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# BREAKING THE NEWS FROM HOME: THE VISUAL FEATURES OF BRAZILIAN BROADCAST JOURNALISM DURING THE PANDEMIC

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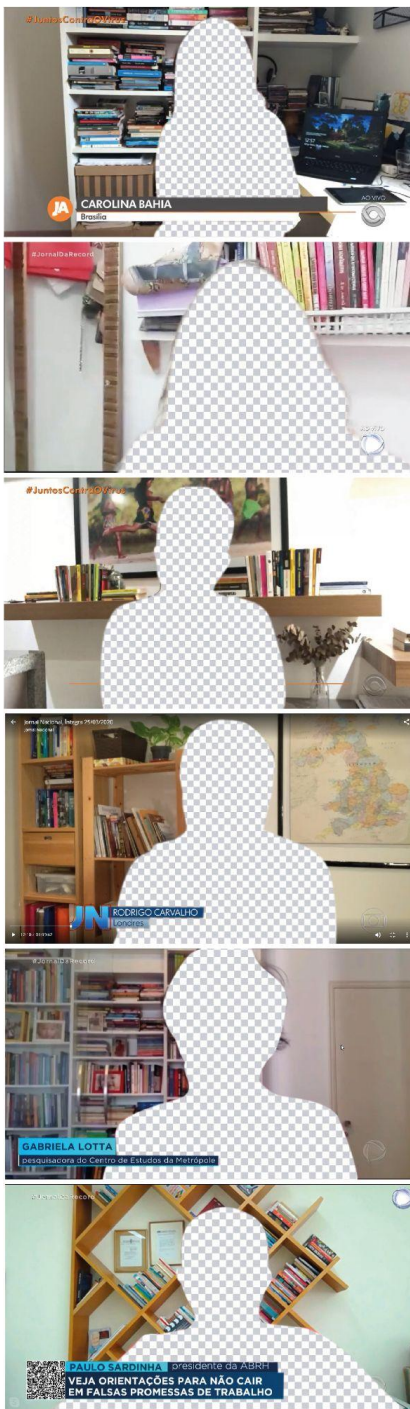
**Keywords:** Television, Broadcast Journalism, Data Visualization, Brazil, COVID-19

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic changed television broadcast production, decentralizing production crews due to World Health Organization recommendations (WHO, 2021) and driving interviews and commentary primarily to online video calls.

Journalists and interviewees' residential private spaces became part of professional performances, using personal objects such as books and bookshelves, decorative elements, and other furniture to help build a public persona and suggest social status. Out of the controlled environment of the studios, closer to homes, new visual patterns emerged. A glimpse of them can be seen in **Figure 1**, after erasing the individuals to highlight the backgrounds.

The authors question which patterns became recurrent in Brazilian news programs from March to October 2020 as they began to include home-based video calls. We collected stills from four shows over eight months, analyzing them with a mix of off-the-shelf and custom-made digital tools.

