TASSIANI APARECIDA DOS SANTOS AND IAGO FRANÇA LOPES

Is Social Media a Democratic Forum for Public Accountability in Times of Crisis? The Brazilian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has troubled the world. In the Brazilian context, many people struggled financially to survive a period of social isolation. Therefore, in the surge of the pandemic, making a decision or forming an opinion about government decisions was very complex. Social media (SM) plays an important role in modern society as a source of information and a potentially democratic instrument for dialogic communication and public accountability. Thus, this research investigates SM as a forum for democratic accountability during Brazil's first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. The methodological procedures comprise an analysis of three events concerning COVID-19 in São Paulo, namely the social isolation mandates from March to July 2020. We gathered, coded, and analysed 970 comments from the São Paulo Government's official Facebook page. We found that the disclosure of information was limited, and users interacted with each other, but the Government did not dialogue with citizens. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, we reflected on SM's potential and barriers to achieving democratic accountability in uncertain and risky times, particularly regarding information disclosure, SM and users' interactions, and the spread of relevant information. We conclude that SM is a forum to achieve greater accountability and responsibility on the part of public managers and governors. However, it is limited by what kind of information is conveyed, whether users get the responses and information they need from the official channel, and SM's political and democratic aspects, which are multifaceted and complex.

Key words: Crisis; COVID-19; Dialogic accounting; Democratic accountability; Public sector; Social media.

The COVID-19 pandemic has troubled the world in a way the community has never seen before. Hence, we were unprepared to deal with the uncertainty and crises that emerged (Ferry *et al.*, 2023). On 12 March 2020, the World Health

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Organization (WHO) declared the spread of the coronavirus a global pandemic. A great deal of information has since been released on different media channels, such as news about the virus's mortality rate, the capacity of health systems to deal with it, and calls for isolation, quarantine, and lockdowns (Mota, 2020).

Day after day, lives suddenly disappeared. In the first wave of the pandemic in Brazil, people were asked to stay at home. Many were extremely worried about their health. However, they had insufficient resources to survive a period of social isolation once they lost their formal jobs, and the situation was even worse for employees in the informal labour market (Teixeira, 2020). Thus, evaluating, deciding on, or forming an opinion on the matter has been highly complex.

The accounting and accountability literature argues that individuals/users need information representing the organization's (or situation's) reality, and, simultaneously, in an abbreviated and understandable format (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019). In risky and uncertain moments, information can enable users to create strategies to overcome and give meaning to crises (Saravanamuthu and Lehman, 2013). Access to relevant information is, therefore, paramount in allowing people to form opinions, create meaning, and make decisions in risky and uncertain situations, such as COVID-19.

However, access to information alone is insufficient for democratic forms of accountability (Scobie *et al.*, 2020). In the democratic view, accountability requires a forum for expressing antagonistic positions, enabling conflict and dissensus, and the opportunity to demand and hold people to account (Brown and Tregidga, 2017; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). In modern societies, social media (SM) has increasingly become a source of information and debate, a communication tool widely adopted by the public, playing an important role in democratic societies. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments adopted SM as a method of communication and engagement with civil society (Landi *et al.*, 2021).

Neu *et al.* (2019, p. 39) state that SM is one way to 'expose the truth and hold the powerful accountable'. In Brazil, Facebook is one of the biggest SM platforms. Over time, Facebook has lost its integrative and fun character and begun to be a space for externalizing public opinion. This space is used to develop identities, political articulations, and so on (Cain *et al.*, 2009). Thus, Facebook may be a democratic forum for debating, discussing, and arguing for social change, accessing relevant information, and dialoguing with government agents, rendering it a potentially agonistic democratic accountability mechanism in the public sector.

Thus, the research objective here is to investigate SM as a forum for democratic accountability during Brazil's first wave of the COVID-19 crisis. More specifically, we answer the questions: What is the role of SM in times of crisis in making information available to the public, facilitating dialogic communication amongst government and citizens, and holding government accountable? What is the potential of and barriers to SM as a forum to promote democratic accountability?

The methodological procedure is a qualitative-inductive approach to in-depth content analysis of Facebook posts (Belluci and Manetti, 2017; Neu *et al.*, 2019). Our analysis focuses on Brazil's first wave of COVID-19, specifically March to July 2020 (NY Times, 2023). Once the COVID-19 mandates were defined at the municipality level, we selected the local government of São Paulo Municipality

(MCSP) due to São Paulo city's complexities. Three MCSP decrees were released during this period, all social isolation mandates. The period reflects the risky and uncertain initial phase of public disclosure of information about the pandemic and social isolation measures. Therefore, the SM data convey people's first reactions and main concerns regarding public policies and the spread of the coronavirus.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it contributes to furthering agonistic democracy in critical dialogic accounting and accountability (CDAA) (Brown, 2009; Brown and Dillard, 2014), specifically, empirically theorizing agonistic democratic accountability (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). As noted by Scobie *et al.* (2020), the democratic accountability literature is conceptual/normative, but empirical realities are nuanced and complex. Therefore, scholars have increased calls to empirically examine democratic accountability (Owen, 2008; Brown and Tregidga, 2017; Scobie *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, accounting scholars have primarily adopted a narrow view of accountability, focusing on organization, transparency, disclosure, and giving an account (Roberts, 2009; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019), all the while dismissing the 'Other' who demands an account, and a forum where the accountability demands and dialogic communication occur (Newell and Wheeler, 2006; Bovens, 2007; Brown and Tregidga, 2017; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). Our agonistic democratic accountability expands empirical knowledge on accountability informed by political theories. Theoretically, we highlight the forum and demands of accountability by empirically investigating SM as a democratic forum for demanding public accountability in times of crisis.

Second, Scobie *et al.* (2020) claim that the forum for accounts is a radical characteristic of democratic accountability. However, while SM has a relevant function in modern societies, CDAA has still not fully addressed SM as a forum for democratic accountability (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). In the context of a crisis, and a lockdown in particular, the virtual space emerged as a potentially democratic space for citizens' demands, the government's giving of accounts, and dialogic communication. Drawing on Mouffe's agonistic democracy, and positioning conflict and antagonism as positive and central features of democracies, we fill a gap in understanding modern SM spaces where democracies unfold, in addition to their dynamics, and the potential and barriers to SM as a forum for achieving democratic accountability.

