Article

Technoconservatism, scientific denialism, and moral panic: health communication, disinformation on medicinal cannabis, and the right to health in Brazil

Tecnoconservadorismo, negacionismo científico e pânico moral: comunicação em saúde, desinformação sobre a cannabis medicinal e o direito à saúde no Brasil

Tecnoconservadurismo, negacionismo científico y pánico moral: comunicación en salud, desinformación sobre el cannabis medicinal y el derecho a la salud en Brasil

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Abstract
Objective: This study analysed the relationship between technoconservative discourses, scientific denialism, and moral panic surrounding the medicinal use of cannabis, assessing how such narratives

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interfered with the right to health and the formulation of public policies in Brazil. **Methods:** A qualitative, ethnographically oriented approach was adopted, combining cybercartography and documentary analysis. The study mapped actors, networks, and discourses disseminated across digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others, between 2019 and 2024, focusing on content related to medicinal cannabis and produced by self-declared conservative and/or bolsonarist groups and social actors. In addition to social media content, the research conducted an in-depth analysis of the government booklet "The Risks of Marijuana Use and Its Legalization", as well as historical and regulatory documents on drug policy and public health. **Results:** The mapping revealed that technoconservative influencers, supported by state agents and ideologically aligned publishing houses, amplified alarmist content linking cannabis to criminality, moral decay, and unrestricted health risks. The government booklet reinforced this framing by omitting clinical findings on the therapeutic efficacy of cannabidiol and by resorting to religious metaphors and sensationalist imagery. A temporal correlation was observed between peaks of engagement with these posts and the weakening of legislative debates on medicinal cannabis regulation. **Conclusion:** The convergence of algorithmic governmentality and moralising discourses hindered the circulation of scientific evidence, legitimised punitive policies, and restricted patients' rights to cannabis-based treatments.

Keywords: Medicinal Cannabis; Health Communication; Scientific Denialism; Moral Panic; Public Policy.

Resumo

Objective: este estudo analisou a relação entre discursos tecnoconservadores, negacionismo científico e pânico moral em torno do uso medicinal da cannabis, avaliando como tais narrativas interferiram no direito ao acesso à saúde e na formulação de políticas públicas no Brasil. **Metodologia:** adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa de orientação etnográfica, articulando técnicas de cibercartografia e análise documental. O estudo mapeou atores, redes e discursos disseminados em plataformas digitais como *YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp*, entre outros, no período de 2019 a 2024, de grupos e atores sociais autodenominados conservadores e/ou bolsonaristas com foco em conteúdos relacionados ao uso medicinal da cannabis. Além das postagens digitais, foi analisada em profundidade a cartilha governamental "Os riscos do uso da maconha e de sua legalização", bem como documentos históricos e normativos sobre políticas de drogas e saúde pública. **Resultados:** o mapeamento evidenciou que influenciadores tecnoconservadores, apoiados por agentes estatais e editoras alinhadas, amplificaram conteúdos alarmistas que associaram a cannabis à criminalidade, degeneração moral e riscos irrestritos à saúde. A cartilha reforçou esse enquadramento ao omitir achados clínicos sobre a eficácia terapêutica do canabidiol e ao recorrer a metáforas religiosas e imagens sensacionalistas. Verificou se correlação temporal entre picos de engajamento dessas postagens e o arrefecimento de debates legislativos sobre a regulamentação medicinal da planta. **Conclusão:** a convergência entre governamentalidade algorítmica e discursos moralizantes dificultou a circulação de evidências científicas, favorecendo políticas punitivas e restringindo o direito de pacientes a tratamentos à base de cannabis.

Palavras-chave: Cannabis Medicinal; Comunicação em Saúde; Negacionismo Científico; Pânico Moral; Política Pública.

Resumen

Objetivo: este estudio analizó la relación entre los discursos tecnoconservadores, el negacionismo científico y el pánico moral en torno al uso medicinal del cannabis, evaluando cómo tales narrativas interfirieron en el derecho a la salud y en la formulación de políticas públicas en Brasil. **Metodología:** se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo con orientación etnográfica, articulando técnicas de cibercartografía y análisis documental. El estudio mapeó actores, redes y discursos difundidos en plataformas digitales como *YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp*, entre otros, entre los años 2019 y 2024, centrándose en contenidos relacionados con el cannabis medicinal producidos por grupos y actores sociales autodenominados conservadores y/o bolsonaristas. Además del contenido en redes sociales, se realizó

un análisis en profundidad del folleto gubernamental "Los riesgos del uso de la marihuana y su legalización", así como de documentos históricos y normativos sobre políticas de drogas y salud pública. **Resultados:** el mapeo evidenció que influenciadores tecnoconservadores, apoyados por agentes estatales y editoriales ideológicamente alineadas, amplificaron contenidos alarmistas que vinculaban el cannabis con la criminalidad, la degeneración moral y riesgos sanitarios sin restricciones. El folleto reforzó este encuadre al omitir hallazgos clínicos sobre la eficacia terapéutica del cannabidiol y al recurrir a metáforas religiosas e imágenes sensacionalistas. Se observó una correlación temporal entre los picos de interacción con estas publicaciones y el enfriamiento de los debates legislativos sobre la regulación medicinal del cannabis. **Conclusión:** la convergencia entre la gubernamentalidad algorítmica y los discursos moralizantes dificultó la circulación de evidencia científica, favoreció políticas punitivas y restringió el derecho de los pacientes a acceder a tratamientos basados en cannabis.

Palabras clave: Cannabis Medicinal; Comunicación en Salud; Negacionismo Científico; Pánico Moral; Política Pública.

