

Citizen Journalism and its Democratic Potencial -Brazilian case studies: *Viva Favela* and *Índios Online*

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Abstract

This paper aims to reflect on citizen journalism and its democratic potential through an exploration of Brazilian case studies. What is the importance of users' participation in online news media? In the case of citizen journalism, does a larger number of ordinary civic voices effect a difference in the quality of a society's democracy? Here, it is pertinent to consider the efforts that have provided the means of communication to this plurality of voices as they have enabled the social inclusion of citizens by training them in the use of new information and communication technologies. This work presents two experiences of citizen journalism that exist specifically in Brazil and concern communities considered excluded from the political system. The first, *Viva Favela*, is an online community representing low-income communities. The second, *Índios Online*, is a virtual indigenous community. Through the exploration, observation, and description of these two cases, the paper analyzes the experience of participatory journalism. To do this, we must understand that localized experiences of citizen journalism could have significant implications for the use of new technologies and for the challenges of democracy more generally.

Keywords

citizen journalism, participation, democracy

*I do not seek to know the answers,
I try to understand the questions*
Confucius

As soon as journalism came to prominence on the internet, a series of definitions and variations gained currency as descriptors of this new means for communication. Since then, the journalistic process has found itself in ever-closer proximity to its audience. The internet, as a new journalistic medium, has affected a reformulation of the means by which news is transmitted and has transformed the user into an active agent in the process of news production. Names for this new participatory process are varied, but among the most common are: citizen journalism (Bowman and Willis, 2003), participatory journalism (Nguyen, 2006), open source journalism (Leonard, 1999), grassroots journalism (Gilmor, 2004) and networked journalism (Jarvis, 2006).

Much of the literature about citizen journalism from authors such as Lacy, Duffy, Riffe, Thorson, and Fleming (2010) relates three aspects: the exploration of the internet's potential for citizen journalism, the description of the nature of citizen journalism, and the characteristics of websites used by citizen journalists. Nip (2006) affirms that the potential of the internet to advance democracy has attracted a lot of research, but that specific studies of the ways in which online news organizations can play a role in a democracy remain to be performed. This paper's importance stems from its focus on that point. According to Nguyen, "by tapping the power of the web and other new media to transform itself from mere news consumers into 'prosumers', the public as the traditional underdog in the news and information flow has created a new information order and paved the way for a potentially better democracy" (2006, p. 19).

The inquiry for this paper emerges from these ideas. What is the importance of users' participation in online news media? In the case of citizen journalism, does a larger number of ordinary civic voices affect a difference in the quality of a society's democracy?

Here, it is pertinent to consider the efforts that have provided the means of communication to this plurality of voices as they have enabled the social inclusion of citizens by training them in the use of new information and communication technologies. However, this line of thinking raises a number of other questions. Aren't we entitled to ask whether this diversity of voices – this pluralism associated with new technology – has truly brought some power to the citizens that have come to express themselves through these channels? What type

of effect and exchange of ideas is generated by one's participation in forums, chat rooms, and online commentary? Has the increased visibility of minorities via these outlets benefited the public interests of those communities? What use might social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have in terms of augmenting democracy?

The questions are many and to reflect them the paper presents two experiences of citizen journalism that exist specifically in Brazil and concern communities considered excluded from the political system. The first, *Viva Favela*, is an online community representing low-income communities. The second, *Índios Online*, is a virtual indigenous community. These are examples of citizen journalism that have existed for more than five years, and which are gaining visibility.

The methodology of this paper as it pertains to the case studies is based on qualitative analysis. Through the exploration, observation, and description of these two cases, the paper analyzes the experience of participatory journalism. The website is the central node of the network that connects people to other nodes and other resources essential to the success of projects. Thus, it is necessary to propose a broad field of study in the hope of answering questions raised by the experience of pioneers in the field of citizen journalism as a whole. To do this, we must understand that localized experiences of citizen journalism could have significant implications for the use of new technologies and for the challenges of democracy more generally.

