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Starting from the Amazon: communication, knowledge and politics of place in the World Social Forum

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Abstract

This article explores how communication activists in Belém, Brazil, engaged with the 2009 World Social Forum (WSF) when it arrived in their city and sought to take advantage of the opportunity it offered to strengthen and gain visibility for place-based movements in the Amazon. While the WSF has enabled an unprecedented diversity of movements to exchange knowledges and experiences, and to a certain extent succeeded in "giving voice" to marginalised groups, it also has continued to suffer from its own hierarchies and exclusions. These are evident, inter alia, in the asymmetrical relationship that exists between "local" grassroots groups and "global" cosmopolitan elites. Emphasising the centrality of place to the construction of alternative epistemological imaginaries, the article analyses efforts by communication activists to facilitate autonomous processes of knowledge production among movements in the Amazon. At once place-based and transnational in scope, their communication strategies challenge conventional hierarchies of scale and highlight the importance of grassroots movements appropriating communication technologies for their own purposes. At stake here is not simply the inclusion of "local subalterns" within the "global" WSF, but the construction of communication networks that can support the proliferation of alternative knowledge projects at different scales, within and beyond the WSF.

Introduction

> The Pan-Amazon will be the territory of the 9th edition of the World Social Forum. For six days, Belém, the capital of Pará, Brazil, takes the place of the center of the region to shelter the greatest anti-globalization event of today and brings together activists from more than 150 countries in a permanent process of mobilization, articulation and search for alternatives for another possible world, free of neoliberal politics and all forms of imperialism. [...]

> Much more than a territory to shelter the WSF the Amazon, represented by its peoples, social movements and organizations, will be protagonist in the process and will have an opportunity to spread their struggle around the world, and make continental and global alliances (World Social Forum, 2009).

The decision to hold the 2009 World Social Forum in Belém was motivated by a wish to give voice to the peoples of the Pan-Amazon – a vast territory spanning nine countries[1] – and focus attention on the significance of the region to the world as a whole. Highly symbolic, the choice of the Amazon as a site for the WSF was intended as a way to put ecological issues on the agenda of global civil society and give visibility to the struggles and knowledges of movements in the region. Organisers were eager to ensure that the Amazon and its peoples should not simply form the "local" backdrop to a "global" meeting but play a leading role. This line of reasoning is in keeping with the by now widely accepted sentiment that "place matters" in the social forum process (Conway, 2004; 2008a), and that an important function of the WSF should be to set in motion dynamics and give visibility to movements and issues in the place where it is held.

In this article, I explore how two particular groups of place-based actors – communication activists in Belém who were involved in (1) community radio and (2) participatory video production – engaged with the WSF and sought to take advantage of the unique opportunity it offered to strengthen and gain visibility for movements in the Amazon region. I argue that their communication practices complicate conventional hierarchical understandings of scale and demonstrate the importance of grassroots movements constructing their own communication networks that can facilitate autonomous knowledge production.

I begin by outlining the theoretical framework that underpins my analysis, focusing first the WSF's contradictory position in the present geopolitical conjuncture. Though it has been conceived as an important site for the elaboration of alternative knowledge projects that can challenge dominant modes of thought, the WSF is also criss-crossed by various axes of exclusion. Suggesting that one such axis relates to the role and status of place-based movements and their knowledges, I outline analytical perspectives that highlight the political and epistemic significance of place in a globalised world, and consider the difference that sensitivity to place makes to the way in which we might conceptualise the relationship between communication and knowledge production in transnational movement networks. I then provide a detailed analysis of the practices of placed-based communication activists at the Belém WSF. I demonstrate how they sought not just to act as conduits of information between the "local" and the "global", but to construct communication spaces – both temporary and longer-term – which were at once place-based *and* formed the basis for engagement with wider networks at different scales.

This article is based on ethnographic research carried out in Belém from November 2008 to February 2009. During this time, I worked as a volunteer at the office of the organising committee of the WSF 2009 and participated in the activities of the communication working group, helping to organise a set of

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[1] Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Peru, Surinam, and Venezuela.

"shared communication projects" (Stephansen, 2011; 2012) for independent media. I attended meetings and workshops with communication activists from Belém and elsewhere, and conducted in-depth interviews with them about their practice.

I have carried out this research from a position of political commitment and practical engagement, and conceive of the knowledge that it has produced as a collaborative effort. This does not mean that power hierarchies are irrelevant; my identity as an educated white European clearly places me in a position of privilege vis-à-vis the activists who are the subjects of this article, most of whom were residents of poor urban communities in Belém and of Afro-Brazilian or mixed European/indigenous descent. During my fieldwork I was acutely aware of being perceived by some of these activists as part of a global "WSF elite" that arrived in their city. Such power differentials cannot easily be ameliorated through methodological dictates, however carefully applied. At the same time, while these differences clearly matter, I also do not want to over-emphasise them, as this might contribute to their reification. What I have tried to do – based on an understanding of all knowledge as necessarily socially situated and partial – is to position myself in such a way that I might "see together with" activists in Belém and consider what the WSF looked like from their particular vantage point (cf. Haraway, 1991).

The WSF and "knowledges from below"

Since its inauguration in 2001, the WSF has brought together an impressive diversity of movements, many of which are geographically and politically anchored in the global South, with radically different organisational practices, political imaginaries and worldviews. Much has been made of this diversity and the capacity of the WSF to challenge the *pensamientos únicos* of neoliberal globalisation. A key reference point for such an understanding is Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2006) notion of the WSF as expressive of an "epistemology of the South": a manifestation of epistemic plurality which forms part of a struggle for "cognitive justice" for knowledges and practices that have been discredited by Western modernity (cf. Santos, 2007; Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007). As epistemology of the South, according to Santos, the WSF seeks to replace the "monocultures" of hegemonic globalisation with "ecologies" that allow for a plurality of knowledges and practices to coexist. Thus conceived, it might be situated within the broad historical challenge that anti-colonial movements, along with movements of women, indigenous peoples, and ethnic and sexual minorities (among others) have posed to the hegemony of Eurocentric and masculinist worldviews and their claims to universality and objectivity. Insofar as in brings together and advances the knowledge claims of such movements, the WSF might be conceived as a continuation of this trend.

