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The Limits of Disruption: Three Lessons from Brazil

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'Have you seen what is happening in Brazil?' It was a cloudy afternoon in London in June 2013, and I was attending my very first conference as a PhD student. I was jumping from café to café, meeting academics whose work I had found inspiring. I told them I was researching the branding and marketing efforts of the Brazilian government ahead of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. In one of those encounters, one academic insisted, 'have you seen what is happening in Brazil, *right now?*'

A quick online search showed me what was happening. Media organisations from the UK, the United States and Brazil were reporting that thousands of Brazilians had taken to the streets of cities all over the country, originally to protest against a public transportation fare increase. Nonetheless, by the time the foreign media had begun covering the demonstrations in earnest, the protestors' agenda had broadened to include demands for gay rights, complaints over corruption among politicians, and most importantly, objections to the exorbitant sums spent on preparing for the upcoming 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic games¹. The latter became particularly salient in the media, given the timing of the protests overlapped with the Confederations Cup, a two-week football tournament that served as a dress rehearsal for the World Cup scheduled for the following year². Ultimately, the demonstrations grew to become the largest period of social unrest in Brazil since 1992, with one million people taking to the streets of 353 cities on June 20th alone, and estimates that one in every twenty Brazilians took part at some point³.

Techno-optimism permeated both those early journalistic accounts and some of the first academic pieces written in the aftermath of the demonstrations. Commentators celebrated the digital media – also called 'new', 'social' or 'alternative' media – as a key factor to understanding the origin, coordination and communication of the protests. Some of these commentators stressed that, through the employment of digital media, collectives like *Mídia NINJA*⁴

¹ Gohn, M. da G. (2015). Brazilian Social Movements in the Last Decade. In P. Almeida and A. Cordero Ulate (Eds.), *Handbook of Social Movements across Latin America* (361–372). Dordrecht: Springer.

² Cammaerts, B., and Jiménez-Martínez, C. (2014). The mediation of the Brazilian V-for-Vinegar protests: From vilification to legitimization and back? *Liinc Em Revista*, 10(1), 44–68.

³ Branford, S., and Rocha, J. (2015). *Brazil under the Workers Party: From euphoria to despair*. Rugby: Practical Action Publishing.

⁴ *Mídia NINJA* is a network of activists and alternative journalists established in 2011 as part of the network of cultural circuits *Fora de Eixo* (Out of the Axis), which live streamed and disseminated photos and information about the protests through social media.

challenged popular national newspapers and newscasts such as *O Estado de São Paulo* and *Jornal Nacional*, which originally framed the protests as simple acts of vandalism. Instead, *Mídia NINJA* and other collectives attempted to make visible a more positive narrative for the demonstrations, with scholars claiming that these collectives were ‘far richer in information and lighter on sensationalism than the printed newspaper and static TV coverage’⁵. This is a particularly relevant issue in the Brazilian context, where ‘mainstream’ media have traditionally represented the interests of more conservative sectors⁶.

Such views were in line with intellectual trends of the time, which claimed that digital media supposedly gave visibility to images and accounts that challenge authority and the powers that be⁷. Those were the days before discussions about Cambridge Analytica, ideological echo chambers, or fake news, the days when some believed that the Arab Spring had actually been a Twitter or Facebook revolution⁸. Indeed, accounts at that time suggested that the events in Brazil had been a ‘tropical spring’⁹, even though it was winter in the southern hemisphere. In other words, the June 2013 demonstrations were viewed as another example of an alleged global trend in social movements, apparently without clear leadership, which occupied public spaces, employed digital technologies to coordinate their actions and by-passed traditional forms of media. As sociologist Manuel Castells stated, ‘it also happened in Brazil’¹⁰.

Beyond techno-optimism

Although techno-optimistic views still prevail in relation to the protests in Brazil, more nuanced perspectives have appeared over time. Some authors have noted that, whilst digital media were crucial in helping protesters coordinate their actions, these media also fragmented the interests of the various groups behind the demonstrations¹¹. Others have observed that social movements within Brazil have become increasingly wary of the neoliberal trends and concentrations of power that have characterised the Internet of late¹².

⁵ Conde, M., and Jazeel, T. (2013). Kicking off in Brazil: Manifesting democracy. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 22(4). 445.

⁶ de Albuquerque, A. (2017). Protecting democracy or conspiring against it? Media and politics in Latin America: A glimpse from Brazil. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 1–18.

⁷ Bennett, L. (2003). New media power: the Internet and global activism. In N. Couldry and J. Curran (Eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world* (17–38). London: Rowman and Littlefield; Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Beaumont, P. (2011, February 25). The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world. *The Guardian*.

