Utopia Digital: Non-governmental organizations and the making of consumers in Brazil's "New Middle Class" shantytowns

Jason B. Scott ⬤

University of Colorado Boulder, USA

Abstract

This article examines how class, consumerism, and employment influence beliefs of an idealized digital world in marginalized communities. I recount 24 months of ethnographic and institutional observation in a non-governmental organization that promoted the concept of "*utopia digital*" (digital utopia in Portuguese) in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* (shantytowns). This corporate-funded non-governmental organization employed members of Brazil's traditional middle class and promoted the liberating potentials of digital inclusion to members of a "New Middle Class" made up of 35 million "previously poor" Brazilians. Interviews with middle-class employees reveal how ideas of digital utopia act as a code for corporate efforts to encourage consumerism among the New Middle Class and bolster employment opportunities for members of Brazil's traditional middle class. Reflecting on informal conversations, I also highlight a middle-class "crime talk" that frames the *favela* as an inherently violent place and, in contrast to their inclusionary work related to digital utopia, encourages non-governmental organization workers to physically avoid *favela* space. I use Zygmunt Bauman's discussion of an "active" or "hunter" utopia as an ethnographic lens to discuss the practical and everyday experiences of technological inclusion in classed settings. By describing digital utopias as actively shaped by everyday understandings of urban exclusion and privilege, this article provides an ethnographic framework for decoding the socially reproductive nature of class-inflected consumer interventions in marginalized communities.

Keywords

Digital inclusion, middle class, NGOs, *favelas*

Corresponding author:

Jason B. Scott, Department of Anthropology, Continuing Education, University of Colorado, 1350 Pleasant St, 233 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0233, USA.
Email: jbscott@colorado.edu

A utopian startup

A few weeks before Brazil hosted the 2014 FIFA World Cup, I volunteered at an event called *Startup Weekend Favela* (SWF). The meeting took place in a catholic school gymnasium at the foot of Providência, Rio de Janeiro's oldest *favela* (Shantytown in Portuguese). As a local iteration of the US-based and Google-sponsored *Startup Weekend* franchise, the event was advertised as a way to challenge historic forms of exclusion found in the *favela*, such as economic informality, social segregation, and drug violence, by introducing residents to global ideas of digital entrepreneurship. Speakers from prominent Brazilian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who came mostly from Rio's more "noble" and middle-class neighborhoods, stood on a stage and presented the concepts of "*inclusão digital*" (digital inclusion) and "*utopia digital*" (digital utopia) to an enthusiastic crowd of several hundred *favela* residents. When defining digital utopia, SWF's presenters followed a familiar narrative that linked technology with democratic inclusion, information access, and individual empowerment.

In between presentations, SWF's participants were asked to "pitch" a *favela*-centric smartphone application that embraced the inclusionary potentials of *utopia digital*. One noteworthy pitch was made by a 16-year-old from Providência named Claude who was critical of billion-dollar videogame franchises such as *Call of Duty* (2007) that depicted nameless *favelas* through a barrage of digital bullets. Instead, Claude wanted to make fantasy games that re-imagined the *favela* as a magical place disconnected from segregation, generational poverty, and gang violence. Hundreds of participants watched as a panel of judges awarded Claude SWF's second-place prize because they believed his ideas captured the utopic potentials of digital technology. While accepting his award, a late model Xbox donated by Microsoft, Claude sobbed into a crackling microphone, "I've never come close to winning anything in my life. I've never been told that I was important like this" (Author's Field Notes, March 2014). SWF's half dozen judges, all notable figures from Brazil's information society, shared the stage with Claude. Rio's minister of science and technology stood next to a former IBM executive, a famous *telenovela* actor and an influential technology journalist. Each one smiled glassy-eyed as they gazed beyond the stage to see SWF's equally emotional participants.