Introduction

The regulation of medicinal cannabis has advanced rapidly over the past decade: as of March 2025, nearly 50 countries had fully or partially legalized the plant for therapeutic purposes, and several European states (e.g., Switzerland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg) are operating pilot programs for controlled cultivation and pharmaceutical dispensing[1]. In parallel, the cannabis market remains the largest among regulated drugs; the 2023 World Drug Report from the UNODC estimates 219 million global cannabis users in 2021 (4% of the adult population), a figure 21% higher than in 2011[2]. Recognizing the growing therapeutic use, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended in 2019 the reclassification of cannabis and its derivatives, acknowledging the "emerging therapeutic role" of these substances and calling for regulatory frameworks that balance medical access with the prevention of harmful use[3].

In this context of rapid liberalization and clinical uncertainty, the quality of health communication has become a strategic priority. The WHO's Strategic Communications Framework advocates that public messages about drugs should be "accessible, credible, timely, and evidence-based," precisely to mitigate misinformation and support informed public policy decisions[4]. Understanding how different countries — including Brazil — navigate competing narratives around cannabis is therefore essential for assessing the impacts on the right to health and the development of regulatory standards.

In Brazil, this debate faces an environment marked by conservative discourses, disinformation practices, and mobilization strategies that generate moral panic[5]. Particularly in recent years, the so-called "conservative criminology"[6] has gained traction by associating cannabis with narratives of moral, social, and criminal degradation, frequently downplays or overlooks scientific evidence that highlights the plant's therapeutic potential[7,8].

Within this context, we introduce what we define as "technoconservatism"[9], which, in the case of the present study, is characterized by the diffusion of a moralist agenda driven by the convergence of various ideological forces — such as scholastic thinking, traditionalism, Christian fundamentalism, evolutionary psychology, Austrian and American neoliberalism, anarcho-capitalism, among others. The reference to the role of Christian groups in the cannabis debate in Brazil should not be interpreted as a generalization. The analytical focus is on specific segments within the religious field that, in recent years, have engaged in systematic campaigns of disinformation, moralization, and resistance to the

regulation of medicinal cannabis — particularly among neo-Pentecostal sectors and religious leaders aligned with ultra-conservative political projects[10]. This is an empirically grounded observation, supported by ethnographic research and digital network analyses[6,11,12]. However, it is essential to acknowledge that there are significant Christian leaders who act in the opposite direction, defending the right to therapeutic cannabis use based on ethical and humanitarian principles[6].

These ideas are disseminated not only through the use of digital platforms but also through their strategic support, which has enabled large-scale diffusion of conceptions that discredit the medicinal use of cannabis. Digital influencers, book editors, publishing networks, private companies, individuals, groups, churches, and professional organizations—including legal practitioners — act in a coordinated manner to popularize a "war on drugs" rhetoric rooted in myths and alarmism[6].

This set of practices and discourses, amplified daily by algorithms, artificial intelligence, and informational bubbles, falls under what we call "algorithmic governmentality"[12,13,14] and/or "transplatform governmentality"[12,15,16]. This occurs because it constitutes a technique of governance in Foucauldian terms — namely, a way of conducting conduct — operating through the confluence of different contents circulating across various digital platforms and their interfaces, ultimately producing a technoconservative subjectivation aimed at constructing a new regime of truth.

It is crucial to emphasize that advertising platforms such as Google and Facebook[17,18] profit financially from the dissemination of hate speech promoted by technoconservatives[9,19]. The concept of technoconservatism refers to a set of practices and discourses that articulate conservative values — often linked to authoritarian, moralistic, or religious ideologies — with the strategic use of digital technologies, algorithmic platforms, and social media. Contrary to the traditional view that associates conservatism with resistance to innovation, technoconservatism is marked by an active and sophisticated appropriation of digital environments to disseminate political narratives, mobilize affect, and generate moral controversies. It is a contemporary phenomenon that merges digital infrastructures with reactionary ideological agendas, frequently relying on disinformation, historical revisionism, and culture war rhetoric. In the Brazilian context, technoconservatism manifests in networks of digital influencers, publishing houses, religious institutions, and actors within the criminal justice system, who operate in a coordinated fashion to shape meaning around sensitive issues such as drugs, sexuality, gender, science, and health[9,12,20]. The term draws on the theoretical contributions of authors such as Siva Vaidhyanathan[21,22], Joan Donovan[23], and Benjamin Bratton[24], and resonates with Latin American studies on technopolitics, digital coloniality, and truth-making devices[15,25,26].

Thus, the central question that arises is: how does this association between technoconservative discourses and scientific denialism strategies interfere with the formulation of public policies and the social perception of medicinal cannabis use? In other words, what are the practical consequences of this articulation regarding the right to health, particularly in a scenario where disinformation is becoming increasingly influential?

To address these questions, this article combines a documentary analysis—focusing on the booklet *"Os riscos do uso da maconha na família, na infância e na juventude"*[7][27] — with a methodological approach we term "cybercartography," which maps networks of actors, digital influencers, and online discourses[12]. The objective is to understand whether technoconservative ideas

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[6] A prominent example is Father Antonio Luiz Marchioni, known as *Padre Ticão*, a Catholic priest who became a national symbol in the struggle for democratic access to cannabis-based medical treatment.

[7] "The Risks of Marijuana Use and Its Legalization" in free translation.

turn marijuana into a symbol of threat to social order, reinforcing stigmas and legitimizing repressive policies, despite strong scientific evidence demonstrating the therapeutic benefits of cannabis consumption for treating certain illnesses[28].