Hence, we bring to light the potential and barriers to SM as a democratic forum to achieve public accountability in times of crisis (Sian and Smyth, 2022; Ferry and Midgley, 2022; Ferry *et al.*, 2023; Lozano *et al.*, 2023). Our results indicate that SM is a forum for democratic accountability because it addresses the population's demands, enhances citizens' knowledge of the situation to create their own understanding by overcoming and giving meaning to the crisis, and enabling conflict and dissensus, antagonistic expression, and users' dialogic communication and demand for accountability.

However, we also emphasize virtual spaces' and engagement's political drawbacks. SM is limited by what kind of information is conveyed, whether the users get the responses and information they need through the official channel to

hold to account, and SM drawbacks, which are multifaceted and complex. Our results also demonstrate the need to further critical investigations into SM, especially SM's language and rhetoric, SM as a corporate controlled space, and the role of algorithms and fake news. These findings explore the capacity of SM as a forum to engage in reasoned discussion, resonating with Alawattage and Azure's (2019) need to investigate dialogic communication potential in SM without a naïve view of organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agonistic Democratic Accountability

The accountability definition is blurred (Scobie *et al.*, 2020), and its conceptualization appealing but elusive and evocative (Bovens, 2007): 'accountability can mean different things to different people' (Bovens, 2007, p. 448). Therefore, researchers define accountability depending on their ontological understanding, research objective and context, and the literature with which they are engaging (Boven, 2007; Scobie *et al.*, 2020).

In the accounting literature, democratic accountability emerged to investigate the role of accountability in democracy, open up organizations and society, and take pluralism seriously (Owen, 2008; Brown, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Brown and Tregidga, 2017, Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). We posit our study under the umbrella of democratic accountability, and, more precisely, the democratic understanding of agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2000), which is inclusive of plural perspectives, demands, and constituencies, and highlights the relevance of the forum and the demand for accountability as much as the practices of giving an account (Scobie *et al.*, 2020).

For Mouffe's (2000, 2013) agonistic democracy, the nature of modern democracy comprises representativeness—a form of rule based on the principle of sovereignty of the people—and an empty space, a symbolic framework where democracy is exercised, currently informed by the liberal logic of liberty and human rights. Representativeness is compared with ancient democracies, and due to the size of new societies, direct forms of democratic rule are no longer possible, hence the relevance of representativeness. An empty space indicates that power is no longer embodied in the person of a ruler or an authority.

Therefore, in an understanding of agonistic democracy, a democratic space, such as SM, is not indicative of a whole population's participation—once democracy is representative and always constituted by an exclusionary boundary (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Instead, a democratic space is characterized by the possibility of the emergence of antagonistic views, objectives, and demands. Hence, conflict and dissensus are positive and crucial features of democracy, the basis for the emergence of social change.

The critical dialogic accounting and accountability (CDAA) tradition (Brown, 2009; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019) is accounting literature that has heavily applied agonistic democracy. The first paper that discusses accountability in CDAA is by Dillard and Vinnari (2019), who term it 'critical dialogic accountability'. They emphasize that

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accountability is limited by what is disclosed, which is in turn limited by what is recorded and reported in accounting systems. Therefore, they developed an accountability framework based on the poststructural ideas that 'meanings are always local and contextualized as well as privileging dialogue and debate' (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019, p. 23). Therefore, critical dialogic accountability cornerstones are the identification of plural groups affected and their information needs, the responsibility network—a set of salient issues dialogically constructed—and the need for to hold to account and of potential consequences.

In parallel, Scobie *et al.* (2020) examine 'democratic accountability' based on Rancière's ideas of conflict. Resonating with Brown and Tregidga (2017), they focus on the demand for accountability and expression of dissensus: 'to hold the powerful to account for their actions, the voice must be given to or taken by the less powerful' (Scobie *et al.*, 2020, p. 940). They highlight the study of the forum for accountability as a radical feature of democratic accountability, which includes the reflection of both who is included and who is not included in the forum. Thus, Newell and Wheeler (2006) state that rights are at the heart of accountability disputes, indicating that the demand for accountability is more important than the outcome as, by demanding a part or a voice, one can use it towards one's particular objectives. Therefore, accountability cannot exist without the opportunity of a forum to hold to account (Bovens, 2007; Roberts, 2009), which in the agonistic democracy is a forum to enable conflict, dissensus, and competing views of the world.

In this context, our understanding of agonistic democratic accountability is mainly inspired by the accounting works of agonistic dialogic accounting and accountability (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019), and democratic accountability (Scobie *et al.*, 2020). Our paper fills a gap in CDAA by exploring the potential of modern democratic forums for public accountability, by building a bridge between enabling conflict and pluralism (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019), but, complementarily, focusing on the forum where the demands of accountability and potential dialogue occur (Scobie *et al.*, 2020).

Adjacent to Scobie *et al.*'s (2022) definition of accountability, however, we position our research within Mouffe's notion of democracy, like Dillard and Vinnari (2019). Hence, we define accountability as 'agonistic democratic accountability'. Agonistic democratic accountability is thus understood in relation to the principles of pluralism and competing views of society, the positivity of conflict and dissensus, and antagonism and dialogue as key features of a truly democratic forum for accountability. For this research purpose, we define agonistic democratic accountability as the powerholder's ethical duty to give an account to the other within a democratic forum which allows dissensus, demanding of account, dialogic communication and antagonistic expressions of competing views of the world.

Therefore, we highlight four main elements: the powerholder (government) giving an account; the forum for democratic accountability; the other (citizens) and their demand for an account; and the consequences of democratic accountability. Neu *et al.*'s (2019) framework is crucial in operationalizing the analysis of accountability in SM, which we detail in the method section. It comprises three main steps: the powerholder giving an account, less powerful constituencies demanding an account, and the potential consequences and social change.