Though suggestive of an *aspiration*, it is however not at all clear that such a vision of the WSF as a space for multiple "knowledges from below" is empirically accurate, given the very real hierarchies that characterise it in

practice. As Janet Conway (2012: 24) makes clear, "the movements of the WSF are encountering each other on a historically unequal playing field constituted by the coloniality of power".[2] Challenging Santos's somewhat optimistic assessment of the WSF's emancipatory potential, this draws attention to the various axes of exclusion that operate also within the supposedly horizontal "open space" of the Forum.[3]

> Recognizing the character of the contemporary world order as one of global coloniality, and the current period of transition as a crisis of Euro-modernity, problematizes modernity, including its emancipatory traditions. It puts the decolonization of knowledges on the agenda of movements worldwide, especially in navigating North/South, non-indigenous/indigenous, and modern emancipatory/subaltern other divides. The movements of the first halves of the foregoing couplets have been hegemonic relative to their others, historically and currently, in and beyond the social forum. Those others remain far more excluded and subaltern, including in the WSF (Conway, 2012: 24).

One important axis of exclusion within the WSF, which intersects in important respects with the ones mentioned above, relates to the role and status of place-based actors vis-à-vis those that operate on a more self-evidently global scale. As the WSF has travelled around the world, it has become a site for claims by various "local subalterns". From Dalits in India to urban slum-dwellers in Nairobi to indigenous peoples in the Amazon, such groups have come to the WSF to encounter global civil society, make their voices heard, and assert their right to be present in the space of the Forum (Conway, 2004; 2008a). This has not been unproblematic: at several editions of the WSF the exclusion of the local resident population has been the subject of controversy, raising the question of exactly how "local" or "global" any given edition of the WSF should be (Conway, 2008a).

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[2] The term "coloniality of power" is used by Ánibal Quijano (2000) to refer to the persistence of racialised hierarchies of power imposed by European colonialism. More generally, it is associated with the so-called modernity/coloniality research programme, whose members (apart from Quijano) include Walter Mignolo (2000a, 2000b, 2002) and Enrique Dussel (2000, 2002). See Escobar (2004, 2007b) for an overview of this literature and Conway (2012) for an analysis of the WSF from a modernity/coloniality perspective.

[3] Commentators have highlighted a number of ways in which the WSF falls short of its ideals of openness and horizontality. These include the formal exclusion from the WSF of political parties, groups involved in armed struggle, and anyone not opposed to neoliberalism (Biccum, 2005; Conway & Singh, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2005); structural barriers to participation such as travel costs and visa restrictions (Andretta & Doerr, 2007; Doerr, 2007; Vinthagen, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2005); the WSF's failure to reach out to new actors beyond the "already converted" (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004; Sen, 2004); lack of transparency and existence of informal power structures (Albert, 2008; Pleyers, 2004; 2008); more subtle mechanisms of exclusion arising from cultural norms and conventional notions of political literacy (Doerr, 2007; Wright, 2005); and the persistence of discrimination and even violence against women (Roskos & Willis, 2007).

The debate about the role and status of place-based activisms overlaps in important respects with the question of the subaltern in the WSF (Conway, 2008a). The spaces and decision-making structures of the Forum have been dominated by a highly mobile cosmopolitan elite of scholar-activists – many of whom are members of transnational research and advocacy networks – who have the resources and inclination to travel the world to attend social forums and related meetings (Pleyers, 2008; Worth & Buckley, 2009). Such cosmopolitan intellectuals – who by virtue of their mobility and transnational connections become constituted as "global" actors within the WSF process – have tended also to be the producers of what come to be seen as authoritative knowledges within and about the WSF, while the knowledges of place-based movements (indigenous peoples, rural populations, the urban poor) – who come to be constituted as "local" – tend to be marginalised.

Although this hierarchy of scale cannot straightforwardly be mapped onto other hierarchies constituted by the "coloniality of power", neither is it entirely distinct from them. Though by no means a homogenous group, the cosmopolitan intellectuals who are positioned as "global" are mostly educated within the terms of Western academia, and the knowledges that have been hegemonic – within the WSF as well as in debates about the WSF and global justice more broadly conceived – are those that are rooted in the theoretical and political traditions of Western modernity (Conway, 2012). Such hierarchies of knowledge and scale also overlap with racial hierarchies: white or light-skinned Europeans and Euro-descendants are overrepresented among the intellectual elites that are positioned as "global", while indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and other racialised groups figure more prominently among those designated as "local".

Consequently, the question of "decolonisation of knowledge" – understood as a project concerned with recognising and decentring the authority of Euro-modernist thought – needs to incorporate the issue of the role and status place-based knowledges, within and beyond the WSF. This is not to say that place-based, grassroots, or subaltern knowledges necessarily or automatically constitute a challenge to Eurocentrism or coloniality,[4] but it is to recognise that politics of place and scale are closely bound up with geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge.

Problematising globality

Beyond the challenge that any particular form of "knowledge from below" may pose to dominant modes of thought, place-based activisms also problematise the claim to globality that is arguably at the heart of the social forum project. As its name suggests, the WSF from the outset has had a global ambition: it is defined in the Charter of Principles as a "world process" and routinely described in such terms by organisers and commentators alike. Debates around the status

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[4] Thanks to Janet Conway for helping me see this point more clearly.

of place-based activisms draw attention not only to the Forum's far from global reach in empirical terms but also the political character of the categories "local" and "global". As Escobar (2008: 30) points out, debates about globalisation have tended to equate the global with "space, capital, and the capacity to transform while the local is associated with place, labor, tradition, and hence with what will inevitably give way to more powerful forces". Within such frameworks, "local" movements are frequently reduced to, at best, misguided struggles to defend traditional ways of life against modernising forces, or, at worst, anti-modern fundamentalisms. Such a conception is also present within the WSF, among those who adopt what Osterweil (2005: 25) refers to as a "universalising globalist" perspective, according to which "effective resistance to neo-liberal capitalist globalization must come in the form of a united global movement that has moved beyond place-based and local struggles".

