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ASSEMBLING 'DIFFERENCE' THROUGH DIGITIZED MUSIC: THE CASE OF URBAN PIRACY IN RECIFE, BRAZIL

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ASSEMBLING 'DIFFERENCE' THROUGH DIGITIZED MUSIC: THE CASE OF URBAN PIRACY IN RECIFE, BRAZIL

Research in Progress

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Abstract

This paper draws from work-in-progress research focusing on the piracy of digitized music within informal markets in the global south. We consider this topic with reference to empirical data garnered from an ethnographic study of informal media markets in Recife, Brazil. These markets are composed of piracy hawkers – street sellers with piracy stalls equipped with CD/DVD player, car battery and speakers, who walk the streets playing and selling copied digital media, particularly, locally produced music. Overall we seek to explore how these alternative means of production, distribution and consumption of locally produced content enable engagement with local culture and, through this, preserve their cultural 'distinct-ness' within the global south. We draw on Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assemblage theory and argue that these piracy stalls are part of complex urban arrangements which enact and extend the circulation and consumption of local music by means of local product and service curation, and through market scaling. Thus, they preserve and emphasize cultural 'difference' through digitized music. The findings reported here are based on ongoing analysis.

Keywords: ICT and societal culture, digitized/digital music, urban piracy, informal markets, Brazil

1 Introduction

How ICT can 'make a difference', or not, in a globalised world has been a basis for many studies and commentaries by IS scholars (Walsham, 2001; Davison, 2012; Westrup, 2012). While most of them reflect on how ICT can enable economic and social development in the global south¹ in areas such as health, agriculture and formal market creation (Braa et al, 2004; Walsham and Sahay, 1999; Tarafdar et al, 2012), surprisingly little literature has attended to the extent and manner by which local economic activities such as informal trade are 'difference-signifying' aspects of societies in the global south. This is the focus of this paper, namely commerce that is not connected to mainstream economic mechanisms, and how this informal trade produces and reproduces societal culture. Specifically, we concentrate on the media industry, particularly music.

Media, such as music, movies and TV shows, can be digitized through ICT and thus easily and inexpensively reproduced. This, coupled with the existence of global and centralized information architectures and distribution platforms, can enable the 'mass-ification' of cultural offerings in these societies by transporting and imposing cultural objects from more economically powerful societies (Adorno and Bernstein, 2001). Looking into the present landscape of the media industry we see that corporate conglomerates heavily influence the global reproduction of music and video content through centralized and large-scale platforms such as iTunes and Amazon. This has to a certain extent, homogenized culture by funnelling the work of artists toward mainstream tastes and consequently limiting the availability of local and regional products (Lemos et al, 2009). In this way, instead of 'making a world of difference', this process could actually mean 'destroying the world's differences'.

However, we also know that the diffusion of cheap digital technologies and increased access are disrupting this landscape and contributing to the emergence of alternative, non-mainstream mediation, almost subaltern channels such as peer-to-peer (P2P) websites, through which locally produced content can be transmitted and shaped (Karaganis, 2011). These channels are as much about the ICT infrastructure that enable the physical flow of digitized content as they are about cultural practices that drive the flows, such as torrent downloads, digital uploading of free-copyright content, YouTube video remixing, online sharing communities, etc. Thus, we also see local media commerce making a 'world of a difference'.

There is also a significant informal economy in and around media, often referred to as piracy. Castells and Cardoso (2012) have suggested the term 'piracy cultures' to describe this diverse set of cultural practices associated with the production and consumption of media, which fall beyond the mainstream and deterministic means of distribution and institutionalised sets of rules. Piracy cultures are particularly applicable to describe activities of communities and networks in relation to the creation, distribution and consumption of digitized content². Such networks are increasingly seen as alternative forms of cultural engagement which are counter to the mainstream. Examples include access to local independent cinema in Europe through P2P networks (Cardoso et al, 2013), opening up affordable possibilities for music artists in Norway through home-based studios (Spilker, 2012), fostering sharing subcultures in Brazil dedicated to collective production of subtitles for foreign downloaded movies (Sá, 2015), or even countering corporate and governmental censorship of media content by alternative circuits of content circulation (Li, 2013). Piracy cultures leverage the convergence between consumption and production, and between reception and reproduction/remixing, and the consequent blurring of the original from the copied, as enabled by ICT (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz, 2013).