From this analysis, we argue that the so-called "cannabis panic," a form of moral panic[5] applied to the trade and consumption of marijuana—including for therapeutic purposes — results from the convergence of political moralism and disinformation techniques, severely hindering the development of health policies based on scientific evidence. We then demonstrate how the aforementioned booklet contributes to sustaining this panic and, finally, discuss the extent to which the phenomenon of "cannabis flat-earthism" obstructs the realization of the right to health. Therefore, uncovering these sociopolitical dynamics is not merely about understanding the specifics of the cannabis debate but also about revealing how conservative agendas technologically articulate themselves to shape public opinion and hinder democratic advancements in the field of public health.

Methodology

This article stems from research carried out by a broad network of scholars since 2019. Overall, the project has employed a qualitative, exploratory, and ethnographically informed approach that combines cartographic procedures grounded in the schizo-analytic tradition with documentary analysis[12,29,30,31], with the aim of investigating the circulation of technoconservative discourses within Brazil's digital and institutional spheres. The empirical data derive from daily monitoring — initiated in August 2019 and still ongoing; for this article we analyse the corpus produced up to March 2024 — of public and private profiles, collecting and examining content published on YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp by individuals, groups, and companies that self-identify as conservatives. In this context, we also conducted documentary analysis of the booklet "*Os riscos do uso da maconha na família, na infância e na juventude*" — as well as a wider set of press-archive materials.

Observing that subjectivation processes are characterised by movement, transformation, and ongoing becoming, Virgínia Kastrup and Regina Benevides de Barros[31] argue that researchers should avoid methods aimed merely at representing a fixed object, since the core interest lies in following processes in flux. For the authors, cartography is far less concerned with pre-constituted objects and closed methodological paths than with locating, understanding, and analysing the lines that constitute the object — and the researcher's relation to it — by situating its constitutive process.

Grounded in Deleuze and Guattari's[29] writings, Kastrup and Barros[30] hold that knowledge production and novelty are not incompatible with describing reality beyond the decal (pré-formed representation). Analysis should proceed by accompanying processes—tracing the lines that gradually give shape to the reality under investigation. Hence, showing what is happening does not reduce to representing reality: experimentation becomes productive when it shows, in another way, what is unfolding, revealing lines that were not previously visible as data.

Eduardo Passos and Regina Benevides de Barros[31] state that "cartography as a research-intervention method presupposes a researcher's orientation that is neither prescriptive, through ready-made rules, nor aimed at previously defined objectives." The "cartographic guideline operates by clues that guide the research path, always considering the effects of the research process on the research object, the researcher, and its results"[31].

This methodological choice enabled us to follow discourses taking place both in private contexts — such as Telegram and WhatsApp groups maintained by self-declared Christian conservatives

influenced by Olavo de Carvalho and Jair Bolsonaro — and in public arenas intended to amplify their political agenda to the wider Brazilian audience. Notably, many of these individuals hold positions within the criminal-justice system — judges, prosecutors, police chiefs, and even university professors — while also operating as digital influencers.

The research team, composed of scholars from diverse national and international institutions, organised the material into thirty-five archival dossiers structured by thematic indicators and categories defined during the exploratory phase. The analysed corpus comprises content publicly posted by criminal-justice professionals and privately shared material extracted — through ethnographic observation — from WhatsApp and Telegram groups aligned with a conservative outlook shaped in Brazil by Olavo de Carvalho. All digital materials were collected and stored in compliance with ethical research protocols for public and semi-public digital environments, ensuring anonymity and the ethical use of information so as to minimise risks to interlocutors. The study is safeguarded by the ethical commitments of the social sciences, particularly those set forth in the professional codes of sociology[32] and anthropology[33].

Beyond social-media monitoring, the study included longitudinal tracking of Brazil's conservative publishing market. Special attention was paid to publishing houses associated with the CEDET network (Centro de Desenvolvimento Profissional e Tecnológico Ltda.), LVM, and É Realizações, all of which relied on Olavo de Carvalho for the selection, translation, and dissemination of authors and books that underpinned the resurgence of conservatism in twenty-first-century Brazil.

Through this cartographically oriented methodological framework, the research was able to map the articulations between the technoconservative political agenda, platform dynamics, and the institutional authority granted to these agents — particularly the ways in which these dimensions converge to shape alarmist discourses surrounding the production, trade, and consumption of cannabis, as well as the contemporary health policies that encompass it.

Technoconservatism and Public Policy

Technoconservatism, understood as the convergence of conservative discursive practices with the use of technological resources to disseminate them on a large scale, has gained prominence in Brazil by reshaping how moralist and denialist ideas gain visibility, influence public policy formulation, and, above all, affect collective perceptions of sensitive issues such as the medicinal use of cannabis.

Within this process, networks of digital influencers, publishers, publishing networks, digital content producers, and legal professionals coordinate efforts to spread a discourse based on moral panic and scientific discredit. They mobilize algorithms, artificial intelligence, and informational bubbles to advance an agenda that prioritizes repression and delegitimizes more progressive approaches[6,12,34]. The central idea is to shape subjectivities through a multi-platform ecosystem, where the systematic repetition of moralizing arguments and anti-drug premises constructs an "abusive truth", which sustains restrictive public policies, particularly in criminal justice and healthcare, even when scientific evidence points in a different direction[9,35].

This phenomenon is not merely ideological propaganda but rather a form of governmentality[36] that, through digital platforms, guides conduct in a diffuse yet effective way, shaping preferences, behaviors, and social demands. Through recommendation algorithms, conservative profiles and

alarmist content gain prominence, while scientifically grounded and critical voices are marginalized[37]. This mechanism of "platformentalization", as pointed out by Rosa, Jobim, and Nemer[15,16], has played a crucial role in legitimizing a "conservative criminology" that emphasizes punitive and moralistic solutions to issues related to drugs, public security, and human rights[6,11,35].

