Transforming informal communities through discourse intervention: RioOnWatch, favelas and the 2016 Olympic Games

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Mega-events like the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup transform cities. These transformations are a conscious aim of hosting such events, hailed by organisers and politicians as lasting legacies for the benefit of the population. Mounting evidence suggests, however, that such events serve to harm local populations, deepening inequality and marginalisation with most positive impacts proving ephemeral (Boykoff 2013). Despite this, media coverage of such events tends to marginalise critical voices (Boykoff 2014; Lenskyj 2004), instead encouraging the celebration of national pride. These events, as Horne (2017) argues, are mediated spectacles of transformation, promoting an often-idealised image of the host city or country on the global stage. Yet this mediated image is contested, with those excluded from the event using alternative media to promote different understandings of what the city could be. This chapter focusses on one group of activists seeking to challenge the idealised image of Rio de Janeiro presented at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, which sought to exclude the (in)famous favelas from the vision of the city.

Rio Olympic Neighbourhood Watch (RioOnWatch) is a media project of the Rio de Janeiro-based NGO Catalytic Communities (CatComm). It provides a platform for news and discussion about development in the Olympic city from the perspective of favela residents, publishing in both English and Portuguese. Initiated in 2010, eight months after Rio won the right to host the 2016 Olympic Games, the news site published over 1,500 interlinked articles in two languages over six years, detailing every twist and turn in the preparations for Rio 2016. This chapter analyses one aspect of RioOnWatch's work as a discourse intervention to improve policies for Rio's favela communities by transforming the discourse which legitimises state violence in informal communities. Through shifting the discourse, RioOnWatch aimed to leave a lasting legacy of diminished state violence in favelas. The chapter starts with an explanation of how the site operates and the various missions of the site before introducing the concept of discourse intervention, and examining CatComm's attempt to change the discourse around favelas in the Olympic spotlight.

RioOnWatch

RioOnWatch is run by the CatComm team, which remains small and loose, with just five paid members of staff. Several different types of material are produced for the site from event reports and Q&A interviews to photo essays and book reviews. These features range from five hundred words to well over a thousand words, as well as providing different types of information in different styles, with all articles required to focus on favela perspectives, frequently quoting residents. This diversity is part of a deliberate attempt to attract readers with different interests and different reading habits, while focussing on the site's core mission by foregrounding favela perspectives.

The majority of articles are written by interns, mostly young Westerners on study abroad programmes in Rio de Janeiro or recent graduates looking for international experience in urban planning issues, but also including Masters and doctoral students and those with an interest in Brazilian development. These are termed 'International Observers', following activists who protested against the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics also using International Observers. Interns, in most cases, are committed to the project for a three-month period and complete a project designed around their skills and interests, in a particular community or on a particular subject that is deemed in need of coverage by the CatComm team (via regular input from favela residents). Interns also regularly respond to requests for coverage made by community leaders, including reporting on human rights violations, community meetings and cultural events. Researchers in Rio de Janeiro for

fieldwork also collaborate with RioOnWatch, attending weekly meetings and writing longer, research pieces for the site. Volunteers contribute on a more ad hoc basis, writing articles when they can with little obligation.

Finally, critical to RioOnWatch's coverage, CatComm receives regular contributions from a team of favela-based journalists and leaders in key locations citywide. Community pieces come in three forms—freely submitted pieces in response to topics community members or the correspondents themselves would like to see reported, particularly internationally, including opinion pieces; solicited pieces by the CatComm team in response to current events reported in the mainstream media where favela perspectives tend to be marginalised (for example the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff); and solicited pieces by the CatComm team around topics deemed in need of debate and depth (for example the impacts of favela stigma). These are the only articles remunerated by CatComm: those produced by community members solely for RioOnWatch. A team of translators translates the articles produced by all these contributors to maintain both Portuguese and English versions of the site with the same content, as well as translating important articles from Brazilian media into English (and occasionally vice-versa).