⁹ Spector, F. (2013, June 21). As Brazil's protests spread, is this a Tropical Spring? *Channel 4 News*.

¹⁰ Castells, M. (2013). *Redes de indignação e esperança. Movimentos sociais na era da internet*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar. 182.

¹¹ Porto, M.P., and Brant, J. (2015). Social media and the 2013 protests in Brazil: The contradictory nature of political mobilisation in the digital era. In L. Dencik & O. Leisters (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on social media and protest* (181–199). London: Rowman & Littlefield.

¹² Morgans, C. (2018). New media and the disillusion of Brazil's radical left. *Latin American Perspectives*, 45(3), 250–265.

That is not to say that digital media played no part. A survey carried out in eight Brazilian cities revealed that 62 per cent of protesters had heard about the demonstrations through Facebook, and that 75 per cent used this platform to invite their contacts to participate¹³. To put these numbers in perspective, Brazil's 76 million registered Facebook users (as of 2013) made it the third largest Facebook market, and the second largest in terms of daily usage at 47 million¹⁴. Other studies suggest that, outside the United States, Brazil has the largest number of Twitter, YouTube and Facebook users, most of whom are middle-class, young and reside in the main urban centres¹⁵.

My own research on protests in Brazil supports this more nuanced view. Between 2014 and 2016, I conducted more than 60 interviews in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, London and New York with individuals who covered the protests or took part in them, including activists, members of media collectives, journalists, foreign correspondents and government officials. Through those interviews and my own observations, a more complex picture emerged, which recognised the importance of digital media, but also stressed some of their limitations. There are three lessons that arise from the Brazilian case which can be applicable to other settings.

1) The boundaries between 'old' and 'digital' media are blurred.

In recent years, various journalistic and academic analyses of episodes of social disruption have described protests as a clash between 'old' or 'mainstream' media – such as newspapers, radio or television – vis-à-vis 'new', 'social' or 'digital' media. The assumption behind some of these viewpoints is that the so-called 'mainstream' media protected the establishment and dismissed social movements, while 'new' or 'digital' media exposed *the truth*¹⁶. As stated before, similar perspectives could be found in Brazil, where alternative media collectives such as *Mídia NINJA* were praised for challenging the dominance of national newspapers and television newscasts, and allegedly showing what was *really* happening¹⁷. As one foreign correspondent told me:

'I was watching a lot of videos on YouTube, which was probably the next best thing to being there, because it was unmediated'.

However, this clear-cut division between different forms of media is unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. Firstly, it has become clear in recent

¹³ Porto and Brant, 2015, 190.

¹⁴ Gomes, H.S. (2013, September 12). Brasil é o 2º país com mais usuários que entram diariamente no Facebook. *G1 - O Portal de Notícias Da Globo*. São Paulo.

¹⁵ Morgans, 2018.

¹⁶ Amaral, F. (2016). 'It's not just 20 cents': How social networks helped mobilise Brazilians against injustice. In S. Price and R. Sanz Sabido (Eds.), *Sites of protest: Protest, media and culture* (195–210). London: Rowman & Littlefield; d'Andrea, C., and Ziller, J. (2015). Violent scenes in Brazil's 2013 protests: The diversity of ordinary people's narratives. *Television & New Media*, 17(4), 324–334.

¹⁷ Conde and Jazeel, 2013; d'Andrea and Ziller, 2015.

years that digital media are not the monopoly of radical forces. Governments, private corporations and the ‘mainstream’ media are also online, and journalists have embraced digital tools in their daily reporting. In my conversations with a collective of foreign correspondents, I was told that they had created a WhatsApp group to share real-time information about meeting points and safety recommendations during the coverage of the demonstrations. Similarly, a Brazilian reporter recalled an episode in which a photo she took of one of her colleagues being arrested during a protest went viral. This was later used by lawyers to secure the release of the journalist.

Despite claims that traditional media are simply being by-passed by digital technologies, ‘alternative’ groups still rely on ‘old’ media, such as radio, television and newspapers, to communicate their messages¹⁸. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, activists in Brazil such as those belonging to *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement), which were responsible for organising the first stage of the June 2013 demonstrations, have grown increasingly critical of the corporate nature of the Internet. In response, they have gradually curtailed their online activities and prioritised face-to-face forms of organisation and communication¹⁹.