As an ethnographer, I felt the moment resembled Émile Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence, as if a particular ideal of digital utopia was "transfigured and imagined in the physical form" (Durkheim and Swain, 2008 [1912]: 236). For many in the crowd, digital utopia transcended the classed and geographic obstacles of Rio de Janeiro's highly segregated urban spaces and created a sense of emotional and philosophical solidarity. Placing digital utopia in a more global context, SWF and other digital inclusion projects embraced members of Brazil's "New Middle Class" (*nova classe média* or new middle class) that emerged in the early 2000s. A global phenomenon of previously poor communities, the new middle class's most notable marker of identity is based on conspicuous consumption (Lange and Meier, 2009). The idea of digital utopia affirmed the 21st century's most

noteworthy consumer trends, providing a narrative that allowed *favela* residents, NGOs, and corporations to collectively make sense of shifting class dynamics in the global south.

Considering SWF and similar institutional spaces that share a collective possibility for utopia, this article describes 40 months of ethnographic observation and 24 months of institutional analysis at a digital inclusion NGO in Rio de Janeiro named CDI (Committee for Democratic Inclusion). As a volunteer for CDI, I helped to translate internal documents from Portuguese to English and took part in daily meetings with coworkers. I carried out non-structured conversations and recorded over 120 formal interviews with employees and clients of digital inclusion NGOs throughout Brazil. While CDI is Brazil's preeminent digital inclusion program, I found at least seven professionalized NGOs that maintained similar ideological and institutional dynamics such as the reliance on salaried, university-educated employees, and the belief in digital utopia. These methods allowed me to analyze institutional structures, practices, and beliefs that guide digital inclusion projects in new middle class communities. Employees of digital inclusion NGOs revealed beliefs concerning socio-economic transformations in Rio de Janeiro's new middle class *favelas* as well as the ways institutions operationalize middle class-ness vis-à-vis digital utopia. Reviewing these conversations, I ask, what are the politics of class and consumption that define modern notions of utopia? How is the idea of utopia mediated through institutional settings such as professionalized, middle-class NGOs? And, how can we conceptualize the philosophies and ethics of a technologically empowered new middle class in the global south?

Digital utopias

The ideal worlds discussed by digital inclusion NGOs reflect what Jeffery Juris (2005) describes as "information utopics": an ideal technological imaginary achieved through "horizontal collaboration, open access, and direct democracy" (p. 22). Through information utopics, digital inclusion projects like CDI imagine a not-too-distant future, and a possible present, where digital technology helps communities overcome socio-economic exclusion. In this sense, digital utopias are never intended to be fully realized. Recent research by Fernando et al. (2018) shows that utopian thinking encourages collective social criticism and allows individuals to contrast their idealized worlds with the society in which they live. Utopian imaginings are intentional and inspire incremental achievements rather than totalizing conclusion. Similarly, the conversations concerning utopia that I had in digital inclusion NGOs reflect a collective social critique and suggest a middle-class future that is incrementally achieved according to shifting socio-technical paradigms.

In his discussion of liquid modernity, Zygmunt Bauman (2005) describes a similar sense of incompleteness when discussing the utopic aspirations of the post–Cold War era. For Bauman, early utopic works, such as Thomas More's Utopia (1516), challenged the "hopelessness" of a modern age, where a blind march toward progress appeared chaotic, unpredictable, and dehumanizing

(Bauman, 2009: 163). Early utopias of the 20th century were imagined like gardens, planted and cultivated to achieve an expected outcome (i.e. a world without class, race, or material anomie). However, real-world attempts at gardener utopias proved impractical and were quickly dismissed as "ugly caricatures of dreams rather than the things dreamt of" (Bauman et al., 2015: 164). The utopic ideals that emerged after the end of the Cold War and the near ubiquitous global domination of neoliberal markets created "hunter utopias," for whom the kill is anticlimactic when compared to the hunt itself. These "anti-utopias" are more "liquid," "a utopia of no end," ever-adapting to the lack of triviality and political finality in a post–Cold War world (Bauman et al., 2015: 164). Contemporary imaginings of utopia are motivated by a belief that, at present, there is a chance to partially address what is preventing an ideal world without seeking complete social and political revolution. Furthermore, hunter utopias are already fully realized rather than abstract expressions of futurist imaginings suggested by gardener utopias.