The spread of misinformation about medicinal cannabis exemplifies how these mechanisms operate. Despite scientific studies highlighting the plant's therapeutic potential[7], the technoconservative movement often adopts a "war on drugs" rhetoric based on myths and alarmism, delaying or even preventing legislative advancements. This aligns with the notion of "moral panic," where certain behaviors or groups are elevated to the status of existential threats, justifying repressive actions and dismissing scientific approaches[12,28].

Aligned with the ideological framework of Olavo de Carvalho[38,39,40], many actors within the criminal justice system — judges, prosecutors, police chiefs, etc.—reproduce, both in their social media profiles and in public events[41,42], the notion that cannabis legalization or regulation would result in moral and social collapse. This oversimplified narrative disregards research that highlights the plant's health benefits and the feasibility of harm reduction policies[6,11].

To understand the influence of technoconservatism on public policies, it is essential to observe how networks legitimize its discourse. Conservative publishing houses play a key role by publishing books that sustain a moralist worldview — such as works on "conservative criminology"[43], which are frequently promoted on YouTube channels, Instagram profiles, and Telegram groups led by figures aligned with this ideology[6].

These books are then adopted by digital influencers, who present them as unquestionable truths, strengthening ties with politicians and public officials who identify with this conservative framework. As a result, a new regime of truth is consolidated, where reality is interpreted through rigid concepts based more on religious and moral values than on scientific evidence. Platforms act as "curators" of the debate, prioritizing content that generates outrage and engagement, frequently converging with alarmist narratives that depict progressive agendas as attacks on family, faith, or public order — since this type of advertising propaganda generates higher financial returns[9].

In this context, the practical consequences emerge in multiple areas. When it comes to public health, technoconservatism often questions the validity of scientific studies and casts doubt on research institutions such as Fiocruz, sometimes even accusing them of ideological bias or data manipulation[34,44]. This stance obstructs discussions on the regulation of substances that could help patients with chronic illnesses while legitimizing materials that emphasize only the "risks of marijuana", failing to differentiate between medicinal and recreational use[6].

In public security, the movement reinforces the notion that only stricter penalties will reduce crime, ignoring analyses that highlight the selective nature of mass incarceration and the stigmatization of socially vulnerable groups[11,45]. Furthermore, misinformation permeates digital networks, encouraging legislators and public opinion to support punitive and restrictive laws under the argument that they combat serious and imminent threats[35].

The transplatform governmentality not only legitimizes discourses but also shapes institutional decisions. Legal professionals who identify with "conservative criminology" incorporate its arguments into courtroom proceedings and legal opinions, often citing materials drawn from social media and books published by conservative publishing houses within this technoconservative ecosystem. In a Minas Gerais Public Prosecutor's Office meeting, for example, concerns were raised about a

prosecutor who actively promoted punitive moralism and historical revisionism through his social media presence[42]. This case illustrates how institutional debates are increasingly shaped by ideological positions that disregard scientific methodology, favoring authority-based arguments from figures like Olavo de Carvalho and his followers[6].

A climate emerges in which subtle censorship and the stigmatization of academic knowledge converge with the promotion of simplistic solutions, almost always grounded in repression. This restricts the space for evidence-based public policies and reinforces the perception that social problems should be addressed through force and criminalization, preventing more complex discussions on penal reform, drug decriminalization, or harm reduction strategies [11,28,45,46].

At the same time, digital platforms — such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram — have become privileged spaces for the consolidation of myths and oversimplified narratives about public security, drug policies, and morality[37]. The lack of analytical complexity in technoconservative discourses on topics such as the therapeutic use of cannabis, reinforced by the "click economy", fosters easy engagement while deepening the gap between dominant discourse and scientific evidence.

Given this landscape, it is essential to deepen the analysis of how technoconservatism turns cannabis into a metaphor for moral and social decay, associating it with crime while completely disregarding its therapeutic potential, which is widely recognized in scientific research[7].

It is precisely at the intersection of scientific denialism, moral panic, and the criminalization of drug production, trade, and consumption that the next section will focus. It will examine how the structures of "conservative criminology", heavily influenced by Olavo de Carvalho and replicated by his followers, reinforce a "cannabis panic" that obstructs any democratic and evidence-based debate on drug policies[6].

In other words, the next step is to explore how fear-driven rhetoric and misinformation tactics, embedded within this technoconservative discourse, intensify scientific denialism, preventing progress in ensuring the right to health for those who could benefit from medical cannabis use.

Cannabis Panic and Scientific Denialism: The Effects of Conservative Criminology

The consolidation of cannabis panic in Brazil is rooted in both a historical legacy of eugenics and evolutionism and the contemporary dynamics embedded in the discourse of conservative criminology. This trajectory dates back to the period when the first prohibitionist laws were implemented, deeply anchored in a social hygiene project aimed at controlling Black and Indigenous populations[46].

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, renowned intellectuals such as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues and Arthur Ramos contributed to the dissemination of evolutionist theories, which attributed to certain groups a supposed natural propensity for criminality, thereby justifying heightened surveillance and punitive measures. Although Arthur Ramos sought to distance himself from strict biological determinism, he still regarded aspects of Afro-Brazilian culture as "backward," advocating for state intervention as a necessary corrective measure[47].

These racist and evolutionist foundations became evident in the sensationalist newspaper headlines of the 1930s and 1940s, when cannabis began to be labeled as "African poison" or "the herb that brutalizes." This rhetoric, laden with pejorative and xenophobic connotations, became a tool of exclusion, directing state repression precisely toward those occupying the most socially vulnerable positions[46,48].

