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Opinion – Sou Ciência: Pro-science wave stops the advance of denialism in Brazil

By Robert

Against expectations and forecasts, once again Brazil surprises. In the last two years, the Brazilian population has been experiencing a boom in interest in science, caused by the pandemic and its effects. Although we are an unequal society and only 5% of the population have completed higher education, most support and want to know more about science. The 2018 presidential election fueled the fake news industry and fueled speeches that deny or distort reality and scientific and historical evidence. At that moment, it seemed that we were entering a period of obscurantism.

But history turned around, in the face of the tragedy imposed by the management of the federal government in the face of the coronavirus, the mobilization went in the opposite direction. Brazilian society, for the most part, reacted to denialism, driven by the need to fight the pandemic, seek reliable information and defend life. With the help of scientists, media and life movements, we have seen increasing interest in science, universities and institutes that produce knowledge.

It was in this context that we created SoU_Ciência. A center that brings together researchers and whose activities are aimed at dialoguing with society about scientific and higher education policy, especially about what public universities do, which in Brazil are responsible for more than 90% of the production of knowledge and shelter 8 out of 10 researchers in our country (). In a short period of operation, we carried out public opinion surveys, in partnership with the Ideia Big Data institute, in addition to analysis of social media, focus groups and news. We found that Brazil has 94.5% of the population in favor of vaccination against Covid-19, and that the anti-vaccination campaign led by the President himself has support of only 5.5%. What makes our country different from countries in Europe and the US, where anti-vax movements are much larger, we can still study. Certainly, the tradition in vaccinations obtained by the National Immunization Plan (PNI), in addition to the Unified Health System (SUS), are determining factors.

In our public opinion surveys, 72% of the population said that their interest in science has increased with the pandemic. This made 69.7% of respondents declare having “very interested in science” and only 2.2%, “no interest”. Among evangelicals and those who consider the government great/good, the high interest in science is also expressive: 63% and 62% respectively. In addition, 32.1% of the population declared having the habit of searching on websites, blogs and channels of universities and research institutes in search of reliable information and, surprisingly, 40% would like to read scientific articles. Comparatively, only 8.8% say they trust what Bolsonaro says about the pandemic, in a clear distancing of the population from the president elected in 2018.

The search for reliable information in the pandemic has led to a strengthening of the ecosystem that involves universities, research institutions and scientists in their ability to communicate and disseminate science, with an expanded space in the media. Two phenomena are worth mentioning. First, the competence that scientists had to communicate and warn about the new coronavirus and its effects, using social networks such as Twitter, and YouTube channels, as monitored by Science Pulse. from Núcleo and IBPAD with support from Fundação Serrapilheira. Additionally, many scientists began to speak to the mainstream media, which in turn expanded its science and health sessions and gave space to new columnists in the area. There has been rapid learning and greater mobilization of scientists to use different means of communication.

The second phenomenon stems from the great interest of the media and a large part of the population about the clinical studies of the various vaccines that were being developed in record time. The studies generated a large audience and expectation. Public universities, such as USP and Unifesp, which coordinated studies on the first two vaccines licensed in the country, gained enormous prominence. The Butantan Institute and Fiocruz, in addition to research, became better known for research and production of immunizations.

In the face of all these elements, it seems to us that, 120 years after the Vaccine Revolt, the revolt is now taking place against a government that refused to buy vaccines for its population and proposed false alternatives, as the Pandemia CPI pointed out. The revolt in 2021, given the huge contingent in favor of the vaccine and in defense of science, was directed against the federal government and makes the president’s popularity melt, passing the approval (great/good) of 37%, in December 2020 , to 22% in December 2021, according to Datafolha; while rejection (bad/very bad) went from 32% to 53% in the same period. Among the factors behind this turn of popularity in the “year of the vaccine” was the continuous presidential clash against science, from the denial of the vaccine’s benefits and the distortion of data. This is happening anew now, in the battle of childhood vaccination and in the weak reaction against the Ômicron variant. Undoubtedly, in

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2021, the biggest opposition to Bolsonaro came from raising awareness through science and bringing scientists closer to society, the media and social networks.

Trying to react to this clash, the federal government has recruited some doctors and other supporters to counterpoint and distort scientific data, creating new fanciful interpretations. And it acted and continues to act for the accelerated dismantling of the science and research system in Brazil, with attacks on CNPq, CAPES and Finep, and brutal budget cuts, whose dimension and impact will be discussed in other articles on this blog. These attacks were not reproduced in public opinion, since a survey by SoU_Ciência showed that only 9% of the population supported the cuts imposed.

We face a great challenge: to consolidate the pro-science wave, beyond the pandemic, and for that it is necessary to recover the national science and research system, with the effective recomposition of its funding. We are facing the opportunity to reach a new level in the society-science relationship with the formulation of public policies based on scientific evidence. For this, we seek a “scientific literacy” that collaborates in the fight against fake news and expands the population’s ability to make rational and reasoned decisions. The signs are of hope, but they ask us for attention and a lot of work. The creation of Centro SoU_Ciência, which will have a voice in this blog, is part of this moment and intends to collaborate to strengthen connections with society, in defense of democracy, and in guaranteeing rights for a new moment in the history of our country.

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