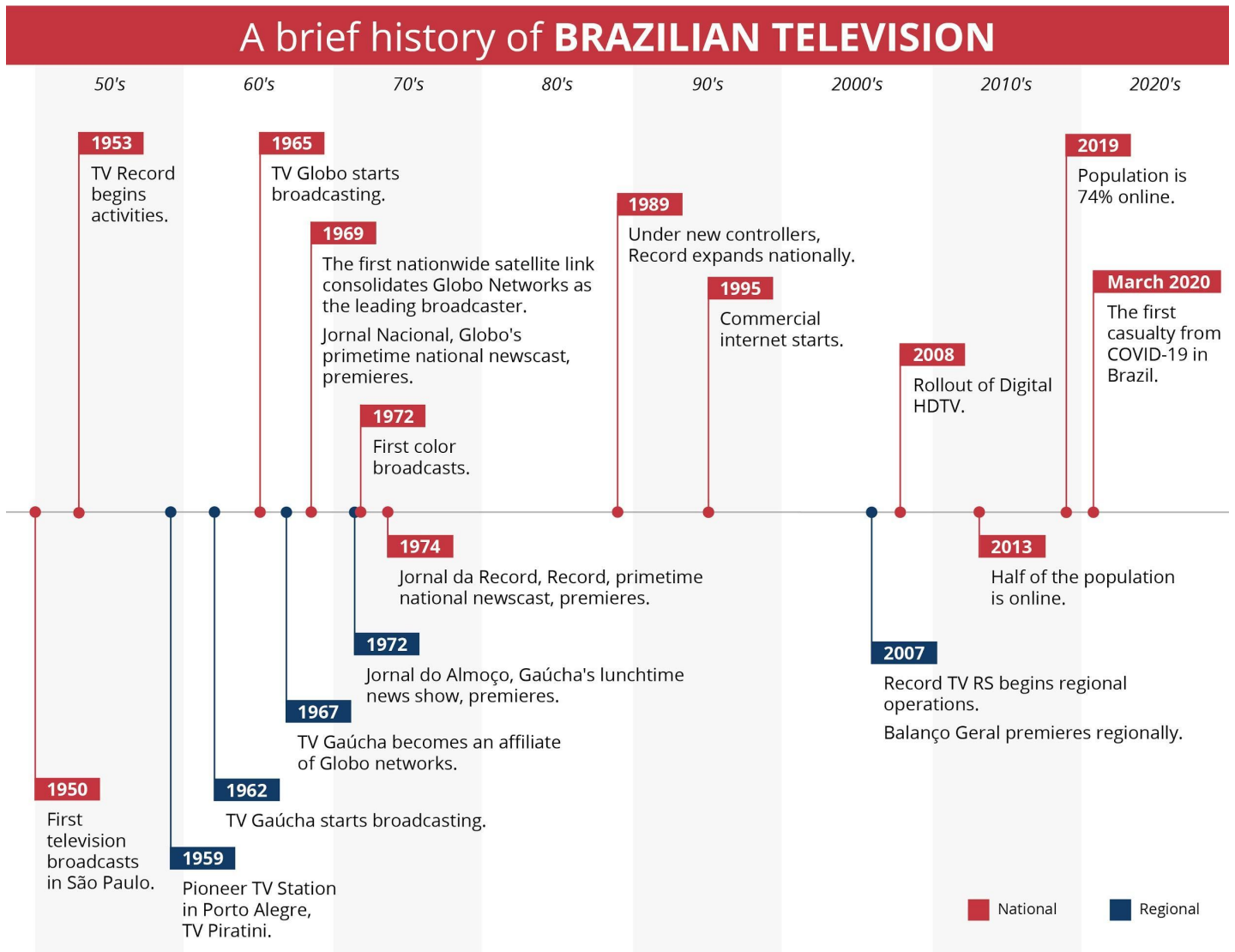


**Figure 1** – Random frames that highlight the background from interviews on Brazilian television, March-October 2020.

Source: Screenshots and layout made by the authors (2021).

# TELEVISION IN BRAZIL: A CONTEXT

Brazilian television made its first broadcast on September 18, 1950, in São Paulo, its chief economic hub. A mix of journalism, fiction, and entertainment made by private broadcasters defined the programming. Over the next two decades, stations spread across the country, and, by the seventies, TV became the nation's most prominent medium, as synthesized in **Figure 2**.



**Figure 2** – A timeline of key dates, with National (red) and Regional (blue) facts. Source: Produced by the authors based on Sodré (1998) and Bergesch (2010).

By the end of 2019, as the first news of the pandemic arrived from China, most of the Brazilian population was online in some capacity, while Globo and Record networks disputed audience attention nationally and regionally. Thus, the corpus' selection criteria began with the authors' professional nexus on the country's southernmost state and fourth-largest metropolitan area, seen in **Figure 3**.