Bauman (2001) believes that consumer culture creates a sense of solidarity in a time of "diffuse plasticity and volatility of desire" (p. 9). In a consumer society, individual desire is promoted as a form of social continuity (Bauman, 2001: 13). The consumer market, ". . . offers instalments, each bit coming ready for immediate use and meant to be disposed of without regret or remorse once it is used up" (Bauman, 2001: 24). As such, a consumer society is liquid and social ideals correspond with the shifting nature of what is being consumed. Constant innovation and built-in obsolescence in an information society, for example, praises consumers for being technologically state-of-the-art by owning the newest mobile technology. Proponents of a digital utopia idealize this dynamic by equating consumption with inclusion and the common good.

The scholarly etymology of digital utopia reflects a similar tonal arc from discussion of a fully realized society to more liquid imaginations of incrementally built ideal worlds. Utopian visions for a cyber-spatial society inspired early social scientists who posited a future where traditional political hierarchies would no longer have a monopoly on communication (Rheingold, 1993) and digital technology would alter society for the better (Poster, 1990) and a new "information age" would provide untold opportunities for education and social inclusion (Castells, 1996). As digital technologies become more ubiquitous, mobile, and diverse, these radical utopian proclamations have notably declined in academic discourse (Wilson and Peterson, 2002). Since the early 2000s, NGOs with middle class, university-educated, and highly specialized staff have promoted digital inclusion in terms of increased access to technology and greater engagement between community and corporate stakeholders (García-Peñalvo, 2018). Recent scholarship concerning digital inclusion describes a process that is an obvious and inevitable force in society, encouraging many scholars to cautiously aspire for the most utopic possibilities of the network society (García-Peñalvo, 2018). These scholars oppose the objectivizing and "neutral" proclamations that defined early debates about technology by focusing on the "human factor" that localizes and

individualizes effects of digital inclusion. Scholars increasingly call for a type of digital citizenship that is radical and reveals the emancipatory relationship between social justice and technology (Emejulu and Mcgregor, 2019). A review of research concerning digital inclusion in Brazil suggests that there is also an important localizing and individualizing component of NGO work that goes beyond a simple paradigm of increased access. For example, Straubhaar and Davis (2018: 375) note how Brazil's grassroots and non-professionalized NGOs promote empowerment through more localized phenomenon such as ethno-racial identity and cultural performance.

Similarly, I see CDI and other corporate-sponsored digital inclusion NGOs as balancing the consumer-access paradigm of digital inclusion with one of locally defined cultural politics by asking *favela* residents to define and enact their own vision of technological utopia. Many of the Brazilians who I spoke with described a digital utopia that embraced a spirit of optimism concerning technology's liberating potential or what William Mazzarella (2010) has likened to a "technological fetishism." I also found that employees at NGOs evoked a technological fetishism to both intentionally and unintentionally obfuscate the sustained conditions of poverty, racial prejudices, and class that contradicted claims of digital utopia by embracing a "hype" of technology's disruptive potentials (Harvey, 2005). Margolis and Resnick (2002) call this process "the normalization of cyberspace," explaining that any subversive potential the Internet offers is often compromised and challenged by political systems that seek to control the production and consumption of information.

Importantly, the information utopia that I observed during ethnographic fieldwork contrasted with other scholarship concerning utopia in Brazil in that digital inclusion is one of the few phenomenon that highlights the politics of consumerism. Paul Sneed (2008) discusses a "favela utopia" inspired by *baile funk* music's ability to create alternative and egalitarian spaces in an exclusionary urban environment. Sneed's sense of utopia references the African diaspora and the roll of music to create a space of urban resistance and suggests that *baile funk* reflects consumption in the informal economy. Furthermore, Sean Mitchell (2017)'s discussion of utopia in the Brazilian space industry suggests a technological utopia that is more exclusionary and tied to the racial segregation of rural space. Among the hundreds of interviews and months of participant observation that I undertook, my informants rarely brought up race as a lens to describe digital utopia. The idea of digital utopia, then, is inclusionary but not equalizing, unintentionally disassociated from non-economic inequalities and, instead, promotes a class consciousness based on beliefs concerning consumerism and the role of professional NGOs in improving contemporary Brazilian society.

