Deliberation and empowerment in Rio de Janeiro's favelas

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Abstract. In modern day Brazil, new media initiatives centred in local communities are attempting to change the face of mainstream ideas about favelas and their inhabitants. One of these initiatives is Viva Favela which is ideologically and physically supported by the NGO Viva Rio that is based in Rio de Janeiro. This non-government organisation runs projects that provide favela residents with skills to take, edit and print their own (photo)journalism contents that enable a community-based framing and documentation of favela life, personalities and issues. The NGO furthermore has developed a range of public venues for displaying these works of (photo)journalism, thus minimising the invisibility that favela dwellers feel in Brazilian political life. This paper takes a discursive and ethnographic approach to investigating how community media might contribute with the aims of empowering people and supporting deliberation within Rio de Janeiro's favelas.

Introduction

VIVA FAVELA is attempting to change mainstream ideas about favelas and their inhabitants by shifting the focus from poverty, shortages, violence and criminality to images of the ordinary life which include the myriad events that occur in the day of the favela. Photographers from VIVA FAVELA, whom I interviewed between

November 2010 and January 2011, mentioned that their job aims to positively present the name 'favela', because the low income suburbs could not be associated only with bad things and events. 'Favela' is often translated simply as 'slum' or 'shantytown', but these terms connote negative characteristics such as shortage, poverty, and deprivation referring to favelas which end up stigmatizing these low income suburbs (Valladares, 2008, p. 1). Scholarly studies, organisations, and, in this paper, a nongovernment organisation VIVA RIO, have made great effort to re-signify the meaning of the name 'favela'.

Despite the steady, sharp drop in income inequality in Brazil since 2001, the country is still one of the most economically unequal countries in the world (de Barros, de Carvalho, Franco & Mendonça, 2007, pp. 22-23). Approximately one third of Rio de Janeiro's 10-million-plus residents live in favelas. Homicide and drug-related crime rates are rampant in these communities. Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan area has one of the highest murder rates in the world due to regular shoot-outs between police and drug dealers and confrontations with each other. Regarding critiques and scholarly studies of violence and criminality in Brazil's favela see [Misse & Lima (2006); Soares et al., (2009); Soares et al., (2005); Soares (2000); and Ventura (1995)].

Ramos and Paiva (2007, p. 15), through quantitative studies of Brazil's main daily newspapers, found that the journalistic report about Brazil's favelas and low income suburbs, especially in Rio de Janeiro, almost always regards these territories as "exclusive spaces of violence" (Ramos & Paiva, 2007, p. 77), and the voices and perspectives of favela dwellers are under-represented.

Dissatisfied with the way the traditional media had portrayed the favelas and their residents, community leaders from different favelas in Rio de Janeiro appealed more than a decade ago to the NGO VIVA RIO for support. The advent of the internet, the dream of a magazine produced by the people, for the people, and with the people from the low income areas became a reality. In 2001, the VIVA FAVELA website was established. Assisted by professional journalists, community correspondents (reporters and photographers selected by VIVA RIO) started to produce the portal content, and by 2008, they had already built a database of nearly 50,000 images by community photographers (Jucá & Nazareth, 2008).

VIVA FAVELA was conceived from the premise of a third-generation of human rights which contains a clear plea for the right to communicate, which is embedded in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This non-government organisation (NGO) runs projects that provide favela residents with skills to take, edit and print their own images that enable a community-based framing and documentation of favela life, personalities and issues. The NGO furthermore has developed a range of public venues for displaying these contents of communication, thus minimising the invisibility that favela dwellers feel in Brazilian political life. "Viva Favela is not just a local web portal or an online magazine about favelas. It's part of an international movement of visual inclusion

to change dominant media" (Lucas, 2008, p. np). In their own ways, both the community and mainstream media that operate in the favela incorporate Brazilian cultural, social and political processes, which are constituted in turn by a diverse mix of voices, creeds, colours and perspectives. VIVA FAVELA's website illustrates this well through its motto, Tudo junto e misturado (All together and mixed up). This expression, which is borrowed from favela dwellers, effectively means 'unity in diversity'. In Brazilian culture, especially, in a city like Rio de Janeiro where the idea of a 'divided city' is very potent, this phrase is a noteworthy signal of the intention to break down boundaries and divisions, strengthening the voice of the people via access to media.