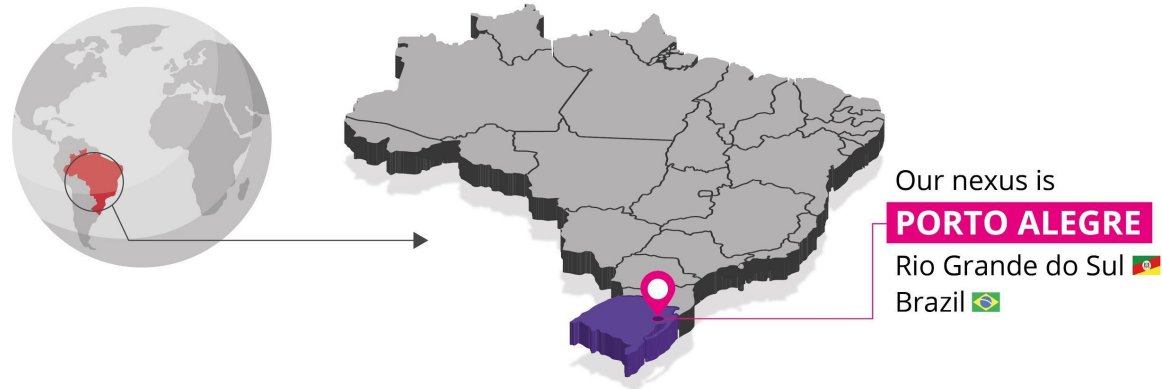


Figure 3 – Geographic location of broadcasts - Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre.

The choices focused on the weekday ratings' peaks. Four shows were selected: two nationals on primetime (Jornal da Record, Jornal Nacional) and two regionals on lunchtime (Jornal do Almoço, Balanço Geral RS), as illustrated in Figure 4.

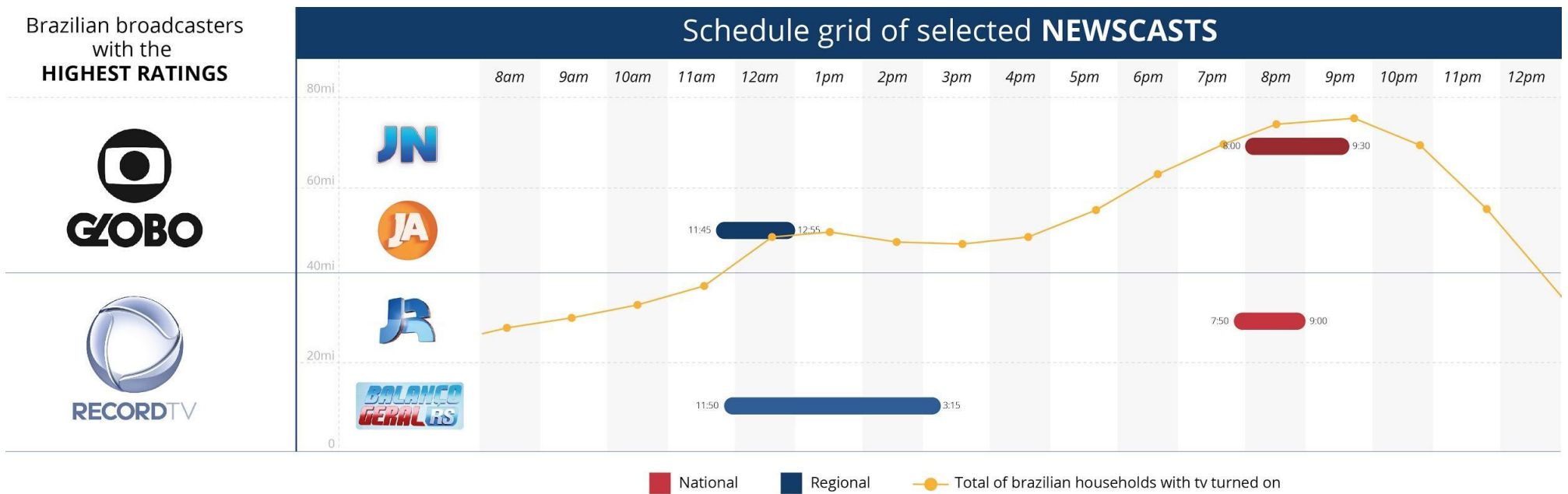


Figure 4 – The four newscasts' starting times and durations on weekdays. The line graph follows the national percentage of powered TV sets, stressing the relevance of the timeslots. Source: The authors (2021).

