D I G I T H U M

The Humanities in the Digital Era

Local content in Brazil: conceptual framework and methodological implications

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Abstract

This article presents work in progress from PhD research investigating the use of the internet in the favelas (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with a particular focus on the internet content produced and shared by those who live there. The research proposes to apply the concept of *local content* beyond the scope of digital inclusion policy and projects, to content generated in everyday practices of internet use. The article presents an overview of internet access in Brazil and discussion of the conceptual and methodological issues raised by the interest in local content, understood as "the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – where the community is defined by its location, culture, language, or area of interest –" according to a definition proposed by Ballantyne (2002).

Keywords

Brazil, internet, local content, digital divide

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Resum

Aquest article presenta el treball en curs de recerca de doctorat sobre l'ús d'internet a les faveles de Rio de Janeiro, al Brasil, i posa una especial atenció en el contingut d'internet produït i compartit per la gent que hi viu. La recerca proposa aplicar el concepte de *contingut local* més enllà de l'abast de les polítiques i els projectes d'inclusió digital, en el contingut generat en les pràctiques diàries d'ús d'internet. L'article presenta una perspectiva general de l'accés a internet al Brasil i la discussió de les qüestions conceptuals i metodològiques que ha suscitat l'interès en el contingut local, entès com «l'expressió del coneixement d'una comunitat posseït i adaptat localment –on la comunitat és definida per la seva ubicació, la seva cultura, la seva llengua o la seva àrea d'interès–», segons la definició proposada per Ballantyne (2002).

Paraules clau

Brasil, internet, contingut local, inclusión digital

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Overview of internet use in Brazil

Internet use has expanded in Brazil in recent years as a result of economic opportunities as well as efforts by the public sector and civil society. The latest statistics (CETIC.br 2009)[1] show that 34% of Brazilians were internet users in 2008 (rising to 61% in the 16-24 age group).[2] Public access to the internet is common, with almost half (48%) of Brazilian users frequenting internet cafés, known as *lan houses*.[3] The falling cost of computers and special schemes to enable their purchase by those with lower incomes have led to an increase in home-based internet use; in 2008, 25% of Brazilian homes had a computer and 18% had an internet connection. However, the 2008 survey, carried out in rural areas for the first time, confirmed that striking inequalities remain in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs): between urban and rural areas, between regions, and between Brazilians with different levels of income or socioeconomic status.

Research into the use of the internet in Rio de Janeiro's favelas (shantytowns),[4] carried out in 2003[5] (Sorj *et al.*, 2005), found that 11.6% of those surveyed used the internet (3.3% had a connection at home). More than half of respondents (51.3%) said their reason for not accessing the internet was the lack of somewhere to do this (cost was cited by only 14.6%). There are indications that this demand for access points in favelas is now being at least partly met by the expansion of lan houses. For example, there are an estimated 150 lan houses in Rio's Maré favela complex alone, which has a population of 130,000 (Observatório de Favelas 2007b). Unsurprisingly, this development is attracting increasing attention from researchers and policymakers who see potential sites of digital inclusion (for example Ibict, 2008; Minuano, 2008; Carvalho, 2008), although others continue to argue that only projects such as telecentres can play this role (Gonçalves, 2007). In November and December 2008 Brazil's biggest television network, Rede Globo, broadcast a feature on lan houses in favelas or similar neighbourhoods on its *Fantástico* programme.

Beyond access, Brazilian internet users have shown a tendency towards the "intense appropriation" (Fragoso, 2006) of certain platforms, including notably their dominance on the Orkut[6] social network site. Global surveys of internet use tend to place Brazilians at or towards the top of country rankings for time spent online, use of social network sites, reading and writing blogs or uploading photos or videos (eg, Universal McCann, 2008). Bryan McCann (2008, p. 131) has called this *the Orkut Rule*, the idea that "wherever possible, Brazilians will avail themselves of the possibilities of digital media to create subcultural niches and crosscultural networks in ways that defy traditional hierarchies and the existing cultural canon". A number of sources (Viva Favela, 2005; Maia *et al.,* 2006; Recuero, 2007; Batista, 2007) and my own exploratory research identify uses of Orkut by favela residents which fit with this pattern, suggesting Orkut is likely to be a key fieldsite for the study of local content produced in non-elite practices of internet use in Brazil. The following section introduces the concept of *local content* and the issues it raises for research.