With the organisation currently staffed mainly by *gringos*, as westerners are known in Brazil, a superficial observer could argue that RioOnWatch is patronising or even neo-colonialist. The unpaid internship model, by which the most involved volunteers contribute, is a three-month project on a specific area, which is not well suited to Cariocas who continue to live in the city and have no reason to end their volunteering. Further, Brazilian university internship requirements follow a government-sanctioned office model including mandatory pay. CatComm recruits international interns by delivering lectures at universities in the United States, furthering the propensity for gringos over cariocas, and limited resources mean articles by community journalists are restricted. That said, what distinguishes RioOnWatch from other independent media in Rio is the bilingual publication of articles – things are written in English for foreigners who don't necessarily know Rio. In this, having outsiders write is valuable for the different perspective they bring, as they pick up on different issues and are arguably better placed to explain the issues to those unfamiliar with Rio.

Such critiques of colonialism are common when privileged Westerners do charitable work in the Global South (see Forde 2015). However, as Sugden (2010) explains, the problematic nature of this form of volunteering should be considered alongside the progress organisations like RioOnWatch achieve in development: in short, by refusing to work with Western volunteers, RioOnWatch would have accomplished very little. Taking this pragmatic approach, several key elements of RioOnWatch's operation seek to ensure the organisation works for the benefit of favela residents. Throughout the process of strategic planning, editors are in constant dialogue with community leaders in favelas to identify issues to cover. Often, residents ask for coverage for their events, and RioOnWatch staff pass these requests to interns at weekly meetings, asking volunteers to cover these events. CatComm's founder and executive director Theresa Williamson, who is half-Brazilian, and her co-director (a Carioca) talk frequently about the importance of the networks of trust between RioOnWatch and favela residents, calling it the organisation's greatest asset.

Mission

RioOnWatch aims "to bring visibility to favela community voices in the lead-up to the 2016 Olympics" (RioOnWatch 2017), specifically to the international audience which is accessed through publishing in English. This fits into the wider strategy of CatComm, which advocates for favelas with the aim of "improving the quality of life for all Rio de Janeiro residents by driving a more creative, inclusive and empowering integration between the city's informal and formal communities"

(CatComm 2015a). For Williamson, the role of RioOnWatch has evolved organically since the project's inception as a news site for favela perspectives. Three principal missions for the site have evolved: detailed documentation of development over the period leading up to the Olympic Games, facilitating media access and coverage of Rio de Janeiro's favela communities, and to steer debates about development in the Olympic city. Each of these missions builds on the previous one, although this is not to say that the initial objective has diminished in importance, but the project has expanded to include new missions.

The founding mission of RioOnWatch is the documentation of events and development in favelas during the build up to the Olympic Games. Their documentation is a first step towards greater visibility and understanding of the problems of Olympic developments from favela perspectives. Documentation, particularly of human rights abuses can "play a key role in rebuilding civil institutions, in formulating movements for reparation and restitution, and in advancing the international human rights agenda" (Hesford 2004:105). In CatComm's previous work, Williamson found that "a favela that had a web presence was treated better [by the state] than a favela that didn't". In its early days, RioOnWatch served to simply indicate where favelas were (a complex challenge, given the estimated 1,000 communities dotted around Rio) and document changes to the informal city. As technology has developed and communities have organised their own web presence through social media, it became less important to profile each community. RioOnWatch continues to profile specific cases where additional attention hold the potential for change. For example, when demolitions began in Largo do Tanque, RioOnWatch took a *CNN* photographer to the favela – over the course of just one day, compensation offered to residents increased from R$7,000 (£1,700) to $45,000 (£12,000) according to Williamson.

From this documentation, the team quickly found that RioOnWatch was being used as a source by journalists covering Rio de Janeiro. As the site began to provide more comprehensive coverage, mainstream media organisations began using the site to keep track of events affecting favelas in Rio de Janeiro, as well as providing space for RioOnWatch's voice in the mainstream press, including an op-ed by Williamson and community photographer Maurício Hora in the *New York Times* (Williamson and Hora 2012). As such, while RioOnWatch's stories were not necessarily reaching a wide audience directly, the favela perspective RioOnWatch offered was used as a source by mainstream reporters, thus reaching a wider audience. A research project by CatComm, concurrent with RioOnWatch, tracked the changing discourse used by mainstream international press in reporting on favelas over several years and across a number of measures, including use of the words "slum" or "shanty-town" and the prevalence quotes from residents. This study found a significant improvement in reporting, moving away from the perception of favelas as dangerous, dirty and destitute neighbourhoods (CatComm 2016).