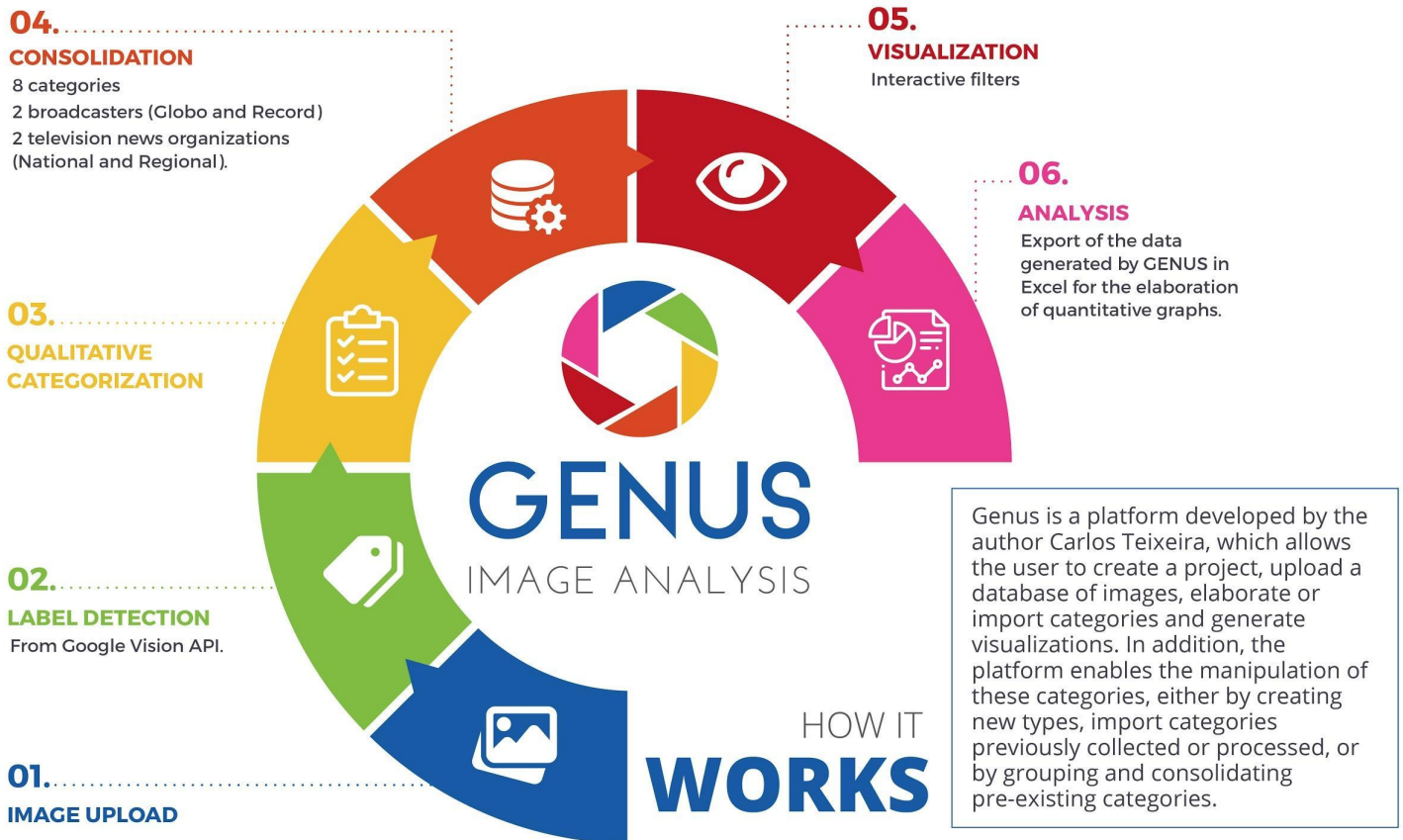
## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

Our methodological strategy is based on three fronts. The first uses Meyrowitz (2001) and the concept of digital materialities. Then, according to Manovich (2020), the next follows Digital Humanities as the research applies human and computational resources to achieve its goals. Finally, the analysis is established on visual explanations inspired by Rand (1993, 1996) who postulates a narrative design as an effective means of communication and data visualizations from Tufte (1990, 1992, 1997) when highlighting patterns from the datasets.

