center national paper, Folha, headline reads: “Bolsonaro is the worse president in the world, says Felipe Neto on the NYT.” The subtitle states: “In a newspaper video, the YouTuber pleads with Americans to not re-elect their lunatic to help Brazil deal with ours.” At the same time, the leading national right-of-center newspaper of record, Estadão, runs “Felipe Neto Says that Bolsonaro is the ‘Worst President in the World’ on video on the NYT.” In response, on the 15th and 16th of July 2020, Brazilians and Americans flock to the fora across the three newspaper sites to produce a total of 757 total comprised of 476 from the NYT, 95 from Folha, and 186 from Estadão. According to Yin (2011), non-representative data may have considerable value as revelatory cases. In this case, the qualitative data sets are valuable as historically grounded accounts from “ordinary” people interacting with one another in real time in order to come to grips with Covid-19 as institutional trauma.

Regarding the analysis of the data, the first stage of open coding was initiated with a general interest in the politicization of the pandemic but without any application of hypotheses derived from sources external to the data. Using a grounded theory approach, the universe of posts was inductively coded to generate categories based on participants’ views and terminologies.Grounding the analysis in the data, open coding generated a comprehensive inventory of foci and frames in the data as expressed by participants. At this stage of the analysis, several foci emerged: the theme of diffusion, the impact of the pandemic on non-health life realms, growing mistrust in institutions, and hostility towards those perceived to be mishandling the pandemic. To verify the reliability of the codes across the three case studies, subsequent rounds of code-and-recode were used to further demarcate and confirm coding categories. Moreover, in order to confirm any potential relationships between frames and nationality, an iterative strategy employed the random sampling of posts. These processes systematically confirmed and verified the codes employed and ensured that the findings here were not correlated with nationality but rather were shared by participants in both the Brazilian and American fora.

Although the analysis ensures reliability across the data set, given the unique nature of the data, this research can make no claims of generalizability to larger populations outside of the platforms on which they are hosted or to different temporal periods. As the data comes from readers of newspapers of national record, it is likely that the commentary is generated by members of the economically privileged classes, as well as readers who are actively participating in the fora, which sets them apart from the larger readership. Finally, whereas the two Brazilian fora are more likely to include readers from across the ideological spectrum, as Neto’s vlog was not carried by The Wall Street Journal there is no data from a right-of-center newspaper from the United States. While the commentary does not include a strong contingent of right-of-center views, a few participants voice confidence in their countries’ leaders and governance with posts such as: “Actually Trump has done quite well if you disregard the politics. The U.S. is
7th in the World accounting for death rate per capita ratio …” and “Bolsonaro is great president who speaks for the people. He is consistently both ethical and honest.”

Finally, a few caveats on the presentation of the data, in which minor typographical errors have been corrected for clarity. Thus, in the excerpt commentaries presented, beyond such correcting needed for clarity, errors and opinions have been replicated intact. Given the nature of some of the data it should be made clear that insensitive terminology and offensive material in no way represents the author’s views. Rather the data has preserved discussants’ own words, either in the original English or when translated from Portuguese.

Analysis: institutional trauma

Neither at the time of data collection nor at the time of writing is there consensus as to clear beginning and end points of the Covid-19 pandemic with agreed upon or tightly defined dates from which Brazilians and Americans collectively can mark their temporal experience of this global health crisis. Making the crisis even more difficult to pin down temporally or geographically, in both Brazil and the US, there is tension between the powers of the federal government and the autonomy of state power. Further, in each country, city and regional authorities may also exert greater authority regarding potentially contentious decisions, including stay-at-home orders, mandating public masks, etc. that may follow very different time intervals and deadlines. For all of these reasons, participants perceive the trauma of the pandemic as bleeding into multiple institutions that fail to act in unison to hold society together with a unified front.

As the data will show, the resulting mêlée amidst the ongoing march of the pandemic becomes internalized as deeply rooted institutional trauma. In discussing the pandemic and comparing presidents, parallels emerge between Brazilian and American participants’ views of the practices and policies implemented by each respective presidential administration. As the data reveal, both Brazilians and Americans make linkages between the ravages of Covid-19 and what they perceive to be the crumbling of bedrock institutions. For them, the crisis of the pandemic is emblematic of institutional trauma, degrading their confidence in political authority and an associated trust vacuum regarding journalism and public health. Taken together these multiple forms of institutional trauma stem not from a single traumatic event but rather from the multiple institutional crises deepened or engendered by the pandemic. Significantly, these discussants graft institutional trauma from the pandemic onto the larger ideological cleavages.

