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Low-Income Pay Television Viewers

The Case of the Rio de Janeiro Shantytown of Rocinha

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Rocinha is Brazil's largest shantytown. In many ways, it has come to resemble "regular" neighborhoods, with its bustling commerce and its many residents with fixed and stable incomes. Yet, drug traffickers and open sewers coexist in Rocinha with pizza delivery services and pay television. It is therefore not surprising that Rocinha is often used to evoke both the negative and positive stereotypes of a violent, economically miserable Brazil, on the one hand, and a determined, resilient, and joyful people, on the other.

This paper presents research into pay television viewership habits in Rocinha. Residents responded to long questionnaires with multiple open-ended questions aimed at understanding whether the advent of pay television in Rocinha signaled a profound shift in habits or interests, with a particular focus on questions of media or cultural imperialism. There seems to be no strong evidence to support the thesis that cable television viewership in Rocinha is contributing to media imperialism, at least in the short term.

As is typical of research of this kind, many topics that the research was not designed to address can be discussed fruitfully through careful data analysis. For example, although satellite television services are available in Rocinha, for most people, the only reasonable television options were broadcast television with poor or even negligible reception or subscription to one of two cable systems. Thus, the idea of the social value of increasing access to local and national programming through narrowcast technologies in places where the number of broadcast options is small is worth examining here. Reasons for remaining subscribed are also particularly enlightening.

Introduction¹

The poor income distribution and the plight of the impoverished citizens of Brazil are well-known stories, particularly to scholars of Latin America. This paper tells another one of these stories, one that I hope will shed some light on the complexities of modern communication and media use in the context of poverty in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This paper will present only an overview of the research discussed below, and the figures have been removed for Web publication; readers are encouraged to contact me for additional details.

I spent July and August 1999 performing research on cable television use in Rocinha, Brazil's – and, many claim, Latin America's – largest slum, or *favela*. It is Brazil's most famous favela, is frequently the subject of news reports, and is often used to evoke many of the common images of poverty in that country. Rocinha has come to represent all that is wrong with Brazil: violence, the drug trade, poverty. But it also represents a point of hope and modernity, through the stories of individuals who “make it”; through the urbanization evident in residents' homes with relatively solid walls, running water, and electricity; and through the penetration of capitalist and consumer culture in its many embodiments, including cable television, which, at least potentially, connects Rocinha's residents to a larger world. Of course, commerce and consumer culture can as easily be understood as constituting part of what is “wrong with Brazil” and with its status as a developing country; the point here is not so much to critique these images as it is to illustrate the importance of Rocinha and the power of the images associated with the place and its residents.

Rocinha is both like and unlike other favelas. First inhabited in 1934, it is rather old and well established. It is also considerably larger than most favelas, and while population estimates

¹ This research was performed with the help of a generous travel grant from the Tinker Foundation. I would also like to thank the participants and my hosts, as well as Joe Straubhaar, John Downing, and Philip Doty for their intellectual support and patience in 1999 and since then.

vary widely (TV Roc, *A Rocinha em números*; IPLANRio, 1996), over 100,000 people reside in Rocinha. Additionally, Rocinha has a few major, paved roads, and most homes have electricity and running water, although the sewers remain for the most part open. Furthermore, the presence of drug traffickers remains formidable. Finally, income levels in Rocinha are higher than in other favelas and illiteracy and education rates are likewise favorable.

Half an hour by bus from Copacabana and abutting the upper-middle-class neighborhood of São Conrado, Rocinha stretches up the side of a steep hill, as is common, and the view from the top of the hill is breathtaking – enough to give credence to the saying that *favelados* (inhabitants of favelas) have the best views of the city. Rocinha is anything but isolated from the rest of the city: many buses carry passengers to and from Rocinha to all parts of the city of Rio de Janeiro, and residents share not only a beach, but also many commercial establishments, such as a supermarket, with residents of São Conrado.