Meyrowitz (2001) defines *media* as a conduit for messages and media literacy as the knowledge about the relatively stable characteristics through a comparative analysis. Each medium's grammatical variables can be manipulated to alter the message content's perception by the audience, such as shot framing, camera movements, and editing. The recurring visual patterns during the pandemic COVID-19's reflect a shift in such grammar and an adaptation to unprecedented hardships. We propose they can be identified in two steps: data collection with AI-supported tagging and visual analysis. **Figure 5** synthesizes the first part, where the word cloud shows the higher-frequency labels related to indoor objects and decoration.

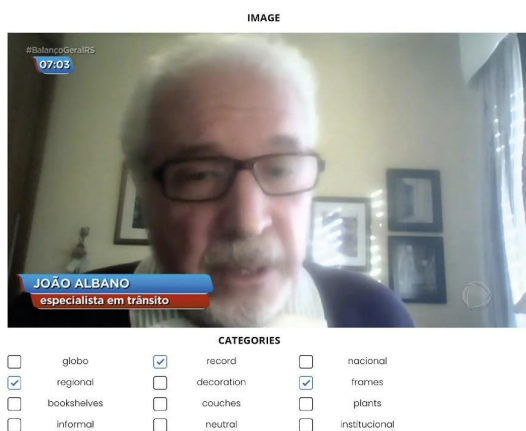


The second step of our methodology – represented in **Figure 6** – expanded the dataset analysis through interactive image mosaics that allowed the automatic labels to be grouped in categories (available at <https://www.ocarlosteixeira.com.br/genus/projetos/mosaico/6>, retrieved June 9, 2021) detailed in the next section.