Defining local content

The need for marginalised groups to produce and access locally relevant content is now a key element of an area of policy and practice known as *ICT for development* (ICT4D) or *digital inclusion*. Local content is understood in my research as "the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – where the community is defined by its location, culture, language, or area of interest –" (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 2), an interpretation which applies not just to the internet, but also to "older" media such as audio, video and print. Indeed, Ballantyne notes that the internet may not yet be a major local content channel in many countries, and that calls for more local content on the internet by international policymakers may have been driven by a concern to give more global visibility to "southern voices", or e-commerce opportunities for local arts, crafts and music (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 7).

There are of course other ways of understanding local content, some of which are mentioned by Ballantyne: content produced in a specific geographic location; content intended for or relevant to a specific local audience; media programming that is not imported from abroad.[7] The key feature of his definition is that it understands

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1. CETIC.br, the research arm of the internet governance committee, is the Centro de Estudos sobre as Tecnologias da Informação e da Comunicação, or Centre for Studies on Information and Communication Technologies. Since 2005, CETIC.br has produced indicators and statistics on ICT usage in Brazil (www.cetic.br).
2. Internet users are those who had used the internet in the three months before the survey.
3. Only 4% used telecentres, spaces providing free, public access to the internet (usually supported by government, private foundations or non-governmental organisations), down from 6% the previous year.
4. Note that favelas are diverse in their topography, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, services, housing, levels of violence and the presence of the state (Perlman 2004; Valladares 2005; Souza *et al.,* 2002, cited in Observatório de Favelas, 2007a), as well as access to ICTs (Sorj *et al.,* 2005).
5. The situation is changing fast, at least in urban areas of Brazil. Sorj *et al.,* research was carried out before the recent expansion of lan houses, before the intensification of government digital inclusion programmes, and before the launch of Orkut and its popularisation in Brazil.
6. User statistics fluctuate, but in March 2009 Orkut's own demographics page showed that 49.7% of the site's users were from Brazil (Orkut, n.d). Of the 90% of Brazilian internet users who used the internet for "communication" in 2008, 70% used social network sites such as Orkut (CETIC.br, 2009).
7. Warschauer (2004) recognises that at least some locally relevant content can be provided by non-local groups, and a recent report by the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (2008) defined local content as a service to be provided by governments.

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local content as content *from* local groups or individuals (rather than produced *for* them) (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 5), which conveys "locally relevant messages and information", and provides "opportunities for local people to interact and communicate with each other, expressing their own ideas, knowledge and culture" (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 1).

Even in academic work, of which there is relatively little, with the notable exception of a body of work emerging from researcher participation in local content projects in Australia and South Asia (Bruns *et al.,* 2007; Humphrys *et al.,* 2008; Tacchi, 2005, 2007; Tacchi *et al.,* 2008), internet-based local content remains a concept mostly associated with policy and projects. In this article I argue that it is also useful in approaching content generated in everyday practices of internet use by non-elite groups.

User-generated content: literacies and appropriation

The scenario for local content creation has arguably changed – some would say opened up – in recent years as a result of overall trends in the development and use of the internet. The increased emphasis on collaboration, participation and interactivity in the current generation of platforms and tools, often known as *web 2.0* (O'Reilly, 2005), has led to a surge in "user-generated content". This can be seen in social networking, knowledge management, creative practice, multi-user online gaming, citizen journalism, collaborative filtering and open source software development, in which users are potential "produsers" (Bruns, 2007). When this user-generated content focuses on specific neighbourhoods it is often labelled *hyperlocal*.[8]

The potential or theoretical increase in the opportunities for "ordinary" internet users to publish their own content does arguably strengthen Ballantyne's proposition for local content. Humphrys *et al.,* (2008) note that web 2.0 platforms may now be more appropriate for storing, sharing and aggregating local content than stand-alone or purpose-built websites. Nonetheless, as well as the opportunities, there are many possible constraints on user-led content creation (Tacchi, 2007). It can be a time-intensive process (Hargittai *et al.,* 2008) and one that requires "very particular cultural competencies as well as creative and technological literacies that we cannot assume to be shared by the majority of the population" (Burgess, 2006, p. 205). **The little work** that exists on the differences between those who post content online and those who do not (in the United States) has pointed to a participation divide in which socioeconomic status is a key factor (Hargittai *et al.,* 2008). Age may be another factor. As well as requiring certain literacies (including potentially foreign language skills), web 2.0 platforms are often difficult to use without reliable broadband connectivity (Van der Velden, 2008).

Beyond these constraints, there are also often conflicts or tensions regarding what constitutes local content in policy or projects. Policymakers or project leaders may define or limit local content as content (or information) relating to local problems or sectors considered to be crucial for the groups or individuals involved, such as health, education or the environment.[9] Content relating to entertainment and leisure may be less welcome in a project setting, reinforcing the idea that a gap often exists between the ideals of digital inclusion projects and actual user practices, as Schofield Clark (2003) found in the United States. Such a scenario can be seen in Brazil where the use of Orkut is increasingly being banned or limited in some telecentres.[10] However, there are also examples of Orkut being embraced by projects working with young people for networking, outreach and promotion. In addition, research has found that "the skills and capabilities […] learned through the use of Orkut are key elements in the development of cyberliteracies and sociotechnical capital" (Spence, 2007, p. 16).

