

The Changing Face of Technology Use in Pacified Communities

Graham Denyer Willis, Robert Muggah, Justin Kossyln and Felipe Leusin



An increasing number of Rio de Janeiro's favelas are confronting two simultaneous pressures for change. The introduction of new technologies and the strategy of police pacification are colliding in tangible ways, forming new centers of power and reinforcing others. And this is occurring in an environment marked by escalating suspicion and general mistrust of the police. This *Strategic Note* is the second of a series and analyzes some of the emerging patterns of information technology use in low-income areas, specifically in relation to resident responses to insecurity and violence. It is possible to detect the rise of 'technology brokers' who are curating information. Even so, there is some evidence that the spread of technology is also exacerbating existing anxieties about the preservation of anonymity, particularly when it comes to the sharing of sensitive information.

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Rio de Janeiro is presently undergoing major technological and social transformations. On the one hand, information technology and connectivity is penetrating deeper into communities historically characterized as poor and marginal. Smartphones, personal computers, laptops, inexpensive netbooks, and, increasingly, 3G enabled tablets, are rapidly becoming ubiquitous among the lower working classes.² Now, more than ever, urban residents are connected and able to benefit from the information and communication that the internet enables (see Willis et al 2013).

Meanwhile, Rio de Janeiro is also undergoing a major change in the policing of its lower-income areas, or favelas.³ The Police Pacification Units (*Unidades de Policia Pacificadora, or UPP*), are driving the second major transformation.⁴ The UPP project is designed to undermine the authority and capacity of armed criminal groups from many of the favelas that they have controlled since the early 1990s. In place of criminal governance, the UPP introduces a new police institution focusing on 'proximity policing' that aims to decrease the distance – spatial, social, and psychological - between citizens and the state.⁵

The removal of drug trafficking groups and the insertion of a community-oriented police in favelas has been far from straight-forward. Criminal groups continue to exert considerable influence behind the scenes, making the work of police difficult and manifesting itself in the reticence of citizens to redirect their allegiances. Local institutions, such as residents associations, have long served as mediators between citizens and those holding the guns.⁶ But UPP police and many citizens are often mistrustful of their residents association and the new police because they fear retribution. The widespread lack of trust – in police, in drug traffickers, in residents associations – threatens to undermine the UPP experiment.

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2 See <http://www.ebc.com.br/noticias/brasil/2013/04/mais-de-90-de-cinco-favelas-do-rio-tem-acesso-a-internet>.

3 In Brazil, poor communities are often associated with the term *favela* – informally built communities that have existed for decades outside of the realm of urban planning and state policy. For decades, most favela communities have suffered with violence, orchestrated through the openly armed control of drug trafficking organizations who truculently imposed their will on residents.

4 The UPP project is officially defined by two government decrees – 'Decretos'. This first, (Decreto nº 41.650, January 21st, 2009) is broad and somewhat vague. The second (nº. 42.787 of January 6th, 2011) carves out a place for the UPP police and its model of 'proximity' policing within the institutional and operational structure of the PMERJ.

5 See http://blogs.iadb.org/sinmiedos/2013/11/18/whither-rio-de-janeiros-police-pacification-units/?fb_action_ids=10153494628895285&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582.

6 See Perlman (1979).

This *Strategic Note* assesses the confluence of these two major transformations at the community level. Drawing from interviews and fieldwork in a selection of four favelas where UPPs have been installed, it examines how new technologies are alternately reshaping and consolidating how citizens cope and communicate in settings characterized by real and potential insecurity. It shows how shifting patterns of governance – between drug trafficking groups, police and other community bodies – is influenced by new forms and applications of technology. In the process, the Note finds that

- Social media use – Facebook in particular – is widespread among young people, and increasingly used among non-digital natives.
- In terms of violence and violence prevention, technology is both forging new lines of communication and strengthen old ones; and
- Technology and new forms of communication can provide an additional layer of anonymity allowing citizens to short circuit traditional patterns of governance and authority

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This Strategic Note was prepared in the context of the smart policing project. The smart policing initiative is a two-year process designed to mobilize technology to improve accountability and oversight over police. As such, the Note draws on data collected during community visits undertaken between January and March 2013 in four favelas where UPPs have been installed – Rocinha, Mangueira, Complexo do São Carlos, and Batan. These four favelas are to some extent representative of the considerable heterogeneity of communities where UPPs have been established, not least in relation to their geography, population, density, income, and other characteristics.

