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Types of favela media activism

*Citizen participation and collective action through the use of media are not new phenomena, but they are more topical than ever in the global, hyperconnected public sphere. In this post, **Leonardo Custódio** discusses his research on the rich media activity produced by favela-based activists. He shows how, through community media, media collectives and networks of mutual support and joint action, favela dwellers have been able to take control of communication channels and platforms to raise their own voices and demands.*

One of the most important civic phenomena today in favelas of Rio de Janeiro is media activism. However, as I argue below, these actions are so peculiar to the context that perhaps it is best to refer to them as “favela media activism.”

As a concept, media activism is not new. For decades, media activism has referred to civil society’s uses of old and new media against the domination of corporate media (Drew, 1995; Opel, 2004). More recently, media activism has related to the instrumentalisation of Internet within political struggles (Meikle, 2002). The Arab Spring, The Wall Street Movement and the 2013 mass protests in Brazil [1] are some recent examples of social movement articulation and mobilisation through online media.

Favela media activism also consists of uses of traditional and new media for demanding media democratisation and contesting politics. However, they are part of complex strategies against everyday life problems. In favelas, media activists challenge negative media representations, denounce human rights violations (e.g. police violence, evictions) and mobilise other dwellers to act (see Souza & Zanetti, 2013).

Favela media activism is a recent development of Latin American traditions of communication for social change (Gumucio-Dagron & Tufte, 2006) and participatory media (Peruzzo, 1998). Activists use old media (e.g. radio, newspapers) and new media (e.g. Internet, smartphone applications) combined with artistic, pedagogic and journalistic techniques to promote critical thinking and political mobilisation in favelas. Thus, it is often the case that their visible online actions are the tip of a complex iceberg of interpersonal relations and creative collective action. (Custodio, 2013)

During my four-year critical ethnographic fieldwork (2011 – 2014), I got to know different forms media activist practices in favelas. The types of favela media activism I identified happen in: (a) community media, (b) media collectives and (c) issue-related cross-favela articulations.

Community media are grassroots forms of traditional media channels. One example is the newspaper *O Cidadão*, at Complexo da Maré. Originally an NGO project, *O Cidadão* focuses on the politics and local culture of the community in which it is embedded. Today, the newspaper’s staff of volunteer favela dwellers is quite independent from the NGO. Since 2012, *O Cidadão* has organised debates and community media courses both to share their knowledge and to mobilise

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Social media



more volunteers.



“Maré will give you voice”: Poster circulated online announcing the first community media course at O Cidadão in 2012.

Media collectives are often small groups of activists formed on the basis of personal affinity and sociopolitical interests. They usually combine online interactions and networking with localised actions with favela communities. For instance, *Favela em Foco* is a photography collective that uses online social networks and localised interventions (e.g. photo and film exhibits) to document, publicise and mobilise culture and politics in favelas. *Ocupa Alemão* is a youth collective that avidly uses social networks online to articulate debates, demonstrations and cultural events in the favelas of Complexo do Alemão. *Cafuné na Laje*, in turn, is an independent video producer that uses critical pedagogical strategies to produce participatory videos with children from different favelas.



Youth-led plenary to debate local demands at Complexo do Alemão in March 2014. The plenary led to online debates and the writing of a manifesto. Photo: Ocupa Alemão.

Another type of favela media activism happens in **networks of mutual support and joint actions** among activists from different favelas. Media activists from favelas circulate and participate in debates, cultural interventions and demonstrations in places other than their own. The “shares”, “likes” and the advertising of political events online also contribute to reinforce ties of cooperation. Sometimes these cross-favela interactions happen around specific issues. After Rio was announced as the host of the 2016 Summer Olympics, media activists from different favelas have made **videos**,

photo albums and **blog texts** to denounce the arbitrary evictions in a number of favelas like Vila Autódromo (located where organizers are building the main venue of the Games). In early 2014, a group of dwellers created the Facebook page *Maré Vive* as a channel of counter-information during the military occupation in Complexo da Maré. Dwellers have anonymously used the page to denounce abuses of authority and human rights violations. The updates are shared among community members and media activists from other favelas.

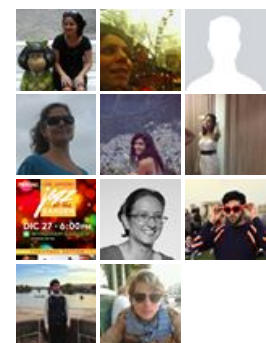
The importance of these and many other cases of favela media activism is that favela dwellers



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have increasingly taken control of communication channels and platforms to raise their own voices and demands. Favela dwellers are often treated either as vulnerable populations in need of help or as dangerous threats in need of control. Therefore, much of the everyday life politics in favelas is mediated by NGOs, academics, the police and so on. In this context, favela media activism is an important bottom-up reaction to the way things have historically been. Media activists from favelas enact, mobilise, articulate and publicise citizenship within, outside and especially across favelas. Most importantly: by and for themselves.



“The right to live”: artistic and humanistic photograph turned into an online image to compose a blog post about the evictions at Vila Autódromo. Photo: Favela em Foco/Léo Lima.

[1] For an in-depth picture of media activism in Brazil, see www.rebaixada.org.

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About the Author

Leonardo Custódio is a PhD candidate at the University of Tampere, Finland. His research (2009-2015) investigates the characteristics, motivations and objectives of favela media activism in Rio de Janeiro.

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