Figure 1. Marijuana: The Devil's Plant[8]

Source: [49]

In this context, the construction of moral panic surrounding cannabis was accompanied by the legitimization of prohibitionist practices aimed at safeguarding a supposed "public order." According to Cohen[5], moral panic is a process in which certain groups or behaviors are categorized as serious threats to social values, leading to the creation of "internal enemies"[9].

In the case of marijuana, its criminalization became closely associated with the figure of the Black and peripheral user, who was frequently depicted in newspaper pages as a collective threat[50]. This stigmatization was further fueled by a criminological perspective that blended moralism and science in an unbalanced manner, attributing cannabis use to a supposed character flaw or degeneration. This approach, which Becker[51] describes as a form of social "labeling," reinforced the perception that drug users were not only lawbreakers but also an existential risk to societal stability.

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[8] The image is a reproduction of a Brazilian newspaper or magazine page with the title *"Marijuana – The Devil's Plant"*, written by Luiz Alípio de Barros with photos by José Medeiros. The layout follows a sensationalist style, using bold lettering and dramatic language to portray marijuana as a destructive force. The accompanying photograph depicts a Black man in worn clothing, with a distressed expression, reinforcing the association between drug use, physical decay, and social marginalization.
The article presents marijuana as a source of personal and societal ruin, stating: *"The story we are about to tell is a story of devastation. A tragic, cruel, and painful narrative that warns of the terrible consequences of marijuana use. The lives of its users become wrecked, their minds lost in addiction, and their bodies consumed by decay. This is the bitter reality of marijuana in Brazil, a country where this evil plant has spread among the unfortunate and the weak..."* This type of discourse was common in 20th-century Brazilian media, shaping public perceptions and justifying prohibitionist drug policies that disproportionately targeted marginalized populations.
[9] Another example of the demonization and construction of social enemies occurred with cocaine in the early 20th century and with ayahuasca [52].

Figure 2. The African Poison[10]

O VENENO AFRICANO

ESTÁ SENDO VENDIDA NO RIO, UMA PLANTA DIABOLICA, QUE LEVA AO SONHO,
— Á LOUCURA E Á MORTE —

Como foi descoberto na Casa de Correcção um fumador de "diamba" —
O uso da "maconha" entre os presos militares — As allucinações
— de um recluso —

Source: (53)

In contemporary Brazil, cannabis panic is not limited to historical interpretations inherited from the past but takes on a renewed form through conservative criminology. This theoretical framework, which is based on the idea that punishment and repression should be the central pillars of control policies, has gained momentum on digital platforms, where alarmist discourses and distorted data about the potential risks of cannabis are amplified. The internet has become a vehicle for spreading misinformation and hate speech, largely due to the financial incentives associated with the circulation of such content.

Under the influence of technoconservative sectors and figures like Olavo de Carvalho, the combination of morality, misinformation, and anti-scientific rhetoric fosters an environment in which any attempt to discuss the therapeutic benefits of marijuana is perceived as an attack on traditional values. With the aid of algorithms, artificial intelligence, and informational bubbles, this prohibitionist discourse reaches massive proportions, functioning as a form of "algorithmic governmentality" — a term that refers to the ability of influencers, social networks, and legal professionals to shape preferences, behaviors, and even lawmaking by guiding conduct through technopolitical means, particularly via digital platforms[45,54].

By analyzing marijuana as a central element of moral panic, it is possible to highlight its connections to institutional racism, which remains deeply embedded in Brazilian society. Since the colonial period, the segregation of African cultural and religious practices has contributed to associating these manifestations with criminality and cultural inferiority[28]. To a great extent, this bias persists, as the prohibition of cannabis has historically been framed with racial arguments, linking its use to racialized groups and reinforcing a punitive perspective that further marginalizes already vulnerable populations[55].

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[10] The image is a reproduction of a historical Brazilian newspaper article with the headline *"The African Poison."* The text adopts a sensationalist tone, referring to marijuana as a *"diabolical plant"* that leads to *"madness and death."* The article describes the discovery of an inmate using *"diamba" (a term for marijuana)* at the Casa de Correção, a prison in Rio de Janeiro, reinforcing the criminalization of cannabis and its association with social deviance.
The publication reflects early 20th-century racist and prohibitionist discourse in Brazil, which portrayed marijuana as a foreign and dangerous substance linked to African heritage. This rhetoric contributed to the stigmatization of Black communities and justified repressive drug policies that disproportionately targeted marginalized populations.

In the media sphere, the figure of the "marijuana user" is stereotyped as someone on the brink of delinquency, intensifying an atmosphere of fear and justifying repressive practices. This is evident in historical images that depict cannabis users as "moral devils"[5].

Figure 3. Marijuana: The Herb That Brutalizes[11]

Source: [56].

At the same time, scientific research efforts continue to challenge the alarmist narratives promoted by conservative criminology. Numerous studies indicate that cannabis has therapeutic potential, particularly in areas such as chronic pain treatment, drug-resistant epilepsy, and palliative care[57,58]. However, as Escohotado[59] argues, the prohibitionist dogma deliberately ignores evidence that could support harm reduction policies or the regulation of therapeutic use.

This dissonance between science and moralism does not stem from a lack of data, but rather from the ideological refusal of conservative sectors that perceive cannabis use — under any circumstances — as a vector of moral decay. This denialism becomes even more striking when influencers and legal professionals openly reject both international and national research, going so far as to discredit universities and research institutions that acknowledge the substance's beneficial potential[6].