The place-based character of many contemporary movements challenges this equation of the global with the universal. Though such movements are often concerned with the defence of place against the delocalising effects of global capital, their politics of place cannot be reduced to mere resistance to global forces (Escobar, 2008). Rather, it "can be seen as an emergent form of politics, a novel political imaginary in that it asserts a logic of difference and possibility that builds on the multiplicity of actions at the level of everyday life" (Escobar, 2008: 67). Such a politics of place does not equal insularity: the struggles of many movements involve both the defence of local models of social life and mobilisations involving the construction of coalitions at different scales (Escobar, 2007a; 2008). What is discernible in such practices is an alternative version of globality and what it means to be engaged in global politics. Osterweil conceptualises this emergent politics as "place-based globalism": a political imaginary that "sees true or qualitative globality as comprised of many nodes, places, interconnections and relations that at no point are totally consolidated into a singular global entity" (2005: 26).

In such a perspective, the place-based character of such movements can be conceived in terms of a positive project concerned with the construction of alternative political and epistemological imaginaries; "an expanding politics of diversity and recognition that acknowledges the multiplicity of alternative visions, values and world views, and the presence of existing 'other worlds'" (Conway, 2008b: 223). The practices of such movements involve the production of knowledge that is "embedded in locality and that is responsive and accountable to place-based constituencies – as opposed to the detached expert knowledge of modernity" (Escobar, 2007a: 286). This can be understood as what Santos (2007: 36) refers to as "postmodern knowledge": "knowledge about the conditions of possibility of human action projected into the world from local time-spaces". Such a perspective draws attention to the importance of place (understood both as a particular geographical territory and people's culturally and historically informed experience of, and engagement with, this territory) to the elaboration of alternative knowledge projects – and perhaps even new epistemological frameworks.

Communication and knowledge production

What implications does this have for how we understand the relationship between communication and knowledge production in transnational movement networks such as the WSF? Much writing on the relationship of social movements to new communication technologies has focused on the opportunities that the internet offers movements to bypass dominant media and construct their own communication networks. Since Indymedia first pioneered the use of open publishing in the late 1990s, the emergence of web 2.0 technologies has increased exponentially the possibilities for ordinary citizens as well as movement activists to circulate their own media content.

Manuel Castells refers to this new form of socialised communication as "mass self-communication": "mass" because "it reaches potentially a global audience", "self" because "it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many" (2007: 248). Giving social movements the chance to enter the public domain from multiple sources, the emergence of mass self-communication increases their chances of effecting social and political change, as "[t]he greater the autonomy of the communicating subject vis-à-vis the controllers of societal communication nodes, the higher the chances for the introduction of messages challenging dominant values and interests in communication networks" (2009: 413).

In such an account, there is a clear privileging of the global: the ability of movements to create or influence global communication networks is, according to Castells, crucial to their success. Observing that in the network society, networks of power are usually global while resistance is usually local, he contends that "[h]ow to reach the global from the local, through networking with other localities – how to 'grassroot' the space of flows – becomes the key strategic question for the social movements of our age" (2009: 52). Like networks of power, alternative projects must also go through global communication networks to transform consciousness if they wish to effect social change: "it is only by acting on global discourses through the global communication networks that they can affect power relationships in the global networks that structure all societies" (Castells, 2009: 53).

Attention to the epistemic and political significance of place, however, complicates this imperative for movements to "go global", raising questions about how media and communication can contribute to the production of place-based knowledges. Research on alternative and citizens' media shows that communication activists around the world also operate at very local scales (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Rodríguez, 2001; 2011; Rodríguez, Kidd & Stein, 2009). Citizens' media are often driven by a concern to enable members of local communities to express identities, negotiate differences, and enact forms of sociality that strengthen solidarity (Rodríguez, 2001; 2011). Such media can play a vital role in constructing and reinforcing a sense of place and place-based collective imaginaries (Rodríguez, 2009; 2011). In the context of the WSF, this highlights the need to not simply bypass the local in favour of the global but

examine the multiple scales at which activists operate and the complex intersections between them (cf. Sassen, 2006; 2007).

By looking at how communication activists in Belém – whose commitment to place was central to their political practice – engaged with the WSF, this article explores some of the complexities of the relationship between "local" actors and the "global" WSF process. Though they initially understood their relationship to the WSF in fairly conventional hierarchical terms, conceiving of the WSF as "global civil society" arriving in Belém and themselves as "local" actors wanting to "speak to the world", these activists also made innovative use of the WSF to facilitate place-based processes of knowledge production and give impetus to a longer-term project to strengthen movement-based communication networks in the Amazon. Their strategies and practices underline the importance of place-based movements appropriating communication tools for their own purposes, in order to create conditions for the elaboration of knowledges grounded in their own realities and lived experience. For the activists discussed in this article, this is a project that is inextricably bound up with place-*making*: the production of knowledges starting from the Amazon – a vast region that comprises a huge diversity of peoples and cultures – also involves considerable work to define what the Amazon *is*. Their emergent project of place-making – grounded in the production of knowledges *within*, *about* and *for* the Amazon – offers a glimpse of what the construction of alternative epistemological imaginaries founded on a politics of place may look like in practice.[5]

Encountering the WSF

> Since they started hearing talk about the WSF, people had this yearning, this will, the social movements were anxious to participate, to be able to give their cry for freedom. So from then on, everybody created this atmosphere around the WSF, that atmosphere of power, that atmosphere of dynamism, of people being able to scream. So, "are we going to be able to divulge? Are we going to be able to scream? Are we going to be able to realise our desire?" (Community radio activist, interview, December 2008).[6]

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[5] Many accounts of the Belém WSF focus (rightly) on the historic presence in the forum of indigenous peoples, from the Amazon and elsewhere, who advanced alternative cosmo-visions based on concepts of civilisational crisis and *buen vivir* along with a strong attachment to territory. Their particular knowledge projects and practices are central to any broader consideration of "decolonisation of knowledge" and politics of place in the Amazon. This article, however, tells a different (though related) story: that of communication activists from poor urban communities in Belém who sought to articulate their own struggles and realities to those of other actors in the Amazon – including indigenous movements. Indigenous peoples and their knowledge claims are not, in other words, the specific focus of this article, which is – necessarily – a partial account, and should be read as such.