With regard to digital content, piracy cultures function through a complex range of informal networks that engage in the practices of its creation, re-creation and transfer. In the global south, this happens widely through the materialization of the digital content in physical forms such as CDs and DVDs,

¹ The term 'global south' comprises Africa, Latin America, and developing Asia including the Middle East. Opposed to other terms (developing world, Third World, etc.) it does not come coupled with 'development' as its point of departure (see Rigg (2007 p. 3) for a critical review of terms used in literature).

² In contrast to the term 'piracy' which denotes illegal sharing of copyrighted context (Castells and Cardoso, 2012)

usually in urban locations and informal markets (Liang, 2009). These practices constitute the 'piracy' of physical objects through urban, informal markets, as opposed to that of digital objects through digital platforms such as BitTorrent. In this paper, we refer to this as 'urban piracy'. Urban piracy increasingly forms the means through which culture is enacted and morphed, and the 'difference' we alluded to in our opening paragraph, is preserved. Thus, urban piracy of digital content is an important ICT-related social and cultural phenomenon deserving our attention (Liang, 2009; Mattelart, 2013).

There have been few studies that have focused on how non-mainstream social units create, propagate and recreate cultural artefacts such as locally produced music through a mix of ICT-enabled social practices (Spilker and Hoier, 2013; Krauskopf, n.d.). For example, in the Amazon region of Brazil, the piracy hawkers help with the distribution of local music (Lemos et al, 2009). However, these studies have insufficiently attended to how informality and urban piracy assemble alternative mechanisms of media distribution which are not only responsible for the reproduction and urban dissemination of content but, more importantly, which give primacy to locally produced music while fostering its ongoing cultural associations. This is where our paper is located – we examine urban piracy of digitized music within informal markets in the global south to explore how alternative media circuits of piracy support cultural provision and 'difference' preservation (Sundaram, 2009; Larkin, 2004; Liang, 2009; Lobato, 2012; Lobato and Thomas, 2012), in contrast to consuming mass-distributed and non-locally produced music. Our study was conducted in urban localities in Recife, Brazil.

Specifically, we investigate the following research questions: (RQ1) *What are the key digital and social dimensions of the urban piracy culture in Recife's informal markets?*; (RQ2) *Through these dimensions, how is locally produced music transmitted, re-produced and preserved?*. By answering these questions, we inform a third larger question as an area for future research, (RQ3) *How do these alternative means of production, distribution and consumption of locally produced content enable local culture engagement in global south societies and preserve their cultural 'distinct-ness'?*

In this research-in-progress paper, we: (1) introduce the theoretical lens of 'assemblages' to help understand key digital and social dimensions of Recife's piracy culture; (2) describe the study's methods and setting and; (3) explain preliminary but instructive findings that speak to our first and second research questions in sections 4.1 and 4.2 respectively; (4) present some brief conclusions and implications for future research. At the time of writing we are analysing our data and if selected to present this paper, we hope to present detailed results addressing our research questions.

2 Theoretical Framework

This research is theoretically guided by the theory of 'assemblages' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; DeLanda, 2006). The term assemblage comes from the French *agencement* and it refers to the arrangement or coupling of different elements. These elements can be human, non-human, material, or even non-tangible concepts like ideas or emotions. Also, the term is not static i.e., the focus is not on the 'constant' arrangement or organisation of, but rather on the "*processes* of arranging, organising, fitting together (Stival, 2014 p.77). In this way, our ontological focus of inquiry is on the 'becoming' of urban piracy culture. That is, 'rather than initially defining what piracy is, we can ask what piracy does' (Sundaram, 2009 p. 113). In the context of informal markets, given their natural resistance to structure and heterogeneity of composing parts, the concept of assemblages has been productively applied (Seale and Evers, 2014; Evers, 2014; Cholez & Trompette, n.d.; Dovey, 2012).