The alternative to ruling what constitutes "appropriate" local content for marginalised groups is to pay attention to what Tacchi calls their "innovative, adventurous and pleasurable" appropriation of the internet and related technologies. In South Asia, she noted that users did not understand ICTs simply as "tools for accessing and circulating useful information", but rather engaged with them "in far more complex and creative ways, mixing information and entertainment, the learning of skills as a pleasurable activity in its own right and skills as a way of directly changing their circumstances" (Tacchi, 2005, p. 29). Similarly, Franklin (2004, p. 101) argues that academic research has neglected "informal, organic online interactions" by non-elite groups on the internet (such as discussion forums or chat), and that viewing these as less political, less social, or less relevant "perpetuates monolithic, monocultural and commodified representation of the Internet".

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8. **The implication of the term** *hyperlocal* is that such content provides a level of local detail and knowledge which is not present in the media; however, the term is also used by the media for web-based projects which encourage reader or audience contributions.
9. Van der Velden (2008) has written about "how technological designs for web-based classification systems [of development knowledge] can become global hegemonic structures that may limit the participation of marginalised knowledge communities", suggesting instead that users should be able to choose their own categories for classifying knowledge, for example through the use of tags (user-generated keywords) which enable resources "to be categorised in diverse, even contradicting ways".
10. This controversial topic was recently discussed at the 7th edition of the Brazilian Digital Inclusion Workshop, held in Belém, Pará (Folha Online 2008). Amadeu (2008) also provides critical coverage of the ban on Orkut, MSN and the microblogging site Twitter in public schools in São Paulo.

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The *local* in local content?

It is claimed that the internet is becoming "more local" as more people use it worldwide (Davies *et al*., 2004, cited in Postill 2008, p. 414), and that a "global process of internet localization" is underway (Postill, 2008, p. 414). Given that internet users are involved in constructing the internet through the content they produce (Hine, 2000, p. 38), local content could represent a form of user participation in localising the internet. However, we need to bear in mind questions about the sites of internet localisation, how it manifests itself, who is involved, and in particular, to *where* the internet might be becoming more local. This last question is particularly important for anthropologically or ethnographically minded scholars, as Hammersley *et al.,* (2007, p. 138) caution: "Our historical preferences for face-to-face communities and intense, local sites of interaction should not blind us to the fact that contemporary forms of communication can transform our sense of what is *local* into widely distributed networks". In other words, we should not assume place, or at least not assume that "local culture" is to be found only in bounded social settings. This in turn raises challenges for researchers interested in objects of study which transcend such settings: when the focus is the internet, "finding a place to go is by no means straightforward" (Hine, 2000, p. 9). Postill (2008, p. 414) identifies complex methodological, conceptual and logistical challenges in the study of internet localisation, which requires that one "spends sufficient time in a local setting to get to know, both online and offline, those who live, work, and/or play there".

Ballantyne (2002) is apparently open-minded about whether the *local* in local content relates to geographical place or a culture, language, or area of interest that connects people in different places. This resonates with Ito's (1999, p. 5) consideration of "how people use networking technology as material for constructing alternatives to geographic localities, network localities driven by non-geographic forms of affiliation". Nonetheless, Ito insists that she is not setting up an opposition between network localities and physical localities, because even network localities are "grounded in concrete places, practices, and material relations" (Ito, 1999, p. 1). The ongoing importance of place in relation to the internet will be discussed below.

Ito (1999, p. 11) describes how members of SeniorNet, a network of senior citizen computer users spread across the United States, shared content via chat and discussion facilities and designated areas of the AOL system, knowing that their posts were "local to the site". People interacted on a daily basis in a "communal space", generating "community-produced content". Ito suggests this is an example of how locality can be produced "through and within" media infrastructures" (Ito, 1999, p. 2), drawing among others on the work of Appadurai. Appadurai (1996, p. 178) emphasises that locality is *a property of social life*, "primarily relational and contextual rather than […] scalar and spatial", and "constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts". He differentiates locality from neighbourhoods, which he understands as "the actually existing *social forms* in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 179, emphasis added). For Appadurai, locality is also something fragile and its production is increasingly a struggle. It is useful to think about local content as a technique for the production of locality and to be alert to the struggles it might involve.