[6] All interview quotes have been translated from Portuguese by the author.

The first group of activists discussed in this article belonged to a network of community radio stations from the metropolitan region of Belém and elsewhere in the Brazilian state of Pará. These were connected through the Forum in Defence of Community Radios (*Fórum em Defesa das Rádios Comunitárias*, or *Fórum de Rádios*, as it commonly was referred to) – a body set up in October 2007 in collaboration with the Pará Society for the Defence of Human Rights (*Sociedade Paraense de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos*) to provide juridical support to community radio activists facing prosecution for unauthorised broadcasting. In addition to fulfilling this legal function, the *Fórum de Rádios* also constituted a reference point for an emerging movement for the democratisation of communication in Pará. In the period leading up to the event, the *Fórum de Rádios* held weekly meetings, in which a diversity of communication activists, including journalists, students, magazine editors, and video producers, participated on various occasions. These meetings functioned alternately as occasions for information exchange about events organised by social movements in the city, political discussions about the communication movement and its aims, and preparations for participation in the WSF.[7]

When I began my fieldwork in Belém in November 2008, two and a half months before the start of the WSF, the atmosphere among activists was one of excitement and anticipation, combined with a slight feeling of uncertainty. There was a clear sense of the historical significance of the WSF coming to Belém, of it representing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But for what? What exactly was the World Social Forum? What was going to happen? Among the communication activists I worked with, there was a flurry of activity, with meetings of one sort or another constantly taking place to discuss how to participate in the forum, how best to take advantage of it, and what it would mean for local and regional movements and their struggles. For most, the WSF 2009 was going to be their first social forum and expectations were high.

At this stage, community radio activists conceived of their task vis-à-vis the WSF as twofold. One set of strategies focused on the need to inform local residents about the Forum. There was a widespread sense that the general population of Belém and surrounding areas either lacked information about the WSF or was misinformed about its character and purpose, as the local mainstream media tended to frame the WSF as a tourist event or conference organised by the Workers' Party led state government of Pará. Community radio activists therefore saw it as a key priority to inform their listeners about the character of the WSF and the issues being discussed there, in this way providing

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[7] The majority of regular participants in the *Fórum de Rádios* were residents of poor urban communities within the metropolitan region of Belém, of Afro-Brazilian or mixed (mostly indigenous-European) descent, and in their 30s and 40s (with some younger and older members). Though some participated occasionally in meetings of the communication working group of the local WSF organising committee, most of these community radio activists occupied a relatively peripheral position vis-à-vis the "official" forum organising process, prevented by various factors (such as sporadic internet access, lack of resources, and weak connections to more established sectors of local civil society) from being more fully integrated.

a much-needed counterpoint to the mainstream media. As one member of the *Fórum de Rádios* explained:

> The main objective is this, that all this information reaches this long-suffering population here, so that they can understand this process [...]. Because their minds are so alienated, from other media, from television, that they don't know, they don't know what a World Social Forum is [...]. So our principal objective is this, to bring information about the things that will be happening at the forum to the peripheries (Eduardo, interview, December 2008).[8]

The second set of strategies revolved around using the WSF to make visible local and regional realities and struggles. As the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section suggests, there was a widespread sense that the WSF provided a unique opportunity for communities and movements in Belém and the Amazon as a whole to "speak to the world". Consequently, community radio activists understood their role as being to give voice to these communities and movements. For one woman, this was a matter of showing the culture and ways of life of the local population:

> [I want to] divulge our culture, our music, to talk about our city, to show, because there are going to be a lot of people from elsewhere participating... show what Belém is like, how it is that the people of Belém live, talk about the sights of Belém, talk about our customs, show our community, how it lives. This is very important (Gabriela, interview, December 2008).

Others, meanwhile, stressed the need to show the realities of the hardship suffered by the local population. This was often placed in the context of what many activists saw as attempts by the local media and government authorities to present an overly positive image of the city to WSF participants. One activist, who belonged to a community radio in Terra Firme, one of the poorest *bairros* in Belém, explained it in these terms:

> I think it won't do to sugar coat things. You have to show the reality of the country, that there is misery, poverty, hunger, prejudice, violence, and this we have to show. And so the Forum, hosted here in Belém, is a good moment to be denouncing the indifference of our appointed authorities (José, interview, December 2008).

Similarly, the WSF was also greeted as an opportunity to highlight the consequences of state-supported exploitation of the Amazon for the region's indigenous peoples:

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[8] Names have been changed to protect anonymity unless otherwise stated.

> We will be able to tell everyone that the indigenous, that the peoples of the Amazon are being massacred by the advance of national capital within the Brazilian territory (Roberto, interview, December 2008).

How might we understand this desire to "speak to the world"? Left at this, it would seem that community radio activists in Belém conceived of their task primarily in terms of acting as conductors for vertical flows of information between the "local" and the "global": on the one hand, to distribute knowledge about the WSF "downwards" to the local population, and, on the other, to disseminate knowledge about local or regional conditions "upwards" to the WSF, conceptualised here as a manifestation of global civil society. But is this all there is to their motivations and practices? The problem with such an analysis is that it makes it difficult to understand the strategies of community radio activists as anything more than a cry for help from disempowered "local" actors. It leads to a conceptualisation of their practices simply in terms of resistance to dominant meanings, and denies them the possibility of positive agency, of being able to construct alternatives. Moreover, a conception of these communication practices simply in terms of transmission from the "local" to the "global" and vice versa relies on a hierarchical conception of scale which privileges the global and fails to account for the variety of scales on which activists operate (cf. Escobar, 2007a; Sassen, 2006; 2007). Though to a certain extent hierarchical conceptions of scale were discernible in community radio activists' understanding of the WSF and their relation to it, especially before they had worked out fully the nature and extent of their participation, their practices went beyond "local" appeals to "global" civil society. In the next section, I discuss how members of the *Fórum de Rádios* made use of the WSF to create a temporary communication space – through an FM radio station that broadcast from the forum site – which enabled them to elaborate place-based knowledges while simultaneously facilitating transnational connections and exchange.