Figure 1. Basic Characteristics of Four UPP Communities

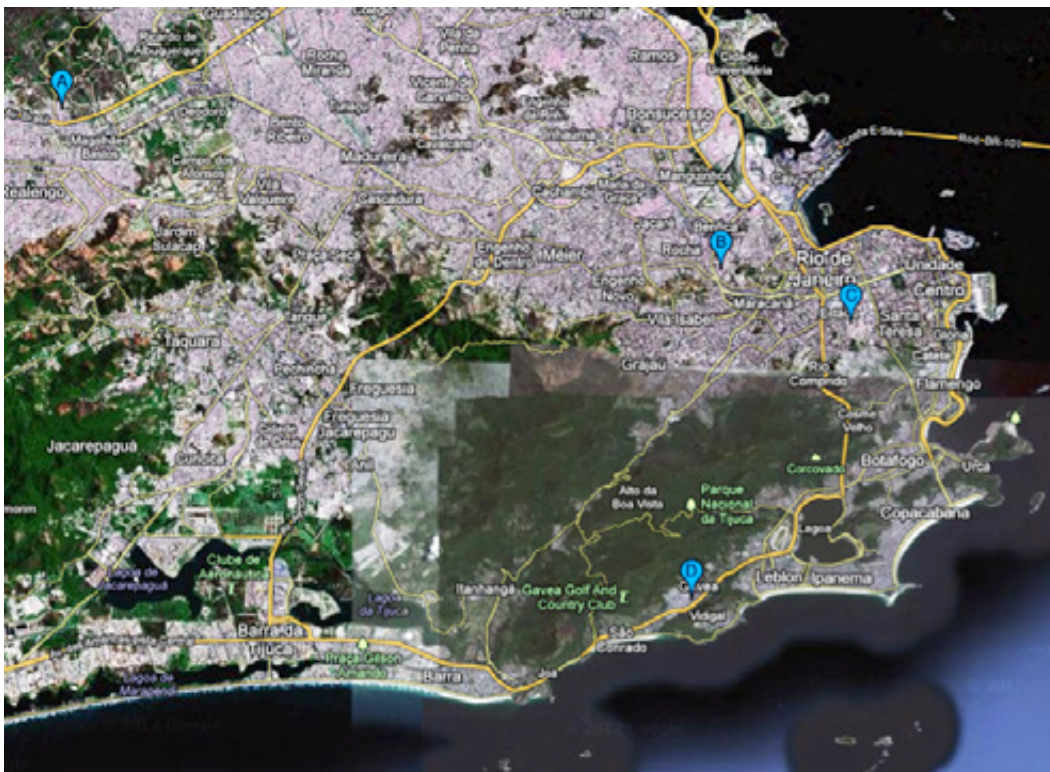
	Rocinha	Mangueira	Batan	São Carlos
Population	69,161	20,353	17,915	15,244
Former Armed Group	Amigos dos Amigos	Comando Vermelho	Militia (Amigos dos Amigos previous)	Amigos dos Amigos
UPP Inaugurated	2012	2011	2009	2011
Geography	Steep Hillside	Steep Hillside	Flat	Moderate Hillside
Median Household Income	USD \$605	USD \$446	USD \$222	USD \$750
Population Density /hectare	815.9	417.6	166.4	394.5
Percent Own/Rent	62/37	83/15	78/15	80/18
Percent Aged 15-29	32	27	26	27

Source: http://www.upprj.com/upload/estudo_publicacao/Diagnostico_Socio_Economico_Comunidades_com_UPP.pdf

Field research consisted of interviews with a combination of residents, community associations, NGOs, police and other actors. The broad research objectives were to examine three aspects of technology related to:

1. how technology is used across different demographic groups;
2. what kinds of devices and media people are using to access the web, and;
3. how people use technology during events or moments of insecurity or violence, especially when seeking to make claims against or by way of appeal of the state. The authors also drew on a range of other studies recently undertaken on connectivity in low-income settings in Brazil.

Figure 2. Geographic Location of the Four UPP Communities



DISPUTE RESOLUTION PRE-UPP

For decades, residents of favelas have been subordinated to the rule of drug trafficking regimes.⁷ A key locus in this system of governance has been local residents associations. Many of these associations have struggled to represent the interest of residents by serving as mediators between gangs, police and politicians.⁸ Residents associations have been indispensable institutions in terms of ensuring safety and minimizing the incidence of conflict. They are central to reconciling difference across a spectrum of local concerns that include everything from land tenure disputes to business fairness and sewage and garbage disposal. While subjected to a range of patronage networks, they have nevertheless played the role of negotiator, demanding new services in exchange for the votes of residents.⁹ In addition, these associations have served as vital safety nets, often providing food, basic jobs and other essential

⁷ See Leeds (1996), Penglase (2005), and Perlman (2010).

