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Paradoxes of Digital Democracy in Brazil:

Media coverage of "Marco Temporal" and the online activism of indigenous movements.

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Introduction

"I sing, but they never listen to me. The moment I make a short video asking for respect, they massacre me"

-Katú Mirim on the #índionãoéfantasia movement (Lima: 2018)

In 2017, Katú Mirim, an indigenous Brazilian rapper of the Boe-Bororo ethnicity, advocated for #índionãoéfantasia ("indigenous are not carnival costumes" in free translation) on social media and offline at protests in São Paulo. The movement, which mainly took place on online forums, problematized Brazilians who exoticize indigenous cultures through Carnival costumes. The common habit of appropriating cultures for costumes and fashion, without any regard or respect, was not a debatable topic for many generations in Brazil. Many Brazilians fiercely opposed Mirim's opinion, while others were willing to understand the critique. Katú Mirim's online content, amplified by the extensive reach of social media, raised a debate about racism against indigenous cultures, fueling a need for indigenous visibility and representation in a country that historically denies their existence. This performance of digital activism brings awareness to an underrepresented problem by instigating critical conversations across Brazilian social media.

The rise of social media activism in Brazil after lower classes gained access to the internet highlights the urgency of representation and polyvocality from the perspective of the oppressed. Independent artists of color are empowered to engage with activism and art through social media. Through these platforms, they can spot a chance of being heard and seen online, while contributing to the debate over social struggles within their communities. After the trendy #índionãoéfantasia, Mirim's reach became so vast that they had the chance to model and perform in TV and fashion magazines. This attention indicated that large media platforms took an interest the activist as a cultural icon, although these partnerships can also be controversial.

A few of months later, #decolonizeamoda ("decolonise fashion" in free translation) became popular amongst indigenous activists after Day Molina, a Brazilian

indigenous stylist, made a post about cultural appropriation in Brazilian fashion brands. Indigenous cultures present the highest suicide rates in Brazil, rising poverty and discrimination (Cimi 2019), as their ancestral lands continue to be taken by the state on behalf of wealthy landowners. Despite this oppression, fashion brands still appropriate indigenous visual identities to produce "cultural" products for a luxury market. In one interview, Molina states that "cultural appropriation takes away someone's right to speak and banalizes something that belongs to another" (Yahn 2020). Later, she challenges the fact that she is one of the only indigenous stylists in editorial positions across Brazil, concluding that: "visibility is power. Give visibility to those you believe deserve power" (ibid). This statement was especially provocative in Brazilian mainstream media.

The hashtag mechanism in social media – essentially a grouping tool that facilitates a search cycle – has the potential to fuel a variety of topics and reach millions of people who engage with debates, online and offline. It is too optimistic though to highlight only the positive aspects of online debate, which often falls into hate speech and misinformation, under the guise of "freedom" (Nakamura and Chow-White 2012). Despite the limitations of social media and its technological optimism, these technologies allow a new degree of polyvocality (Rodal, Castillo and Sánches 2019). As the oppressed raise their own voices within the confines of profile templates not designed for them, they evade the mediation of mainstream media. Now under the emerging control of corporate social networks, these debates soon become exploitable trends for the capitalist mechanism.

For indigenous communities in Brazil, to exist is an act of resistance. To exist and to have access to digital platforms means resistance to the constant threat of the Brazilian economic elite, who persist as a legacy of the colonial era. These digital politics bring new possibilities of organization, community empowerment, memory restoration, awareness, education, art and activism (Quesada 2019). Indigenous online presence also brings visibility to underrepresented histories and political struggles, archiving resistance in digital space across generations. The case of the Marco Temporal is an example of how society benefits from independent journalism that is not televised, but facilitated by social media. However, the author of this paper – as a digital marketer – continues to question: why does indigenous journalism not reach the majority? Is this an indication that our society is not really interested in consuming activist content, or is there any sort of hidden technological bias?