Institutional trauma: democracy

For Brazilians and Americans participating in the fora, their respective presidential administrations’ response to the pandemic is retrofitted and expanded to their sense of institutional trauma that, for many participants, stems from the 2016 and 2018 presidential elections. In this way, both Brazilians and Americans extend their sense of the pandemic as trauma to their larger concerns about the state of democracy in their countries. They make these linkages to the pandemic explicit in their commentary with colorful language: “Trump and Bolsonaro are the symptoms of the illness of democracy, not the virus
itself.” Not only do nationals of both countries see ties between the pandemic and their respective presidential administrations, but they also see this pattern as linking Brazil and the United States.

For both Brazilians and Americans, the pandemic is being weathered in parallel fashion in both countries: “Can we have a dishonourable tie between Trump and Bolsonaro, for the President with the worst response to the pandemic?” Other voices chime in to compare governmental handling of the pandemic as a form of institutional trauma:

It’s almost as if there is a competition between Brazil and the U.S. to see who has the worst president in handling the virus. Trump: “I take no responsibility at all for COVID deaths.” Bolsonaro: “Death is the destiny of all of us.” Trump’s country: leads world in COVID deaths. Bolsonaro’s country: 2nd in COVID deaths.

As residents of the largest democracies in South and North America, these discussants repeatedly use metaphors drawing on vivid analogies: “the two, Bolsonaro and Trump, are likely identical twins separated at birth.” While their metaphors may differ, both Brazilians and Americans signal a strong diffusion effect between institutions in the two countries. However, they do not concur on which country is suffering more deleterious institutional crisis. They go back and forth, offering competing rationales for why each should “win” this competition. As some say: “Trump is the worst – as he gave Bolsonaro all of his ideas!” Others push back: “Wrong Trump enabled Bolsonaro. Trump is worse.”

These matters aside, no matter which candidate they advocate for this dubious honor, many agree with Felipe Neto that presidential elections in one country have the power to sway the other. Thus, for those critical of Trump and Bolsonaro, nationals of each country have a vested interest in the 2020 election in the United States as part of the larger fight against Covid-19. In this way, not only do they agree on past causal linkages but also share a forward-looking view of the institutional trauma of the pandemic as implicated in future elections. Those sharing this point of view believe that the 2020 US election may have a domino effect in Brazil with the upcoming 2022 election: “help Brazilian people and yourselves as well.” Yet another Brazilian argues: “Your vote is not only about your country. It’s relevant for America, the continent as a whole.”

Over and over, particularly Brazilian contributors tie together present governmental response to Covid-19 and future election outcomes in Brazil: “The Brazil response to pandemic is embarrassing. America must help Brazil avoiding reelecting Trump …” In this extended temporal timeline, the pandemic is viewed as pivotal to institutional trauma with implications for future elections: “Formal institutions of democracy are functioning in Brazil, despite Bolsonaro’s attacks … I don’t know if we will be able to resist much longer if Trump is re-elected.” In this way, for them, the 2020 election is not only a referendum on crisis response to the pandemic but also potentially a link in a much larger causal chain influencing institutional crisis: “the Amazon is being destroyed and we have a military man in front of the health ministry, during a pandemic! Unfortunately, the mistake of electing Bolsonaro was ours, Trump is just the influential leader he uses as
a model.” As these points of view indicate, the institutional trauma of the pandemic extends both backwards and forwards into time and space vis-à-vis democratic elections.

**Institutional trauma: public health**

On another institutional front, these participants express fears over the denigration of the scientific foundation of public health as an institution, which should apolitically serve the people. In their eyes, the pandemic has ushered in self-perpetuating trauma in public health as an institution marked by a lack of “regard for human life, science, democracy, environment and for the entirety the peoples they represent.” Both Brazilian and American commenters reel from what they see as the erosion of public health for ideological maneuvering. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, they believe: “Bolsonaro rejects science when the only thing can save Brazilians is science itself.” For them, the dismissal of the science undergirding public health is a critical element of institutional trauma triggered by the pandemic: “I accept the right and left forces alternating in power as a beauty of democracy. Unacceptable are the rant, the anti-scientific disinformation and bigotry …”