The intersection of conservatism, scientific denialism, and digital platforms manifests directly in public policy, particularly in the fields of health and public security. In legislative debates, the logic of cannabis panic often prevails, as portraying marijuana as a dangerous agent of social contagion mobilizes support for harsher laws and the ongoing criminalization of users. This stance directly impacts thousands of individuals who could benefit from the medicinal use of cannabis but face significant barriers to accessing the substance in a legal and safe manner[60].

Moreover, the persistence of this scenario reinforces penal selectivity, as the strict enforcement of drug laws primarily targets peripheral neighborhoods and racialized populations, resulting in

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[11] The image is a compilation of historical Brazilian newspaper clippings that depict marijuana (*"maconha"*) as a dangerous and corrupting substance. The headlines use alarmist language, referring to it as *"the herb that brutalizes," "the herb of death,"* and describing cities as *"infested"* with marijuana. The articles emphasize criminal arrests, portraying users and small-scale sellers as threats to public safety.

These publications reflect the prohibitionist and moral panic discourse that dominated Brazilian media in the 20th century, reinforcing the association between cannabis use, crime, and social decay. Such narratives played a significant role in justifying repressive drug policies that disproportionately targeted marginalized communities, particularly Black and poor populations.

disproportionate incarceration rates[55]. In this sense, prohibitionism functions not only as a questionable public health strategy but also as a mechanism of social control and segregation, perpetuating historical inequalities.

The expansion of this punitive imaginary on social media, in turn, involves the systematic modulation of fear. Narratives linking cannabis to organized crime, urban violence, and the "collapse of family values" thrive in algorithmically designed environments that prioritize emotionally engaging content[45]. This feedback loop makes it increasingly difficult to foster a balanced discussion, one based on scientific data and the complexities of drug policy regulation.

As a result, the so-called "transplatform governmentality" — driven by technoconservatives through their social media profiles and fully supported by Big Tech corporations — continues to promote punitive and repressive narratives. These narratives are reinforced by political leaders, law enforcement authorities, and even judicial figures, who advocate for legal crackdowns, receiving applause from segments of the public that absorb misinformation as absolute truth.

This entire landscape reaffirms the deep-rooted systematic denialism surrounding cannabis, which, under the guise of social protection rhetoric, actively prevents progress in the development of innovative public health policies. The current war on drugs, driven by moral panic, gains legitimacy with every alarmist post shared on social media by individuals, groups, or technoconservative organizations, and with every statement from public authorities reinforcing stereotypes of the "degenerate user." Given this scenario, it is crucial to promote a plural and evidence-based debate on cannabis, one that moves beyond panic-driven rhetoric and takes into account scientific evidence, social justice principles, and racial equity[28,57].

The inevitable conclusion is that cannabis panic — rooted in historical racism, religious moralism, and pseudoscientific theories — produces concrete effects by perpetuating misinformation and legitimizing repressive policies. By revisiting the evolutionist and hygienist origins of prohibitionism, it becomes evident how the criminalization of marijuana has been used as a tool of social exclusion in Brazil for over three centuries.

However, the conservative criminology that has emerged through technopolitical means via social media has further entrenched this legacy, turning moralization and scientific discredit into an amplified discourse through digital platforms. Nevertheless, these narratives are not unshakable. Academic groups, social movements, and even sectors of the judiciary are actively challenging these perspectives, calling for urgent regulatory measures based on empirical data and democratic values.

This very conflict sets the stage for the next section, where the case of the booklet "The Risks of Marijuana Use and Its Legalization" illustrates how misinformation and moralism intertwine to block legislative changes and undermine the fundamental right to health.

The Case of the Booklet "The Risks of Marijuana Use and Its Legalization"

The booklet titled *" Os riscos do uso da maconha na família, na infância e na juventude"*[27] emerged within a decisively conservative context, where government discourse relied on the demonization of drugs to justify the continuation of prohibitionist policies. Published under the auspices of the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights during the Bolsonaro administration, led by Damares Alves, the booklet reflects a political and ideological alliance between ultraconservative groups, such as Ordo Iuris, and neoliberal and religious think tanks, including the Atlas Network.

Within this framework, key figures — such as Angela Gandra, former National Secretary for the Family and daughter of jurist Ives Gandra Martins — played a central role in the creation and dissemination of the material, aligning it with a "culture war" aimed at reinforcing moralist values and a punitive approach to public security.

Far from being a neutral or educational resource, the booklet serves as a tool for constructing moral panic[5] and moralizing discourse, which overrides scientific evidence on cannabis in favor of ideological narratives.

Figure 4. Cannabis Alarmism

A maconha afeta o desenvolvimento do cérebro e suas funções mentais.

12

Source: [27]

The booklet's primary strategy is to present marijuana as an absolute threat to family cohesion, social order, and the "future" of young people, aligning itself with a historical tradition of campaigns that construct "internal enemies" to justify repressive interventions. In this sense, it revisits key elements of moral panics, in which certain phenomena — such as the use of psychoactive substances — are exaggerated, taking on the appearance of an existential threat.

Here, marijuana is associated with personal failure, school dropout, and juvenile delinquency, creating a deterministic narrative that disregards structural variables such as socioeconomic inequality and racial discrimination, which are essential for understanding the context of drug use[6,52,61,62].