Consequences are acknowledged but not emphasized. In SM, consequences are implicitly and potentially related to the emergence of social movements and social change, which is unpredictable (Neu *et al.*, 2019). For instance, the former Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff, had her presidential impeachment associated with SM. A Facebook movement led to street demonstrations, parliamentary enquiries, and, finally, impeachment (Galinari, 2017). However, in SM, consequences are always potentials of extrapolating to other social spheres, and not bound to punishment or legal sanctions. This definition is especially important for SM in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, as governments were not obliged to use SM to give an account, but the virtual space was used to externalize citizens' demands, enabling competing views of society.

SM as a Forum for Democratic Accountability in Times of Crisis
In the context of agonistic democracy, social media is a democratic forum within the conditions of enabling plural antagonism, dissensus and competing views of the world, dialogic communication among antagonistic individuals, and responses and interaction with the powerholder. During times of crisis, the democratic forum of SM allows citizens to raise their concerns and demands, dialogue with the government and each other, and, through the process of giving and demanding accounts, create strategies to overcome and give meaning to risky and uncertain moments such as the COVID-19 crisis.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, Landi *et al.* (2021, p. 1) claim that:

> As many people turn to SM to obtain information and advice and discuss public policies, a dialogic approach to engagement can extend knowledge of the crisis, understand responsibilities, empower citizens in protecting from the virus and combat misinformation.

SM's potential to act as a dialogic instrument and democratic forum for accountability has already been highlighted (Bellucci and Manetti, 2017; Neu *et al.*, 2019; Landi *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Bellucci and Manetti (2017) explore, from an organizational perspective, Facebook as an instrument of stakeholder engagement and dialogic accounting. After employing a content analysis of 100 Facebook pages of the 100 largest American philanthropic foundations, they affirm that SM represents a powerful mechanism for a polylogic conversation. However, further studies are needed to understand how organizations can exploit this potential.

Similarly, Landi *et al.* (2021, p. 4) claim that SM can benefit dialogic engagement 'since it can help define what material to stakeholders is, collect their opinions, provide public information and reinforce a sense of belonging'. They see SM as a source of informal information, where individuals can create networks, exchange information, develop opinions, and articulate themselves. In this context, SM is known for its democratic and dialogic features, due to its technology structure that allows people to interact. Hence, SM is considered a forum for achieving accountability (Bellucci and Manetti, 2017; Neu *et al.*, 2019; Landi *et al.*, 2021):

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> The potential of SM to disseminate, aggregate, channel and democratize social accountability processes has encouraged a variety of organizations to actively promote and champion such initiatives. (Neu *et al.*, 2019, p. 1)

In times of crisis, governments have used SM to disclose information and address the uncertainty that can drive people's behaviour, such as fear and anxiety (Roy *et al.*, 2019; Ao and Mark, 2021). Lerouge *et al.* (2023, p. 1) state that 'fear can be contained at reasonable levels by governments counterbalancing uncertainty with information'. Developing this work in the first wave of COVID-19 in Italy, they discovered that government communication about solutions for the pandemic 'positively influenced the public mood' (p. 1). Controversially, SM messages about people's vulnerability and external control were positively correlated with levels of public fear. This study suggests that SM has an emotional impact on how citizens react to a risky and uncertain moment such as COVID-19. Therefore, SM features can support governments in addressing fear and anxiety, controlling citizens' behaviours, and enhancing crisis communication (Ao and Mak, 2021).

Furthermore, Roy *et al.* (2019, p. 1) state that access to information and timeliness are fundamental to responding to a crisis, thus, 'SM facilitate(s) fast and easy exchange of information through sharing, discussion, and communication producing a huge amount of digital content'. In addition, rapid communication is vital to successful disaster management (Roy *et al.*, 2019). In the public sector, SM is recognized as an essential forum in times of crisis and disaster to communicate with the population, and share information, updates, and mandates (Getchell and Sellnow, 2015; Roy *et al.*, 2019; Ao and Mak, 2021).

In addition, SM is an alternative to traditional media as the only source of communication (Getchell and Sellnow, 2015). Neu *et al.* (2019, p. 39) claim that SM opened a new public space of appearance, in contrast to traditional media which is often politicized and determines what is and is not published, acting as a gatekeeper. Thus, SM's democratic potential empowers stakeholders to inform themselves, engage, speak, articulate, act, and ask for accountability (Bellucci and Manetti, 2017). However, despite the aforementioned potential of SM, there is a literature gap in understanding SM's democratic accountability potential during government decisions in crises (Sian and Smyth, 2022; Ferry and Midgley, 2022; Ferry *et al.*, 2023; Lozano *et al.*, 2023).

She and Michelon (2018) highlight SM as a public arena where critical issues for different stakeholders are presented and debated, acknowledging the dissenting socio-political views and ontology of multiple stakeholders, especially in such a broad arena as SM. In line with this, Brown and Dillard (2014) emphasize that multiple-stakeholder accountability requires multiple political spaces to engage and build multiple accounts. The agonistic view reinforces the concept of accountability as relational, decentralized, and multidirectional, focusing on the relevance of the forum for accountability.

However, the drawbacks of SM should not be dismissed. Indeed, accounting researchers should critically reflect their findings and the hidden structures in investigating SM interactions (Butler, 2015; Neu *et al.*, 2019). In this context, we highlight prior discussions on SM's political forces and power dynamics. In SM, the disclosure of information is somewhat limited by the information that

spreads furthest. Not all information has the same capacity to inspire public opinion (Neu *et al.*, 2019).

Neu *et al.* (2019) posit the existence of a political factor that is likely to constrain the information that circulates in SM and further social mobilization, namely the corporate controlled space. SM is a corporate controlled public space where the limits of appearance, the capacity to spread information, and the relationship with algorithms are not fully understood. In addition, Neu *et al.* (2019) point out the nature of SM as 'machine language', indicating that SM language also impacts what information, posts, and comments are spread through the platform. Thus, the power of SM language should be further analyzed (Butler, 2015).