For them, the institutional trauma extends from foundational institutions to scientific authority that is “discrediting and ignoring scientific judgement … We are now number one at most Covid-19 infections in the world … unbelievable, given all the capable scientists and medical professionals at our disposal.” They decry “ineffective leaders” who are “so imbecilic in dealing with any crisis or problem where science is crucial or any kind of expertise is required, from climate change to Covid 19.” Significantly, these participants believe that the institution of public health is being sacrificed on the altar of politics in what one American describes as “an alternative reality of fear, anti-science, and social Darwinism.” For them, the institution of public health is being diverted from its role to serve all citizens and even drive a wedge between them: Bolsonaro “doesn’t take science seriously and he is always trying to put the Brazilians against each other. He doesn’t have a government for all Brazilians, he has been excluding minorities …” Those critical of the presidential administrations accuse them of being “more interested in his election than the health and welfare” of their constituents. Another admonishes: “Can both presidents stop posturing and get back to the job in hand, keeping people alive and healthy and gaining trust and respect.”

As this indicates, discussants marshal what they see as evidence of the undermining of scientific authorities that is part and parcel of larger institutional trauma: “the conduct of the crisis by the Brazilian president who twice changed the minister of health and denies the gravity of the pandemic to this day and has worked against the governors and social isolation.” Another opines on the failure to set aside ideology in the interest of public health and the common good that the government: “has put its political agenda ahead of the health, welfare, and security of the people of the nation.” Others chime in with claims that political gain is prioritized at the expense of trusted scientific institutions: “Not to forget he’s in denial and is under the delusion he knows more than the scientists and doctors.” Critiques of the undermining of scientific and medical authority are equally trenchant:
Bolsonaro has been contradicting health experts since the pandemic started, advocating for a “vertical social isolation” which he invented and that has no scientific support nor evidence. Also, he said numerous times that Covid-19 is nothing more than “a little flu”. No health system can fight that amount of misinformation.

One summarizes the majority view: “President failed to provide effective leadership during the worst health crisis in one hundred years. World ranking of the worst countries. Brazil number one. America number two.”

Both Brazilians and Americans question the legitimacy of reported statistics and accuse the presidential administrations of influencing public health reports by: “trying to suppress Coronavirus data by cutting CDC out of the process” and “concealing Covid 19 data from the public to bolster his own image.” They accuse their governments of state-sponsored misinformation seeking to actively undermine scientific institutions:

Bolsonaro did all that as well. Suppressed COVID-19 statistics, called COVID-19 a “minor flu”, recommended prescription drugs to non-prescribed patients as a cure, fired 3 health ministers. Fired the 1st minister of health because he was actually doing a good job going against Bolsonaro. He did all that and much much more.

Others critique “the conduct of the crisis by the Brazilian president who twice changed the minister of health and denies the gravity of the pandemic to this day and has worked against the governors and social isolation” and “all hospitalization statistics to now be given to his Health and Human Services Secretary, instead of the CDC!” such that they believe there is active political manipulation to “‘go dark’ as far as public health information is concerned.”

All of these comments point to participants’ perception of public policy as weaponizing public health. In their eyes, presidential actions diminishing the role of public health to fight Covid-19 is evidence of institutional crisis linking the pandemic, the role of the state, and the politicization of public health; as one states: it is “all about politics, not science.” For them, this crisis of the institution of public health is emblematic of larger institutional failure: “the same chaos has been installed in education system, environment preservation, healthcare, economy and more.” Most important, they explicitly link this institutional crisis in public health to the state of democracy: “Bolsonaro is a nightmare for our fragile democracy and his policy in Education and Public Health is completely chaotic … a president and his administration who don’t believe in Science.”

**Institutional trauma: journalism**

Equally important, discussants identify what they see as institutional erosion of journalism that increasingly panders to the lowest common denominator. Discussants link their concerns to larger institutional trauma undermining journalism as a trustworthy institution that has chosen to pander rather than inform: “Bolsonaro is another Trump-like buffoon who seemed to have gotten elected because the voting public craved entertainment more than professional competence. Same with Boris Johnson in the UK.” Another
discussant critiques the state of journalism as indicative of the larger institutional trauma plaguing the electorate:

As a Brazilian, I would add that democracy is as good as the education of the people … in those countries in which education is performed recklessly, democracy often leads to dictatorship in so far as fascist tendencies include the idea of questioning science and the ones who have knowledge (a degree, some academic title). Here in Brazil, as well as at the United States people with no knowledge at all believe what they want regardless of proof, so it’s easy to deceive and redirect them with fake news …

They see the crisis of journalism as “what happens when a country’s citizenry no longer believes in the system of governance” and put forth causal chains between the denigration of public-minded journalism and the future of democracy:

Brazil is going through its worst moment in political history since its independence, in spite of terrible moments like the dictatorship of 1964 that, incredibly, is defended by President Bolsonaro himself. I know that he was elected because of a wave of hatred coupled with an agreement between bad politicians and an extremely corrupt judiciary (in addition to the cooperation of the media outlets that were only concerned with selling scandals).