In order to make known and establish possible points of comparison, the paper presents an analysis of both projects' respective histories, their website formats, their administration and partners who have supported and enabled their projects, the content produced by each and the repercussions of this content, as well as the participation and empowerment of citizen journalists through these sites, the use of forums and social networks, and the efforts in place to monitor the information published. In this way, it became possible to evaluate how these websites and their users might contribute to participatory journalism online and what effects they might have for the challenges of democracy.

1. After all, what is citizen journalism?

Irrespective of specific differences in journalistic words about participation, this paper aims to show that technology and the internet have facilitated participation on the internet where people are now able to create, transform, and share information. The reason for choosing the

expression ‘citizen journalism’ in this paper is its wide dissemination and applicability for studying the websites that we analyzed. This expression has attained value by use; it designates only part of the new web journalism phenomenon.

According to Glaser (2006), “The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the internet to create, augment, or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others”.

Users of these sites are named citizen journalists, a well-known denomination that deserves additional clarification. Dan Gilmore (2010) talks about the possible names of these new media creators. He argues that the expression ‘citizen journalism’ arose at a time of scarcity, when few people had this role; he argues further that this is more than a semantic dilemma. The author raises other issues, such as protection laws, which aim to protect informers and journalists that are aware of corporate and government mismanagement. Gilmore also suggests that while digital media has become omnipresent and more people communicate and collaborate online, individuals may produce content of journalistic value, although few of these people think of themselves as journalists.

David Rosman (2010) contends that practicing unpaid collaborators working regularly (citizen journalists) should also be considered ‘professionals’ if they met the requirements of the formally recognized press. He argues that many reject this idea, and base their definition on the traditional *Oxford Dictionary*¹ definition in that payment is required to be defined as a professional. If this was the case we would be unable to associate the word citizen to the profession of a journalist. The *Merriam-Webster*² extends this meaning: the word ‘professional’ as an adjective is “(1): characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession (2): exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner in the workplace”. In this perspective, if any citizen prepares himself for a task and improves while practicing this activity, then he may be considered a citizen journalist.

The idea is whether content produced by citizen journalists, with or without a professional journalist as an editor/mediator, is able to create spaces that foster democracy. Thus, I use the expression citizen journalism for that type of journalistic work where citizens

¹ http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1280978#m_en_us1280978

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/professional>

participate actively by providing opinions, producing, editing, and publishing text or hypermediatic content.

2. The potential of citizen journalism for democracy

The key to solving the polemic around the expression ‘citizen journalism’ and its association with the challenges of this work – and of perceiving its democratic potential – may be the word ‘citizen’.

A definition of citizen may be easily found in any dictionary, as “one entitled to the rights and privileges of a Freeman, a member of the state”. To this definition Feliks Gross (1999) adds the statement that "Citizenship is an articulation of an inclusive political association and common culture that unites all inhabitants of diverse ethnicity, religion or race" (1999, p.13). Thus, "All members are therefore members of a political community, the state. The state is an association of citizens, all free and all having the same rights and respective duties." In a well- working democratic state, ethnic diversity is a source of strength, cultural wealth and creativity. The effectiveness and success of the civic state depends on the proper balance between the civil society and the state" (Gross, 1999, p.128).

This definition underlies our decision to choose experiences of citizen journalism in two long-time socially disfavored communities. It is important to underline that these examples belong to different orders, although they are comparable. In the case of *Índios Online*, we are speaking of ethnically defined communities, whereas *Viva Favela* comprises individuals from socially and economically disfavored communities. In the former, citizens define themselves by their ethnic origin; in the latter, citizens belong to communities that may or may not be part of something present at their birth, and where they may change their social class if the opportunities and means for such become available. Although these communities have distinct features, both are examples of citizen diversity in a State.

Thus, more than understanding citizen journalism as a concept, we may perceive it as a current phenomenon on the internet that competes with – or in the best cases associates with – the traditional media consisting of professional journalists. It may be thought, therefore, that individuals use journalistic tools – specifically digital journalism – to create, produce, and distribute content of interest to a community in their social and political dimension or status as citizens with rights and duties in a democratic system.