Institutional ethnography of digital inclusion NGOs in Brazil

Research on digital inclusion has been a key point of reference in understanding the institutional dynamics of the 21st-century *favelas*. Recent ethnographic research

explores how digital inclusion programs are often reproductive of social traumas and authoritative institutions in the *favela*. Nemer and Gray (2019) express concern that women who gain access to digital inclusion projects are not disrupting existing, patriarchal structures, but rather giving those with privilege another object to exert their dominance. Similarly, Jeffery Omari (2018) discusses the parallel rhetoric relating to oppressive security policies in the *favela* and Brazil's recently enacted net neutrality laws. I see my institutional ethnography adding to this literature by revealing the classed and consumer mentalities in the *favela* that are filtered through the concept of digital utopia. As such, I see institutions like CDI – middle class, university educated, and professionalized – offer a window into the contemporary reproduction of classed and consumer logics in Brazil.

In order to understand the relationship between class, consumerism, and digital technology, my observations often focused on how the informally built favela was imagined in terms of formal institutions. Nestor Canclini (2019) describes an ethnographic analysis of everyday life that examines the affinity between the formal and the informal economy. An ethnography of (in)formality can reveal how governments, corporations, and NGOs depend on informal actors to deliver utilities such as the Internet and shape notions of middle-classness. I found that corporate-sponsored NGOs provided a bastion for more active utopian discourses and shaped new consumer identities in terms of an idealized global technology market. Most noticeably, NGOs help to mediate the relationship between informal *favela* spaces and global market actors who operate under the formal sanction of the state such as NGOs and corporations.

Over the course of 24 months of institutional ethnography with digital inclusion NGOs, I found that beliefs pertaining to socio-economic class and consumerism were an essential factor in expressing ideas of digital utopia. CDI, for example, was funded by Fortune 500 consumer-oriented companies. Most of CDI's employees described themselves as middle class ("*classe meia*"). CDI's employees used digital utopia that acted as a codeword for corporate efforts to encourage consumerism within the *favela* and bolster employment opportunities for members of Brazil's traditional middle class. Ethnographic observation also allows researchers to see how NGO workers enact a middle-class "crime talk" (Caldeira, 2000) that references gang violence and justifies *de facto* segregation of urban space. By examining the ways in which digital utopias are actively shaped by everyday understandings of urban exclusion and privilege, institutional ethnography can decode the idealized nature of class-inflected consumer interventions in marginalized communities.

Following decades of military dictatorship (1964–1985), Brazil's re-democratization resembled other "new left" movements that emerged during the post–Cold War era (Habermas, 1989). NGOs waded into public debates about street-level governance and the role of the government in individual lives (Gay, 2010). Brazil's middle-class liberals "professionalized institutions where militancy [became] a full-time job rather than a part-time activity" (Gonzalez, 2010: 134). Many NGOs also sought to be integrated into government and corporate institutions, forming a new

set of partnerships between state and non-state actors on Brazil's political left (Reis, 1995). CDI exemplified the trend of non-governmental community development and, along with other digital inclusion NGOs in Brazil, re-politicized an often politically neutral discourse about technology. Government programs cultivated a network of "insurgent experts" who used technology to subvert the practices of exclusionary educational, technical, and political institutions (Shaw, 2008, 2011). By the late 2000s, the Brazilian state was oriented toward supporting digital inclusion NGOs, as well as ideas of digital utopia, through clearly defined institutional paradigms.