They fear that journalism has lost its way playing to the public’s taste for infotainment and celebrity, which they link to other institutional crises in public health and democratic elections:

We are in a world pandemic, but not just Covid. It is a pandemic of stupidity. People elected these leaders because they stopped reading books, educating themselves, and rejecting real journalism for propaganda media and Internet conspiracy theory idiocy.

A number of Brazilians and Americans agree that the institutional trauma they experience from the pandemic is augmented by their sense that they cannot trust journalism to provide information that is needed: “I would like articles on the real issues like unemployment, poverty, education, national security. We are not Brazil and media is focusing on wrong things.”

Ironically, the very story initiating this discussion elicits rage at the state of journalism writ large. Particularly for Brazilians, the institutional trauma of the pandemic is aggravated by their loss of faith in journalism to accurately report on public health. For them, the fact that a mere YouTuber has been vaulted into the role of political commentator and public health expert by the *NYT* is a clear sign of institutional crisis. Expressing disgust at the state of journalism as an institution, Brazilians are flabbergasted that that flagship newspapers have deigned to promote a children’s entertainer as an expert commentator. Unleashing their ire on Felipe Neto, even those who share Neto’s views are aghast at Neto’s valorization, which they interpret as further evidence in the crumbling of the institution of journalism. There is consensus that “Sadder than having Bolsonaro as president, is having a Felipe Neto involved in being a political commentator. End of Times!” The elevation of Neto to membership of the chattering classes becomes a lightning rod for the vast majority of Brazilians and Americans to find fault with the current state of
journalism: “This is not journalism and it is a shame … everyone in his or her common sense would criticize the manner that both presidents are coping with the pandemic crisis created by COVID-19. Both Trump and Bolsonaro are terrible, but what was published today is just rubbish.” They decry what they see as the collapse of journalism as an institution symbolized by the elevation of Neto:

NYT is the o Globo spoken in English. And Felipe Neto is nothing. Now, speaking of NYT, instead of wasting time on this bullshit, Estadão could approach a subject that is boiling in the USA … how rigged mainstream American newsrooms have become and the threat to democracy …

In addition to repeatedly stating a litany of Neto’s transgressions (allegedly avarice and much worse), they are horrified by flagship newspapers’ headlining of Neto to the same degree that they are horrified by their government’s handling of the pandemic: “I didn’t understand how the NYT gave voice to a guy who got rich asking 5 year olds to call a number …”

For many, Neto’s moment of glory as a political commentator is the last straw, which the majority of participants perceive as the death knell for journalism’s ability and willingness to serve the public interest. For them, journalism as an institution has betrayed its obligations to public health and democratic debate on the pandemic: “It is frightening to think there are well-paid editors in this newspaper who have not recognized that in a crisis you need to have discipline and focus in the reporting and messaging.” They see the damage wreaked by the Covid-19 pandemic as rooted in the larger institutional trauma stemming from the interrelated crises in journalism and journalism’s loss of credibility as a trusted institution standing apart from ideologically turmoil. For these individuals, the NYT’s decision to run Neto’s vlog is evidence of appealing to the lowest common denominator. It is clear evidence of the decay of trust in journalism as yet another wave in the storm of institutional trauma: “They are not fake news but a way to present decontextualized truths… Worthless. I’m sorry NYTimes and Estado? giving space for that.” These discussants feel betrayed by the institution of journalism that they see as selling out: “Do we … deserve this kind of bottom of the barrel journalism? … It just confirms the general feeling that the traditional media is declining …” For them, this crisis of journalism as an institution is part and parcel of their larger sense of trauma induced by the pandemic that extends to multiple societal institutions.