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[12] The visuals depict three distinct warnings: a young man carrying theatrical masks, accompanied by the caption "marijuana affects brain development and its mental functions"; a person sitting with their head down, suggesting emotional distress or depression; and a pregnant woman smoking, implying potential harm to fetal development. This type of visual representation is part of a broader prohibitionist discourse that links cannabis use to mental health disorders, cognitive decline, and social degradation. While such messages express legitimate concerns about drug use, they also align with moral panic narratives historically used to justify restrictive drug policies in Brazil. However, the risks highlighted in these images are neither prevented nor mitigated by prohibitionist policies — on the contrary, such approaches tend to hinder access to information, harm reduction strategies, and healthcare, thereby worsening the very vulnerabilities they claim to address.

Figure 5. There Is No Such Thing as Medicinal Marijuana[13]

A flexibilização do controle sobre a maconha leva a um aumento no número de homicídios, criminalidade e violência.

NÃO existe "maconha medicinal".

Source: (27)

The booklet reinforces an explicit manichean perspective, establishing a rigid boundary between "good" and "evil": on one side, the family and the church as "protectors"; on the other, the drug and its supposed advocates, portrayed as promoters of an irreversible risk to social stability. This rhetoric resonates with the notion of the "public enemy" that Michel Foucault[63] identified in discourses on criminalization, highlighting how state power relies on discursive constructions to legitimize control and punishment.

A statement by former National Secretary for the Family, Angela Gandra, exemplifies this dramatization: "We do not want, in the name of freedom, to open the doors to slavery and manipulation." This type of argument overlaps a diffuse threat ("slavery") with any possibility of a more humanized or rational regulation of drug policies. Such moralizing discourse makes any discussion on decriminalization or harm reduction impossible, turning it into a battle between virtue and degradation.

This dramatization, however, is not limited to alarmist expressions. The text employs metaphors and imagery that associate marijuana with tragedy and social failure, without presenting comparative data or scientific references to support such claims. When references are provided, they are often taken out of context or misinterpreted. This is the case with studies like Volkow et al.[64], cited to argue the alleged dangers of cannabis even in medicinal applications, despite the original authors highlighting methodological limitations and emphasizing the need for further research.

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[13] It contains two illustrated messages: one depicts a man holding a gun, with a caption stating that *"loosening control over marijuana leads to an increase in homicides, crime, and violence."* The other features a distressed young person surrounded by shadowy figures, accompanied by the claim that *"There is no such thing as medicinal marijuana."* These visuals align with alarmist and moral panic discourses, commonly used to justify strict drug policies by associating cannabis with criminality and social decay. The explicit denial of medicinal cannabis contradicts extensive scientific research and international regulatory trends, where cannabis is increasingly recognized for its therapeutic applications.

This selective manipulation of academic evidence is characteristic of disinformation tactics[37], in which preliminary or inconclusive data are promoted as definitive proof, while rigorous research on the therapeutic benefits of cannabidiol (CBD) or tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is deliberately ignored or discredited[57] by technoconservative actors.

Another crucial facet of the booklet's discourse is the stigmatization of the "drug user", who is practically equated with a criminal or a morally degenerate individual. This framing is not new in the history of the war on drugs, as scholars have long pointed out how marijuana criminalization serves as a mechanism of control, disproportionately affecting Black and marginalized youth[11,45].

By linking cannabis use to "early school dropout, low professional success, lower wages, greater chances of unemployment, and criminal behavior" — as highlighted in the document itself—the booklet effectively endorses a punitive and militarized policy, aligned with political interests that see the repression of psychoactive substances as a form of social control. This approach ignores the real causes of mass incarceration, overlooking the problem of institutional racism, which turns the "war on drugs" into a strategy of selective criminalization.

The booklet's connection with technoconservative networks such as the Atlas Network and Ordo Iuris reveals a political diagram[9,41] that extends beyond cannabis prohibition, engaging in a broader ideological project. The true objective is not merely drug regulation but a broader dispute over values, reinforcing a moralist agenda in cultural matters and a neoliberal stance in economic policy, particularly by radicalizing competition and market-driven narratives.

This scenario aligns with what researchers define as algorithmic governmentality[12,13,14] or transplatform governmentality[15,16], where influencers, public authorities, and digital platforms converge to promote a homogeneous discourse that opposes rational drug regulation and criticizes any perspective rooted in human rights.

The rhetorical framework of the booklet itself—suggesting that "THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS MEDICINAL MARIJUANA" or that loosening control would lead to social chaos—functions as propaganda slogans that spread through digital spaces, creating informational bubbles and reinforcing adherence among social groups already highly sensitive to alarmist narratives.

One of the most significant practical effects of this rhetoric is the obstruction of evidence-based debates, particularly in public health. While national and international organizations—such as Fiocruz and the World Health Organization (WHO)—produce scientific evidence on the therapeutic benefits of cannabis for conditions like epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, and chronic pain, the booklet reinforces prejudices and myths, hindering the adoption of policies that could improve the quality of life for patients.

Instead of presenting nuanced discussions, the document relies on a simplistic formula that associates cannabis with "evil" and abstinence with "good", thereby undermining the possibility of a more complex scientific and ethical debate.

Ultimately, the booklet does not act in isolation; it is part of a broader set of strategies to legitimize prohibitionist policies, using a language that blends pseudo-scientific arguments, religious morality, and claims of protecting family and youth. However, despite its alleged concern for children and adolescents, this discourse deliberately ignores the racial and structural roots of prohibitionism, reinforcing stereotypes that disproportionately impact the most disadvantaged sectors of society[11].

As a result, the anti-drug stance promoted by the document reinforces a repressive model based on incarceration and surveillance, rather than harm reduction, prevention, and care-oriented policies.

In conclusion, the booklet titled *" Os riscos do uso da maconha na família, na infância e na juventude "* is, in practice, a political artifact deliberately designed to sustain moral panic and demonize marijuana use, disregarding scientific research and discrediting its potential therapeutic applications. The use of dramatic language and selective data interpretation reinforces a manichean and moralistic perspective that ultimately legitimizes the criminalization of users, particularly those belonging to historically vulnerable groups.