Secondly, such clear-cut divisions portray the media as constituted by fragmentary camps, rather than as an interrelated whole²⁰. People construct, project, contest and re-appropriate news through various connected media platforms and organisations, such as newspapers, television, radio, Twitter, YouTube or Facebook. These different kinds of media do not always oppose each other and may actually perform ‘in tandem’, re-appropriating and amplifying the contents that they construct and show²¹. At the peak of the June 2013 demonstrations, *Mídia NINJA* had an average of 150,000 daily viewers online²². Although this constituted a significant number of viewers, it was a far cry from the almost five million spectators who watched newscast *Jornal Nacional* every day²³. As members of *Mídia NINJA* told me, they stopped ‘preaching to the converted’ only when they were interviewed on popular television talk shows and when their footage was also shown by newscast *Jornal Nacional*, as part of a story about a demonstrator unlawfully arrested²⁴. Examples of the media working in tandem were not limited to national boundaries: a sympathetic report about *Mídia NINJA* published by *The Guardian*²⁵ helped the media collective to gain

¹⁸ Cammaerts, B. (2018). *The circulation of anti-austerity protest*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁹ Morgans, 2018.

²⁰ Cammaerts, B., Mattoni, A., and McCurdy, P. (2013). Introduction: Mediation and protest movements. In *Mediation and protest movements* (3–19). Bristol: Intellect Books.

²¹ Cottle, S. (2011). Media and the Arab uprisings of 2011: Research notes. *Journalism*, 12(5). 652.

²² Cardoso, G., Lapa, T., and Fátima, B. Di. (2016). People are the Message? Social Mobilization and Social Media in Brazil. *International Journal of Communication*, 10(0), 22.

²³ Becker, V., & Alves, K. (2015). Análise da queda da audiência do Jornal Nacional e os impactos no telejornalismo. *Comunicação & Inovação*, 16(32), 87–102.

²⁴ Spuldar, R. (2013, August 13). Brazil's Mídia Ninja covers demonstrations from the inside. *Index on Censorship*.

²⁵ Watts, J. (2013, August 29). Brazil's ninja reporters spread stories from the streets. *The Guardian*.

validation within Brazil. Hence, accounts of a struggle between different kinds of media risks failing to acknowledge that the media are actually a hybrid, with content circulating through interconnected media technologies and organisations²⁶.

2) Digital media remain vulnerable to ‘old’ pressures.

It is true that the use of digital technologies challenged traditional media during the protests in Brazil, not only in terms of producing opposing content, but also in altering how established journalists covered the demonstrations. Brazilian and foreign reporters noted that they had to pay attention both to the streets and to social media. As one of them told me:

‘Social media were like a thermometer. It was really important to monitor what people were saying, what was happening, what was being planned, because there was no central leadership; there wasn’t a group that you could talk to, to know what would be the next step, what is being planned after this big protest. We always had to resort to Facebook because that’s where the events were created, and people started responding, accepting or declining them’.

However, the notion that digital media were a game-changer seems unrealistic given that many of the same ‘old’ commercial, organisational and institutional pressures are still prevalent. A few months after the protests had lessened, *Mídia NINJA* was severely criticised by the Brazilian media and other bloggers after a live streamed interview with the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, in which they were felt to have been too sympathetic toward the politician²⁷. As Rafael Vilela, a member of *Mídia NINJA*, told me, their mistake was to use the format of a print interview to conduct what was more akin to a televised discussion. The more conciliatory style apparently did not fit with the conventions of live streaming, which call for drama and confrontation²⁸.

Similarly, digital platforms are apparently less constrained, in terms of time and space, than newspapers, television or radio. Indeed, many of the Brazilian and foreign reporters that I spoke with complained about the difficulty of narrating nuanced accounts of the demonstrations because of those limitations. New technologies might be thought of as facilitating more detailed coverage. In fact, some analyses praised the live streaming and lack of editing carried out by alternative media collectives precisely for those reasons²⁹. That impression is deceptive. Members of these collectives held that online live streaming

²⁶ Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁷ Mazotte, N. (2013). *Mídia NINJA: an alternative journalism phenomenon that emerged from the protests in Brazil*. Retrieved from <https://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/00-14204-midia-ninja-alternative-journalism-phenomenon-emerged-protests-brazil>

²⁸ Taylor, P.M. (1997). *Global communications, international affairs and the media since 1945*. London: Routledge

²⁹ Conde and Jazeel, 2013.

contributed to simplifying accounts about the demonstrations. As Rui Harayama, anthropologist and collaborator of *Coletivo Carranca*, admitted:

‘I don’t like doing streaming, because there is a moment when you have nothing else to say. You keep on talking about what is happening right at the moment, but you are incapable of doing any analysis.’