The press established itself in 1900 as an independent social force for democracy in countries with different legal systems. However, the idea of journalism as a fourth state or a counterpoint and watchdog of the governing powers (Aguinaga, 1988, p.25) is threatened by a purely market concept of enterprises. Thus, if journalism is thought of as an institution, it becomes essential for democratic societies, because it is able to serve the common interest. “And it does so often better than other institutions with the same purpose, such as politics.” (Gomes, 2009, p.70).

Gomes points out that public interest may be presented by this means of expression and also in other terms that foster ideas of common interest and citizenship; these may become objects of what journalism provides to society. This is where the ‘public’ needs to be taken into account; in this context, public means the civil sphere and public interest – people’s right to know about topics of their concern. Journalism would assure the existence of free public opinion and recognition and satisfaction of interests pertaining to the civil sphere.

Service in the public interest, however, is not an absolute principle of journalism; demand for varied and specialized information creates a need for increasing and diversifying the forms of journalism. Digital journalism opens the possibility of revitalizing traditional journalism and its principle of defending the public interest. By being interactive, it is closer to the “public”, to “common people,” to society, and may therefore foster dialogue among the media, citizens, and government, thereby motivating civil participation and democracy.

In the Web 2.0 – a phase of the internet that Tim O’Reilly (2005) characterizes as being mainly “a participative architecture” – the horizontal conversational environment among users and communications media allows citizen journalism to raise the ideas of ‘power’ and gains for democracy.

This moment supports the idea that “there is a public, a sphere of citizenship, that needs to find free channels for expression, to establish a presence *vis a vis* the State and society. The freedom of channels of expression, therefore, would be a condition for sovereignty” (Gomes, 2009, p.72). Online journalism that fosters participation could bring these manifestations into forums, comments in news and blogs, or news and content produced by citizens themselves. Citizen journalism opens the possibility of even more forceful communication channels for society to express itself freely, as these channels do not depend on the politics and interests of the gatekeepers.

On the other hand, citizen journalism initiatives – a fertile field for manifestations by citizens – may not necessarily be journalistic communication channels, as the idea of journalism evokes a commitment to be neutral, objective, and impartial (although we realize the difficulties of encountering these criteria in traditional journalism).

Adghirni (2005, p. 271) states “The field of journalism is important in the social world because it has true monopoly over large scale production and dissemination tools of events that may affect other fields.” We may consider this statement valid for the Web 2.0 where journalistic corporations no longer command monopolies, and where citizens have created their own media that interferes with the agenda of the conventional media. But without means of mass communication, is social media able to produce and disseminate widely events that could affect other fields and have a relevant role in democracy?

The issue that Gomes raises “the matter of public interest in the theory and practice of democracy consist of making sure that the interest of the civil sphere and the public may affect political decision making” (2009, p. 79) is similar for both traditional and citizen journalism. Are there any advantages for the latter?

It may be said that citizen journalism is more pro-civic than traditional journalism because the former democratizes communication. It is easy to think that citizen journalism is more democratic because it facilitates participation; but the concept of more horizontal participation – more people participating meaning more democracy – is a shallow idea of democracy.

We need to consider and discover whether the initiatives of citizen journalism do in fact increase civil power, strengthen a society of rights and freedom, and increase pluralism and minority power, all of which are important for a democratically relevant digital initiative. (Gomes, 2010).

3. Presenting the case studies

3.1 Viva Favela



Figure 1: Viva Favela website.

Since 2001, *Viva Favela* has trained correspondents in its own workshops or in partnerships with other social projects, ‘culture points’³, courses, training schools in communications, and volunteer work by communications professionals. The workshops teach editing for the internet, photography, video editing, audio editing, multimedia production, and video making.

Website content is distributed by RSS, *Twitter*,⁴ *Facebook*,⁵ *Orkut*,⁶ and a *YouTube* channel⁷. *Viva Favela* has a large support structure for this project, and has developed an extensive network of partners⁸ in Brazil and overseas, which has enabled the project to grow and attain visibility. Partners may provide funding, exchange technology and methods, partnering for media and training (exchanging or reproducing/divulging content), and cultural partnerships.