Also, many users post comments, interactions with other users, photos, and videos to argue about what they consider the 'truth'. As pointed out by Butler (2015) and Neu *et al.* (2019), SM communication and interaction has a strong political character comprising complex relations of emotional content, SM rhetoric, algorithms, and other political and social factors that could still be hidden, making us question the real potential of SM to build a dialogic communication with reasoned discussion. Thus, the discussion on fake news and SM users' behaviour is relevant, and has been addressed by interdisciplinary studies (Ahmed and Msughter, 2022)

Furthermore, Bellucci and Manetti (2017) point out that prior studies that attempted to promote dialogic forms of engagement through SM produced unsatisfactory results, indicating that the voice of marginalized individuals remained unheard. Moreover, Bellucci and Manetti (2017), Metallo *et al.* (2020), Landi *et al.* (2021), and others, have provided evidence that SM has been used as another tool for organizational legitimation, as asymmetrically one-way communication, very often to promote better reputation and influence on stakeholders' perceptions, space for online advertising, and product promotion (Bellucci and Manetti, 2017, pp. 13-14), a tokenistic approach to participation rather than an important forum for dialogic participation.

RESEARCH METHOD

The methodological procedure is a qualitative-inductive approach to in-depth content analysis of Facebook posts (Belluci and Manetti, 2017; Neu *et al.*, 2019). We opted for a short period and a limited number of posts, rather than a large amount of SM and statistical data because of the nature of the object of study, addressing the content of such posts, the kind of interaction among users, the information disclosure, and the types of mechanism used in SM for public accountability purposes. It should be noted that it is a qualitative study and not intended to be representative, unbiased, or create generalization in quantitative terms. We do generalize in qualitative terms, which is within a broader theoretical frame.

This research investigates SM as a democratic forum for public accountability during Brazil's first wave of COVID-19 (NYTimes, 2023). Drawing on this research direction, we analysed the first three decrees regarding COVID-19 in São Paulo (SP), Brazil: (i) release of the social isolation decree (Decree no. 64,879, 20 March 2020);

(ii) release of the extension of isolation decree on 27 April 2020; and (iii) release of the extension of isolation decree on 8 May 2020. This period reflects the risky and uncertain initial moment of public disclosure of information about the pandemic, mainly related to social isolation measures. Thus, the SM data convey people's first reactions and main concerns regarding public policies.

The local government of MCSP was selected, once the COVID-19 mandates were defined at the municipality level. In the Brazilian context, at the beginning of the pandemic, in April 2020, the Supreme Court of Justice decided that the isolation decrees were under the municipality's autonomy to legislate. The large number of inhabitants and the complexities of social isolation in a very crowded area made it an exciting location to study—more than 12 million habitants at 7,398.26/km^2 (IBGE, 2021). Furthermore, SP is the most cosmopolitan city in Brazil. Hence, it was the first city hit by the virus, and, for several months, the epicentre of cases and deaths in Brazil and globally.

Aiming to explore agonistic democratic accountability in SM, we addressed four main elements of accountability: forum for democratic accountability (step 1), powerholder (government) and its account-giving (step 2), other (citizens) and their demanding of an account (step 3), and the consequences of democratic accountability (step 4). Our framework is based on Neu *et al.*'s (2019) social accountability analysis on Twitter. We added one more step (step 1) which focuses on the analysis of the Facebook page, the forum for accountability, as shown in Figure 1.

Methodological Framework

Step 1: SM as a democratic forum The first step was to analyse the MCSP Facebook page to understand the Facebook community and the use of SM as a democratic forum. We gathered data to answer four questions: What is this community about? How many followers are there? What are the rules of this community? What kind of publication do they have?

We first identified SP city's official website,[1] and then its Facebook page.[2] Thus, the data were collected from the MCSP's initial Facebook page. Based on its content, we analysed the general features of the page, mainly how it is managed by SP city, the rules, and how they aim to interact with the broader public.

Step 2: Giving an account—official information disclosed in SM This step occurs when the organization discloses official information in SM (Neu *et al.*, 2019). To achieve our objective, we searched for information about the abovementioned COVID-19 decrees.

First, we identified the post related to the social isolation decree, 64,879, on 20 March 2020.[3] From this post, we analysed the content of the information
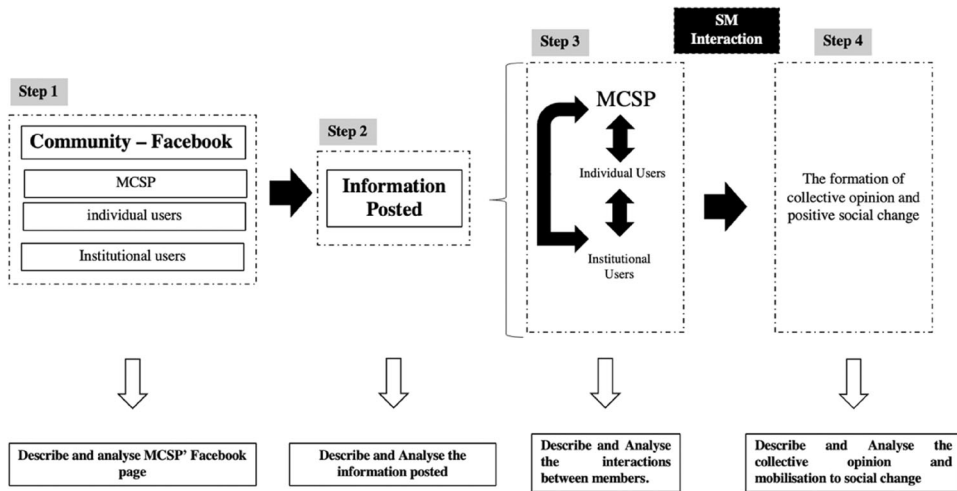
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[1] https://www.saopaulo.sp.gov.br/coronavirus/

[2] https://www.facebook.com/PrefSP/

[3] The Facebook post can be viewed via the following link: https://www.facebook.com/PrefSP/posts/1349202135278220

FIGURE 1

RESEARCH DESIGN

Source: Authors.

disclosed to the population and its level of detail. The same procedure was followed for extending the isolation decree on 27 April 2020[4] and on 8 May 2020.[5]

Step 3: Demanding of an account and dialogic communication Step 3 analyses how information from step 2 is disseminated and discussed (Neu *et al*., 2019). The objective was to analyse the users' antagonistic positions, dissensus and conflict, expression of competing views of the world, interaction among users, and the dialogue, or lack thereof, between the Government and the public.