Temporary openings: the *Rádio dos Povos*

> The radio served as an exchange between the people who were there [at the WSF] from other countries with our population here in Belém. Why? Because [...] from the moment they were using our microphones, they were passing on to other people what they were thinking, not just about the WSF, but also about the capital Belém. And the people who were there [listening] ended up sharing what the person was transmitting [...] through the interactivity that the public had with the interviewee (Fernando, co-organiser of the *Rádio dos Povos*, interview, February 2009).

During the 2009 WSF, activists involved in the *Fórum de Rádios* set up an FM radio station – dubbed *Rádio dos Povos* [the Peoples' Radio] – which broadcast

live for the duration of the event. Coordinated by representatives from four local community radios who were responsible for technical infrastructure and management of the programme schedule, the *Rádio dos Povos* was live on air from early morning until late evening every day, and around ten community radios (mainly from Pará but also from elsewhere in Brazil) participated, dividing available air time between them. According to organisers, the radio reached most of the metropolitan region of Belém as well as some neighbouring areas.

At a basic level, the *Rádio dos Povos* functioned to raise awareness of the WSF among the local population. As one of the organisers, a woman from a community radio in a poor neighbourhood on the periphery of Belém, explained:

> Our concern was to be passing information about the forum to people who were not here in Belém following the forum, so that they could have a sense, the listener could have a sense of the programme, of what was happening, of the debates that were taking place at the forum (Brenda, interview, February 2009).

Seeking to bring the WSF to their local communities, community radio activists went to workshops and seminars, listened to speeches and debates to learn about the themes being discussed, and got hold of representatives from various movements who they then brought back to the studio to be interviewed.

As well as acting as the eyes and ears of their listeners, the organisers of the *Rádio dos Povos* also conceived of their role in terms of "giving voice" to WSF participants. What they wanted to achieve through the radio was, in Brenda's words,

> to be able give voice to all the segments present at the forum. Whoever wanted to go there to talk about or debate any subject, that we could put issues on the agenda and debate them, without discriminating against anyone […], that delegates from whatever country, whatever state, could have access to the means of communication. Because of this we named it *Rádio dos Povos*, because this was what best identified… the identity of the radio was of this amplitude, of this democratic opening, that any segment could arrive there, could have their space and speak, give their interview, give their testimony, pass on their experience (interview, February 2009).

In bringing the voices of the WSF to its listeners, an important function of the *Rádio dos Povos* was to provide a counterpoint to the distorted image of the forum that activists found in the local mainstream media, thereby helping the local population better understand its objectives and significance. However, the radio was not only about one-way dissemination *from* the WSF *to* the listeners. Emphasising the interactive character of their programmes, activists also conceived of the radio as a means for listeners to participate in the forum. As

was everyday practice in their own radios, they opened up telephone lines for listeners to interact with presenters and interviewees in the studio. Describing the target audience of the radio as those who were excluded from the forum because of the R$30 (around €11) entrance fee, one organiser saw the *Rádio dos Povos* as

> the entrance ticket that enabled these people to participate. People who were on the outside, when they had some issue they were interested in, they called and spoke live on air, via telephone, directly on air, on the radio, and debated the issue with us (Fernando, interview, February 2009).

As well as bringing the WSF to the local population, then, the radio also brought the local population, most of who would otherwise have been excluded, to the WSF. By enabling this kind of two-way communication, it provided opportunities not just for information dissemination but for debate about the issues being discussed at the forum. In this way, the radio might be conceived as having provided a link between the "local" and the "global', enabling listeners who could not be physically present to share in the intercultural learning and exchange of experience for which the WSF is celebrated.

However, if we consider in more detail the activities facilitated by the *Rádio dos Povos*, it becomes clear that its function went beyond inclusion. More than just a means to include the "local" population within the "global civil society" gathered at the WSF, the communication space opened up by the radio functioned as a node for transnational connections while being firmly grounded in a commitment to the Amazon as a place. According to organisers, the common denominator for the diverse range of themes debated on the *Rádio dos Povos* was a connection to the Amazon. From urban reform to hydroelectric dam projects, climate change to the struggles of indigenous and Afro-descendent populations, topics were either directly related to the Amazon or discussed with reference to their relevance for, and impact on, people living in the region. As one organiser affirmed, "the criteria that we chose [for what to cover] were like this: verify the most visible themes within the forum that had to do with the Amazon region" (Brenda, interview, February 2009).

This production of knowledge about the Amazon as a region also involved place-*making*. As Brenda explained,

> I think [the radio] contributed to disseminating the significance of the WSF, what it represents for society. What the importance of this movement is, principally here in the Amazon region. Say to the population what it means to be Amazonian. People are in Belém and didn't know that they were from the Amazon region. Belém is inside the Amazon region and we have a responsibility to debate the problems that are inherent in the Amazon region (interview, February 2009).

Raising awareness among Belém's urban population about the problems that the Amazon faces and the struggles of movements in the region – enabling them to "see the reality of the Amazon region, in depth", in Brenda's words – also had as an aim to make this population identify as part of the Amazon. As hinted at in the interview extract quoted above, a sense of belonging to the Amazon – a region that is perhaps most commonly understood as a vast and sparsely populated rainforest – is not necessarily obvious to residents of Belém, a metropolis of around 1.4 million inhabitants (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2010). Generating a sense of connection to the Amazon among this urban population, by linking the struggles of poor communities in Belém to those of indigenous peoples, *ribeirinhos* and other rural populations elsewhere in the region, was therefore a key task for the *Rádio dos Povos*. As one community radio activist explained in the run-up to the forum, this was not only about producing media coverage; it was also, crucially, about constructing regional alliances:

> We are going to take advantage of the coverage to engage in dialogue with other movements [...]. It is not just about coverage in itself. We will show the situation, for example, of the indigenous, how they live. But our idea is to support their struggle and for them to support ours. So it's about political dialogue, beyond coverage, beyond saying "let's go to the indigenous camp, [and show that] they live like this, their difficulties are these" but [also asking] "how can we unite our struggles?" (Henrique, interview, December 2008).