³ *Points of Culture* does not have a single model. A common feature to all of these Points is cultural cross-sectionalism and shared public/community management. *Points of Culture* aims to strengthen cultural actions that have been developed previously by sectors that have historically been excluded from public policy; it creates the means for alternative and autonomous economic development in support of communities.

⁴ <http://twitter.com/vivafavela>

⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Viva-Favela/110787784145>

⁶ <http://www.orkut.com.br/Main#Community?cmm=33684890>

⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/user/vivafavela>

⁸ Funding partners (current): *Petrobras*; *Ministry of Culture/ Lei de Incentivo à Cultura*/Programa *Cultura Viva*; support from the Norwegian church - *AIN/OD*. Funding partners (founding): *UNESCO* and *GLOBO.COM*. Technology and method exchange partnerships: *Overmundo Institute*, *Piraí Digital*, *Serpro*, *Elluminate*,* *Pontão de Cultura Digital Circo Voador*, *Pontão da Eco*, *Alliance for Youth Movements*. Training partnerships: *Escola de cinema Darcy Ribeiro*, *Observatório de favelas/ escola de fotógrafos populares da Maré*, *Instituto Overmundo*, *Ponto de Cultura o som das comunidades*, *Pontão de Cultura Digital Circo Voador*, *Pontão da Eco*, *Ponto de cultura “fazendo a diferença em paquetá”*, *The New School* (New York), *Coaxo do Brejo*. Media partners - exchange or reproduction/dissemination of content: *Jornal Expresso*, *Tv Morrinho/ Projeto Morrinho*, *Imagem do Povo*. Cultural partnerships: *The Ghetto Film School* (New York), *Lentes dos Sonhos*. International partners: *Viva Favela* also promotes a cultural exchange program since its inception, in a partnership with Peter Lucas, a professor of Media and Human Rights, New York University and The New School, US. Every year students from New York visit the project and work as volunteers in Rio de Janeiro.

3.2 Índios Online



Figure 2: Índios Online website.

Índios Online is a project that aims to overcome digital divides. It was started in 2004 – coordinated by the *Thydêwá* NGO, which partnered with a private enterprise to create an internet connection, to buy computers and to create the *Índios Online* website - to facilitate information and communication among seven native Indian nations⁹.

The goals of the *Índios Online* network are to facilitate access to information and communication for several native Indian nations, to stimulate intercultural dialogue, to encourage native Indians themselves to study native Indian cultures, to recover, preserve, update, value, and disseminate native Indian cultures, to foster respect for differences, to learn and reflect on contemporary native Indians, to make files about native Indians (texts, pictures, videos) available over the internet for Brazil and the world, to supplement and enrich native Indian multicultural school education, and to qualify native Indians from different ethnic groups to assure their rights.

A *Point of Culture* was formed in 2005 in a partnership with the Ministry of Culture; in 2007 the network included four new native Indian groups. A native Indian coordinator was elected in 2006, paving the way for the autonomy of the *Índios Online* network.

Índios Online had a modern design and focused on autonomy. It became a network that was coordinated and updated by native Indians, having started as a project for overcoming digital divides. It then developed into a social inclusion project that uses ICT to divulge the culture, issues, and difficulties of native Indians, and to inform, make demands, and learn about the reality of other native Indian communities.

In 2008 the work of *Índios Online* was given several awards that recognized its work.¹⁰ In 2009 the program *Celulares Indígenas* was launched; it distributed 60 mobile phones to 60 native Indians of 24 different Indian nations in Brazil, with the goal of fostering plurality and enabling native Indians to use this device as a tool to promote cultural diversity, social justice, and a culture of peace. Native Indians are free to autonomously publish and share information –

⁹ Kiriri, Tupinambá, Pataxó-Hãhãhãe, Tumbalalá na Bahia, Xucuru-Kariri, Kariri-Xocó em Alagoas and Pankararu in Pernambuco.