CDI occupies what many Brazilians call a third sector (*o teceiro setor*) that is distinct from both their patrons (corporate institutions) and clients (*favela* residents). Third sector NGOs offer alternative types of knowledge and authority while negotiating complex and constantly evolving relationships with dominant State actors. As intermediary, third sector organizations that bring together individuals from various institutions and class backgrounds, NGOs like CDI produce a contradictory set of prerogatives (Fisher, 1997). When these arrangements first arose in Brazil, they were considered a "global associational revolution" (Salamon, 1998) that shifted relationships between social welfare and civil society while being haunted by the "specter of the market" and entrepreneurial discourses. The move to a third sector was led by corporate-funded international charities and considered a "social compromise" that promised to increase institutional efficiency and eliminate political influence (Yamamoto, 2007). NGOs like CDI create middle-class jobs with the principle goal of introducing a corporate and socially progressive discourse to the urban periphery (Kamat, 2004).

NGOs like CDI represent a shift from early state-centric development paradigms that framed marginalized communities as pre-modern "others" (Ginsburg, 2008), living in a "culture of poverty" (Lewis, 1959) and excluded from the democratizing forces of technology. Rather, corporately sponsored digital inclusion NGOs like CDI embrace a "post-development" logic that encourages marginalized communities to articulate alternatives to the State (Escobar, 1995). According to Brodwyn Fisher, NGOs sometimes act as state builders in communities neglected by government institutions and undertake an enormously varied range of activities, including implementing grass roots or sustainable development, promoting human rights and social justice, protesting environmental degradation, and pursuing many other objectives formerly ignored or left to governmental agencies (Fisher, 1997: 440). By contributing to a social good, NGO employees view themselves as removed from the problematic structural arrangements of government and corporate institutions (Fisher, 1997: 442). Most of Brazil's digital inclusion NGOs that I observed had collaborated with the government on projects and often depended on the government for financial support. NGOs as third sector organizations most clearly demonstrate how an ideal form of consumption, articulated through such concepts as digital utopia, mediates classed subjectivities.

Brazil's new middle class and a nascent consumer market

The new middle class's consumption of digital technology is often presented as a panacea for social ills in a nation known for the highest rates of economic inequality in Latin America. Rio de Janeiro has more than 400 *favelas* that are products of intense poverty as well as exclusionary racial and classed conditions. Rio's world famous beachfront neighborhoods like Copacabana and Ipanema have a Human Development Index equal to Switzerland, where many of the city's *favelas* reflect the socio-economic conditions of developing countries like the Dominican Republic (Arias, 2006). In addition to these inequalities, a 30-year war on drugs, highly antagonistic drug factions, and paramilitary militias contributed to a violent death rate of 6.749 a year in 2017 (Forúm Nacional de Segurança Publica, 1998).

During my research, a community policing policy dubbed "*pacificação*" (pacification in Portuguese) made efforts to remove drug gangs and formalize market activities in the *favela* through job programs and urban development. At the same time that pacification sought to reshape the institutional role of the Brazilian government in *favelas*, an new middle class was being shaped by wage growth and increased access to Chinese-made consumer goods. Pacification and the emergence of Brazil's new middle class encouraged corporations to develop social programs that could align the changing social status of *favela* residents with global consumer technology trends.

I spoke with over 40 corporate-sponsored *favela*-based NGOs over the course of my research that described "*inclusão digital*" (digital inclusion) as their central objective. Seven of these NGOs had at least five full-time professionally trained employees. Rather than targeting increased access to physical technologies such as smartphones and personal computers, something that had been mostly resolved by income growth among the NCM (Neri, 2011), many of these NGOs were concerned that *favela* residents failed to perceive the social and political potentials of digital technology. NGO workers framed digital inclusion programs as a crucial means to instill the ideals of plural democracy, access to information, and individual empowerment in the economically and socially ascendant favela. Many of the activists and NGO workers who I spoke with referred to a world where these conditions were realized as a "digital utopia." While a discourse of digital utopia unites *favela residents*, NGOs, and corporate sponsors behind a common philosophical orientation, the definitive goals of digital inclusion were less clear.