The first decree's post attracted (approximately) 1,334 reactions, 532 comments, and 647 shares. The second decree's post, (approximately) 2,000 reactions, 798 comments, and 300 shares. The third decree's post, (approximately) 1,500 reactions, 816 comments, and 206 shares. The data collection was conducted between 2020 and 2021, on the first decree in July 2020, and decrees two and three in March 2021.

After collecting the Facebook data and comments, we organized them in Microsoft Excel® software. We included only the available comments, since some were no longer present on the Facebook page. It is our understanding that a comment may be deleted by (1) the user who posted it, (2) the administrator of the Facebook page, in this case MCSP, or (3) Facebook itself, in order to comply with the company's policies, legal demands, and local government censorship laws,

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[4] https://web.facebook.com/PrefSP/posts/pfbid02ipbkZD2KJSVDSaX8cNFkwSjuyWdvmpvDgMbEcj79sr5i2PN8Vdtnvw7wUZ5fDzHWl

[5] https://web.facebook.com/PrefSP/posts/pfbid0nbgBvyvP3SpwXBYPYjpJXKByUkdFCCFHpfi5T21obYEf9MkBpMkvfq78mWdDSgmKl

which depend on the context. However, it is not possible to state precisely why a particular comment was deleted.

The final numbers gathered comprised 319 comments for post no. 1, 474 comments for post no. 2, and 177 comments for post no. 3. In total, 970 comments were analysed. In the sequence, we coded and analysed the following groups of data: (1) posts and their comments; (2) emoji and text interactions in the comments; (3) types of user (individual, institutional, or MCSP); (4) emotional and rational content of the comments; (5) interaction among users and MCSP; (6) statements in favour of or against the three social isolation decrees. The two authors undertook the procedure in an iterative manner. From the coding process and thematic analysis, four categories emerged from the fieldwork: (1) economic aspects; (2) regulation, surveillance, and responsibility; (3) use of public resources and corruption; and (4) fear and anxiety due to lack of information.

Step 4: Democratic accountability and potential consequences For Neu *et al*. (2019), step 4 is a result of disseminating information in SM (step 2), its discussion, expression of competing views, and user interaction (step 3). Hence, Neu *et al*. characterize step 4 as accountability, which consequently should potentially result in positive social change. Within agonistic democratic accountability, step 4 is related to the notion of consequences, which in SM is the likelihood of the emergence of social movements and social change based on SM interaction, which is unpredictable (Neu *et al*., 2019). Therefore, we draw on SM information gathered in steps one, two, and three to analyse collective opinion formation and the use of SM as an agonistic democratic accountability forum.

FINDINGS

Step 1: SM as a Democratic Forum
In the first step, we analysed the MCSP Facebook page, the community codes, and rules. Descriptively, this page was identified as @PrefSP, and had 523,393 likes and 649,816 followers (July 2020). There is an essential difference in the engagement features 'likes' and 'followers'. The former indicates that users like the page, but only the latter users receive notifications on their Facebook feed. Once the information is posted, it reaches only people following the page. In this sense, the disclosure of information by MCSP will reach almost 650,000 users, the followers, hence, those likely to interact with the community.

MCSP welcomes users with the phrase: 'Facebook page of municipality city of the largest Brazilian city. The city of which you and more than 12 million people from all around the world are a part. Welcome!'. This message could indicate openness and a sense of community. However, on the same page, MCSP shows some conduct rules for its users on the @PrefSP page that guide user interaction, indicating that they will not engage with users or provide information through SM.

From the conduct rules, we summarize that @PrefSP states that: i) anyone can read and share; ii) it is not responsible for content posted by users; iii) comments

that suggest or incite illegal activities will not be allowed under any circumstances; iv) false, distorted or manipulated messages will be deleted, so that they do not generate false conclusions; v) comments that invade privacy will be removed; vi) links that configure spam, and virus propagation will be deleted; vii) the page is a direct information channel. Therefore, MCSP does not commit to serving each user individually, and viii) any user who repeats the practice of comments and/or deleted links to configure one of the listed practices will be banned, and thus prevented from interacting.

From an analysis of MCSP's Facebook page, we also acknowledge that MCSP often conveys information about actions and decisions of the municipality city that impact citizens' everyday life, and about various subjects related to public administration and public services. In addition, during the COVID-19 crisis, it published public policies and decrees. Some of this news was about vehicle restrictions in São Paulo city, technological devices for teachers in elementary school, remote learning in the COVID-19 period, the COVID-19 vaccine, and information on supportive action for homeless people or others in need.

Step 2: Giving an Account Through Disclose of Information on Facebook
In step 2, we analysed the information disclosed by MCSP related to the three decrees of social isolation released during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first published post, decree no. 64,879 on 20 March 2020, was one of the first official items of news regarding the pandemic on the Facebook page (see Figure 2).

The information disclosed was: 'Protect yourself! Coronavirus/State of Emergency'. From this, we realized that insufficient information was disclosed. The Government had limited itself to announcing that a social isolation period had started. The lack of sufficient detail, context regarding the pandemic, and MCSP's guidance resulted in some user reactions and comments that will be analysed in the following sub-section.

Post 2 was related to the extension of decree 64,879, 20 March 2020. The information disclosed by the City of São Paulo was 'Protect yourself! Coronavirus/ Extension of Social Isolation' (see Figure 3).

The communication of the extension of the social isolation decree was again informationally limited. In the second decree, a picture accompanied a short description: 'The social isolation decree is extended to May 10. The measure aims to mitigate the virus spread and take care of everyone's health. Stay at home and protect yourself'. The post had a representative effect on MCSP's SM. We observed that the publication garnered approximately 798 comments, almost double that of the first post.

The social isolation decree was again extended one month after the second post (see Figure 4). In post 3, MCSP communicated: 'Quarantine extended to May, 31. The measure aims to mitigate the virus spread and take care of everyone's health. Stay at home and protect yourself'.