¹⁰ Prêmio AREDE 2008 Award, *Editorial Moment*. Semifinalists of the *Experiências de Inovação Social* Award 2008, of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and CEPAL. Prêmio LUDICIDADE do Ministério da Cultura 2008. Prêmio *Top Social 2008* (ADVB/BA ABAP/BA e ACB).

videos, pictures, text – on the *Índios Online* website and on *YouTube*.¹¹ The portal can also be followed on *Twitter*.¹²

According to information in the website, *Índios Online* is a network for communication that provides opportunities and fosters the freedom of native Indians belonging to Brazilian and non-Brazilian native peoples. It encourages native Indians to freely express their opinions, and to become ethnic journalists, cyberactivists, and protagonists of their culture, history, mores, and traditions, and to share these with other peoples and nations.

Índios Online started as a project coordinated by an NGO; today it is an autonomous network that is managed by native Indians themselves. The *Thydêwá* NGO and other entities are partners¹³ that came in to support this project. At present, *Índios Online* adopted shared management – a project for expanding the network – where participating native Indians are equally important in decisions concerning the network; there is no single general coordinator, and eight native Indians of different nations manage the network jointly. The project consisted of 500 native Indians belonging to 25 ethnic groups that have participated in the last six years.

4. Comparing Chaos

By studying and comparing these cases, it is possible to understand the intertwining paths that arise from such initiatives, showing their contributions to democracy.

4.1 Partnerships and support

Both projects arose because of an initiative from a non-governmental organization; they grew with support from private companies and the Federal government. The two efforts are considered cultural points that were selected by public tenders to recover, preserve, foster, and disseminate cultural manifestations from several regions of Brazil. Public support – as well as that of other partners – is often vital for these initiatives to survive.

A team of students from several universities, funded with donations from the *Pew Charitable Trusts* and the *Knight Foundation*, have conducted research in this field since 2007 to quantitatively analyze citizen journalism in the United States. They have confirmed that

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/indiosonline>

¹² <http://twitter.com/indiosonline>

¹³ *Índios Online* has a partnership with the *Thydêwá* ONG, Ministry of Culture (*Cultura Viva*), Ministry of Communications (GESAC), *Oi Futuro* Institute and the Secretary of Science, Technology and Innovation of Bahia (SECTI).

citizen media activities are on the rise. After empirical studies of about sixty citizen portals, however, one of the authors reported that the most significant hurdle against the success of citizen journalism is that websites lack funding from foundations, professional journalists, or supported links in the traditional media. These websites are generally supported by personal motivation, and disappear when this goes away (Thorson, 2010).

If the flow of financial resources does cover costs and generate profit to improve the structure, correct inevitable mechanical failures, and technological obsolescence, the enterprise will fail. According to this view, projects should meet these costs, whether by local partnerships, voluntary work, government incentives, or community support, cover structural and maintenance costs, and share tasks among the website managers. Different ambits of society need to become involved to consolidate, maintain, and expand such activities; such initiatives may thus stand a chance to help strengthen democracy by bringing other voices into the media ecosystem.

Índios Online and *Viva Favela* differ significantly with regards to support and partnerships, repercussions in the structure of the portal, and visibility. *Viva Favela* benefits from much more support and partnerships than *Índios Online*, and therefore produces a higher-quality portal with more information and diversified content, and is present in more social media.

4.2 Social representation

The issue of community identity (Souza Leal, 2006) deserves more thought, particularly because there is a huge difference between being poor and being a native Indian – between an ethnic-social status and a disfavored social and economic condition. Our focus here is to perceive these internet portals as opportunities for these minorities to freely communicate their self-representations. Thus, the study cases have found in the internet an opportunity to change the image that society has of these two communities, images that have grown out of mass media representations. In the case of the *Viva Favela* portal, it is divulging the fact that the slum (favela) is not a place of violence and drug trafficking only, as is usually portrayed in newspapers, soap operas, and movies. *Índios Online* portrays native Indians as people that are part of society as professionals in several areas, and who struggle to preserve their culture, tradition, and land.

It is an opportunity for community members to represent themselves on the website through content about their communities (text, video, or audio), to debate the issues and the culture of these places, and to add their voices by connecting with similar realities.