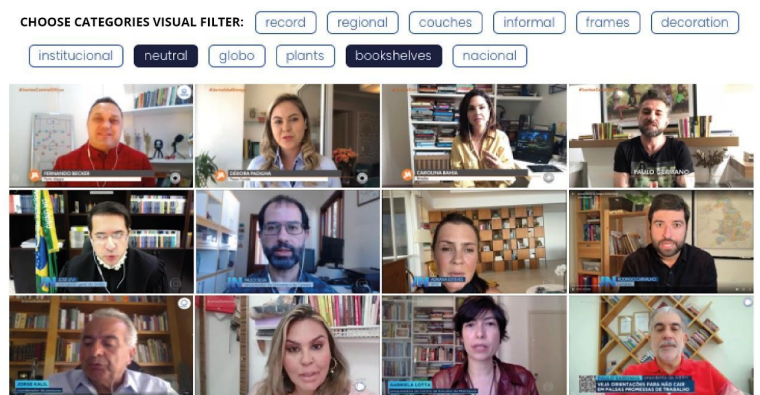


## GENUS INTERFACE SCREENSHOTS EXAMPLES

Qualitative categorization



Mosaic Images Visualization

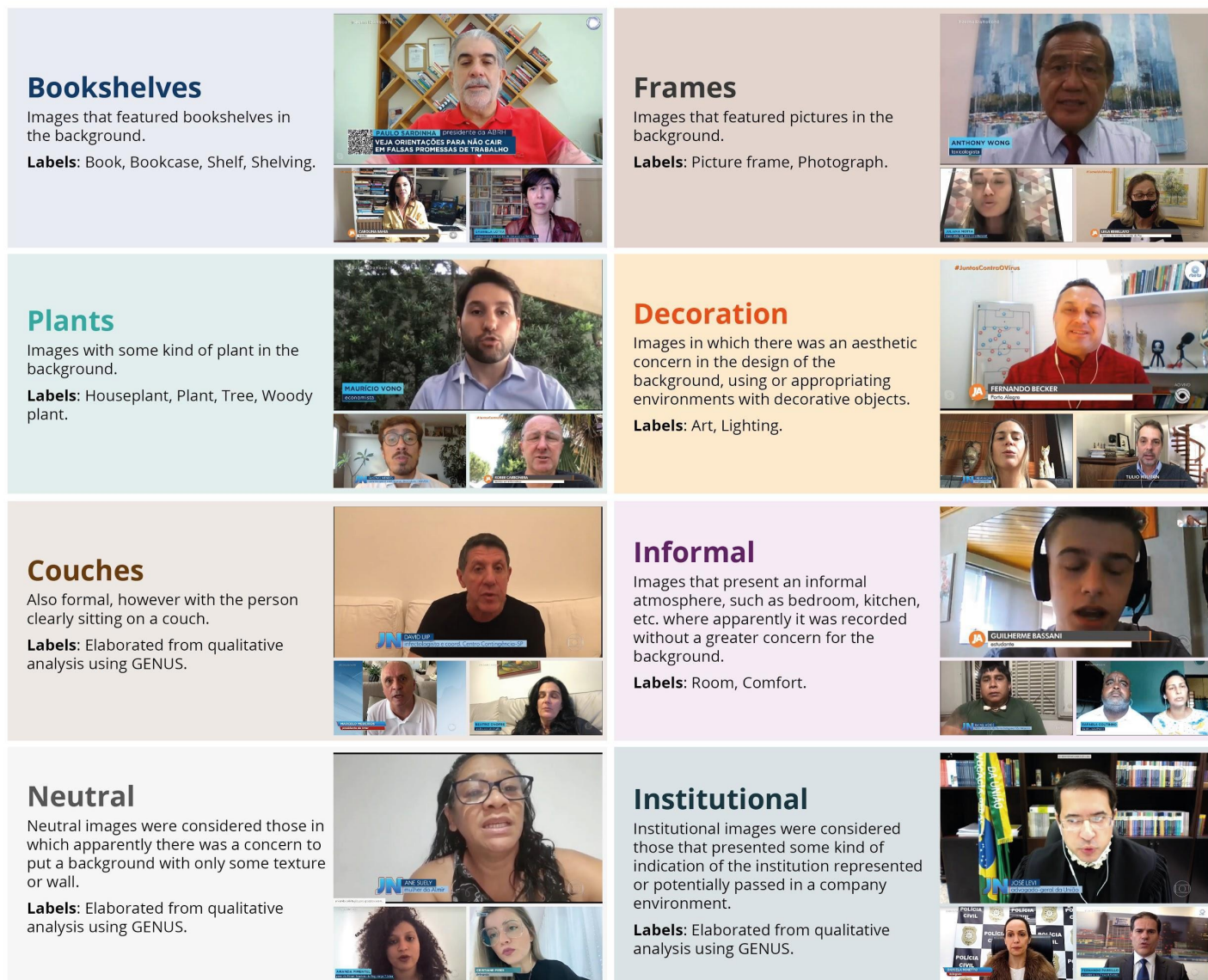


**Figure 6** – A step-by-step look at the Genus tool and how it helped organize the images for qualitative and quantitative analysis. Source: The authors (2021).

# MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

By performing a floating analysis on the refined dataset, it was possible to establish eight image categories grouping the visual variables emerging from the home video calls, as detailed in **Figure 7**. The selected categories' names were given by the authors highlighting the perceived differences.