**Synthesis: pandemic-induced institutional trauma**

The findings offer rare insight into the institutional trauma experienced by Brazilians and Americans as an outgrowth of the Covid-19 global public health crisis. As this research has shown, the pandemic has produced powerful waves of cultural trauma due to diminishing trust in foundational institutions. This slowly growing crisis intensifies to the point at which individuals feel they can no longer place their trust in institutions. As the findings indicate, discussants attempt to make sense of the pandemic as a 100-year event and do so by making connections with institutional failure to adequately respond to protect them. These Brazilians and Americans express a profound sense of institutional crisis
regarding the cornerstones of democracy: the appropriate exertion of governmental authority, citizen literacies to parse information about the crisis, journalism’s failure to provide impartial and unbiased coverage, and ultimately the perversion of public health as a politically balanced trustworthy pillar of society.

Contrary to early collective unification in the face of Covid-19, as the data show here, all too soon crumbling faith in institutions has given rise to division, fear, and loss of confidence. For all of these reasons, the concept of institutional trauma is introduced to capture the slow trauma induced by the pandemic, with potentially devastating consequences for Brazilians and Americans no longer able to marshal a shared sense of the collective as unified to fight the virus together. Significantly, unlike responses to previous disaster events in which tragedy is leavened with collective hope, the data here fails to reveal strong confidence in collective action or solidarity across ideology to continue to meet the challenges of the pandemic and its secondary effects on civil society.

As the findings have shown, both Brazilians and Americans report experiencing Covid-triggered trauma due not only to the virus but also the domino effect on societal institutions. Their discourse is marked with an awareness of diffusion on multiple fronts and the gutting of authority, both of which stem from the pandemic and threaten society. As the data make clear, while Brazilians and Americans may trust the ideals of science, they believe that the power of public health to combat the pandemic has been systemically undermined through its politicization. Likewise, confidence in journalism has plummeted during the pandemic. For these Brazilians and Americans, it is no longer possible to trust journalistic outlets to provide unbiased information necessary for public health messaging prompting solidarity. Rather, both Brazilian and American discussants frame the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic as multiple forms of institutional trauma noxiously seeping into multiple institutions necessary to healthy democracy.

The data from respondents here is mirrored by large-scale studies revealing a loss of faith in authority, particularly journalism and the press as a bulwark institution in both the United States and Brazil. According to Funk and Kennedy (2020), only 13% of Americans express confidence in the press and even fewer (6%) in Congress. Pre-pandemic deep-seated distrust of political institutions was quite high in Brazil with only 8% of Brazilians expressing satisfaction with how democracy is working in their country compared to 58% of Americans (Kent, 2019). Post-pandemic, Brazilians and Americans are even more concerned about the damage wreaked by the Covid-19 on foundational institutions due to large-scale fissures regarding inequality, politics, employment and education that are forming a tsunami of collective trauma undermining these institutions (Devlin and Moncus, 2020).

Yet even worse than the institutional trauma engendered by growing distrust of journalism as an institution is the blow to confidence in health science. Until recently, public confidence in science in the US had remained stable since the 1970s (Funk and Kennedy, 2020), with 44–47% of Americans reporting a great deal of confidence in the scientific community, and 89% expressing a great deal or fair amount of confidence in medical scientists to act in the public interest. However, as the data make clear, Brazilians and Americans identify what they perceive to be tampering with public health authorities such as the CDC as abuses of governmental power. Here we see how the dismantling
of public health by governmental authorities is accomplished through the denigration of scientific authority, the pushing of pseudo-science, and, perhaps worst of all, the suspicion that the state is politicizing public health science to “manage” the spin on its Covid-19 response. 

Yet none of these processes occurs in isolation. The ongoing onslaught is not limited to a singular slice of space and time but extends without any clear start or end date. As a consequence, the institutional trauma of the pandemic stretches across time and prompts us to consider the long-term effects of the pandemic as deeply rooted institutional trauma that becomes normalized across society. Applying the theoretical lens of institutional trauma to analyze the ways in which mundane and quotidian suffering has been evoked by the pandemic allows us to understand how the ongoing onslaught of Covid-19 continues to undermine collective trust in foundational institutions.