RioOnWatch has embraced this role in assisting the mainstream press. While this could be seen as competition for RioOnWatch's readership, for Williamsonit represents a positive collaboration, not a competitor taking ideas. This is an intentional, strategic approach to the relationship between RioOnWatch and the mainstream press, with this as one of the advantages of CatComm being a non-profit organisation: the important thing (from CatComm's perspective) is that the information reaches as wide an audience as possible. In this role, RioOnWatch facilitated contact between the international journalists and favela residents who had stories to tell, taking journalists to favelas and introducing them to residents, sometimes even translating interviews. They refined their approach from the World Cup for the Olympics, creating a package for journalists including background information and guided tours of favelas. From the experience of the World Cup and Olympics, CatComm learned that journalists are likely to reach out to them in the months leading up to the

event, but during the Games the journalists tended to focus on the event itself – this pattern is clear in research at previous mega-events (Horne and Whannel 2011; Steen 2012; Boykoff 2014). However, editors report that readership on the RioOnWatch site peaked during the World Cup and Olympics, suggesting the lack of mainstream coverage of urban issues during mega-events is not due to a lack of demand from readers.

In their role facilitating dissemination of favela perspectives, RioOnWatch saw an opportunity to advance the perspectives and narratives which met the strategic goals of CatComm – "driving a more creative, inclusive and empowering integration" between favelas and the rest of the city. This is possible due to the detailed nature of RioOnWatch's focus – the team will normally be around twenty people in Rio focussing on development from favela perspectives and discussing this as a group at a weekly meeting. While articles were generally guided by an editorial line emphasising bottom-up decision making and respect for housing rights, residents' voices were always the fundamental element of RioOnWatch's work, even if those voices clashed with this editorial perspective. For certain major events, such as the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, RioOnWatch commissioned a series of articles by community journalists seeking to promote different voices, fleshing out the diversity of opinions held by favela residents. Coupled with strong links to communities built up by CatComm during their work prior to RioOnWatch, this close engagement gives the team the ability to see debates emerging prior to the mainstream press, as many international news agencies are represented by a single reporter in Rio de Janeiro who may have responsibility for the entirety of Brazil or even Latin America.

This focussed knowledge allows RioOnWatch to be the first organisation to talk about certain issues, allowing them to start the debate on certain issues and thereby set the terms of reference for that debate. This is in part possible because the audience of RioOnWatch includes international journalists, as Williamson explains: "we have this audience now which includes both people in favelas and community organisers, the grassroots, and this international media, so it's these very hyperlocal and then global elements. Because we're in this position when we introduce something and they're both seeing it, we're basically introducing the lens as well". Williamson illustrates this by discussing gentrification of favelas:

> So with gentrification for example, by being the first to introduce it, we were also in a position to introduce the idea of collective land-titling, we were also in a position to introduce these concepts … that was probably the topic that the Brazilian media has most called us in on, so I've been on radio, TV, all sorts of things talking about gentrification of favelas. (Interview with AT 20/12/15)

Discourse Intervention

In the run up to the 2016 Olympic Games, favela communities experienced forced evictions (see Magalhães 2013) and pacification (see Rekow 2016). These policies can be viewed as two sides of the same coin – a coin the city uses to incorporate valuable land from the informal city into the real estate market. Forced evictions affected various communities in Rio de Janeiro, with 22,059 families (or 77,206 people) forcibly removed between 2009 and July 2015 (Comitê Popular da Copa e Olimpíadas do Rio de Janeiro 2015). By forcing evictions in favelas, the city government reclaims land which can be used by real estate developers to build condominiums for Brazil's expanding middle class. Those removed are often relocated to apartments in the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (My House, My Life) federal housing programme. However, some who moved there report that conditions are worse and costs of living, such as power and water, are considerably higher. Moving people from favelas to *Minha Casa Minha Vida* projects is justified by a conceptualisation of favelas

as dangerous slums where housing is inadequate, and thereby any alternative housing would be better.