As our capitalistic system becomes increasingly entangled with the internet, it becomes impossible for companies and institutions to ignore the potentials of the digital landscape (Dahlberg 2005). There is the urge to colonize those spaces because it is where their consumers are now inhabiting and exchanging information. Thus, trendy and popular topics are seen as business opportunities. On the other side of the game, social media was created by private companies, serving private purposes, funded by private capital. Therefore, it would not be wrong to assume that the principles that structure social media come from the same private world, despite its branding of democratic participation. The so-called algorithmic bias proposes a game that privileges those who have money to burn. But if social media becomes a powerful medium because of its inhabitants, does it also mean that the same inhabitants have power over their late digital colonizers?

The Paradoxes of Digital Democracy

In the article "Does the whatever speak?" written by Alexander Galloway (2012), the author proposes another interpretation of Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial book "Can the subaltern speak?" (2008), aligned with present digital paradigms. According to Galloway, the question today is not so much can the subaltern speak – it no longer a question of *can* but of *does*. Also, *where* and *how* does the subaltern speak, and *where/how* are they forced to speak. In a digital era where the subject is analyzed through a post-Fordist economic model, the subject becomes a consumer that has no escape: everything is tailored and targeted; every economic transaction is effectively predicted to maintain a system that is essentially and inevitably exploitative. Difference becomes fuel for value creation in the marketplace, and is appropriated by marketing strategies that ultimately feed a politics of disappearance: the once subaltern is forced to speak, but does not necessarily speak the truth for themselves or even in their own benefit. Phenomena like pink-washing, greenwashing and purple-washing, in which companies adopt social and environmental causes to increase brand value, are an example of how companies allow the subaltern to speak: when it is convenient for the elite's interests and in a way their maintains their privileges.

An example in the Brazilian context is the advertisement "Agro é Pop" from Rede Globo, the biggest public TV channel and entertainment company in Brazil, which exalts the benefits of agribusiness. This propaganda uses images of Indigenous and rural workers to connect sustainability, technology and nationalism. The campaign reinforces the idea that agribusiness is the industry that mostly employs workers in the country, when in fact it exploits and expropriates indigenous, quilombola, and riverine locals (Quesada 2019). As a response to it, the visual artists Luana do Amaral and Luis Roberto Quesada created the counterpropaganda video piece, "Agro é" (2016), which circulated online ad in art exhibitions in Brazil to subvert the content of Rede Globo's well-funded advertising campaign. The original message states that "Agro [business] is pop, agro is tech, agro is all".

In the counterpropaganda video, the artists add an extra phrase "Agro is death," using the aesthetics of death and protest to contest the agribusiness campaign. This work is an example of *culture jamming*, which uses activism and art, supported by a "guerrilla" political script. Their tactics seek to question the empires of Brazil's agricultural elite and the mainstream media that hegemonically reinforces the extractivist policies that govern the country's economy. The profit and expansion of agribusiness is responsible for serious socio-environmental damages and the high number of murders and deaths in the sector, to satisfy the economic interests of the state and the elites (Quesada 2019).

However, the counterpropaganda campaign went viral for only a few weeks, while the propaganda of Rede Globo started in 2016, and continues to reinvent itself until now. Furthermore, agribusiness in Brazil has its own TV channels and programs running for over 40 years, their own marketing institution (ABMRA), columns in the biggest newspapers, and sponsorships from banks and corporations (Andrade 2020). Even when online activism can engage the attention of audiences organically, it becomes tough to compete with institutions that have a very consolidated position in society and receive monetary investment to boost online content and overpower once subaltern voices.

Although once subaltern peoples have more visibility through online media, Galloway argues that their participation is limited, and their speech is somewhat plotted by the same elites of the offline world. Furthermore, Galloway explains an alternative concept of data mining and surveillance proposed by the philosopher Barbara Cassin in her book "Google me: one-click democracy" (2017):

"We think of data mining in terms of location and extraction of nuggets of information from a sea of background noise. But this metaphor is entirely wrong. Data mining is essentially a plastic art, for it responds to the sculpture of the medium itself, to the background noise itself. It valorizes the pure shape of relationships. Not "can" but "does" the body speak? Yes, it has no choice" (100-102).