The third decree attracted approximately 816 comments, a similar number to post 2. The information disclosed in the picture and in the short description was exactly the same as in post 2, indicating that no directions, explanations, or more

FIGURE 2

FACEBOOK POST OF THE FIRST SOCIAL ISOLATION DECREE

Source: MCSP's Facebook page.

information regarding the pandemic, social and economic support, quarantine and home office, public transportation, and citizens' other concerns were communicated in SM. The result of this lack of information and interaction is presented in step 3.

Step 3: Interaction and Dialogic Communication Among Users and MCSP

We gathered and analyzed a total of 970 comments from the three posts. Four categories were identified in our thematic analysis regarding the public's reactions to the social isolation decrees: (1) economic issues; (2) regulation, surveillance, and responsibility; (3) accountability; and (4) feelings. All users' pages were identified as citizens, as we did not identify official pages such as MCSP, organized groups, unions, and NGOs reacting and interacting.

Overall, we recognized that users interacted in the three posts. In addition, we acknowledged that the number of interactions increased with time and the lack of information disclosed by the state. Of the 970 comments analyzed, 195 were original comments, and 775 were interactions with the original comments, indicating a highly interactive and dialogic forum. Seven comments generated 50% of all interactions, all of them related to post 2.

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FIGURE 3

FACEBOOK POST OF THE SECOND SOCIAL ISOLATION DECREE

Source: MCSP's Facebook page.

The volume of discussion increased from post 1 to post 2 as the Government extended the social isolation decree without further information, reflecting the relevance of information in uncertainty and risky moments, such as a global pandemic. In particular, the interaction increased due to the antagonistic positions taken by users, in favour of or against the social isolation decree. During the discussion, many users raised different issues related to the thematic analysis. However, it should be noted that dissensus over the Government's decision was the main trigger generating dialogic communication among users.

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FIGURE 4

FACEBOOK POST OF THE THIRD SOCIAL ISOLATION DECREE

Source: MCSP's Facebook age.

User 1: My God, so many blind people! If there's a catastrophe, it's the duty of the Government to assist those in need. Social distancing is the best way to reduce contagion. There won't be enough beds for everyone if many people get sick at the same time. Have more compassion. I don't want my father or any family members dying unattended.

User 2: Apparently she (user 1) doesn't depend on public transportation, hypocrite.

User 3: @Géssica Silva (user 1) blind, deaf and dumb people!
They don't understand that if they get sick, they won't be working anyway. And they can still die without medical attention.

User 4: @Géssica Silva, You're so right!

User 5: @Géssica Silva #nocomments.

User 6: If you can stay at home, stay … but don't criticize those who need to work so that we don't starve.

One of the most prominent claims was the lack of information from MCSP. The themes that emerged were sources of information, interactions between users on where to consult more data, and calls from users for accountability of public entities.

User 7: Now tell me something about the public hospitals, didn't anyone die?

User 8: I have a question. I'm elderly, 65 years old, diabetic, and hypertensive. I can order the medications I use regularly from the Popular Pharmacy. I use a blood glucose metre and must go to the health centre every month to pick up the strips. […] What can we do if we can't leave home because we're in a risk group? And what about the Flu vaccination starting on the 23rd? I'd appreciate a reply with instructions. Thank you.

User 9: Coronavirus infections in Brazil have reached 900 and 11 deaths as of Friday, March 20, 11 p.m.

User 10: @Rodolfo Lent (user 11) Does anyone have a secure link to this?

User 11: @Tiago Alcântara (user 10), see … https://www.google.com.br/…/janelas-de-sp-edital…/amp/

User 12: @David (user 13) what are you doing to make this happen?

User 13: @Kelly Ferreira (user 12) pressuring the mayor.

User 14: @Bruno Covas (the mayor), look after those of us who work in call centers, very crowded places, and the companies don't care.

We acknowledge in particular that there are narratives questioning sources of information and information exchange among users, where there are shared alternative sources of information to complement government SM posts. The Government's lack of response is one factor that makes citizens increase their claims for accountability.

Step 4: SM as a Forum for Democratic Accountability
Step 4 is the phase where the interaction among users on social media can lead to social mobilization and social change. In our data, we observed that users positioned themselves in favour of or against social isolation. In addition to this process, we observed that users made suggestions on how to face the pandemic, including social, health, and economic aspects. Mobilization occured mainly through the use of a hashtag to call attention to an idea.

> #Don'tDonate10millionsForConcertsOnTheWindow
> #MyLifeDoesNotMatterToMCSP
> #EveryoneMustStayAtHome
> # ElectoralFundForHealth
> #10MillionForCulturalActivitiesNo

As with the use of the symbol @, a hashtag was applied to call attention to and ask for the accountability of the public entity, that is, 'tagging people in the post'. This aims to disseminate information, expanding the practice of disclosure from the margins.

> User 15: #saopaulomunicipality I see the government will help many people working with CLT (formal workers). However, the cleaners, in my case, if I go to work, I'm in danger! And if I stay in quarantine, the bills mount up, and I'd like to know what to do in this situation 😔

> User 16: Help us #brunnocovas (the mayor)

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our first objective was to explore the role of SM in times of crisis (step 1) by giving the public an account (step 2), demanding an account and dialogic communication between government and citizens (step 3), and holding the Government accountable (step 4). Figure 5 illustrates our agonistic democratic accountability (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020).

SM is acknowledged as a democratic forum where users can express themselves politically (Brown and Dillard, 2014; Neu *et al.*, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, we explore the MCSP Facebook page as a democratic forum where agonistic democratic accountability occurs. First, the data demonstrate that SM is an agonistic democratic forum where users can express dissent-political views (Brown and Dillard, 2014; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020), antagonistic positions, and competing views of the world (Mouffe, 2000, 2013).