For the first two decades of the 21st-century, concepts of middle class-ness in Brazil underwent a dramatic transformation. Brazilian economists have often relied on a Marxian framework to describe the nation's economic divisions and to distinguish between "managerial" classes and a vast working class. In both popular and scholarly terms, middle class-ness in Brazil most commonly describes light skin, college educated, and white-collar individuals who have taken part in a generational transfer of social, cultural, and economic capital. The term new middle class most frequently describes 35 million "previously poor" Brazilians who emerged during the late 2000s (Klein et al., 2018; Neri, 2011). Two thirds of

the new middle class came from *favelas*, where most residents identify as Afro-Brazilian, black, or brown (Quaino, 2013). Between 2003 and 2013, Brazil's ruling party, *o Partido de Trabalhador* (Workers' Party, or PT), capitalized on the stability of the national currency and the high value of commodities to fund expansive social welfare programs in the country's socio-economic periphery. Alongside health and housing programs that reflected more traditional concepts of socialist welfare, the PT promoted a middle-class consumer lifestyle through broad economic formalization policies (improving labor laws, registering of work papers, promoting stronger property rights, encouraging bank accounts, and giving greater access to higher education).

In large part due to the new middle class, Brazil transformed into the world's second largest consumer of personal electronic devices (DAquino, 2019). The new middle class embraced a bourgeois consumptive lifestyle, spending R$1 trillion (US$494 billion) on consumer goods each year (Estadão, 2014), but rarely invested in more durable forms of household capital like education, healthcare, and real-estate (Kerstenetzky et al., 2015). By the start of my research in 2008, digital technologies such as smartphones and social media were a noticeable element of *favela* life. In 2015, Google released a study showing that 54% of Brazil's Internet users were from the working classes. The director of research for Google Brazil affirmed, "[*Favela* residents] are the new owners of the Brazilian Internet" (Matsuura, 2015). Multinational corporations – such as Google, Microsoft, and Facebook – who stood to profit from the growth of a consumer electronics industry in the *favela* provided millions of dollars in funds to NGOs with digital inclusion programs. These companies wanted not just consumers, but digital citizens who could play a role in a broader globalized society.

Recent scholarship has compared Brazil's new middle class to the new middle class in other countries, suggesting a number of perspectives shared by previously poor communities throughout the global south. Lower rates of unemployment and informal employment as well as increased university enrollment and expanded legal rights for workers represented the more prominent qualities of a global new middle class. Brazilian youth, for example, are interested in aesthetics that are situated in more cosmopolitan notions of cultural consumption, social distinction, and educational and professional success (Cicchelli et al., 2018). Similarly, Mehita Iqani's (2016) analysis of slum tourism in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro shows that the commodification of poverty and inequality is a principle means by which informal communities are integrated into the global market.

Nonetheless, scholars such as Roger Southall (2018) have found the idea of an new middle class to be an inadequate means to describe previously poor or racial excluded groups. Scholars have specifically questioned the demographic stability and relevancy of the new middle class in countries such as Brazil and South Africa that weathered the 2008 global recession only to later witness an end to economic growth, (Fernandes, 2018). Researchers have found that many who would economically qualify as new middle class do not recognize themselves as such, suggesting that the term is more an academic construct than it is a reflection of a lived

and self-identified class consciousness (Klein et al., 2018). The term new middle class fails to fully capture the role of urban segregation in Rio de Janeiro and the more durable constructions of *favela* identity (i.e. *favelado* or *morador*) and a form of class consciousness that persists despite economic change.

Without the presence of a broadly observable new middle class consciousness, I see the utopic discourse surrounding consumer technology provided one of the more common mechanisms to develop collective identities among Brazil's middle classes. Consumerism provided a central unifying discourse between corporate, middle, and working-class Brazilians. Rather than consumer technology acting as an exclusive marker of class distinction, emulation, or aspiration, increased access to smartphones through a growing consumer market laid the groundwork for a collective experience that transcended the *favela*'s historic forms of socio-economic segregation. Paralleling Latour's (1991) actor network theory, the mediation of traditional and new middle class experiences into a unified sense of consumer belonging allows NGOs to promote a script of digital utopia that simplifies the relationship between people and technologies.