4.3 Acting as citizen journalists

The portals we studied, with interesting news for these communities posted mostly by their own members, reflect the idea of citizen journalism. Participants and contributors to these sites, however, are not concerned whether what they are doing is journalism or not. They want to tell their stories, to describe what is going on in their communities, and to show their own language and narrative in the internet. The important point in this article is freedom of expression for these channels. Portals as channels for communicating freely and democratizing information is the proposition of the *Índios Online* website, in which there is no mediation by professional journalists before publishing content; the native Indians themselves are responsible for producing and publishing content on the portal.

In contrast, *Viva Favela* has a content editor, a professional journalist that decides what should and what should not be published. The publishing criteria are simple – content themes (text, pictures, audio, or video) or announcements of services and events should pertain to low-income communities, and should abide by the website’s editorial policies.

Viva Favela provides opportunities for denouncements; but the right to answer is given if these are made against institutions, groups, or individuals, and an explanation is given that “listening to the other side” is a basic rule of ethical, responsible, and quality journalism, and also of democracy.

These participation and publishing issues are included in the rules for using the website¹⁴; *Índios Online* contains no rules for participating, but only asks users to register, as happens in the *Viva Favela*.

The content editor of *Viva Favela* is also responsible for editing the texts for orthography and grammar before publishing. This is not done in the *Índios Online* website, which does not have professional journalists; text is published as the native Indians express themselves, which make idiomatic errors rather obvious.

¹⁴ <http://www.vivafavela.com.br/regras%20de%20uso> 21.07.10

4.4 Overcoming digital and social divides

It is clear that the main purpose of *Índios Online* is to include native Indians from local communities in the ‘Global Village’ by connecting the remaining and dispersed Brazilian native Indian communities to defend their rights. Because there are no professional journalists involved, expression is freer and easier for participants – they know that the website is made by them for themselves.

Other non-native persons can participate in the website and the project as volunteers. *Índios Online* seeks partners and support to bring the internet to other native Indian peoples, to improve the technical aspects, for technical support, and to improve the ability to use computers.

There is a concern in both initiatives to train collaborating users through workshops on the production of text, audio, and video. *Índios Online* teaches how to use the telephone to connect to the Web, and how to produce and publish audiovisual content on the website and on the *YouTube* channel. This is an important aspect for overcoming digital divides, as providing access is not enough; citizens need to be trained to use ICT. Internet access is the starting point for overcoming the digital divide; the next challenge is to overcome social divides, which requires information and training. Both projects contribute to this goal.

A statement by Luiz Carlos Díaz (in Franco, 2009) – of *Gentedeapie*, an independent digital training project in Venezuela – on inclusion projects and training may be applied to these Brazilian experiences. The idea is that if these projects have an effect on democracy, it is by training ‘infocitizens’. Citizens exist if they are informed, which provides a reference of a nation, the ability to learn what is going on, and to produce information. Díaz adds that ‘infocitizens’ are better audiences for traditional communications media, who wish further information, who want more, and will not accept less. As ‘infocitizens’ learn how to seek information, how to edit and publish content, we will have more empowered citizens.

Another important aspect of computer literacy is, in the case of *Índios Online*, a differentiated proposition to overcome the digital divide by using computers and mobile phones for mobile internet access. This type of access is growing and becoming a common path for using and consuming information and the internet. Inclusion of these native Indian peoples into the digital world is more advanced compared to people that have access to the internet (computers or mobile devices) but that remain apart from society by not having been encouraged or not feeling able to use the internet.

4.5 Politics and democracy

The rules for using *Viva Favela* are transparent, and it is not linked to any political party. Clearly electoral content is excluded, although political news is published and commented on; except when it defends political parties, or has commercial aims, or any type of advertisements.

Political themes may be found on both portals, especially if they are of interest to these communities. Political issues are more obvious on the *Índios Online* portal, and are expressed as demands, denouncements, and debates that may result in petitions and manifestations such as visits to Congress, or the noteworthy episode in which a team of FUNAI (National Foundation for Native Indians) was held by the Potiguara people. This news was not widely published in the mass communications media, but was shown in several blogs and in the *Índios Online* portal¹⁵ as an opportunity to explain this action.