## Images **CATEGORIES** description and exemples

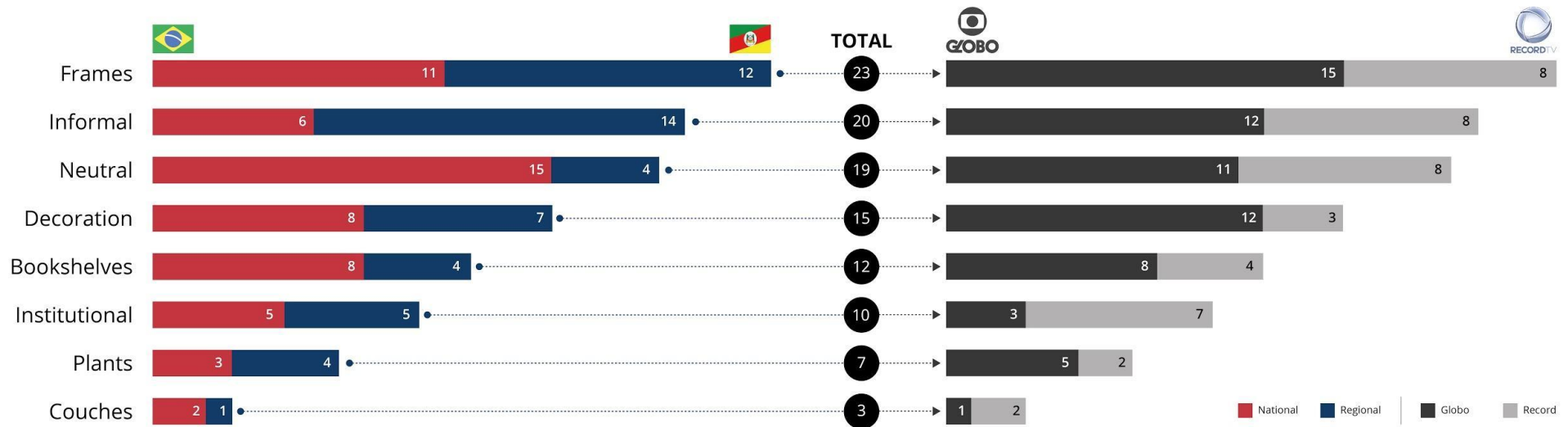


**Figure 7** – Once the categories were formed, it is possible to point out the main characteristics of the images. Source: The authors (2021).

Six out of eight categories feature expected home decorations like picture frames and couches. Neat home studios akin to the ones seen on Youtubers and Twitch streamers' feeds were not observed, although it is possible to interpret the background elements as indexical signs of economic status or profession, informing a set of variables. **Figure 8** Builds on the analysis, matching the categories with the shows and broadcasters to some interesting findings.



## IMAGES' CATEGORIES - NATIONAL X REGIONAL AND BY BROADCASTERS



**Figure 8** – Presence of the categories on Local vs. Regional and Globo vs. Record. Many bars converge in results, but some point to relevant commentary about the broadcasters. Source: The authors (2021).

The distinction between regional and national news is emphasized by near 2:1 frequency of informal backgrounds on the regional front, possibly reflecting fewer coaching of the interviewees by smaller production crews. The approximate 4:1 advantage of neutral backdrops on national news corroborates such inference. Bookshelves also stand out nationally with a 2:1 over regional broadcasts, operating as a visual sign of authority and knowledge.

There is also a significant split between the broadcasters. Globo featured nearly 2:1 more picture frames, 4:1 more home decor, 2:1 bookshelves, and almost 3:1 plants over Record. However, institutional signs were featured more prominently on Record by roughly 2:1 over Globo. This suggests a difference in each broadcaster's profile and audiences, with Globo reflecting an appeal to the middle class with a somewhat bourgeois taste and Record favoring crime-heavy news coverage, appealing to a conservative audience, reflected by the presence of police and judges as sources, accompanied by the matching visual features.

Figure 9 exemplifies the abstraction of the visual categories one degree further into two large meta-categories: a) shots suggesting some consideration for composition, called **AESTHETIC** (uniting bookshelves, frames, decoration, plants, institutional and neutral categories); and b) shots that treated its background layout casually named **UNCONCERNED** (blending informal and couches).