Data Collection

This paper presents the partial results of a research project which investigated the working practices, self-understandings, and discourses of community media photographers working alongside photojournalists of the mainstream media. This work reflects particular understandings of the role that photographic representations of the favelas might have in political agency or in representing favela people's views within Brazil's favelas. To do this, the study has examined collective instrumental case studies. This article will only show the working practices of the project VIVA FAVELA, and how it has influenced government policies.

In my attempts to understand not only how community photographers see the world but also how their 'world' and their subjectivities are constructed by discursive practices, I went to Rio de Janeiro in order to conduct open-ended interviews with community and mainstream photographers. The way I conducted the interviews depended on the person and the situation. Sometimes, the interview went on for two hours and a half and sometimes around 35-40 minutes. As Patton (2002, p. 27) points out "Participant observers gather a great deal of information through informal, naturally occurring conversations. Understanding that interviewing and observation are mutually reinforcing qualitative techniques is a bridge to understanding the fundamentally people-oriented nature of qualitative inquiry". In so doing, I allowed photographers to decide where they wanted to be interviewed. When it was possible, I went to their communities attempting to understand their lifestyle, neighbours and everyday life. As Patton (2002, p. 49) argues "Understanding comes from trying to put oneself in the other person's shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act and feel". Following his principle, I went into six different favelas to have direct contact with community photographers in their own place of living. I got close to favela communities by talking to the children, because I understood that it was a good way of getting to

know about the favela everyday life. Another decision which I made was to go into the favelas by bus even though I had my own car in the city.

At the beginning of my fieldwork I was open to getting to know favelas and their communities, photographers' viewpoints and ways of living and, in so doing, I needed to go whenever the phenomenon took me. In the following stage, I focused on certain aspects, and questions, which emerged from photographers own voices, such as how photography can be used as a tool for social change and empowerment in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. I adopted ethnographic techniques because they provide insights into how to get to know others' worlds and what it means to participate or be in the field. Therefore, ethnographic principles were very useful when I needed to conduct my interviews and to understand community and mainstream photographers' worldviews, motivations, self-understandings, and practices.

Viva Favela portal and online newsroom

By March 2010 (Mesquita, 2010), VIVA FAVELA had grown into a collaborative web portal through which people from low income suburbs across Brazil could be the protagonists of their own stories which, up to then, had rarely if ever been told by the mainstream media. The contents of VIVA FAVELA are created by its community correspondents and/or correspondents 2.0, as Viva Favela calls them, from Brazil's low income suburbs. Some of them attended VIVA FAVELA's multimedia workshops either in VIVA RIO NGO setting or favela communities. The project Vamos fazer uma revista? (Let's create a magazine?) was established at this time. VIVA FAVELA chooses the topic and stipulates a deadline, and then a meeting to discuss the news agendas of the next magazine happens in its online newsroom. As VIVA FAVELA has over 500 correspondents the online newsroom was created as a way of exchanging experiences, and discussing what is worth covering in favelas. The meeting starts at 5 pm on Mondays. Anyone can attend the meetings as long as they register on the website. Each edition (bimonthly) has a different invited editor who conducts a debate and decides which contents will be published in the magazine. The first edition Festa na Favela (Party in the Favela) had as its editor a renowned REPORTER of GLOBO BROADCAST, Caco Barcellos. It is a noteworthy signal of the dialogic relationship between VIVA FAVELA and the mainstream media even though Barcellos is known for his interest in themes related to human rights, violence, criminality and social justice.

As well as this bimonthly online magazine community correspondents can upload their contents of communication on the VIVA FAVELA website freely whenever they can. In this process, no one decides what will be published. VIVA FAVELA's staff only monitor its website content to check whether it is in accordance of VIVA FAVELA's editorial line.