The controversial pacification policy, under which favelas are occupied by the military police, also appears influenced by prejudiced perceptions of favelas. Pacification, in theory, makes communities safe and therefore increases property prices, and has been accused of being a catalyst for gentrification in communities such as Vidigal and Santa Marta (Froio 2015). Special police units, known as UPP's (Police Pacifying Unit) are installed as a permanent occupying force which patrols the favela armed with assault rifles, fingers on triggers. This has been controversial due to the military police's well-deserved reputation for brutality. 2,500 people were killed by police in the lead up to the Olympic Games, a figure which includes extrajudicial executions and children as young as two caught in the crossfire. On occasions when a member of the police is killed, it is common for the police to take revenge with a killing spree (Human Rights Watch 2015). As Williamson puts it:

> If you think favelas are violent by nature, you're going to think any policing is good policing. If you think favelas are precarious horrible places to live, then you're going to think any public housing is good housing. (Interview with AT 20/12/15)

RioOnWatch sought to change the discourse around favelas in an attempt to curb this violence of formalisation, particularly targeting international media reporting. They saw the attention brought to the city by the 2016 Olympic Games as an "unprecedented opportunity to straighten out the narrative on these neighbourhoods once and for all" (RioOnWatch 2016). RioOnWatch used the privileged position they had carved out for themselves as English-speaking experts on favelas to generate sympathetic press coverage of these communities in the media spotlight that the Olympics brought to Rio de Janeiro. With some 30,000 journalists descending on the city during the Games and countless others coming to check on preparations prior to the event, Rio's moment in the global spotlight provided an important political opportunity for this. The discourse intervention was deliberately intended to effect a change in policy towards favelas, deliberately undermining the justification for removals and heavy policing by showing favelas are not inherently dangerous.

Discourse intervention, as Karlberg (2005: 1) explains, is "an effort to change our social reality by altering the discourses that help constitute it". This draws on the Foucauldian idea that how we talk about a particular phenomenon affects how we think and act in relation to it (Foucault 1970). In essence, discourse influences behaviour. To put some empirical meat on these theoretical bones, if we can only think of favelas as slums, ghettos, and havens of crime and poverty, our preferred action towards favelas will naturally be to remove these blights on our cities. Millington and Darnell (2014), in their analysis of online contestation around Rio 2016, note that sources like RioOnWatch are marginalised in a media landscape dominated by powerful interests including the International Olympic Committee and corporate sponsors. While the output of the site was often a useful resource for journalists and researchers to understand favelas, with this understanding seeping into more widely read, mainstream reporting, RioOnWatch's work to challenge dominant discourses involved more than the output of the site itself. It is the group's work with journalists on the ground as an attempt to promote an alternative discourse on favela communities that I focus on in this chapter, promoting an understanding of favelas whereby these communities are celebrated for their contributions to the city, transforming how favela communities are treated as a result.

RioOnWatch's editors and several experienced volunteers took journalists from major publications to favelas in the months leading up to the Games, helping with access, context and translation. The intention was to help journalists understand that the notion of favelas as dangerous hives of villainy was not always accurate, emphasising the positive elements of these communities with the hope that these qualities would be described in the reports produced. Many news reports were produced in this way, supported by RioOnWatch. A report in *Time Magazine* from a favela threatened with demolition focussing on the emotional attachment residents had to their community and explaining

their justifications for refusing sizeable compensation packages (Gregory 2015). A *CBC* report from the same favela quotes a resident speaking about their attachment to the community: "I've worked really hard, so did my husband. Here I have everything, good friends, lots of peace" (*Rio's mood* 2016). A mini-documentary from *Vox* typify the reporting RioOnWatch sought to encourage: myth-busting work that shows favelas from the perspective of residents, even as it deals with the complex issues of gang violence and police brutality (Harris 2016).