Users participated in the virtual space to create dissensus, to dialogically communicate with users who share similar views by tagging people in comments, replying to other users' comments (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020),

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FIGURE 5

AGONISTIC DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY
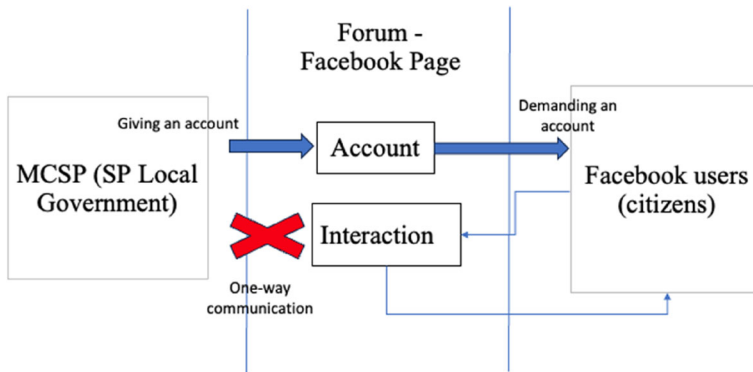
Source: Authors.

sharing other sources of information, and also to attempt engagement in a SM social movement and create possibilities for social change (Neu *et al*., 2019), in particular by using hashtags in the comments to create a collective view of the matter.

Any analysis of a democratic forum must acknowledge its exclusionary boundaries (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2000; Scobie *et al*., 2020). Who participates in the forum for accountability matters, as does who is not present in the democratic forum. With particular relevance to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize the exclusionary boundaries of the vulnerable and poor in the city of SP, who are affected by digital inequalities (Madianou, 2015). In addition, elderly citizens were the most severely affected by the spread of the coronavirus. Prior literature has pointed out that the elderly cannot access digital media (Tirado-Morueta *et al*., 2016). Regarding the profile of the participants on the MCSP Facebook page, we identified them as institutional pages or personal pages, as we aimed to analyse the interaction between the Government and its citizens. As we have noted in the step 3 analysis, almost all interactions were conducted by pages classified as citizens.

The democratic forum is where giving and demanding an account occurs, and, consequently produces potential dialogic communication, social movements, and social change. In terms of giving an account, we analysed the three Facebook posts related to each of the three social isolation decrees. As noted, the disclosure of information was limited to the announcement of a new period of quarantine, resonating with Chen *et al*. (2020):

> Government agencies use their accounts to release information about updates and guidelines, but few employ participative strategies to promote citizen-government collaboration and engagement.

The results highlight the state's lack of information disclosed to citizens on MCSP's Facebook page. In SM, they stated: 'Facebook page of municipality city

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of the largest Brazilian city. The city of which you and more than 12 million people from all around the world are a part. Welcome!'. This statement could indicate openness and a sense of community. However, on the same page was a disclaimer that they would not engage with or supply information to users through SM. MCSP did not use Facebook to engage and dialogue with the population, or to give any direction or guidance. There was no response on their page. The posts were the only information disclosed, always very limited, followed by a link with official legal information.

The findings correspond to prior literature, which has pointed out that government engagement in SM is very limited in times of crisis, even though there is evidence that citizens' involvement through effective epidemic communication becomes crucial in mitigating public fear, fostering trust in health authorities, and encouraging adoption of recommended behaviours (Landi *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). Prior literature has also shown that in times of crisis, governments have used SM to disclose information and address the uncertainty that can drive people's behaviour, such as fear and anxiety (Roy *et al.*, 2019; Ao and Mark, 2021; Lerouge *et al.*, 2023).

In step 3, we further analysed the use of SM to demand an account and dialogic communication. During times of crisis, the democratic forum of SM allows citizens to raise their concerns and demands, dialogue with the Government and each other, and, through the process of giving and demanding an account, create strategies to overcome and give meaning to risky and uncertain situations such as the COVID-19 crisis.

SM's potential to act as a dialogic instrument and a potential democratic forum for accountability has been highlighted by prior researchers (Butler, 2015; Bellucci and Manetti, 2017; Neu *et al.*, 2019; Landi *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Landi *et al.* (2021, p. 4) claim that SM can benefit dialogic engagement 'since it can help define what material to stakeholders is, collect their opinions, provide public information and reinforce a sense of belonging'.

Our findings indicate the level and type of interaction among users, and users and MCSP, emphasizing SM as an arena in which to express dissensus, antagonistic positions, and competing views on social isolation and government decisions (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Scobie *et al.*, 2020). Users employed the virtual space to express emotions and ask for information and accountability during the COVID-19 crisis. This allowed them to create strategies to overcome and give meaning to the crisis, as access to relevant information is paramount in allowing people to form opinions, create meaning, and make decisions in risky and uncertain situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Saravanamuthu and Lehman, 2013).

Moreover, while dialogue with MCSP was absent, two-way communication among users was highly evident. The communication was facilitated by Facebook mechanisms such as sharing, hashtags, and the @ symbol. Sharing allowed users to spread the information disclosed by the MCSP Facebook page. The @ symbol was employed by users to tag someone in a post or comment. Therefore, the users were able to engage in two-way communication, thus spreading information beyond their followers.

Finally, step 4 explored the democratic accountability consequences. Agonistic democratic accountability is grounded in the ethical obligation to respond to citizens' demands in a crisis, and potentially has consequences in other social

spheres. Hence, in SM, consequences are acknowledged but not bound by punishment or legal sanctions, and are implicitly and potentially related to the emergence of social movements and social change, which is unpredictable (Neu *et al*., 2019). This understanding was paramount in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, as governments were not obliged to use SM to give an account, but the virtual space was used to externalize citizens' demands, enabling competing views of society and potential social change.

The hashtag (#) sign is a mobilization tool in SM for engagement and perhaps the promotion of a viral trend. We recognized that users applied a hashtag when trying to engage with MCSP, asking for information and accountability. Therefore, SM represents an alternative to traditional media as the only source of communication (Getchell and Sellnow, 2015), an open space of public appearance, dissensus, dialogue, and interaction (Neu *et al*., 2019), where citizens can inform themselves, engage, speak, articulate, act, and demand accountability (Bellucci and Manetti, 2017).

However, despite the stated potential of SM, there is a literature gap in understanding SM's democratic accountability potential (or barriers) during government decisions in crises (Sian and Smyth, 2022; Ferry and Midgley, 2022; Ferry *et al*., 2023; Lozano *et al*., 2023). Therefore, we move to our second research objective, which was to respond to the question: What are the potentials and barriers to SM as a forum to promote democratic accountability? We summarize our findings in Table 1, indicating three potentials and three barriers to SM as a democratic forum for public accountability. Thus, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, we reflect upon the potential of SM to achieve agonistic democratic accountability in uncertain and risky times, particularly regarding information disclosure, SM and users' interactions, the spread of relevant information, and calls for democratic accountability.