After the FUNAI employees were captured in the São Francisco village, a team was sent to negotiate their freedom. They were only released after a negotiating committee heard the demands and promised to act on them, which was made official in a document.

This is an example of how mobilization yielded a result for native Indian communities; the portal was important to organize these communities, to provide visibility to this initiative, and for native Indians to express and represent themselves without being intermediated by the conventional media. The action was successful because in this case the native Indian communities did not require the implications of society. However, mobilization requiring more people than are found in native Indian communities does not attain expected results. This is what happens with petitions and undersigned documents with various objectives that are published on the *Índios Online* portal.

The portal is a channel that contains links to other sites where these petitions are hosted; some of these sites are more structured than others, and yield different results. The petition to save the Xingu river and to stop construction of the Belo Monte¹⁶ hydroelectric dam has its own website, with links to blogs, the petition, and most of the main social networks (*Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, and *Delicious*). In spite of these links to social networks, few native Indians – if any – use these social media.

¹⁵ See news: <http://www.indiosonline.org.br/novo/povo-potiguara-faz-refens-funcionarios-da-funai-brasil/> (14.09.2010)

¹⁶ <http://www.xinguvivo.org.br/>

A further less successful example for mobilizing society was the petition against a restructuring initiative of FUNAI¹⁷ – this could be found in a specific public service web that makes public petitions available for free. The petition, which was created on 17 January 2010, was visited 1,236 times and contained only 107 signatures on 09.05.2011. Not even the native Indian communities seemed interested.

Viva Favela deals with topics of general interest to the public. There is much on citizenship that is relevant for communities, such as health and education, and information about social and cultural events. The portal does not aim to mobilize people for such evident social and political causes as those in *Índios Online*. But *Viva Favela* also exploits its potential for mobilizing people, as in the news “Niteroi cries for help”,¹⁸ which denounced that five months after rains had caused significant damage to the city there were still communities at risk, and asked for help. These sites have supported digital democracy by providing access to information and by becoming able to mobilize people.

4.6 Online social networks

These websites use social networks as allies to inform and mobilize as many people as possible. Both have profiles in *Twitter* and videos in *YouTube*. *Viva Favela* also distributes its content by RSS, on *Facebook*, and on *Orkut*. Distributing content on digital social networks has become a necessity for any form of internet communication that wishes to divulge its content, strengthen its brand, and attract visitors to the websites. Digital social networks are the most efficient method for sharing news, information, and opinions.

Such distribution of information, which goes beyond the website itself, is relevant for political purposes such as adhesion to petitions in support of the Tupinambá de Olivença people (for demarcating land) and the *Opará* campaign (native Indian peoples defending the São Francisco river) in *Índios Online*.¹⁹

Online social networks are also important for generating information flows about these initiatives, and to provide visibility to these websites. For example, it is important to disseminate cultural events in slums (favelas) through social networks to provide visibility to partners or projects and to reach more people, who may feel motivated to participate in

¹⁷ <http://www.abaixoassinado.org/abaixoassinados/5543>

¹⁸ <http://www.vivafavela.com.br/materias/niter%C3%B3i-pede-socorro>

¹⁹ <http://www.apoinme.org.br/>

workshops and to become collaborating users of *Viva Favela*. They can then assure and increase essential support and partnerships for surviving and for extending the website/project.

Looking at the profile of these portals on social networks, one can see that they are rarely used. One of the reasons for this is that information in these profiles is often not updated. It is important for information flows in these communication channels to be adequately and constantly used so that these tools gain strength as social networks that connect and generate bonds among users.

4.7 Participation on websites

There is little participation of *Índios Online* users on forums or through comments; those that participated were the native Indians themselves who are also citizen journalists. The chat service was empty when we analyzed it. The forum in the *Viva Favela* website is used for the agenda of the multimedia magazine, and as such works well.