Viva Favela's multimedia workshops

In 2010, as VIVA FAVELA had grown into a collaborative web portal (Mesquita, 2010), it conducted some multimedia production workshops at the VIVA RIO NGO setting in order to teach ordinary people how to write, photograph, record audio, edit and upload their work on the Internet. These workshops, which are uniform top-down training programs, aspire to give participants skills to become active media producers. These programs have resulted in the creation of short movies, photographs, podcasts, and written texts by favela dwellers from across Rio de Janeiro's low income suburbs. Some recurring themes include favela culture, fashion, garbage, police intervention in the favela and social issues. Afterwards, the workshops' participants upload their own content on the VIVA FAVELA portal for publishing.

Howley (2010, p. 184) stresses that participatory communication "raises the community's awareness of its own resources and talents as well as its capacity to alter or transform some aspect of daily life". This concept is connected to an idea of deliberation which says that it is not just identifying a problem, but enabling citizens to name and frame issues and work progressively through processes that help them towards identifying, evaluating and choosing solutions.

Based on Dewey (2007/ 1922), Romano (2010, p. 3) notes that deliberation is not only a dialogue, a debate or conversation even though deliberation encompasses different forms of communication. Deliberation is a process in which people take part before making a decision related to issues that affect their lives. "Politics is not something that only happens in the realms of government or formal political processes. Politics occurs whenever individuals act alone or with others to identify and resolve issues, both minor and momentous, that affect their community" (Romano, 2010, p. 4). Thus, the processes which happen through multimedia workshops and collaborative online newsroom conducted by Viva Favela are political processes. There people are challenged to reflect on their own community and themselves in order to identify their issues and resolve them. Collaborative content creation and photography have been applied by this community-based initiative as a tool for social change in Brazil's favelas. As Mathews (2002, p. 17) pointed out "While it is common for institutions and government agencies to talk of empowering people to deal with their problems, the most important empowering moves in the opposite direction, from citizens to institutions".

Mayra Jucá, who is THE COORDINATOR of VIVA FAVELA, and whom I interviewed in December 2010, in Rio de Janeiro, said that VIVA FAVELA's multimedia workshops were interrupted for a while because the project, during 2010, mainly focussed on an online newsroom and the creation of a bimonthly collaborative online magazine (Let's create a magazine?). Moreover, the NGO

VIVA RIO has tried to expand the project VIVA FAVELA overseas. Since 2004, it had a branch in Haiti where it has developed different kinds of initiatives. However, Jucá mentioned that, in 2011, they have an intention to restart the workshops at VIVA RIO settings.

Regarding the relationship between VIVA FAVELA and favela communities, Mesquita who is an EDITOR OF THE CONTENT of this project has acted as a mediator between favela communities and VIVA RIO. At the beginning of November, I accompanied Mesquita in six different Rio de Janeiro's favelas, so as to understand how Viva Favela works, and how it creates its partnerships and carries out its workshops in these low income suburbs. At that time, a group from the NGO DIACONIA, physically located in Recife, was in Rio de Janeiro in order to strengthen the dialogue with the NGO VIVA RIO. Like Viva Rio's projects, DIACONIA aims to contribute to a process of citizenship and defense of human rights for disadvantaged classes in northeast Brazil. Supervised by Mesquita, DIACONIA's group and I went to Santa Marta, Cantagalo, Pavão Pavãozinho and Cidade de Deus (City of God) to get to know those favelas and make connections with the people from there. The outcomes achieved by favela residents of these two days were:

1. a photographic screening in the middle of Pavão Pavãozinho's square;
2. collaborative creation of graffiti on the wall of LENS OF DREAMS, in the City of God (Cidade de Deus);
3. collaborative creation of a stop motion short-movie in Cidade de Deus;
4. editing of the images captured in Cidade de Deus at VIVA RIO setting;
5. screening of the stop motion short-movie during a party at the VIVA RIO setting.
6. strengthening the dialogue between DIACONIA's group, VIVA RIO and people from Rio's favelas aiming to further collaborative initiatives.