The question arises, with this approach to changing how favelas are treated, of why RioOnWatch focused much of its attention on international media, as opposed to local, Brazilian press. While it would be inaccurate to suggest RioOnWatch didn't try to influence coverage by the national media, it lacked the privileged position it held in relation to the international media. The focus on favelas from the perspective of those who live there was in direct contradiction to mainstream Brazilian media: as one of the editors described it, part of RioOnWatch's role was "showing that [*Globo*] was saying something different from [favela]" residents. The marginalization of favela perspectives in mainstream Brazilian media is not new (Rosas-Moreno and Straubhaar 2015) and by focusing on favelas, RioOnWatch was exploiting a niche in mainstream coverage. However, this focus on favelas was not unique to RioOnWatch: it was one of many alternative media outlets covering mega-event development in the informal city using new media technologies (Bailey et al 2017), meaning the Portuguese language output entered into a competitive marketplace. The English language reporting landscape on favelas, conversely, was irregular and often ill-informed, written in some cases by journalists who have never visited the community which they describe.

The discourse intervention crystallised in RioOnWatch's specific push to get journalists to "call them favelas" (CatComm 2015b). This focus proved an effective opening gambit, drawing in the various issues related to the misrepresentation of Rio's favelas from a single issue. RioOnWatch editors lobbied foreign correspondents to avoid using terms such as slum and shanty town, framing these translations as inaccurate. These translations hold connotations of poverty, destitution, and danger, which are not accurate for many favelas (for a more detailed examination of the problems of translating the word favela, see Revelo-Imery 2014). One editor tells a story of discussing the issue with a New York Times correspondent in Brazil. In the days that followed, he asked his Twitter followers how best to translate the word favela, generating discussion. In his next report on a favela, he avoided using terms like slum or shanty town, instead describing favelas as if no name existed, describing a vast maze of cinder block homes, for example. Others were less receptive. The Associated Press, for example, argued they needed to use language which could be easily understood by all and as such favela was not an acceptable term. In my own work publishing about the Vila Autódromo favela for smaller outlets, editors have attempted to change the word favela for slum or shanty town – but backed down on my insistence that the term is inaccurate. These terms matter: they signify wider understandings of favelas as places of either poverty and criminality or culture and innovation.

RioOnWatch conducted their own research project into the representations of favelas in international media between 2008 and 2016 with content analysis of over 1,000 articles mentioning the word "favela". They found some evidence that this discourse intervention was successful: there was a small increase in articles calling favelas by the Portuguese term from 2009, concurrent with a decrease in negative alternatives like slum or shanty town and an increase in neutral alternatives like community or neighbourhood (CatComm 2016: 35). The report also looked into how favelas were portrayed throughout the article, not just in the translation of the term. Over the period, favelas were predominantly depicted as sites of violence and drug/gang activity, with over 350 articles portrayed in this way. By contrast, favelas were depicted as sources of culture in around 130 articles and as places with a sense of community in around 90 articles (CatComm 2016: 47). More encouragingly, from RioOnWatch's perspective, favela residents were portrayed as active agents of change in over 150 articles, the second most common characteristic of residents in press coverage, behind financially poor (just under 250 articles).

Digging deeper into this data suggests a distinction between the articles produced by foreign correspondents and those produced by journalists who have flown in briefly to report on the mega-events. This cannot be confirmed, as the research did not include details of the journalists who wrote each article. While the year-by-year data shows a slow decline in portrayals of favelas as sites of violence and gang activity increased, there is a noticeable increase in articles depicting favelas in this way in 2014 and 2016, coinciding with the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games. This shift in depiction occurs alongside a huge increase in the volume of journalism in those mega-event years, with just under half of the articles covered in the eight-year project published in those two years. Headlines on reports by parachute journalists in the lead up to the Games claimed that "bullet-ridden bodies lie in pools of blood and gun-toting teens in flip-flops rule the day" (Moore 2016) while "fear and violence rule in Rio's favelas on eve of Olympic Games" (Fisher 2016). These reports tended not to quote favela residents and portrayed violence as solely the work of trafficking gangs. Conversely, articles by permanent correspondents tended to promote residents' voices more strongly, as well as laying some blame for the violence with the police (see for example Garcia-Navarro 2016; Romero 2016). This points to a significant divide between foreign correspondents with an ingrained understanding of the city built through years of living in Rio de Janeiro and those journalists who flew in for a few weeks to cover the Olympic city.