The assemblages' processual emphasis on the 'how' instead of the 'what' further focuses on the relational aspects between the elements that make for the emergence of an assemblage. Applied to piracy culture, this implies that this culture is not a given constant or a 'bounded whole' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), but a contingent happening, a becoming, which emerges from relationships between a heterogeneous variety of elements and assemblages that constitute it.

These relations are characterised by exteriority, which means that while each element assemblage has an identity of its own, when coupled together this shapes the identity of the whole. In relation to urban piracy, this means the inquiry accommodates both things. We see this in relation to the identity of each

element assemblage, as will be discussed in the next section, and the identity of the 'whole' that emerges through these element assemblages as they get plugged-in together through a process of transformation of cultural media from the digital into the physical.

3 Methods and Data Collection

This study reports on an ethnographic inquiry into the urban music piracy markets in Recife, the capital of the northeast state of Pernambuco, Brazil. According to APCM – Music and Cinema Anti-piracy Association – Recife has the third highest consumption rate of pirated products in Brazil with around 20% of its citizens being associated in some form with informal piracy markets³. These markets, which are dispersed and mobile, are comprised of piracy hawkers, i.e., street sellers with mobile stalls equipped with CD/DVD player, car battery and speakers who walk the streets playing and selling copied digital music and films in the physical format of CDs, DVDs and VCDs (video CDs). Although these markets are often associated with 'piracy' networks, they are also central to the dissemination of local music products from artists who freely provide their work to these street sellers for advertising and selling. Some illustrations of the data are shown below.



Figure 1: Piracy hawkers and their urban piracy stalls in Recife city centre

Primary research and data collection was undertaken in late 2014 and early 2015. The primary participants were the piracy hawkers who we followed in their daily activities. Over time, we developed good relations with the hawkers which meant they introduced us to other relevant participants. Data collection comprised of three elements: semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observations and physical and digital recordings.

First, we conducted thirty semi-structured interviews. These were focused on three types of participants: a) distributors of music products (piracy hawkers and music CDs stores); b) producers of content sold on the streets (disk jockeys [DJs], local artists, DJs and artists' sponsors and local store owners) and c) consumers of urban piracy (passers-by, formal store owners and other street sellers). The interviews focused mainly on: a) from the distributors in relation to the types of content sold, their business model, daily work routines and daily geographic trajectories of piracy hawkers; b) from the producers in relation to the aesthetics of content produced, interactions with piracy hawkers and their business model and finally c) from the consumers in relation to the types of music content bought on the streets and any other ways in which they come to access and consume music media.

Second, we made numerous ethnographic observations of the daily workings of the urban piracy markets. These observations focused on the human and non-human elements of the urban piracy assemblages such as the material dimension comprised of the piracy stalls and their material and technological components, but also the immaterial dimension of the sonorous aesthetics of music and marketing jingles' lyrics, as well as the overall urban soundscapes.

Third, we made physical notes as well as audio, video and picture recordings. These methods were used to capture the visual and sonorous dimension of the urban piracy assemblages comprised of

³ Numbers retrieved from the official site of APCM - <http://www.apdif.org.br>

sounds, stalls, sellers and urban infrastructure as well as the flow of interactions performed in these market spaces and their situated urban soundscapes.

The data was organized and catalogued through research diaries, and analysed by examining and identifying emergent themes through the process of codification (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The following section discusses our data in relation to the first two research questions.

4 Findings and Analysis

In subsection 4.1, to respond to (RQ1) – *What are the key digital and social dimensions of the urban piracy culture in Recife's informal markets?* – we applied the lens of 'assemblages' to a central aspect of the informal piracy market – the urban piracy stall, as shown in Figure 1. By examining some of the components that made up the piracy stall we were able to reveal the different dimensions of the urban piracy culture in Recife. Then, in subsection 4.2, to respond to (RQ2) – *Through these dimensions, how is locally produced music transmitted, re-produced and preserved?* – we explain how the interaction of these dimensions shapes the ongoing circulation and consumption of locally produced music.