For every subaltern that is forced to speak, there is somewhere an algorithm that listens, filling the gaps of a system of prediction, and mining the behavior of the users.

Colonization of the Internet

When the author of this paper started her career in digital marketing in 2014, there were long meetings, conferences and workshops on the last trendy and hyped strategies in the field, essentially revolving the "personification" of brands; the switch from text-based content to visual content, enhanced by platforms that privilege image over text; and the moto "content is king." It was relatively new for users on Facebook and Instagram to be friend a company and, not surprisingly, the success of corporate profiles were indeed very low. Therefore, it was necessary to create likable personalities to speak about interesting and trendy topics, create engagement with users and increase the loyalty of customers. At the same time, social media platforms were creating features to facilitate buying options and product exposure. These strategies were developed based on SEO (search engine optimization) and data analytics from social media platforms, find that personification is the best strategy to brand consumer goods on social media (Chen et. al. 2015).

However, the fact that a great part of the population is not aware of the mechanisms of search engine optimization makes them more vulnerable to the content in which they are more likely to be exposed to. Search engines are designed to favor those who can afford to employ SEO experts, can pay for priority indexing and/or sponsored links, can attract many inbound hyperlinks, and who own and control significant domain names and large amounts of interlinked online properties (Hargittai 2018). These strategies are related to the concept of the *corporate colonization* of cyberspace, theorized by multiple authors in Lincoln Dahlberg's article *The Corporate Colonization of Online Attention and the Marginalization of Critical Communication?* (2005). The main argument proposed by Dahlberg is that powerful corporations are re-creating and reinforcing dominant discourses of the offline world on the internet, supported by neoliberal policies that regulate digital spaces. Furthermore, practices of consumer capitalism in the digital landscape overpower the critical communication central to every strong democratic culture.

It is visible how companies and their digital marketing experts are getting more skilled at persuading users to become loyal customers. They are no longer only selling services and products, but luring people to believe that social engagement, social demands, and minorities values are part of the product. Therefore, it promotes an idea of "empowerment" through the logics of consumer capitalism. Yet, the same people that are being "represented" by those brands are often rejected to work for them, according to research by Ernest J. Wilson III and Sasha Constanza-Chock (2013). Much of the conversations, opinions and debates put mass media as the center of civic discourse, but it is also necessary to understand that the same media produces absences and skewed or inaccurate representations of the most vulnerable people. The same authors argue that an increasingly multiracial and multicultural society requires not only multiple channels, but truly diverse ownership, employment, participation, and content. According to Dahlberg (2005), "the corporate domination of attention not only marginalizes many voices but also promotes the constitution of participants as individualized-instrumental consumers rather than as critical-reflexive citizens." It necessary to not only have information, but also to continue critical conversations on representation. Otherwise, social causes become an easy target for commercial appropriation.

Despite this ongoing colonization of digital spaces, extensive critical communication continues to take place online on an impressive scale. In every corner of blogs, forums, comments sections and profiles, thousands of online civil society and independent media professionals facilitate diasporic, alternative, and disruptive digital scenes that provide safe places for the articulation, contestation, and the development of identities, organizing online and offline actions (Dahlberg 2005).

Case Study: "Marco Temporal" News Coverage

The Marco Temporal is a law project under judgment that blocks the current demarcation of ancestral indigenous lands in Brazil by changing the rules that define them. The law project was created by the rural political party in 2009, and it is a forced interpretation of the 1988 Constitution to serve the interests of the agribusiness. According to the project, only the lands that were in possession of the original people until the day of the promulgation of the Constitution of 1988 will be considered indigenous lands, ignoring that many ethnic groups were no longer in their lands at that time because they were expelled or massacred. This interpretation of the law determines that many indigenous people permanently lose the right to claim their ancestral territory. The defense of this project privileges preciselythose who expelled the indigenous people from their territories: landowners, land grabbers and miners (Filho 2021; Thomaz 2021).