Asked about a political impact which the project VIVA FAVELA might have through its processes of supporting deliberation and contributing with the aim of empowerment, Jucá (2011) argued that VIVA FAVELA had had a political impact at two different levels, personal and governmental. In the personal dimension, she stated that the project had encouraged its 'community correspondents' to see themselves as someone who is capable to generate information by using communication tools to spread out one's own worldviews. This process allowed them to engage in conversations beyond social, educational, and geographical boundaries of the favelas. However, she mentioned that the most remarkable thing was when the contents of the communication they produced were displayed by the traditional media and/or other media. It resulted in a bigger impact by generating public discussion, job opportunities, partnerships, and/or even government actions at the local level. In terms of government policies, Jucá (2011) mentioned a

project which had attempted to transform the city of Rio de Janeiro into a digital/ smart city. This program was inspired by THE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY SECRETARIAT OF RIO DE JANEIRO STATE, Franklin Coelho. He, who had already founded the program PIRAÍ DIGITAL, in PIRAÍ REGIONAL COUNCIL, worked at the NGO VIVA RIO and became engaged in the project VIVA FAVELA when it had telecentres in different low income suburbs of Rio.

Reflections

The social divide in Brazil, ["for example, as of June 2007 only 13 percent of the nation's households owned a PC and just 3 percent of the population had broadband access" (Clarke, 2009, p. 146)], is one of the impediments that THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT faces to take the role of community-based initiatives in Rio de Janeiro's favelas.

The history of Rio's favelas assembles stories about disadvantaged classes who struggle for a life of dignity. This includes such areas as: the drugs trade, which increases in importance and, sometimes, acts by financing local services; a civil society which demands safety and social justice; and, a STATE GOVERNMENT which "seems to have given up all social concern" (Valladares, 2008, p. 11). To tackle the increase sense of insecurity and fear among many sections of Rio's society, THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT set up the first UPP (PACIFYING POLICE UNIT) at the favela of Santa Marta, Rio's south area, in December 2008. It aimed to reestablish control over Rio's low income territories, strengthen the dialogue with favela residents, and increase community participation. From that moment on, favelas in Rio have faced a process of state pacification and intervention through THE POLICE. Projects like RIO CIDADE DIGITAL work in partnerships with the UPPs in favelas, however, in contrast to the NGO VIVA RIO, which, since 1993, has dealt with favela communities and has built partnerships with people within Rio's favelas to achieve common goals by creating a trusting work environment, UPPs have faced challenges in interacting with favela dwellers because there is a lack of trust in relation to THE RIO DE JANEIRO POLICE which has a long history of corruption. In relation to THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT, the fear is that those initiatives are aimed primarily at government election campaigns and/or attempts to build an atmosphere of security and an image of "Rio, Capital da Inovação e do Conhecimento" (Rio, Innovation and Knowledge Capital) for coming international events, such as WORLD CUP in 2014, THE OLYMPIC GAMES in 2016, and environmental events like THE RIO+20, United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

During my fieldwork in Rio's favelas I noted that favela communities which had UPP had faced a process of transition which had built new relationships

among favela residents and THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT and THE POLICE. Favela communities are very concerned about the stage of post-pacification, because they say that just THE POLICE are not sufficient to solve their problems. They ask for a long-term social program which would include training courses, job opportunities, schools, and child services. To respond to favela demands, THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT is establishing THE UPP SOCIAL (SOCIAL PACIFYING POLICE UNIT) in partnership with the IPP INSTITUTO PEREIRA PASSOS (PEREIRA PASSOS INSTITUTE) and THE UN-HABITAT which works from the premise of giving voice to locals in order to identify their own demands by working from a bottom-up perspective. THE UPP SOCIAL which combines secretaries, civil society, and the private sector attempts to strengthen the dialogue with favela communities by engaging people in conversations to identify their own resources and demands, and to solve their problems.

For ten years, VIVA FAVELA has tried to promote the principle of digital inclusion for the purpose of social change by initiating the processes of community dialogue and collaborative content creation. Today, THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT through, first, THE UPP and, then, THE UPP SOCIAL is attempting to promote citizenship, economic, urban, and social development in 'pacified' favelas by combining civil society, secretaries, and the private sector. Within the next couple of years, THE UPP SOCIAL will be established in different Rio favelas, if it proceeds according to THE RIO DE JANEIRO GOVERNMENT's plan. The greatest questions will be how the THE UPP SOCIAL will be established and how long it will last, and if it will be harnessed toward giving voice to favela communities and creating a less divided city, and, in other words, a more equitable society.

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