⁸ See Gay (1994) and Arias (2006).

⁹ See Gay (1990).

services to residents. In other words, in the absence of regular and predictable public goods, residents associations have served as the carer and caretaker of last resort.

The relationship between residents associations and drug traffickers is, of course, tenuous and complex. Some resident association leaders, who are themselves elected by direct vote, have been perceived as puppets of drug trafficking groups, advancing the interests of gangs and the expense of the community. For this reason, police have often considered the offices and people working in residents associations as ‘fronts’ for illicit activities. By contrast, some leaders who have been too outspoken have also been expelled and told never to return, or killed by traffickers. Resident associations and their leaders have always struggled to strike a balance between these competing interests.

Residents associations have served, almost uniquely, as the primary conduit for residents to provide anonymous feedback to those who were once in charge – namely the drug traffickers. When disputes flared-up, particularly incidents involving petty theft or crime, residents could turn to their residents association for a solution. Associations would commonly convene a meeting to resolve the problem, bringing key parties together. In cases of severe violence – including sexual violence and homicide – drugs traffickers would often be involved in meting out punishment.¹⁰ How residents resolved cases of violence typically involved one or both of these two actors – the residents association for mediation, and the drug traffickers for punishment.

RESOLVING TENSIONS POST-UPP

This system of governance in favelas and, in particular the dispensing of punishment, is rapidly changing. And this is not surprising. The expulsion of drug trafficking groups by the UPPs was explicitly focused on disrupting the historical patterns of criminal governance. The UPP police initiative seeks to bring police as close to citizens as citizens were to drug traffickers during the latter’s years of dominance. Walking down the street, police seek be more visible than drug traffickers had been in previous times. The constant presence of the police, and the physical proximity with residents that comes with it, is intended to foster a dynamic (it is hoped) in which citizens actively seek out police in order to resolve their problems collectively.¹¹ This represents a dramatic departure from previous police methods, which tended to emphasize qualified repression.¹²

The UPP have also deployed a number of additional strategies to expand their legitimacy and contact with communities. For example, the UPP recently introduced alternative dispute mechanisms that mimic the work of residents associations. These dispute mechanisms, which are administered by UPP police trained in conflict mediation, seek to provide residents with a means to resolve their non-criminal problems without needing to use traditional methods or channels of authority.¹³ What is more, the UPP have also expanded their public outreach in communities, including through the sponsoring of youth activities, working with women’s groups, recreation for young and elderly residents, and a host of other activities.

¹⁰ See Arias and Rodrigues (2006).

¹¹ See http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2013/03/15/000333037_20130315115010/Rendered/PDF/760110ESW0P12300Rio0de0Janeiro02013.pdf.

¹² See Muggah and Mulli (2012).

¹³ See Santos (1977) and http://infosurhoy.com/en_GB/articles/saii/features/main/2012/08/23/feature-02.

A central challenge, however, relates to who residents feel they can trust. When residents are confronted by violence and feel compelled to report on specific incidents, the choice of who to turn to is no longer obvious. Their decision is clearly shaped by who will be the most responsive and whether or not they will be guaranteed any degree of anonymity. And since it is not clear whether UPPs will last beyond 2016, there are signs that community residents are still undecided. They fear that if they develop too tight a connection with the UPP (as opposed to the residents associations) they may face severe punishment when the drug trafficking groups return. Many residents are not yet convinced that the police will sufficiently protect them and keep them safe from reprisals if they disclose information on the whereabouts of traffickers.

THE USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN UPP SITES

A key question, then, relates to the role and influence of new technologies in the midst of this contested space occupied by UPPs. This *Strategic Note* considers the extent of penetration of ICTs in communities with newly-installed UPP. It also considers the extent to which these new technologies are altering how people respond to and report on violence and victimization. A number of key trends emerge and are summarized below.

Major Increases in Internet Access

Internet access is now virtually ubiquitous in the four communities examined during this assessment. Almost all respondents indicated that they had personal internet access at home, either on a desktop or a laptop. Most communities used to have functioning LAN Houses, though many have been shuttered. Their demise can be attributed to two factors. First, there is a declining market for internet cafes owing to the rise of personal computing.¹⁴ Second, many of these businesses were not legitimately registered or legally connected to the internet, and were closed by the UPP. Of the four communities, only Batan –the poorest of the four – still has multiple LAN houses located in key business areas.