Rui’s observations about the shortcomings of live coverage are telling, as it prompts the questioning of how much new technologies have actually altered the nature of reporting protests. His experience was strikingly similar to an episode recalled by a television journalist who had taken part in a live broadcast of a protest outside a football stadium in late June 2013. Despite being a kilometre away from the venue, in an area under police surveillance, she reported being just outside the stadium, giving the impression that the demonstrations were next to the venue. In hindsight, she admitted that the technological limitations of live reporting prevented her from giving a more nuanced account:

‘If I’m in the middle of tear gas I’m not going to explain, oh, you know, this started in the city square and there were thousands of people. You’re just explaining what’s happening and you’re trying not to get hurt.’

Hence, despite techno-optimistic views that praise digital media for apparently empowering citizens, broadening the spectrum of accounts shown in the media and even introducing different practices to those followed by ‘traditional’ or ‘mainstream’ media, ‘new’ technologies may sometimes replicate or amplify some of the same drawbacks of ‘old’ technologies like newspapers, radio and television.

3) Digital media may disrupt those disrupting.

Earlier analyses have stressed how new communication technologies may contest and disrupt those in power. In part, this is said to be due to an increase in the number of voices and images circulating in the media sphere, the critical mass of which can serve to undermine, parody or erase the authoritative monopoly once enjoyed by governments and media organisations in the production of content³⁰. More recently, however, various studies have observed that governments, corporations and other groups are able to strike back and use digital media against activists or radical movements³¹.

A good example is the experience of Carla Dauden, a Brazilian filmmaker based in the United States, whose video ‘No, I’m not going to the World Cup’ went viral during the protests. In the video, she criticised the decision to host the

³⁰ Dayan, D. (2013). Conquering visibility, conferring visibility: Visibility seekers and media performance. *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 137–153; Taylor, 1997; Thompson, J.B. (2005). The new visibility. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(6), 31–51.

³¹ Uldam, J. (2018). Social media visibility: Challenges to activism. *Media, Culture and Society*, 40(1), 41–58.

event at the expense of investing in public education and healthcare. Although the video reached 2.5 million views in less than a week and influenced discussions among activists and the mainstream media³², it soon became the target of criticism. Discussions in other blogs and forums accused the video of being fraudulent and some even personally attacked its creator³³. As Carla later told me, she reacted with a mixture of surprise and fear, and ended up deleting all personal information from her website and social media accounts. In addition, she sent a note to a Brazilian magazine dismissing conservative or right-wing interpretations of her video, stating that she was only a filmmaker voicing her opinion, and that she did not support either an impeachment of then-President Dilma Rousseff or calls to alter the rule of law³⁴.

This episode illustrates one of the dilemmas inherent in digital media. On the one hand, communication technologies represent a source of opportunities for people like Carla Dauden or the members of *Mídia NINJA*, who, with limited resources, were able to share content with wide audiences, sometimes even beyond the boundaries of Brazil, as well as challenging (to some extent) the accounts of established media organisations. On the other hand, the very same technologies facilitated a state of *fragility*³⁵, in which content could be twisted or manipulated, and those producing them could be attacked. As Carla summarised:

‘Once [content] is on the Internet, it is like a black hole and you cannot control it anymore [...] Once it is out there, you are so vulnerable, so exposed. It is a good thing, but it is also scary’.

The ambivalence expressed by Carla Dauden reflects broader shifts in attitudes towards digital media. In the wake of Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of populism in different settings, techno-optimistic views towards digital media have been replaced by scepticism and even fear. However, as some have noted³⁶, fear is not the most appropriate answer. Instead, a more measured perspective is preferable, one that questions ideas of ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ media, and which acknowledges that new technologies have effectively altered the manner in which protest and disruption are communicated, while at the same time recognising that ‘new’ media remains vulnerable to ‘old’ organisational, institutional and economic pressures.

³² Tognazzi, M. (2014). A força das redes sociais. In R. Figueiredo (Ed.), Junho de 2013: A sociedade enfrenta o Estado (73–86). São Paulo: Summus Editorial.

³³ ‘No, I’m not going to the world cup’ – A desconstrução de uma fraude. (2013).

Retrieved from <https://cbjm.wordpress.com/2013/06/24/no-im-not-going-to-the-world-cup-a-desconstrucao-de-uma-fraude/>

³⁴ De Aquino, R. (2013, June 20). Carla Dauden: ‘Tem gente dizendo que eu trabalho para a CIA!’ *Época*.

³⁵ Cammaerts, et al., 2013; Thompson, 2005.

³⁶ Elkus, A. (2016, January 8). 2015: The Year That Techno-Optimism Broke. *Medium*.