Sá studied the *Capao.com* website, set up by residents of the São Paulo neighbourhood of Capão Redondo, from a cultural studies perspective. She found that contributors were involved in forging an idea of place, or "their own idea of Capão" (Sá, 2007, p. 130), which included pioneering the written register of the oral language spoken in São Paulo. However, their use of the internet also contributed to producing locality, as a relational and contextual sense of social immediacy:

> The sense of belonging to a place does not come from a long line of ancestors or historically deep cultural connections. It comes from their own activities, from what they believe they are building at the present moment, from the networks of solidarity that they themselves are constructing. (Sá, 2007, p. 131)

Capao.com is also a way of achieving a new presence, "by appropriate use of one's voice to articulate the specific narratives and discourses about one's group or subculture" (Mitra, 2004, p. 492, cited in Sá, 2007, p. 127).

Despite such localised narratives, desired or actual audiences are not only local. Ballantyne (2002, pp. 6-8) proposes a taxonomy of local content audiences and flows based on a grid made up of two axes. One runs horizontally for the application of content, from local (left) to global (right); and the other vertically for its expression (generation or adaptation), from local (bottom) to global (top). Both *Capao.com* and *Viva Favela*, an NGO portal focusing on favelas in Rio de Janeiro,[11] were explicitly set up with the aim of presenting a positive view of such neighbourhoods on the internet (Sá, 2007, p. 126; Ramalho, 2007, p. 47), and both therefore fit at least partly into the "southeast quadrant" of Ballantyne's taxonomy, corresponding to locally expressed content gaining visibility or application among external local or global audiences.

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11. **Most of the stories on the** *Viva Favela* site are produced by community correspondents in the favelas. Ramalho (2007) covers the process of content development in detail.

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Local content: text and practice connecting online and offline

The discussion above implies that locality can be produced both online and offline. However, scholars have shown (Miller *et al.,* 2000, 2004; Leander *et al.,* 2003) that online and offline dimensions, contexts or spaces are not separate or distinct, but rather intersect and configure each other in a multitude of complex ways, which should also be studied (Slater, 2002). If we think of local content as text, then we should be aware, as Hine (2000) suggested, that content published on the internet often passes to the offline, undergoing transformations which merit attention from researchers. These transformations may affect the meaning and reach of the content. There is also a flow in the opposite direction, from an offline situation or event to its representation in internet content.

Hine also asserts that the sites of internet content production are dispersed (2000, p. 38), and I would argue that they potentially include not just the websites or platforms where content is published and accessed, but also the public access points, homes and workplaces where the internet is used, the spaces where the content originates (is inspired) and where it reaches, or leaves echoes. This would allow for the construction of a "networked field site", incorporating physical, virtual and imagined spaces, and "defined by the physical movements, places indexed in speech and text, and social imaginings produced by research participants", which the researcher follows and intercepts, as proposed by Burrell (forthcoming).

Connecting content to the multiple sites of its production, reception and (re)interpretation implies then that local content is more than a text, and can also be thought of as practice. Couldry (2004, p. 117) has proposed that media be approached "as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media", a paradigm which fits with my interest in investigating local content as part of the digital culture in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, or what people are doing with, or in relation to, the internet there. Local content and internet use are also part of local *communicative ecologies*, a term developed by Jo Tacchi *et al.* to refer to "the everyday, complex network of information and communication in an individual's life" (Tacchi *et al.*, 2007). Communicative ecologies include not only media but also transport systems and networks, "visits to neighbours, gossip, and public and private places where people meet to communicate". Mapping communicative ecologies therefore involves mapping people, practices, *and* places.

Towards a conclusion, towards fieldwork

Place remains crucially important for understanding the internet, which is "not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace'; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations" (Miller *et al.,* 2000, p. 1). Despite claims that ICTs would reduce or eliminate the importance of place and space, ethnographic work in Manchester, UK (Agar *et al.,* 2002, p. 283) found that on the contrary, "ICTs are always and everywhere *actively* embedded within the social networks through which place is constituted and histories made relevant".

As well as the growth of lan houses in the landscape of Rio's favelas mentioned above, the favelas are increasingly present on the internet through websites for NGOs, news agencies, tourism services, and samba schools – as noted by Valladares (2005) and confirmed by my own research. Beyond these "institutional" websites there are also many projects which involve young people from favelas in producing and sharing content through blogs and other platforms. Most importantly perhaps for research into everyday local content, internet users in the favelas are involved in uses of Orkut and other platforms that reference or relate to the neighbourhoods where they live. Although this research begins with a specific geographic place, it is connection, rather than location, which will help to define the object of research, and the local context of interpretation and use of the internet which will ultimately constitute the field (Hine, 2000).

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