Although internet is common at home, it is less commonly accessed by smartphones. Indeed, inexpensive tablets and laptops are proving to be more efficient ways of allowing low-income residents to access the web. This is because such devices are often shared. Smartphones remain expensive and out of reach when compared to tablets and Brazilian made laptops. In addition, contract-based cell phone and data plans – which are cheaper than pre-paid plans – nevertheless remain prohibitive for many residents. This is particularly true among underemployed youth who want a smartphone but do not have regular and reliable incomes. Income continues to be a major factor in shaping Rio de Janeiro's digital divide.¹⁵

¹⁴ Widespread access to the internet was also reflected in the near unanimity of respondents who had, and used, email addresses.

¹⁵ Those who did register having a smartphone reported spotty cell network reception, even for simple conversations. As a preliminary test during field visits Igarape Institute researchers noted how often their respective smartphones maintained reception. One researcher used the Vivo network, while another used TIM. In places like Sao Carlos and Rocinha, the Vivo network maintained connectivity, even in impenetrable alleyways. By contrast, the researcher with TIM often failed to get reception. Vivo is a more expensive service provider than its competitors.

It is worth noting that almost all community organizations and residents associations featured access to the internet in their offices. But a clear distinction could be made between organizations run by more mature leaders and those with younger staff in prominent or leadership positions. Those with young personnel typically maintained a more impressive web presence – including websites, Facebook pages, and, somewhat more rarely, a Twitter account. All testified to using email as one of the primary means of communication. Some checked it only seldomly while others were connected repeatedly throughout the day.



Phone and electricity cables in a lower-income community in Rio.

Photo: Justin Kosslyn

Growing Use of Web-based Applications

Facebook was by far the most popular social networking application used by respondents in all four communities visited by Igarapé researchers. This was true even among those people who said they did not have internet access at home. Some key informants reported that Facebook superseded an email address in importance. Facebook has replaced previously popular applications – Orkut, MSN Messenger – seamlessly since it is not just a social network, but also features chat and video chat functions. These latter functions are especially popular among young people, whom many parents reported of harboring an ‘addiction’.

The use of Facebook was also the primary web application for respondents relying on smartphones and desktop computers. It served to connect people both within the communities as well as with people outside of them. With the exception of Batan, all of the Residents Associations had set-up Facebook pages in which they share news and information. Subscription to these pages ranges from modest (Mangueira 8 ‘likes’) to large (Rocinha’s Upmmr, 3,810 friends), though its use is also clearly a function of the size of the constituency. It is worth also noting that the UPP also maintain Facebook pages, though these vary in terms of content and activity.

At the moment, Facebook is not being used as a tool by community members to report incidents of violence and victimization. When questioned, few individual residents claimed to use the internet to send requests to the government, such as by seeking out information related to state services such as the police. Indeed, many described using it for basic communication with associates, friends and family. Some younger residents reported using web browsers to search for information in the course of homework. By way of contrast, a growing number of NGOs and Residents Associations did use the net to express grievances – mostly in response to queries from residents about deficiencies of services.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO PREVENT VIOLENCE

There is growing evidence of the ways in which citizens and police across Latin America are turning to technology to help prevent violence.¹⁶ A question, then, is whether such tools have been applied with success in Rio de Janeiro. Indeed, is the increasingly prominent resort to new technology reshaping the ways in which people in UPP-sites are responding to violence? Owing to the decentralizing pressures of information technologies and online social networks, it stands to reason that citizens should be able to share information more freely. New forms of social organization are made possible by citizens who connect to one another directly, quickly and quietly.

In communities where UPPs are installed, this also appears to be the case. Residents share much on line. But there are also clear limits. Further investigation suggests that when it comes to reporting on violence or violence entrepreneurs, residents regularly self-censor due to fear of reprisal. Residents spoke of choosing either not to post certain details online because these could be seen by anyone, or to sharing only when they could be sure that the person at the other end of the line is the very person they believe they are speaking with. There is concern that police or drug traffickers will see or hear about these online comments. As a result of these reservations and concerns, a number of fascinating adaptations have been pursued by residents.