According to the Vilela (2020), in 2019 there was a 150% increase of violence against indigenous people in Brazil compared to the previous decade. The deaths by Covid-19 in 2020 were 16% higher among indigenous people and 30% of their lands are in danger due to the expansion of agribusiness (Rebelo and Neto 2020). In the same news piece, the legal coordinator of APIB (Brazil's Indigenous People Articulation), Eloy Terena, attests:

"Indigenous people are experiencing a very adverse political context in the management of the Bolsonaro government, the first president-elect who is openly opposed to indigenous people. Since he took office, he has signed several acts that contradict the Constitution and international treaties that protect indigenous communities and their territories. It is important to point out that, in this pandemic context, it is fundamental to reflect on the important role that traditional territories play in the balance of humanity. Therefore, indigenous lands, in addition to protecting the way of life of indigenous peoples, are federal public property and ensure climate balance."

In August 2021, the Marco Temporal began voting sessions in the national congress in Brasília. Around 5,000 indigenous people of 117 ethnicities started camping in front of the government palace for a movement called "Luta pela Vida - Nossa história não inicia em 1988" ("Fight for Life - Our history does not begin in 1988" in free translation) (Andes 2021). The protests and results of the voting sessions have been covered by several media broadcasters, but with very different approaches.

In this section, I will compare the coverage made by one of the biggest national online news broadcasters, "O Globo," controlled by Rede Globo, and the independent online page, "Mídia Guarani Mbya," managed by the indigenous activist Richard Wera Mirim. I will focus this analysis of only two Instagram pages for the following reasons: Instagram is currently the 4th most used social media in Brazil; both O Globo and Mídia Guarani Mbya have profiles on Instagram and Facebook, however, the difference between the number of followers on Facebook is way bigger (5k vs 5mi) than on Instagram (35.6k vs 2.3mi). Therefore, for the sake of this analysis I will limit it to both Instagram pages. Mídia Guarani Mbya does not have an official webpage, and their main communication mediums are Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. On the other hand, O Globo has a huge webpage linked to the other related webpages from the same corporation and massive advertisements.

The trend in mainstream media is to remain silent about the Marco Temporal process (Filho 2021). There has not been any big coverage on the process besides TV Bandeirantes – a traditional public TV channel managed by ruralist party in Brazil – and their "terrorist" approach to the topic, which leave a majority of Brazilians alienated from the most important process of the century for indigenous people.

O Globo Instagram Coverage on Marco Temporal

O Globo is a Brazilian printed newspaper based in Rio de Janeiro, and the 4th biggest in the country in terms of circulation. Like most of the other printed newspapers, they have their own webpages and supporting social media channels with mobile and desktop versions. Their Instagram page has 2.3 million followers and the page posts on average 18 images/videos per day. From 22 August to 23 September 2021, they had 585 posts covering national news, mostly about politics and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of 585 posts, four were about the Marco Temporal and two were related to indigenous people. The first post on the topic had the title "Estátua de Pedro Álvares Cabral é incendiada no Rio em protesto contra o Marco Temporal a ser analisado no STF"

("Statue of Pedro Álvares Cabral is set on fire in Rio in protest against the Marco Temporal to be analyzed by the STF" in free translation). Since the start of the judgment, many protesters in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro set fire to statues of colonizers, which prompted backlash from readers. The post had 18,000 likes and 1,109 comments, most of them condemning the protests. Rather than prompting critical debate about the Marco Temporal process, the newspaper instead instigated hateful opinions against Indigenous movements by focusing on this piece of news.