4.1 The urban piracy stall assemblage

Informal trade is prevalent across Recife's popular squares and streets. Among the pervasive informal street trading of food, drinks, cell-phone equipment, and other products there is a background soundtrack which mixes with the voices of traders and passers-by enacting a distinct sensory texture to urban informality. The music is diverse – from global hits, distributed by big music labels, to locally-produced songs, composed by local artists in home-based studios. The 'piracy hawker' – shown in Figure 2 – is the conductor of this 'orchestra' creating these soundscapes through his piracy stall.



Figure 2: Piracy hawker and his stall at the informal market of Dom Vital square in Recife city centre

The piracy stall is itself an assemblage of various components – CD shelf, CD/DVD player, speakers, battery, video player, marketing stickers, plastic chairs, extra fixed CD shelves, etc. – each with an identity of its own that also functions in tune with the rest. While being an aesthetically and audibly distinct element from its surroundings, the piracy stall couples itself flawlessly into the informal market by materialising and selling a wide range of low-cost music CDs and making these heard through its speakers, from which an urban piracy culture emerges.

For the purpose of this research-in-progress article, we focus on three main components of the piracy stall assemblage – the CD shelf, the broadcasting of music, and the mobility of the stalls – shown in Figure 3. These components were chosen because they were the most pervasive throughout all piracy stalls in our findings. Consequently, they are integral to the ways in which economic activity is performed in these markets, as it is detailed next.



Figure 3: piracy stall components (left to right: CDs shelf, CD/DVD player, speaker, battery, wells)

4.1.1 The CD shelf as assemblage of legal, illegal and mixed music products

The first component relates to the CD shelf. Products found in the CD shelf include music CDs, DVDs, MP3 collections, and VCDs of movies and live music shows. For the objective of this paper however, we will only focus on the music CDs. These are sold at three Reais (1 US\$) and can be characterized into three types: infringed copyright music, local artists' copyright-free music and music compilations from local DJs which can include a mix of both.

Infringed copyright material is the main product for which the piracy hawkers are targeted by police officials. Piracy hawkers usually rely on a 'piracy network' ('PN' in Figure 4) to get their supply of such material. The piracy network is comprised of high volume digital reproduction technology, reproducers who copy the music through this technology and a wide range of distributors who supply these copies to the street sellers at scheduled places and times for 1 Real (0,3 US\$) each. During these encounters, the piracy hawkers make their requests for further deliveries based on demand or by checking the piracy network's 'catalogue' of available products. The piracy network obtains its original content via two sources – (1) downloaded from internet sharing sites or (2) original CDs bought by piracy hawkers in order to get copies.

The shelf also contains local artists' material ('LA' in Figure 4) which piracy hawkers, often proudly, introduce to passers-by. However, as opposed to the infringed copyright CDs, these are given freely by the local artists who purposefully renounce copyright protection, and use the hawkers for promoting their products. They do this to become known, which leads to revenue-generating live shows in nearby avenues. This music is usually produced in two ways – through the artist's own home-computer and low-cost or 'pirated' digital production software, or through small local producers ('LP' in Figure 4) who are better equipped with production technologies. Interestingly though, when the piracy hawkers do not have enough copies of these CDs due to excess demand, they again rely on the piracy network to supply more copies. Also, local artists give piracy hawkers blank CDs, as motivation to promote them since hawkers can use them to reduce the price of copies by 50% to 0,5 Reais (0,15 US\$).

On the shelf there are also CDs produced by local DJs containing a mix of both copyright-free local artists' songs and copyright-infringed national or international hits. In addition, they also usually contain DJs' personal branding and live shows' marketing jingles. Like the local artists, the DJs also offer products for free to piracy hawkers, as well as supplying them with blank CDs for further copies.