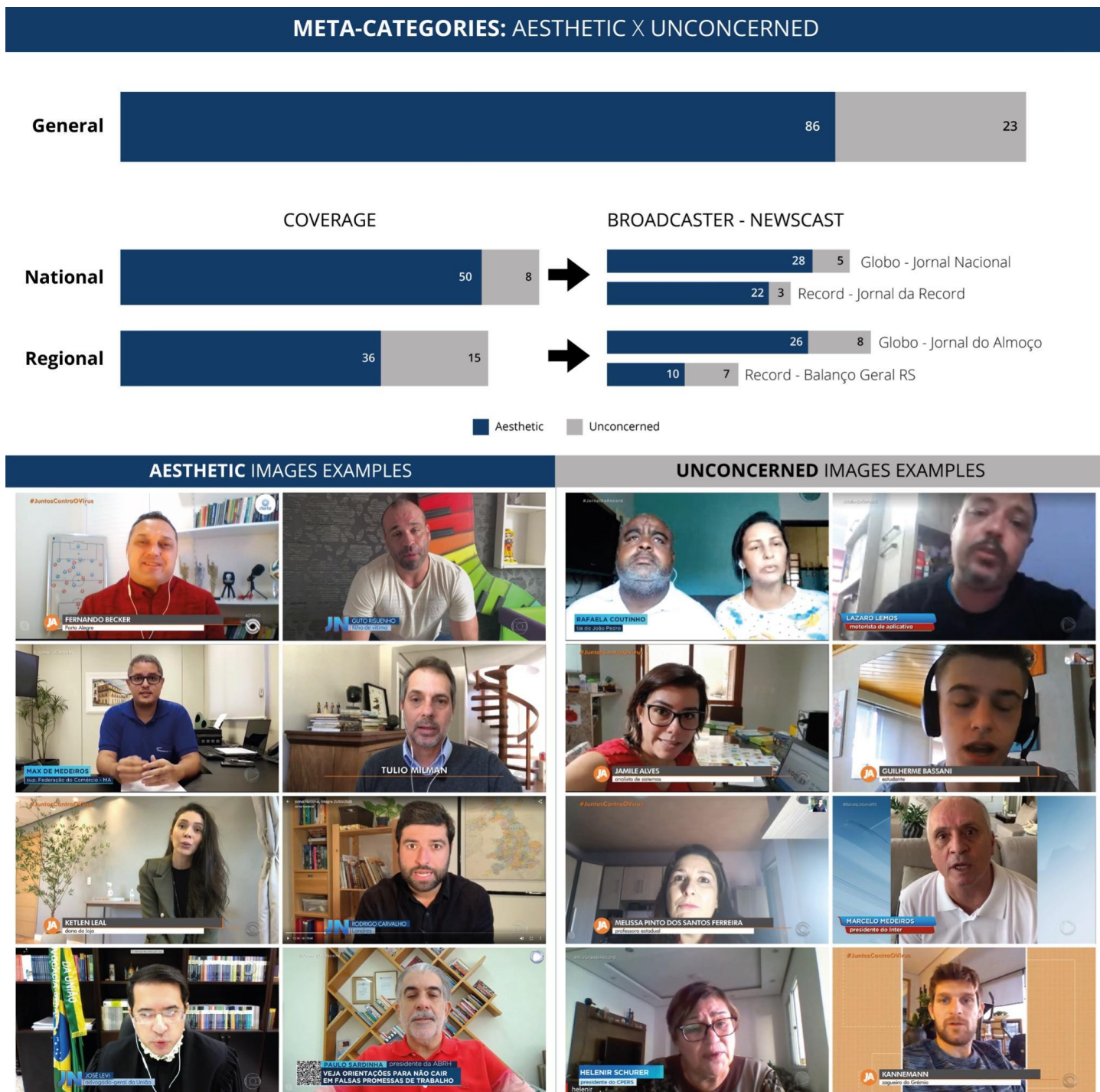


Figure 9 - The meta-categories define two strategies: try to incorporate the background into your visual discourse or make it irrelevant. Source: The authors (2021).

The *aesthetic* category is commonplace on general outlook, with roughly four out of five shots. On the regional news, the *unconcerned* grows, especially on the Record network's lunchtime show. If there's one variable that remains constant throughout the collected sample and both meta-categories is the centrality of the interviewee or source on the frame. It suggests the silent ubiquity of an ergonomic feature of most devices, where the front-facing camera is usually on the center, and so the autofocus' standard calibration.

The pandemic confirmed and accelerated the movement detected by Meyrowitz, showing close approximations between several variables. To the author, "as boundaries become more porous, more permeable, more transparent, we are not experiencing a simple homogenization. We are experimenting with new forms of fusion and new forms of disintegration" (2004, p. 27). This is evident in the images through the crossovers: public and private; office and home; marginal and mainstream, and others. Thus, the news broadcast from home includes visual features that cannot always be fully controlled by the interviewees and sources and communicate more than their answers.

The device screen (either a phone, a computer or a tablet) can be assumed as a feedback mirror that made the participants aware of their surroundings. This fomented the two meta-categories, being *aesthetic* based on the rhetoric operations of addition and permutation (include elements, change them for a more refined result), and *unconcerned* on subtraction (take as much of the background out as possible). Either way, this separates the individual from the background on different conceptual layers, as they do not interact physically with one another. As the pandemic reaches its third year, many visual grammar variables remain in flux and bookshelves remain relevant as a staple of home-based broadcasting.

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