The second post had the title "Reservas indígenas: entenda a importância do julgamento do marco temporal no STF" ("Indigenous reservations: understand the importance of the temporal landmark ruling at the STF" in free translation. The post had 2,600 likes and 79 comments, most of them criticizing how late the newspaper was to start talking about the process. The third post had the title "Indígenas colocam fogo em caixão em frente ao planalto em novo protesto contra o marco temporal" ("Indigenous people set fire to coffins in front of the Planalto in a new protest against the Marco Temporal" in free translation). The coffins had several protest phrases against ruralists, miners, lawmakers, and the president. The post had 5,000 likes and 399 comments, in which some of the commenters condemned the protest and others showed support. The fourth post had the title "Em Brasília, mulheres indígenas pressionam contra omarco temporal" ("In Brasília, Indigenous women pressure against the Marco Temporal" in free translation). The post had 3,900 likes and 85 comments, most of them positive about the march. All four posts were made once a week. It is not possible to check the exact time and day of the week it was posted. However, it is possible to notice the bias of the coverage, although they use very professional journalistic language.

Despite the impact that Marco Temporal process has on the indigenous communities and the stakeholders inplay, the posts give almost no reliable or in-depth information on the topic, and do not instigate critical conversations or opinions. Instead, they seem to focus on specific acts of the protesters that generate divided and hateful reactions from the audience. Furthermore, O Globo mostly focuses on a very superficial idea of the indigenous community and, authors often use the pejorative term "indio" instead of the preferred term, indigenous. In the texts, the authors focus on the judicial process but without any further explanations on how the law impacts both sides of the dispute. It is definitely unfair to assume that the majority of the population would be able to simply understand complex law regulations without any background information on it. Besides, it is also problematic that there is no community management of the comments, even when commenters are fiercely discussing or asking questions. In many posts, the comments section becomes a collective of hate speech, instead of providing fertile soil for critical debates. In conclusion, the newspaper seems to provide information that misinforms and biases the public opinion in favor of the Marco Temporal. The audience is also not very welcoming to divergent opinions, leaving little space for debate. It is clear though that they have professionals writing their posts and articles as most of them show a consistent level of reach and engagement. It is also visible that the posting strategy follows professional marketing guidelines (hourly posting, hashtags, interlinks, tagging, titles on image, visual consistency, sponsored ads), as it is a page managed by a big corporation.

Mídia Guarani Mbya coverage on Marco Temporal

The Instagram page is maintained by Richard Wera Mirim, an indigenous journalist, filmmaker and activist of the Guarani Mbya ethnicity. His page has 35,700 followers and 129 posts over the past month (22 August - 23 September). The vast majority is about the Marco Temporal with authorial photographs of the protests. Although Mirim posts frequently, he doesn't seem to follow a regular calendar or schedule. Many of his posts also do not have titles for the images. The amount of likes and comments also varies a lot, from 200 to 4,000 likes, including partnered posts from other indigenous artists. It is clear how much of an insider he is, and how he uses art photography in his journalism.

Richard Wera Mirim has a non-neutral eye and voice to expose the struggles of a community he is part of. Besides, the content is very polyvocal: he shows political claims from different ethnicities, naming them and making their differences visible, instead of homogenizing indigeneity; he posts about every minor decision throughout the Marco Temporal process and explains what the legal process means to them. Mirim represents celebrations and debates from an intimate perspective, contributing to a more complex popular imaginary of a community that is still very stereotyped and exoticized in Brazil. He seems to have a proportional and fairly organic engagement to his number of followers. Most of them show support for his work, and others share their opinions and views on the topics. One of the most popular posts of the month was an artivist illustration by Thiago Padilha stating "O chimarrão não é gaúcho, é indígena" ("Chimarrão is not gaúcho, it is indigenous" in free translation). The text in the post explains the main reason:

"They appropriated the cultural elements of the indigenous, called it 'Brazilian culture' and threw the indigenous out. As they also do with the black cultures. The real gaucho is indigenous, the name comes from 'gauche,' one who does not fit in, who wanders aimlessly, like the indigenous after losing everything to the invading whites. The South is indigenous territory, as is all the rest of Pindorama (Brazil)."