It is important to recall that the network of friends and acquaintances that people create on Facebook is built to a large extent on previously existing circles of friendship and association. Facebook to a large extent replicates the interpersonal social relations that exist between people physically.¹⁷ Indeed Facebook and other platforms that sustain relationships online carry with them many of the same norms, expectations and consequences as those in the real world. Just as residents are fearful of being labeled as gossipers (*fofoqueiros*), people maintain these same expectations in a cyberspace. Many residents were still not at all convinced that the internet offered them any serious level of anonymity. And to a large extent, these reservations are not unfounded.

Not surprisingly, citizens tend to resort to older means of communicating concerns about victimization. Discussions of specific incidents, perpetrators and related outcomes are still pursued in closed and protected forums. Even though people post impressions and comments online with greater regularity, residents fear that their comments can leave them vulnerable, and that they could eventually face the wrath of police or traffickers. In these communities the exchange of sensitive information typically still takes place in a safe physical place where all individuals are trusted.

¹⁶ See Muggah and Diniz (2013) and <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/nov/10/latin-america-crime-smartphones-social-media>.

¹⁷ See Burkhardt and Brass (1990).



Newly wired communities in Rocinha

Photo: Justin Kosslyn

Suspensions run deep. Residents reported that in sensitive situations even telephones are avoided for fear that lines can be tapped or there are unknown people listening at the other end. One powerful truth continues to resonate - if you cross someone powerful online or in person, the consequences are equally severe.

When it comes to reporting on violence, there is a widespread preoccupation with anonymity. This extends to anonymity from their fellow residents, police and drug traffickers. Although residents use Facebook regularly, most residents do not sufficiently trust the infrastructure or messaging functions to transmit sensitive information in a secure manner. In this particularly contentious time of UPP implementation and drug trafficker resistance, there are doubts that information is secure at all. Passwords can be shared, data can be hacked and email can, in the 'right' (or wrong) circumstances, be opened by anyone.¹⁸

Many residents expressed worry that they do not know who will be opening and viewing their electronic communication. Few people are believed to be impartial, and association with UPP police or the drug traffickers can have real physical and reputational consequences. As a result, people generally, and people 25 and older in particular, avoid talking about subjects related to violence and public security online. Justified or not, some residents fear that even filming the police - and not necessarily posting it to an online forum - could lead to violent reprisals.

The news is not all bad, however. Indeed, Igarape-led research reveals a number of important trends emerging in the ways that people share information about violence within UPP communities. In particular, young people and those who have taken an interest in technology appear to be more likely to share photos and videos of specific incidents. It

¹⁸ Reflected or not in the security of online communications, the perception that Facebook and other applications can be 'hacked' is pervasive, serving as a powerful disincentive to bring sensitive conversations online.

is this demographic segment of the population that is increasingly providing information to newly centralized curators - local 'technology brokers' – whether prominent websites, blogs or popular Facebook communities. In other words, the times are changing.