Potential of Social Media as a Democratic Forum for Public Accountability
First, SM is key to crisis communication and creates understanding in times of crisis (Roy *et al*., 2019). However, governments do not usually use SM as an official source of information in times of crisis (Chen *et al*., 2020). In this study, the Brazilian Government's lack of response is one factor that encouraged citizens to increase their claims for accountability. We conclude that the lack of information and dialogue between MCSP and users increased the fear and anxiety experienced by citizens. In this respect, the literature is controversial. Even though Chen *et al*. (2020) provide evidence that disclosing information helps decrease citizens' anxiety and fear, Landi *et al*. (2021) posit that the disclosure of information in a crisis can create overreaction, increasing fear in the population.

Second, SM is a mechanism to increase the call for accountability using Facebook tools such as sharing, hashtags, and the @ symbol (Neu *et al*., 2019). For instance, when many comments criticized the use of public resources, a significant number of users asked for the allocation of such resources usually delivered to political parties for election purposes to be redirected to health. The hashtag electoral fund for health was raised with some users trying to spread #ElectoralFundForHealth (literal translation).

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Potential	Barriers
SM is key to crisis communication and creates understanding in times of crisis	SM is a political arena: the information disclosed and the spreading of it is highly dependent on powerful forces
SM is a mechanism to increase the call for accountability by sharing information, hashtags and the @ symbol	Disclosure and visibility of information depends on political aspects of SM, such as language, hidden corporate control policies, and algorithms
SM is a space in which antagonistic views can express their opinions	SM can divide the population, and be a mechanism for opinion formation and social control, a lack of sufficient reliability, privacy, and security

Source: Authors.

Finally, SM is a space of appearance and can contribute to antagonistic views expressing their opinions (Mouffe, 2000, 2013; Butler, 2015). For example, during the Brazilian COVID-19 crisis, SM was an arena to express emotions and ask for information and accountability. While the dialogue with MCSP was absent, the two-way communication among users was highly evident, allowing citizens to express antagonistic views exercising their democratic values.

Another relevant finding of our research is the recurrent emotional content in users' interactions. As Neu *et al*. (2019) point out, SM can be a public space for people looking to 'talk', 'smack', and/or 'troll' other participants. The conditions under which emotions affect SM content and the spread of information are not understood. As noted by Butler (2015) and Neu *et al*. (2019), although SM has the potential to impose accountability demands and social change, it has not always led to that, nor do the movements that lead to social mobilization have the same features.

Barriers to SM as a Democratic Forum for Public Accountability
First, SM is a political arena: the information disclosed and its spread greatly depend on powerful forces. In this way, the information in SM creates an echo chamber used by agents in the virtual space to capture the agenda and socially influence citizens' perceptions and opinion formation. In our case study, the division of citizens in favour of or against social isolation measures was permeated by political parties' ideas and the range of responsibility of state and individuals, the paradox of democracy (Mouffe, 2000).

SM is one of many spaces of engagement, and, as in any other space, such as traditional and private media, it is politically influenced by a power structure (Butler, 2015). However, we claim that, although researchers should further politically analyse the virtual space, SM is an informal and democratic source of public accountability, and a way to reach out to more citizens than through official reports (Parker, 2020).

Besides the dominance of powerful groups, the SM space is shaped by its own language, hidden corporate control policies, and algorithms. As prior studies point

out, dialogic communication is not simply the full disclosure of information and/or replying to users on SM. Thus, scholars should still understand the unintended consequences of SM as a public accountability tool. This is mainly due to the features of such spaces' appearance as political, corporate controlled, and composed of particular ways of communicating, including SM language and its relationship with algorithms and the spread of information (Alawattage and Azure, 2019; Neu *et al.*, 2019).

Moreover, the spread of information is also constrained by many factors that are still not fully understood. For instance, the MCSP Facebook page states: 'We reserve the right to delete comments from users that promote commercial ventures or values that do not conform to the institution's guidelines'. So, who decides what comments should be deleted or remain? Dissenting comments may be deleted in an attempt to silence users. The same questions can arise in the realm of corporate controlled SM companies and their (unclear) rules to delete or spread information on SM.

Finally, government agencies may experience challenges in using SM for citizen engagement, including the digital divide, reliability and accountability, vague organizational strategies, a lack of sufficient resources and formal policies, privacy, and security issues. Thus, the efficiency of SM in communicating crisis information is also a cause for concern (Chen *et al.*, 2020, p. 2). We acknowledge in particular that there are narratives questioning sources of information and information exchange among users.

In the aftermath of the Brazilian COVID-19 crisis, we reflected upon the potential and barriers to SM in achieving public accountability in uncertain and risky times, particularly regarding information disclosure, SM and users' interactions, and the spread of relevant information. We conclude that SM is a mechanism to achieve greater public accountability and responsibility on the part of public managers and governors. However, it is limited by the kind of information that is conveyed (disclosure), whether users get the responses and information they need from official channels (dialogical accountability), and political aspects, which are multifaceted and complex (Butler, 2015; Alawattage and Azure, 2019).

These findings shed light on the debate about the pandemic as a fundamental challenge to democratic processes and procedures (Sian and Smyth, 2022; Ferry *et al.*, 2023; Lozano *et al.*, 2023). Ferry *et al.* (2023) are convincing, showing strong evidence about governmental power, regimes of control, and liberty in times of crisis. We believe that SM does offer a way forward concerning the relevance of the forum for accountability to enable dissensus, antagonism, and competing views of societies (Brown, 2009; Brown and Tregidga, 2017; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Sobie *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, opening up a space where dissenting voices and questions about the Government's actions, including power, regimes of control, and lack of liberty can be externalized.

Finally, fake news and poor information should be further investigated as barriers to SM as a forum for democratic accountability, and dialogic communication in the context of an emergency crisis, since fake news and SM users' behaviour have already been addressed by interdisciplinary studies (Ahmed and Msughter, 2022).

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