This analysis thus highlights the need to develop public approaches grounded in evidence and the protection of rights, challenging the punitive model widely promoted by materials of this nature. It is therefore essential to critically assess how this set of ideas and practices, which can be referred to as "cannabis flat-earthism," impacts the right to health in Brazil, exposing the tensions between moralism, denialism, and the need for more inclusive and democratic drug control policies.

Conclusion

When critically addressing technoconservative discourses on cannabis, this study does not aim to deny or minimize the potential risks associated with abusive or problematic use of the substance. On the contrary, it acknowledges that there is consistent scientific evidence regarding adverse effects, especially in cases of early onset, continuous use, and lack of medical supervision. What is questioned here are the false associations frequently established between the regulation of cannabis for medicinal (or civil) purposes and a supposed scenario of generalized permissiveness, moral decay, or collective threat. Regulatory proposals—whether in the fields of health, law, or public policy — do not ignore the risks; rather, they address them in an integrated and evidence-based manner, also considering the collateral effects of prohibitionist models, which tend to exacerbate vulnerabilities, hinder access to treatment, and increase the harms associated with the marginalization of cannabis use.

The scenario outlined throughout the previous sections culminates in a significant tension between the demand for public policies based on scientific evidence and the rise of a discourse that systematically denies the therapeutic potential of cannabis, a phenomenon that can be described as "cannabis flat-earthism." Similar to geographic or climate denialism, this type of rhetoric disregards extensive studies and clinical experiences involving this substance in the treatment of various illnesses, replacing them with arguments rooted in moral panic and an essentially punitive perspective on drug-related social practices. In Brazil, this movement has profound implications for the right to health, as it restricts legislative debates, obstructs scientific research, and closes off opportunities for treatments that could benefit a significant portion of the population[7,57].

First, the expansion of this "cannabis flat-earthism" is grounded in the actions of conservative criminology, which, by emphasizing criminalization and moral risk, relegates the objective evaluation of clinical data to the background. As a result, prohibitionist policies persist, disproportionately affecting socially vulnerable groups, particularly young, Black, poor, and marginalized individuals.

This penal selectivity, historically linked to institutional racism, not only inflates incarceration rates but also reinforces stereotypes that delegitimize discussions on the therapeutic use of marijuana. Consequently, "cannabis panic" gains momentum on social media, fueled by algorithms and artificial intelligence, where sensationalist content is prioritized while voices presenting scientific evidence or testimonies from patients benefiting from therapeutic cannabis use are silenced.

Second, the association between technoconservatism and disinformation practices presents a serious obstacle to the right to health. This right extends beyond access to hospitals and medication; it

also involves the production and dissemination of qualified information, enabling informed decisions regarding alternative treatments.

Thus, when digital influencers, political authorities, and even judicial officials promote the idea that access to marijuana equates to criminal and destructive behavior, citizens who could benefit from cannabinoid-based therapies are led to question their safety and efficacy[12,34]. Moreover, fear of violating prohibitionist norms often prevents regulatory progress, leaving Brazil lagging behind other countries that already recognize cannabis as a clinically significant resource for treating various medical conditions.

Finally, the discourse sustaining this "cannabis flat-earthism" serves to shield the current drug war model, blocking legal and institutional innovations that could reduce harm, promote prevention, and ensure greater equity in the treatment of substance dependence and chronic illnesses.

The conflict between, on one side, civil society sectors, the scientific community, and health organizations, and, on the other, actors who rely on moral polarization, religious myths, and pseudoscientific claims to maintain marijuana as a social threat, highlights that the debate goes beyond the mere regulation of a substance.

At stake is the fundamental question of whether drug control policies will be guided by principles of social justice and scientific evidence, or whether they will continue to operate under historical exclusionary models that enforce stigmatization and criminalization of vulnerable populations, while using scientific denialism to legitimize technoconservative narratives[11,55].

In summary, the rise of technoconservatism in Brazil, coupled with the alarmist rhetoric of conservative criminology, has created an environment hostile to the development of policies that recognize the therapeutic benefits of cannabis. This "cannabis flat-earthism" represents a barrier both to patients' access to alternative treatments and to legislative advancements, remaining committed to the drug war framework as a tool of social control.

Given this reality, the debate on the right to health — which necessarily includes freedom of research, the dissemination of reliable information, and access to appropriate therapies — emerges as an urgent political and ethical challenge. The construction of more inclusive and rational public policies will require direct confrontation with denialist narratives, as well as the collaboration of multiple sectors (academic, legal, and social) to center science and human rights in legal reforms and institutional practices.

Ultimately, criminalization based on moral panic and disinformation, characteristic of "cannabis flat-earthism," directly contradicts the constitutional commitment to ensuring health and human dignity. Dismantling these discursive frameworks and opening space for evidence-based discussions on social justice, scientific research, and diverse therapeutic approaches requires overcoming digitalized conservatism, which has dominated public debate.

Although this task is complex, it is a necessary step toward establishing effective regulatory and care strategies, ensuring the right to health and therapeutic freedom for all those in need.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Author' Contributions

Souza AT contributed to the conception/design of the article, data analysis and interpretation, article writing, and approval of the final version. Rosa PO contributed to the research development, article design, analysis, data interpretation, and text writing. Camargo GM contributed to the article's conception, data analysis and interpretation, and article writing. Fraga P contributed to the article writing, critical review of its content, and approval of the final version. Nunes ELG contributed to the article writing and critical review of its content.

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