The kind of identity construction at play here can be understood as based on the production of discourses that define the Amazon as a place. This place-making might be described, on the one hand, as based on linking the local urban population to the region as a whole; on the other, it was concerned with facilitating a better understanding of the geopolitical location of the Amazon vis-à-vis the world, particularly in relation to its implication in the projects of global capital. Community radio activists' concern to facilitate the production of knowledge *in*, *about*, and *for* the Amazon – and involve their local listeners in this process – provided the occasion for connections to be made with other actors and their knowledges. WSF participants – from elsewhere in the Amazon and other parts of the world – were brought into the studio in order to bring their experience to bear on issues pertaining to the Amazon, and local activists in turn shared their own experiences. In this way, while grounded in a particular locality and focused on place-based issues, the *Rádio dos Povos* functioned simultaneously as a convergence point for actors from different localities and as a space for translation between different knowledges.

The experience of the *Rádio dos Povos* shows how the WSF provided not simply an opportunity for "local subalterns" to "speak to the world" but an occasion for a collective project of knowledge production involving participants from different places. Although activists were motivated by a concern to better understand a particular place, their participation in the radio also enabled them

to arrive at a better understanding of their place in transnational networks. While they might initially have conceived of themselves as the "local" counterpart to "global" civil society arriving in their city, the experience of the *Rádio dos Povos* facilitated a conceptualisation among community radio activists of themselves and the Amazon as connected to other actors and places through transnational networks.

Having considered the way in which the WSF prompted the opening up, for a delimited period of time, of a place-based communication space for transnational connections in the form of the *Rádio dos Povos*, the following section examines longer-term efforts to strengthen movement-based communication networks in the Amazon region, and the difference that the WSF made to this project.

Longer-term strategies: strengthening communication networks in the Amazon

> [The forum] served for us to show the work of the organisation and strengthen the groups that work with us, that always worked with us, which are young people, social movements, women, university students […]. For us, the event served to further strengthen this will to continue a process of participatory communication here in the Amazon (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, February 2009).[9]

The second group of activists discussed in this article were connected to CEPEPO, a small NGO based in Belém that worked with communication as a tool for popular education.[10] Inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, CEPEPO was founded in 1980 to support urban movements in Belém, using photography and film as pedagogical tools to help poor communities reflect on and better understand their realities and struggles. The organisation had since continued working with communities and movements on a range of issues, and described itself as "an NGO that works with and for social movements, to strengthen and document their struggles, using audio-visual tools, giving workshops in this area, producing documentaries and institutional films" (CEPEPO, n.d., my translation). Founded on a vision of the transformative effects of participatory communication, CEPEPO had a long history of working with urban communities in Belém, running projects with the aim of contributing to individual and collective empowerment.

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[9] Ilma Bittencourt (real name) was at the time of my fieldwork the director of CEPEPO.

[10] The organisation's full name was originally Centre for the Study and Practice of Popular Education *(Centro de Estudos e Práticas de Educação Popular)*; this was changed after the WSF 2009 to Centre for Communication and Popular Education *(Centro de Comunicação e Educação Popular)*.

At the time of my fieldwork, the organisation's premises – which provided meeting rooms, film equipment, editing facilities, and a small library – were located in the *barrio* of Guamá. Home to the Federal University of Pará, which hosted the WSF, Guamá is one of most deprived areas of Belém, but also has a diverse cultural and political life, and CEPEPO was strongly embedded in the local community.[11] In addition to this local orientation, the organisation also conceived of its ambit as including the rest of the state of Pará as well as the Amazon region as a whole. Activists involved in the organisation had a strong conception of their city and neighbourhoods as part of the Amazon, and this regional identification seemed more pertinent to their work than a sense of national identity. Much of CEPEPO's work was focused on thematic areas relating to the Amazon, including deforestation, agriculture, and development projects, and the organisation had been involved in various projects with rural communities in the region. Its work could be characterised as having a dual focus: on the one hand, to document and make visible the realities and struggles of people living in Belém and the Amazon, and on the other, through capacity-building, to enable movements and communities to appropriate communication technologies for their own purposes.

Having started as an organisation concerned with the use of communication as a tool for education, CEPEPO increasingly had come to see communication as a theme in its own right, and its own role as being to promote the issue of communication among organisations and social movements, in Belém and in the Amazon as a whole. This was motivated by a strong sense of communication being a major challenge for movements and organisations in the region, partly due to problems of geographical distance and poorly developed communication infrastructures, partly due to a lack of resources and capacity. A key aim for CEPEPO was therefore to strengthen movement-based communication networks in the Amazon, through capacity building, awareness-raising, and developing bonds of solidarity.

The arrival in Belém of the WSF was greeted as an important opportunity to give impetus to this project. This was conceived partly in terms of learning from the experiences of communication activists from elsewhere in Brazil and other countries:

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[11] Very much a low-budget operation, the work of CEPEPO was co-ordinated by one full-time member of staff (a white woman in her late 30s) supported at the time of the WSF by a small core of young volunteers from Guamá and nearby Terra Firme. In their late teens and early twenties, these volunteers (one woman and three men, of Afro-Brazilian and mixed heritage) had come into contact with CEPEPO through participating in the organisation's communication projects for young people, and had aspirations to continue studying or working with communication. Though similarly situated to the *Fórum de Rádios* in terms of its connection to poor urban communities, CEPEPO was somewhat better equipped (in terms of resources, time and cultural capital) to participate in the forum organising process, and the organisation's director, Ilma Bittencourt, was one of the co-ordinators of the Communication Working Group for the WSF 2009. Though they did not work closely together, members of CEPEPO and the *Fórum de Rádios* attended each other's meetings and workshops in the run-up to the forum.

> The forum is going to be this great moment, where there will be other organisations which already have managed to work a bit with [communication], where we can be seeing, participating in this laboratory, learning, and trying to implement this afterwards here in our region, in the Amazon (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, December 2008).