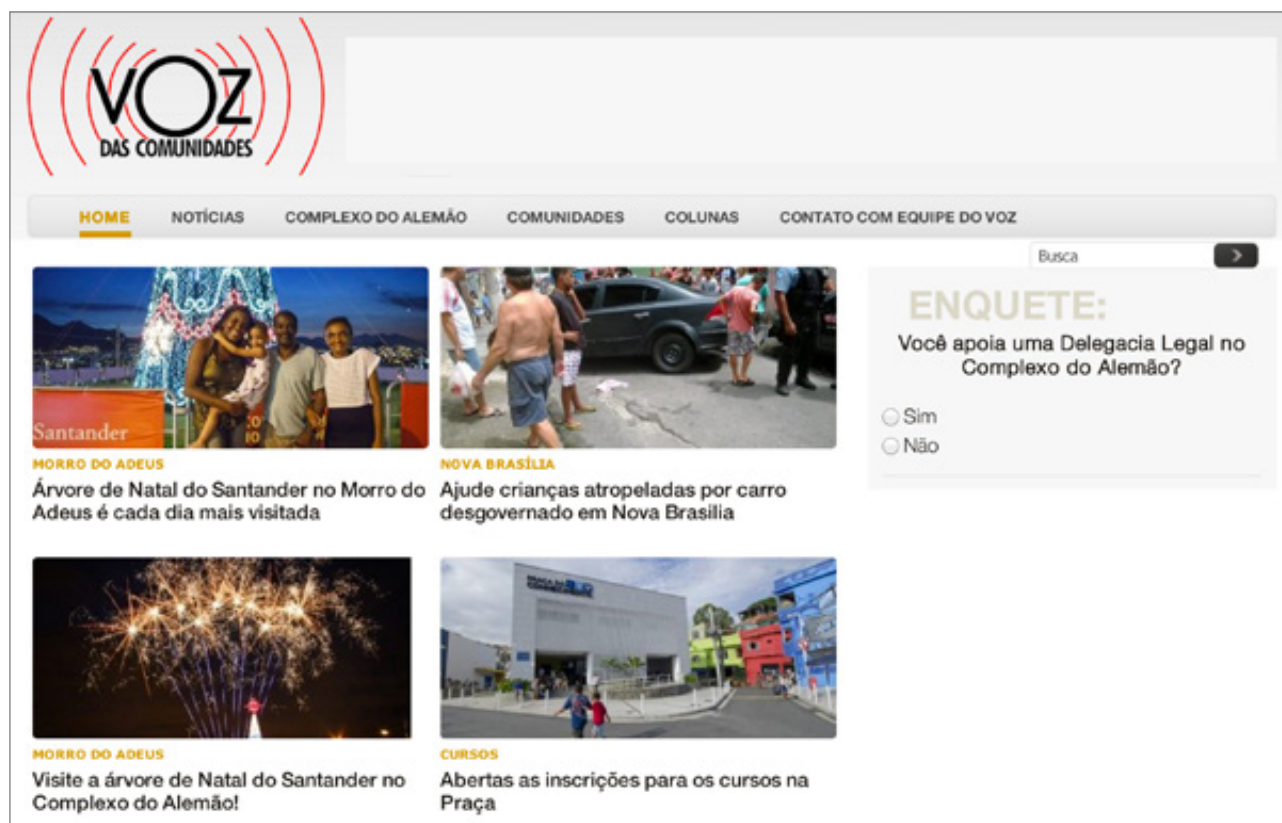
Figure 3. Facebook Page of FaveladaRocinha.com



In Rocinha and other favelas, these technology brokers are emerging as new trusted sources information diffusion. These brokers include people that operate blogs or websites that share news and information about the community. Such sites of information have managed to build the trust of locals who contribute stories and reports about crime. Technology brokers take crime reports or other information that is emailed, Facebook messaged or Tweeted to them, and post it on a central website, blog or other platform without providing the identity of the contributor. In this way the technology broker serves as a conduit for community-based information to be broadcast on the internet, giving the reporter a degree of distance from the event. In this manner, complaints about police are aired with greater anonymity and chance of reprisal, as are reports about drug trafficking.

These brokers also play a key role in gathering and distilling content from Twitter and Facebook and reposting it for a much broader audience. Videos of alleged police abuse of force, for example, have become broadly publicized because of the role of recognized broker. Whereas previously residents would talk in hushed tones about violence or would consult the Resident's Association for a resolution, this new channel of information serves as a loudspeaker for decentralized and eminently relevant community news. Brokers can connected to previously existing organizations or entirely new networks, including those developed in the wake of major events. In Rocinha, for example, the pacification process was well documented by one young man who tweeted the events live and photographed the advancing police. His list of online followers exploded, leading to the creation of a news website – *faveladarocinha.com* - that today serves as a vital and trusted source of community information. Other examples are common, such as *Voz da Comunidade* in Complexo do Alemão.

Figure 4. Website of “The Community Voice”



CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

While they hold promise, the technological and policing transformations currently underway in Rio de Janeiro are not necessarily guaranteed to improve state-society relations. Access to the internet is widespread and residents of communities where UPPs are established are engaging with one another in ever more creative ways. Yet it is important to recall that digital social networks replicate real world social relations, carrying with them the same consequences and problems. These are important considerations when exploring ways in which new technologies can potentially make communities safer.

Even so, there are signs of the emergence of young internet savvy residents who are emerging as technology brokers in some favelas. These brokers can serve as diffusers of local information *and* as anonymizers of the identity of information providers. Residents are starting to become aware of the fact that with the help of the broker, they can potentially send an SMS, email, a Facebook message or a tweet about violence without undue fear of reprisals for speaking out. This pattern of information centralization, and the possibility of connecting brokers directly with the UPPs may prove to be an important and innovative new conduit.

Still, new forms of anonymity that are emerging between the traditional forms of power is a promising sign. Residents increasingly have new channels for voicing their concerns about violence, without having to go to police, to their residents association or to the drug traffickers. Though still very much in formation (and flux), these new brokers of information and anonymity can potentially play an important role for residents who wish to make claims on the police and the state in a medium that is both trusted and recognized as valuable.

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