With such a large population and relatively high incomes, Rocinha is able to support levels of commerce and services that might surprise outsiders. One of these services is the provision of pay television signals. With the assistance of the family that hosted me in Rocinha and a number of their neighbors, particularly one woman, Karina, who accompanied me for most of the research, I was able to identify not only the legally-operating TV Roc, but also three cable systems that were operating illegally there.² We administered long surveys with open-ended questions aimed at understanding subscribers' viewing habits and their reasons for and circumstances regarding their decisions to subscribe. The remainder of this paper will discuss only some of the highlights from the data analysis, in addition to a few conclusions we can draw regarding cultural and media imperialism and unequal access to information and communication

² Except for Rocinha (which is too famous to disguise) and TV Roc (which operates openly and legally), all names of participants and establishments have been changed.

technologies (ICTs). Again, readers are encouraged to contact me if they are interested in a more detailed discussion.

TV Roc and Alternative Systems

TV Roc was created in 1996 and resulted from a partnership between Net Rio and SMR Comunicações. Net is the cable television arm of Globo Enterprises, which is best known for its broadcast channel, called Rede Globo. Globo has for decades dominated the broadcast scene in Brazil, although its audience shares have dropped in recent years (Duarte, 1996). The intention was to bring pay television, a largely elite phenomenon, to the C and D classes, or the working poor and lower middle class (Silva, 1998).³

TV Roc's office is located in São Conrado very close to Rocinha. Roc employs residents to hook up homes, thereby reducing costs and making it easier to locate homes on unlabelled alleys. The company maintains a constant presence in Rocinha, and its employees go to great lengths to appear professional and above-board, although they are not always successful at convincing residents of their competence or honesty.

Roc provides not only new, narrowcast channels, but also, significantly, improved signals from all of the (at least theoretically) already available broadcast stations. The narrowcast channels are a subset of those available elsewhere in the city via Net; this reduced menu allows Roc to maintain low prices. Additionally, Roc offers two levels of service, the more expensive one offering a larger number of Net's channels. In 1999, access could be bought for a sign-up fee

³ The class structure in Brazil is often described as ranging from A (very rich) to E (extremely poor). Estimates and data collection methods vary widely, but it is generally acknowledged that a very small percentage – under five percent – of Brazilians are among class A and that class B comprises less than another twenty percent of the population. The majority of Brazilians belong to classes C and D, and members of class C in particular are generally believed to have, individually, little disposable income but to represent, in the aggregate, substantial buying power and an untapped market in many areas.

of R\$18, or about \$10, and a monthly fee of R\$18 (about \$10) or R\$32 (approximately \$18). The three alternative systems, each of whose area of operation overlapped with that of Roc but not with those of the other alternative systems, offered fewer channels for under half the price of the less expensive option offered by TV Roc. The alternative systems focused on the broadcast channels in addition to the most popular narrowcast ones, particularly the Cartoon Network and sports and film channels. They appeared to be doing so by capturing signals from Roc.

Research Methods

Several residents and I were able to administer over 150 complete or nearly complete questionnaires. I also interviewed one person at TV Roc and the owner of one of the alternative systems. Karina was of immense help, accompanying me throughout the research. We started with a snowball method, and when that proved to be insufficient, we began asking people on the street to partake in the research. Because of our limited resources, particularly time, only people who were at the time subscribed to pay television systems were asked more than the first several questions. Of the 161 who got past the initial questions and agreed to continue with the survey, 156 finished or nearly finished it. I interviewed 85; Karina interviewed 3 with my help and did 22 on her own, plus 16 that she performed soon after I had returned to the United States and for which she mailed me the forms. Members of the family with which I was staying, as well as one neighbor, administered the remainder. One family member was a teacher and asked her students' parents to participate. Karina and I visited many of the parents to clarify their answers or to finish the questionnaires.

A crackdown on illegal cable services had been announced in May of 1999 (see Letalien, 2002, pp. 70-72), and some residents were at first wary to speak with us, but we saw no direct

evidence of the crackdown in Rocinha in July or August of that year and, indeed, I did not become aware of the announcement until after my return to the United States; many residents may likewise have been unaware of it. A greater impediment was the length of the survey, which would have benefited from the removal of a substantial portion of the questions or their replacement with more in-depth conversations. Nonetheless, Karina and I found it rewarding and at times exhilarating that participants frequently expressed interest in the topic, which was described to them as viewership habits and reasons for subscribing, as well as appreciation that someone other than a marketing firm – someone coming from the United States, at that – would be interested in hearing about what they liked and disliked about television.