In preparation for the forum, CEPEPO hosted what was dubbed the "Shared Communication Laboratory" (*Laboratório da Comunicação Compartilhada*), which was in operation for a few weeks prior to the event.[12] The Laboratory organised a series of workshops bringing together communication activists, members of various social movements, university students, and local residents. During these workshops, participants gained practical skills in journalism, radio, and audio-visual production, began to produce media content relating to the WSF, and made plans for their coverage of the event itself. As a result, activists connected to CEPEPO were well prepared for the forum, having learnt practical skills, established links with various other groups, and – perhaps most importantly – gained confidence in their abilities as communicators.

As well as offering the possibility to learn new skills and practices, the WSF – a rare occasion for organisations and movements in the Amazon that normally are separated by vast distances to come together – was seen as an important opportunity for CEPEPO to develop relationships with regional actors and demonstrate the importance of communication to them. In the period leading up to the WSF, CEPEPO invited representatives from a range of movements to the Shared Communication Laboratory to discuss how they could collaborate. This was conceived in terms of putting issues relating to the Amazon on the agenda:

> What we wanted was to [...] construct this space where we could congregate all these organisations that are related to the big themes to do with the Amazon. So what we did first was [...] call the social organisations from here in the Amazon, which represent the movements, in the widest sense possible, at the level of the Amazon. So we called the MST, we called Via Campesina, the women's movement, the indigenous movement, the black people's movement, to sit down and discuss how we could do this laboratory and incorporate these themes into each [communication] project[13] (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, February 2009).

Insofar as it brought together activists from different movements and enabled them to share their knowledge of issues relating to the Amazon, the Shared Communication Laboratory can be conceived as an attempt to create a space for

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[12] For a brief discussion of the politics and practice of "shared communication" in the WSF, see Stephansen (2012).

[13] The independent media coverage of the WSF 2009 was organised in a set of "projects": the TV Forum for audio-visual coverage, the Radio Forum for independent and community radios, and Ciranda for text- and image-based journalism.

translation and collective knowledge production which was oriented specifically towards the Amazon. Drawing on its history of working with regional actors and issues, CEPEPO put the Amazon, and its peoples and their struggles, at the centre of its engagement with the WSF. This commitment to the Amazon was also prominent in the way the organisation approached the task of reporting on the WSF:

> We decided here at CEPEPO that we were going to put this on the agenda, the Amazon, themes related to the Amazon, and where there were activities at the forum that had to do with the Amazon, we had to be there, covering, getting interviews, collecting material (Vanessa Silva, interview, February 2009).[14]

The WSF, in brief, was seen as an opportunity to give voice to movements in the Amazon and make their struggles and alternatives visible. Of particular significance to CEPEPO was the discovery of various online platforms for independent media coverage of the WSF, such as www.ciranda.net (for text- and image-based journalism) and www.wsftv.net (for audio-visual content). Previously, CEPEPO activists only had circulated their material by distributing DVDs, mainly within Belém; however, from the experience of the Shared Communication Laboratory, they discovered how to share their content with people in other parts of Brazil and the world.

This sense of being able to connect to the global – the idea that their work could be disseminated via online platforms that in principle are accessible to anyone anywhere in the world – was a great source of motivation and confidence:

> We went to the forum with a much higher self-esteem, in the sense that [we knew] we could produce good quality material and disseminate this material to various places in the world, in Brazil, and in the Amazon (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, February 2009).

However, as hinted at in this extract, acting on or through global communication networks was not necessarily their only – or even primary – concern. Given the difficulties that social movements and organisations in the Amazon have in communicating, circulating media coverage within the region was considered just as, or even more, important:

> First, I think [our audience is] Belém and the Amazon [...]. It's a very big complaint among the social movements that we don't see ourselves; we don't communicate what we are doing, neither to ourselves nor to civil society [...]. I think first here, because sometimes it is much easier to have information about the Amazon there in [your] country, there in São Paulo, but we don't have this

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[14] Vanessa Silva (real name) was a volunteer at CEPEPO from Guamá.

information here for society to know (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, February 2009).

Conscious of how movements and communities in the Amazon tend to be excluded from global communication networks and the knowledge that circulates in such networks, CEPEPO sought not simply to enable place-based movements to get a message across to a somehow external "global public". The organisation's work to strengthen communication networks in the Amazon was also, crucially, about creating a space in which these movements could elaborate what that message might be. A key aim, in other words, was to create conditions for production of knowledge *in*, *about*, and *for* the Amazon, starting from the realities of people living in the region.

This project went hand-in-hand with place-making: as in the case of the *Rádio dos Povos*, the production of knowledges starting from the Amazon necessarily also involves work to define what the Amazon *is*. The complaint among movements that "we don't see ourselves" is telling in this respect: strengthening communication networks in the Amazon is not just about rectifying a lack of factual information; it is also about constructing shared understandings of the Amazon as a place and of what it means to be from that place. During an interview in which we discussed the significance of knowledge produced by social movements, Bittencourt offered the following thoughts on the issue of knowledge production in the Amazon:

> Here in the Amazon, it is a struggle which I think is very related to identity […] in the sense of constructing a knowledge for the communities, for the originary peoples from here, which is ours, constructed through our own relationships here […]. We perceive that today, the movements, they understand better this process of constructing knowledge from here, from our roots, from our identity – and not from what comes from above […], which causes problems [in the sense that] you don't manage to develop, you don't construct identity (interview, December 2008).

Recognising the obstacles to identity construction posed by detached "knowledge from above", Bittencourt sensed strongly the need for people in the Amazon to become *subjects* of knowledge and engage in a collective process of identity construction grounded in place. But what exactly was the character of the "Amazon" that CEPEPO wanted to help construct?

What stands out in the accounts of CEPEPO members, as well as those of the community radio activists discussed earlier, is a sense of the Amazon as a place of *difference*, a place that is home to a multiplicity of peoples and movements. When they spoke about the Amazon, they typically did so in terms of the struggles of a diversity of movements and groups in the region: women, young people, poor urban communities, Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples – often with emphasis on the latter two. This particular association of the Amazon

with difference was also discernible in CEPEPO's coverage of the WSF 2009: in the videos that the organisation produced and posted on wsftv.net during the event, the diversity of movements in the region was an important theme in its own right, and indigenous groups as well as Afro-descendants (particularly local youth) featured prominently.