This distinction between the foreign correspondents and parachute journalists is telling. RioOnWatch worked with foreign correspondents at times, with the change in *New York Times* coverage just one example among many. Indeed, foreign correspondents like Will Carless (quoted in Savchuk 2016) were well aware that "CatComm has a certain worldview and agenda", drawing on the group as a useful resource but avoiding being spoon-fed information about favelas. However, the majority of RioOnWatch's work with the press (at least during my fieldwork) was with parachute journalists asking for help understanding and accessing favelas. These journalists arrived in Rio often with few local contacts, little local knowledge and often no more than a Portuguese phrasebook. Many of them had been banned from entering favelas by their editors, reporting on this part of the city especially challenging. As such, they needed the help which RioOnWatch could provide – RioOnWatch was able to access these journalists far more easily than the national media or permanent correspondents, influencing the coverage of favelas through working with individual journalists on the ground.

In the months leading up to the Games, RioOnWatch helped a steady stream of journalists report on the Olympic city, attempting to subtly influence their coverage. As Hannerz (2004: 154) notes "the critical importance of local helpers in foreign news work tends not to be acknowledged", meaning RioOnWatch's contribution to discourses surrounding favelas in the international media remains in the background. While RioOnWatch's own report highlights a variety of shifts in the discourse, hailed as "a truly positive legacy of the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics" (CatComm 2016: 63), the picture remains complex. Slum remains the most common translation of favela (although the word favela is used more often), violence or drugs remains the most common topic and a plurality of articles still give an overwhelming negative impression of favelas. On some measures, such as the translation of the word favela, the 2016 data most closely resembles the data from 2008, having recovered from an initial jump in negative alternative translations after Rio won the right to host the Olympics.

All this leaves a complicated picture for the future. While RioOnWatch was able to shift discourses slightly through working with international, there is no clear sign linking these changes to policy shifts. Despite some uncharacteristically sympathetic coverage of police violence by mainstream Brazilian media outlets Globo (Briso 2016) and Veja (Ritto et al 2016) in the weeks before the Games (arguably evidence of the positive discourse surrounding favelas in the international media bleeding into local coverage), Brazilian media still appears to routinely marginalise favelas (Rosas-Moreno and Straubhaar 2015). Even the gains made through working with foreign correspondents may be lost, as bureaus and correspondents move away from Rio to São Paulo or Brasilia after the Games. Hannerz

(2004) notes that most foreign correspondents with major outlets routinely move to new locations every 3-5 years. In the case of Rio, this seems to be timed with the schedule of mega-events, as long-serving correspondents are reassigned elsewhere after the Games, with new personnel arriving having little experience of the city (Michaels 2017).

Conclusion

What then, has been transformed? It is difficult to conclude that RioOnWatch has successfully transformed the discourse around informal communities, but it is also clear that a number of smaller scale changes have been achieved, with significantly greater space for favela residents' voices in news coverage of their communities. Likewise, Williamson cites numerous examples of human rights violations that have been helped by press coverage, transforming the lives of favela residents. Residents of Vila Autódromo, a favela close to the Olympic park which was slated for removal for the Games, put their victory in being able to stay on their land, in part, down to international press coverage. However, further research is needed on this subject, as wider concrete changes in policy linked to a transformed understanding of favelas would take time to bed in. RioOnWatch continues beyond the 2016 Games, but it will change, focussing more on community solutions, moving away from human rights reporting (although not abandoning it entirely). This alternative discourse on favelas will stilled be presented through the site, even as the Olympic spotlight moves on to Tokyo. Meanwhile this alternative understanding of favelas appears ignored by those in power: as Magalhães (2013) argues, the Olympics Games have transformed and reinvigorated the municipal government's ability to evict favelas residents.

At the core of the attempt to shape debates around favelas is the idea that a well-informed public acts as a brake on poor policy and that by transforming the discourse used to describe a phenomena, the policy interventions to address that phenomena will change. RioOnWatch sought to exploit the political opportunity brought on by hugely increased media attention in the city to effect a change which would last beyond the mega-event – a legacy, if you will. While the evidence of success is mixed and difficult to attribute solely to RioOnWatch, there is clear potential for activists to collaborate with international media to transform international discourses about host cities. As such, discourse interventions conducted in the Olympic spotlight can provide a transformative legacy for host city populations, not just for event organisers.

Acknowledgements

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