The survey questions focused on the topics of reasons for subscribing, types of programs viewed, and preferred genres, as well as demographics and social ties. Most of the questions will not be discussed below, but some of what I consider the most interesting and revealing results will be highlighted.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Of the 161 participants, 62.7% (101) were women, largely because we had to perform many interviews in a short period of time, making it necessary to perform a great number during the day, when women were more likely than men to be available. Most were between the ages of 19 and 50. Just over half of the participants were Northeastern migrants, one-fifth were from Rocinha, and one-fifth were from elsewhere in Rio. The remaining participants were from elsewhere in Brazil. Just over half were Catholic, just under a third were evangelical Protestants, and the remaining participants had no religion or gave some other answer. (See Figures 1-4.)

Figure 1: Gender

[removed]

Figure 2: Age

[removed]

Figure 3: Birthplace

[removed]

Figure 4: Religion

[removed]

Almost half of all participants had started school but had not finished primary school. However, over a third had at least started high school, some having gone on to college. Overall, participants claimed to be more literate than they claimed to be schooled: 67% claimed they could read “well” or “very well,” while 46% had finished primary school. Even if people tended to exaggerate their ability to read, it would seem that participants’ illiteracy rate was lower than the World Bank’s 2002 figure of 14.8% for Brazil. (See Figures 5 and 6.)

Figure 5: Education

[removed]

Figure 6: Literacy

[removed]

Most lived in households of 2-5 people. Over half of the households had more than one television, and with one exception, all participants had at least on color television. (See Figures 7 and 8.)

Figure 7: Number of Household Members

[removed]

Figure 8: Number of Television Sets
[removed]

We did not discover two of the alternative systems until we had already completed a large number of surveys, and the sample suffered from this lack of knowledge on our part: just under half of the participants subscribed to Roc; 40% subscribed to the system that was available in the area in which Karina lived and I was staying, and some 10% subscribed to one of the other systems (see Figure 9). That Karina, a long-time resident of Rocinha, was unaware of the other two systems should give readers an idea of just how large and diverse Rocinha is.

Figure 9: Pay Television System
[removed]

Reasons for Subscribing and Viewership Habits

The two characteristics of the participants that were most striking in the frequency and intensity with which they were mentioned were their stated reasons for subscribing and those for maintaining their subscriptions. Participants were asked why had they subscribed and could give as many reasons as they wished. A reason was coded as “primary” if a participant mentioned only that one reason, specifically said it was his or her primary reason, or said it first without then going on to label another reason as primary. By this definition, over 60% mentioned improved reception of broadcast signals as their primary reason for subscribing, and many others mentioned it as an additional reason for subscribing. Just over 20% gave increased variety in programming or channels as their primary reason (see Figure 10). For geographical reasons, there are parts of Rocinha where managing to watch broadcast channels with the use of only a television and an antenna is extremely difficult and where the number of available channels is

greatly reduced from the number of stations that are broadcast in the city. This left many residents with what they perceived as either the choice between no television and paying for cable or the choice between only one channel – Globo – and paying for cable. Such difficulty in capturing broadcast signals is by no means unique to Rocinha, but that such difficulties are common does not diminish their significance.

Figure 10: Primary Reason for Subscribing
[removed]

Participants were also asked if they had ever temporarily ceased their subscriptions and what they liked most about cable. They were not, however, asked directly if they would ever consider ceasing their subscriptions. Nonetheless, it quickly became apparent that one of the most valuable aspects of subscriptions to participants with children was the Cartoon Network, a network that is generally popular across income levels. We may lament that television is often used as a babysitter, but many parents were glad to see that their children were more interested in the Cartoon Network than being out on the streets, which they considered dangerous because of the presence of drug traffickers. In this way, the parents believed they had encountered an incentive for their children to stay out of trouble in a place where a parent's biggest fear is often, if not usually, that his or her child will become involved in the drug trade. A number of parents suggested that they would not be able to cease their subscriptions for as long as they had children who were interested in watching cable rather than being on the streets, and, in particular, in watching the Cartoon Network.