This post had 4,100 likes and 93 comments, one of the most popular of the month. In the comments section, there were many different opinions being debated from different locations in Brazil. Even when opinions were conflicting, there were no major fights or apparent hate speech being fueled. The space seemed to be favorable for critical and democratic debates on a difficult to understand legal process.

After studying the page for a month, it became clear that Mirim's succuss on social media was the result of quality journalism and artivism. Yet, his lack of consistency makes his page look quite organic and amateur in terms of digital marketing techniques. Richard Wera Mirim has few mentions and interlinked material online to other related indigenous webpages, events, and institutions, however those webpages are not interlinked. His Instagram page filled with photographs, illustrations and videos is a detailed and honest portrait of indigenous activism in contemporary Brazil.

Conclusions

Perhaps what Dahlberg (2005) and Galloway (2012) miss is that people need to stop accepting their position as passive followers, users or consumers. Although it is not our fault that the position of "user" is imposed, the term "user" denotes exactly what non-democratic governments and exploitative companies want them to be: functional individuals with little to no criticism, loyal consumers, numbers that are being fed and manipulated by a predictive system. Although social media opens possibilities for emerging democratic spaces, the structures in which they are based are essentially repeating and enduring the inequality of the offline world. With progressive audience segmentation and tailored content strategies, public opinion gets even more divided, and blind to topics that are not part of their own social networks. Furthermore, companies are colonizing digital spaces and appropriating social causes as marketing strategies. These questionable practices leave us to question the algorithmic bias of social media, and visualize this gradual process of digital colonization.

Hargittai (2018) is clear about the success or failure of web pages: thosewho can afford professionals and professional techniques are to be privileged within a search engine system. It means that in a sea of information in which the ultimate goal is to catch someone's attention, the winning formulas are restricted to groups that can invest on it. This consolidation of capital into algorithmic privilege goes against the techno-optimism promised by digital democracy. In the Brazilian media landscape, it is clear which information will be disseminated to the largest number of people: the ones in the interests of dominant classes. In the case study of O Globo and Mídia Guarani Mbya, it becomes visible that popularity does not necessarily correspond with quality or veracity. In the case of the Marco Temporal coverage, mainstream news broadcasters like O Globo reach a much higher reach, even though their reports did not provide any relevant information or valid explanation on the topic. On the other hand, independent media outlets like Mídia Guarani Mbya provided free and quality information that did not reach the majority of online news audiences. Therefore, it is possible to notice an algorithmic bias in which inequality gets larger as digital media professionals and monetary investment circulate on only one side. In this case, the demarcation of indigenous lands directly confronts the Brazilian rural elite – the wealthiest group in the country. Therefore, it is possible to see the unequal clash of power mirrored in the media: misleading, biased and alienating pieces of news get the highest access and engagement rates, while complex portraits of the indigenous resistance remain hidden and unpopular on social media because there is no monetary interest on it.

It is important though to notice two aspects of this dynamic: firstly, biased posts do not have high rates organically. Even if no paid campaign boost was made on a single post, there are paid professionals behind it, regularly working on this specific page to build consistency. Which leads us to question: perhaps if people were consistently bombed with another type of content, they would also build a different pattern of opinions. Secondly, although independent journalists often have a small reach, we need to acknowledge that they gained their thousands of followers organically, relying on post shares and genuine interest in them. Thus, there are many audiences in similar situations, hungry for

representation and building digital networks with shared desires over the internet. Perhaps if digital media professionals and audiences stressed democratic values of representation, polyvocality, ethical criticism and tolerance, we could defeat the corporative colonization of our digital democratic spaces by reinvigorating their promised civic purposes. We need to move beyond being mere users and accept our positions as engaged and critical citizens.

"Multidão vira maré"

["Crowd becomes a wave" in free translation]

- Francisca la Braza (2018)

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