4.1.2 The 'urban radio' service assembled through CD player, battery and speakers

The second component relates to the broadcasting of music. The main purpose of the DJs' compilations is to market local DJs and artists' upcoming events. This brings us to the important assemblage of the CD/DVD player with the car battery and speakers which are embedded in the piracy stalls. The CD/DVD player is strategically positioned at the back of the stall, in a small compartment close to where the hawker stays while he manoeuvres the stall and deals with clients. It functions through a car battery placed inside and one or two speakers placed on either side of the stalls. By plugging in these three components the piracy stall gets 'upgraded' with a broadcasting function, which is used by the piracy hawkers to attract their potential customers by playing one of the three kinds of music described above. At the same time, customers may use the CD/DVD player to test the quality of the CDs before purchasing. Moreover, given their revenue motivations, local artists and DJs see this functionality of

great value for promoting their works on the streets. This then upgrades the piracy hawkers' income possibilities. Local producers give piracy hawkers blank CDs for broadcasting the music of their artists, particularly for promoting future live shows. To this respect, another source of revenue comes from the local stores ('LS' in Figure 4) which develop short marketing jingles for the piracy hawkers to broadcast at particular sites and at particular times. In this case, the payment for the broadcasting service can vary between 10 to 30 Reais (3 US\$ to 10 US\$) per week.

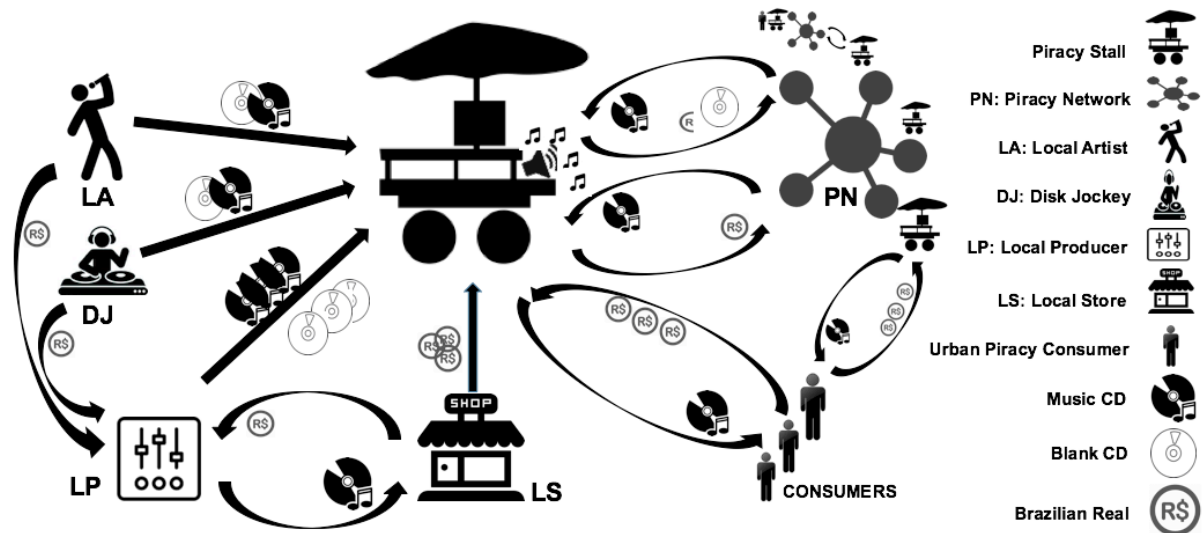


Figure 4: Recife's urban piracy and local music circuit

4.1.3 The stall's mobility and local music dispersion

Another important component of the piracy stall is its mobility – that is, its ability to move through the city that is brought by the coupling of a pair of wheels on the sides. Although some piracy hawkers perform their activities in fixed locations, most tend to be mobile. This happens for a variety of reasons but perhaps most importantly, so they can more easily change locations when pressured by police officials. In fact, given the pervasiveness of the presence of piracy stalls throughout the city, most often the officials, rather than confiscating or apprehending their products, ask them to move from crowded high streets to less visible peripheral sites.