One oft-cited concern regarding foreign media products, which most of the narrowcast channels provide, is that they will overshadow local or national products and culture and

contribute to media and cultural imperialism. Although this is a reasonable long-term concern and one for which there is ample anecdotal evidence, we found nothing in this study to suggest that Rocinenses were shying away from Brazilian television or being inundated with foreign programming; indeed, often the opposite seemed to be more true. Certainly, many residents discussed their love of American feature films (for which Brazil unfortunately produces few alternatives) and children and even adults watched Japanese and American cartoons, but only 20% said they watched fewer Brazilian soap operas, or *novelas*, after subscribing, and several of these said the change was because they simply had less time to watch television. Novelas are the quintessential Brazilian television program format, they are aired during prime time, and they are exported to dozens of countries throughout the world. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority said they had watched novelas before subscribing and most participants continued to watch them after subscribing. (See Figures 11 and 12.) Furthermore, the extent to which children watched cartoons passively – that is to say, in a manner congruent with the thesis of cultural imperialism – is open for debate. While no work was done directly with children for this study, it was common for us to see children playing in front of the television with other children. Conversely, seldom is anyone alone in a place as densely populated as Rocinha, and seldom did we see children sitting quietly or staring at a screen.

Figure 11
Telenovela Viewing Habits Previous to Subscription

“Before you subscribed, did you have the habit of watching Brazilian novelas?”

[removed]

Figure 12
Changes in Telenovela Viewing Habits

“Now that you subscribe, do you watch more Brazilian novelas, fewer Brazilian novelas, or has it not changed?”

[removed]

Furthermore, the extent to which participants valued the improved signals and access to more than one national channel suggests that interest in Brazilian programs over foreign ones was strong, except in specific areas, such as cartoons and films, where the availability of Brazilian productions is low. Also, 60% said they viewed no more or less Brazilian television than they had when they subscribed, 24% said they watched more, and only 17% said they watched less Brazilian programming since subscribing (see Figure 13). Again, some of these changes may have been due to overall changes in time devoted to watching television; indeed, a number of men complained that they had less time to watch television since the economic downturn had forced them to take more odd jobs.

Figure 13
Changes in Brazilian Television Program Viewing

“Now that you subscribe, do you watch more Brazilian programs, less Brazilian programming, or has it not changed?”

[removed]

Conclusions

Firstly, there was no strong evidence of cultural and media imperialism in this study, but these remain a reasonable concern over the long term, and “snapshot” studies are inadequate for identifying slow, long-term trends. Secondly, people often make unexpected uses of technologies. Television-as-babysitter and the use of pay television to improve broadcast signals

are anything but new, but in the context of drug violence and trafficking, as well as the dominance of a single network, these gain new significance and may be quite beneficial. Finally, media convergence and “bridging the digital divide,” if they ever occur, are still years away for most Brazilians. As long as conventional television remains a major medium for information, entertainment, and communication in Brazil, it may be of interest to individuals and organizations working to reduce “information poverty” or other socio-economic disparities to contribute to efforts such as those of TV Roc and its competitors. In particular, programs to provide cable television that are designed to ensure that the underprivileged have access both to public television (in this case, TV Cultura) and to the full variety of broadcast channels that are expected to be available in their geographic areas should not be overlooked in the rush to acquire the latest, most sophisticated digital technologies. We need to consider with skepticism the common argument that television should be left to the market, either because intervention would disrupt the market’s mythical near-perfection or because television is inconsequential, insignificant, or only about entertainment – as if television offered nothing more than entertainment, and as if entertainment were an unworthy pursuit or one that might legitimately be the province of only a miniscule slice of the world’s population. We must also examine critically the consequences of believing this argument and we must be careful, too, not to allow ourselves to become so enamored with the latest, fastest, most interactive technologies that we overlook older, still valuable, and proven ones. Broadcast television, all of the reasonable critiques of it and of television in general notwithstanding, remains one of these latter technologies.

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