Viva Favela encourages three types of interaction: publishing of content, comments about such content, and voting²⁰ about content. It is clear that users interact more by vote than commenting. Comments are usually sparse, and are often absent after news and content; when present, these comments are laudatory. Thus, opinions are exchanged, but these initiatives do not use or develop democratically configured participative spaces to foster debates and deliberation.

It is important to say that slum dwellers produce quality content; there are also many Communication Studies undergraduates or graduates who publish their content about the slums (favelas). This is evidence of how the portal involves not only citizens living in slums but also other sectors of society, which tends to raise the quality of the content and increase the visibility of *Viva Favela*. A more in depth study about these citizen journalists could verify if the majority of published content is in fact published by people living in low income communities.

Viva Favela, compared to *Índios Online*, is able to motivate more participation of citizen journalists (from low income communities or not). Possible explanations are the subjects covered in *Viva Favela* are broader interests than those treated in *Índios Online*. Moreover, *Viva*

²⁰ The home page of *Viva Favela* shows an article, a video, an image gallery, and audio content. These are selected electronically based on the number of votes given within the last two days. Thus, a given content may be on the home page with relatively few votes if most of these votes were given within the past two days in that section. In each section, content is shown by publishing order. In the "Most votes" item, on the left of the page, content is shown by voting order, irrespective of the section.

Favela has a more open administrative and communications policy, a large number of supporting partners (Brazilian and international), collaborating Communications professionals, professional journalists managing the website, and an NGO that supports the project. The philosophy of *Índios Online* differs in that they are not funded by an NGO (which is only a partner), it has no professional journalists among its staff, and there are fewer supporters, all of which is evident in the structure of the website.

5. Final comments

The conclusions about both experiences may seem similar, as this is an exploratory analysis that did not aim to measure the democratic content of these initiatives. Thus, the potential of these contributions suggest significant gains for citizens, namely: including minority voices in the digital world, providing access to information of interest to communities, configuring a space (website) bringing visibility to these minorities, offering a place for debates (to a certain extent), interconnecting citizens in similar conditions, and organizing possible mobilizations of communities to defend their rights.

These observable aspects may guide future research, such as empirical studies where quantitative methods support qualitative approaches. Thus, the questions that gave rise to this exploratory and preliminary study could become testable hypotheses.

An answer to the initial question: “what is the importance of users’ participation in online news media? In the case of citizen journalism; does a larger number of ordinary civic voices affect a difference in the quality of a society’s democracy?” We should say that more voices are not enough for quality democracy. This is clear when we look at digital journalism, which opens opportunities for users to participate. However, these consuming users and collaborators of newspapers that belong to communications groups are part of an information society, and produce little in a deliberative sense when participating in such media.

What is clear about the users of these websites is that there is more than merely having a channel of expression. Here we answer the first issue, the importance of participating: it is both to communicate and to access information. These projects are the means by which users may produce content about their lives, needs, wishes, and problems in their communities – themes of possibly common interest. They gain the opportunity to link with other citizens that have similar problems, and by having information and being able to organize, can defend certain causes, denounce more often and demand more.

A further potential gain for democracy is the possibility of building an identity that is not commonly divulged in professional communications media. Citizen journalists are writing and presenting themselves (who they are or what they represent) and what they want from society by posting multimedia content in websites such as *Viva Favela* and *Índios Online*. There are more voices, which are heard and that bring others into these communities.

There are a few remaining issues: to what extent does society perceive this visibility and mobilization? For instance, how does the public power relate to the issues that these communities denounce? The path to these answers suggests that the cases we studied could reach better results if the potential of social networks was used more effectively and if they had more access to conventional media.

As with all cases studies, it is difficult to reach general conclusions from specific experiences. The challenge of reflecting more widely, and the fact that citizen journalism is still a recent form of journalism over the Web, suggest that its potential is still far from being fulfilled. This refers both to citizen journalism as a form of social communication on the internet, and especially as a tool for strengthening citizens and democracy.

Based on these reflections, there is no doubt that citizen journalism may bring positive results for democracy, regardless of whether it is a type of journalism or not. It is potentially a relevant communications channel among citizens, the media, and governments, which can be developed and explored further.

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