Beyond facilitating the piracy hawkers' 'cooperation' with police officials, the piracy stalls' mobility also serves to increase the scale and range of products and services they offer. By being able to move between urban spaces, the piracy stall is able to 'follow different audiences' through space and time and consequently adapt its range of products and services accordingly. For instance, it can promote and sell Brazilian romantic classics on 'family sites' versus urban hip-hop when in the vicinity of a favela – a Brazilian slum. Also, the mobility allows the piracy stall to promote artists from different localities further extending the hawkers' revenue stream.

4.2 The enactment of Recife's urban piracy culture

The different dimensions described in the previous section point to particular mechanisms which – (1) facilitate the circulation of locally produced music through the informal markets; (2) give higher primacy to the local content as opposed to the copyrighted national or international hits. In doing so, and in speaking to RQ2, they not only facilitate transmission and re-production of the local music, but also its preservation, enrichment and constant evolution. In this way, they preserve the local culture through the digitized music. This is achieved by means of three mechanisms – local product curation, local service curation, and local market scaling, as explained below.

4.2.1 Local product curation

The selling price of each of the three types of products found on the CD shelf is the same. However, the piracy hawker has a higher motivation to sell local free-copyright music as opposed to the national or international copyright-infringed music. This is because his cost price of local content is either effectively zero (as in the case where the local CD is given freely to him by local artists or producers) or half of the cost of the illegal copies of international music (as in the case when blank CDs are given to him by local artists or producers to get a discount copy price from the piracy network). Also, and perhaps more importantly, local artists and producers form relations of kinship with piracy hawkers as a result of which the latter are keen to 'help' them out by selling their music.

4.2.2 Local service curation

By means of its broadcasting capabilities, the piracy stall assemblages what can be seen as a specific type of 'mobile urban radio' through which local artists, producers and stores promote their music and products. Specifically, the piracy hawker is paid to broadcast the music and upcoming events of local artists and the marketing jingles of local stores. In this way, the piracy hawker curates what is heard on the street giving primacy to local media products, thus entangling the local music, products and economy and reinforcing local culture.

4.2.3 Local market scaling

By being mobile, the piracy stall functions as a scaling device which geographically spreads local content throughout the city. Moreover, this scale is further extended because once the piracy hawker gives a local CD to the piracy network, that CD becomes available to all other mobile piracy hawkers interacting with the piracy network. Thus, there is the existence and constant expansion of a repository of local music that gets re-produced and distributed throughout different localities aided by the recursive interactions between the piracy networks and the piracy hawkers (see Figure 4 top right).

In summary then, all of these mechanisms enable the assemblage of an urban piracy culture which reinforces the propagation of digitized local music and the preservation of local culture.

5 Discussions and Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that in the context of digital content development and distribution, ICTs can create opportunities for reducing the distance between artists and people while enabling audiences to have a bigger role in the creation of culture. However, studies suggest that such development and distribution should be accompanied by mechanisms of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation, in what Robertson (1992) calls 'indigenisation' and Appadurai (1996) references to as 'glocalisation' processes, thus shaping the content into localised forms (Lemos et al, 2009). Especially with respect to 'making a world of a difference', neglect of such mechanisms presents the potential for cultural hegemony in the global south. Through our case study of urban piracy markets of locally produced and digitized music in Recife, we highlight key mechanisms in this paper, which instructively inform our research questions RQ1 and RQ2. By analysing the main components of the piracy stall we were able to bring forth how these materials intertwine with local culture and economic arrangements that together assemble an urban piracy culture which enacts and extends the circulation and consumption of local music. This is achieved through an alignment of economic incentives, kinship relations and urban culture that creates favourable conditions for local music products to be sold within urban sites, heard within urban soundscapes, and scaled to different localities. In this way, and informing our RQ3, our ongoing analysis suggests that the assemblage of the urban piracy stall is an appropriate urban technology for circulation, promotion and scaled-distribution of locally produced music. Thus, it is also a 'vehicle' for local culture preservation. We hope to present a more detailed treatment if selected for the conference.

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