Significantly, these societal ills stretch far beyond any single administration as this highly “recommended” comment from the NYT forum illustrates: “When Trump leaves office in January, racism, corruption, science denial, conspiracy, insanity, and so forth, will not go away with him.” And, indeed, the issues dividing society from 2020 have only deepened into wider cleavages in both the United States and Brazil after the conclusion of the 2020 election in the United States. Despite the introduction of vaccines in Brazil and the United States, society has not been restored and unity has not been achieved. Rather, at the time of writing in 2021, the alarm calls raised in the data here are even more urgent today when these same politically motivated differences are driving vaccine resistance in both the United States and Brazil. Sadly, independent of nationality and ideology, the ways in which discussants in this research collectively envision the existential crises heightened by Covid-19 are even more intimately linked to larger institutional crises weakening the two largest democracies in South and North America.

**Discussion: institutional trauma as new normal**

Connecting these dots provides a meta-view of the institutional trauma experienced by Brazilians and Americans in the wake of Covid-19 that introduces the concept of institutional trauma. Findings enlarge the way we understand the processes of institutional trauma that is fundamentally different in scope than for previous disasters. Previous work trains its gaze on short-term, albeit devastating disaster events. Disaster events such as Katrina and Super Storm Sandy, as well as terrorist events such as 9/11/01, have engendered cultural trauma along diverse axes (Peek and Sutton, 2003; Trumbo et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the long-term physical and emotional trauma stemming from these events may ultimately pale in comparison with the scope and long-term impact of Covid-19 for several reasons: event duration, exponentially larger victim counts, and complexity of the domino effects globally (Robinson, 2021).

We have yet to see the end results of this ongoing crisis that may alter the way we understand institutional trauma as a process marking perceptions of democracy in Brazil and the United States for years to come. As the data indicate, institutional trauma must be parsed as differing in its effects from temporally or geographically defined trauma. In other words, the institutional trauma of Covid-19 has not resulted in
the same processes as other traumas that are more temporally or geographically bounded. From this angle of view, the Covid-19 pandemic calls for us to understand how trauma becomes mundane in the ongoing crisis in the present rather than a crisis in the historical past. Therefore, while foundational studies of cultural trauma emphasized interaction around disaster events as producing solidarity, emotional ties, and ultimately collective rebuilding (Alexander et al., 2004), institutional trauma presents another process in which disunity results from the shared experience of Covid-19. As this indicates, further work is needed to continue to monitor the effects of institutional trauma on key democratic institutions identified in this study.

**Directions for future work**

The politicization of the pandemic and other threats in both countries continues to lead to the diffusion of cultural narratives about institutional dysfunction. Therefore, key fronts for future study include the restoration of trust in public institutions to diminish institutional trauma and repair confidence in journalism and public health for the public good. From the top down, at least one study on Bolsonaro has shown that editorials from national flagship newspapers have the power to normalize threats to society to bolster election outcomes (Araújo and Prior, 2020). From the bottom up, future work is also needed on the power of journalism to promote unity as we continue to battle Covid-19. Given the crisis of journalism heightened by the pandemic, fresh forms of journalism may become an increasingly powerful tool in building or damaging foundational institutions. On another institutional front, the sheer rates of mortality from Covid-19 point to the need for future work on the trust vacuum regarding public health. Researchers would do well to look at the degree to which confidence in public health institutions will play a role in future elections, such as Bolsonaro’s bid for re-election in 2022 and Trump’s possible run in the 2024 US election.

Finally, another important consideration for future work on institutional trauma is the parallels between mortality from the pandemic and political violence. For many, institutional failure to combat the pandemic is perceived to be an act of aggression. Both now, at the time of writing, and at the time of data collection, the US and Brazil have the unfortunate distinction of leading the world in number of deaths from the virus (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020–21). At the time of data collection in July of 2020, the United States and Brazil had each suffered over 50,000 deaths from Covid-19. These early casualty numbers are comparable to the number of American military casualties in the Korean War and the number of Brazilian military casualties from the War of the Triple Alliance (Latin America’s war with the greatest number of casualties, in which Paraguay fought Brazil and its allies Argentina and Uruguay). This argument becomes even more apparent across time as, ultimately in 2021, we now know that more nationals of Brazil and the United States will have died from Covid-19 than from any military engagement in Brazil or the US, including the American Civil War, the most costly military engagement in American history, which took over half a million lives. At the close of 2021, we now stand at over 800,000 deaths in the US and over 600,000 deaths in Brazil, with numbers still climbing with each new Covid variant. With these somber numbers in mind, it becomes clear how the scope of mortality caused by Covid-19 results in
collective trauma, with ripple effects into multiple foundational institutions – areas future study must probe more deeply to avert this growing threat to democracy in Brazil, the US, and beyond.

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