While the notion of difference provided a common thread, what sometimes was less clear in these accounts were the exact boundaries of the Amazon under construction. Though the term "Pan-Amazon" featured occasionally, activists tended to speak of "the Amazon" in general terms, more often than not referring implicitly to the Brazilian Amazon. This mostly Brazilian orientation was also evident in CEPEPO's coverage of the WSF 2009, which was almost exclusively in Portuguese. However, the forum contributed to bringing the trans-boundary character of the Amazon into clearer view, and provided an entry point for CEPEPO into the Pan-Amazon Social Forum (*Fórum Social Pan-Amazônico*, or FSPA) – a process modelled on the WSF which has had as an aim to bring together movements from across the nine countries that share the Pan-Amazon.[15] Having previously only followed this process at a distance, CEPEPO activists decided after the WSF 2009 to join the FSPA communication working group and participate in the organisation of the 2010 FSPA. In July 2009, a planning meeting of the FSPA Council was held in Belém, and CEPEPO's coverage from this event shows a much clearer Pan-Amazon orientation: of seven videos uploaded on wsftv.net during this meeting, three were in Spanish (two of which featured indigenous people from Ecuador and Peru respectively), three featured Afro-descendants talking about racism (one highlighting the importance of unity between Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples in the Pan-Amazon), while two examined the social and environmental impacts of large development projects in the Amazon.

Like the *Rádio dos Povos*, the case of CEPEPO shows that the WSF should not be thought of as simply an occasion for "local" movements to act "on global discourses through the global communication networks", to use Castells' (2009: 35) terms. For activists connected to CEPEPO, the WSF provided the opportunity to strengthen autonomous processes of knowledge production and place-making in the Amazon. Although they welcomed the opportunities that the WSF appeared to open up for disseminating material at a global scale, there was also a strong sense of the need for people in the Amazon to appropriate communication technologies in order to be able to take ownership of the knowledges they produce and share these among themselves. The importance of such a project was summed up by Ilma Bittencourt in the following terms:

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[15] At the time of the WSF in Belém, there had been four previous editions of the FSPA (in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005). The WSF 2009 gave renewed impetus to this process, leading to the organisation of the fifth FSPA in Santarém, Brazil, in 2010 and later the sixth FSPA in Cojiba, Bolivia, in 2012.

The social movements have a lot of information about how another world is possible [...] in the form of family agriculture, alternative forms of fishing, of food production, social movements' construction in their communities, how they are constructing more egalitarian relations. So I think this creation of another possible world is in our hands. If we manage to appropriate the tools, and understand communication as a human right, and put this forward through the opportunities that are being given to us today, we will manage to change the world (interview, February 2009).

Conclusion

This article has explored the complex ways in which communication activists in Belém engaged with the WSF 2009 and sought to make use of it for their own purposes. In the case of the *Rádio dos Povos*, community radio activists constructed a temporary communication space that facilitated exchange of knowledge and experience between WSF participants and the local resident population. In the case of CEPEPO's longer-term project of strengthening movement-based communication networks in the Amazon, the WSF provided a unique opportunity to learn from activists from other places, develop links with movements from across the region, and put themes relating to the Amazon on the agenda.

What these examples highlight is the centrality of place – and politics of place – to the practices and imaginaries of communication activists in Belém. Emerging as a central theme is the need for place-based movements to appropriate communication technologies for their own purposes. What comes across clearly both in the case of the *Rádio dos Povos* and CEPEPO is a strong commitment to facilitating autonomous processes of knowledge production that *start from* the Amazon and are grounded in local and regional realities. This commitment to place does not equal insularity; rather, the production of knowledge *in*, *about* and *for* the Amazon becomes a prerequisite and starting point for engaging with wider movement networks at different scales. In the case of the *Rádio dos Povos*, activists' concern to facilitate a deeper understanding of issues pertaining to the Amazon among the local resident population provided the occasion for drawing in activists from elsewhere to share their experiences of similar struggles. In the case of CEPEPO's longer-term project, strengthening movement-based communication networks in the Amazon was conceived as a starting point for the elaboration and proliferation of alternatives grounded in the knowledges and practices of the region's movements.

The politics of place that these activists engaged in challenges conventional hierarchical understandings of scale, demonstrating the complex ways in which different scales of action may overlap, intersect or even be mutually constitutive. The *Rádio dos Povos*, while aimed at the local population of Belém and geared towards the elaboration of knowledges related to the Amazon region, simultaneously – and by virtue of its place-based character – provided a site for transnational connections. For CEPEPO, the ostensibly global WSF process gave

impetus to a project concerned with strengthening regional communication networks that could articulate a diversity of actors and struggles.

In both examples, the production and circulation of place-based knowledges are closely bound up with processes of place-making: the construction of shared understandings of what the Amazon is like as a place and what it means to be from that place. This is far from straightforward, given the vastness, diversity and trans-boundary character of the Amazon combined with the lack of adequate communication networks among movements in the region. Discernible in the discourses of communication activists in Belém is a conception of the Amazon as a place of difference and possibility, as a place that is home not only to a diversity of struggles against domination but to a diversity of *alternatives*. In this respect, their emergent project of place-making offers a glimpse of an alternative epistemological imaginary based on a logic of difference.

What this article has not done is analyse in depth the specific *content* of the knowledges being produced and circulated through these communication practices. In this respect, the extent to which such practices might contribute to a broader project of decolonisation of knowledge remains an open question. What *can* be said is that the efforts of communication activists to facilitate autonomous processes of knowledge production among movements of Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples and other marginalised groups in the Amazon – a region that for centuries has suffered the effects of colonialism – constitutes a necessary starting point for such a project.

This article began by highlighting the asymmetrical relationship between "global" cosmopolitan elites and "local" grassroots groups within the WSF process. What has become clear is that strengthening the capacity of place-based movements to communicate on their own terms is about much more than inclusion within the "global" space of the WSF: it is about enabling the proliferation of alternative knowledge projects at different scales, within and beyond the social forum process.

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