The mediatory role of consumer interventions was made visible at an opening of a *Casas Bahia*, Brazil's largest consumer electronics chain, in the *favela* where I conducted 2 years of ethnographic research. I spoke to one corporate representative who explained, "We don't care about police. There are no pacified *favelas* in São Paulo and we have several stores in *favelas* in São Paulo... What really changed was access to credit cards." He then pointed toward Casa Bahia's future partnerships, including one with CDI, that exemplified the socially informed technology projects he believed could mitigate insecurity in the community. The Casas Bahia representative, like many at CDI, highlighted the incremental building blocks needed to achieve an ideal world vis-à-vis middle-class consumerism in the *favela*. However, while the traditional middle-class/new middle class binary appeared mitigated by economic parity found in the consumer market, I found that everyday experiences reproduce some problematic conditions relating to the exclusion of Brazil's favelas. The remainder of this article tests the assumption of social equality, inclusion, and parity often discussed by proponents of digital utopia.

The day-to-day of a digital utopia

CDI is headquartered in a 19th-century neo-romantic rowhouse in Rio de Janeiro's noble Laranjeiras neighborhood, a pinnacle of generational wealth and comfortable urban life only a few bus stops from the renowned beaches of Ipanema. CDI was organized like a small business with a specialized staff of dozens that included accountants, grant writers, computer technicians, educators, executives, and a housekeeper. As a 20-hour a week volunteer, I sat at a desk in the rowhouse's second floor antechamber alongside six other members of CDI's grant team. The day-to-day of the work related to re-writing previous grants for resubmission to corporate benefactors as well as developing CDI's guiding mission into public

presentations. I translated dozens of internal reports from Portuguese to English. As an ethnographer who followed the nine-to-five of CDI's employees, I had countless opportunities to discuss their life goals and sense of belonging in urban space. During these conversations, we discussed CDI's mission of digital inclusion and the orienting principle of digital utopia. We also discussed the practicalities of working for an NGO in a highly segregated and violent city and what contradictions that may produce.

Rodrigo Baggio, CDI's founder, came into the office for a few hours each day. He politely greeted all of his employees by name and asked how their day's work was progressing. He then retreated to his private office, a modernist glass booth where the home's master bedroom once was, to receive visitors and make phone calls. My time at CDI overlapped with a period in which Baggio was preparing a *TED Talk* about what he called "e-topia" or electronic utopia. The TED series was seen as the Internet's premiere venue for entrepreneurs who wished to present highly scripted presentations about their personal brands. Many TED Talks had gone "viral," receiving millions of online views and sometimes transforming philanthropist into minor celebrities. Baggio wanted to give the TED Talk in English instead of his native Portuguese, and on several occasions asked for my help with pronunciation and clarity. The talk was based on his personal experiences with digital technology, his philosophies about education and marginality, and his beliefs that digital inclusion NGOs can affect change in Brazil's poorest communities. Rather than as a means to generate a distant and overly optimistic future, Baggio wanted to argue that a digital utopia could be understood in everyday terms and through real-world examples.

Indeed, Baggio's personal life demonstrates a constant tension between his own middle-class privilege, a belief in consumer inclusivity, and the struggles of Brazil's least fortunate. In the 1980s, Baggio's father, a successful electronics vendor, gave him a Brazilian-made clone of the Apple II personal computer. While practicing for the TED Talk, Baggio told me, "No one had computers back then. I was dyslexic and never liked school. But technology I understood." Baggio became enamored by personal computers and embraced their ability to empower disadvantaged individuals. His technical inspiration paralleled a personal social enlightenment:

> I played football with street kids. They always fought and thought I was older because I was tall. I went to school and they didn't, and they came to me to resolve their problems. Unfortunately, they solved many of their problems with a switchblade [*canivete*] and one time I got stabbed while trying to break up a fight. I went to the ground and they stopped fighting to take care of me. I told them, "I don't feel pain, just love" ["*Eu não sinto dor, só amor*"]. (Author's Field Notes, October 2014)

Years later, he had a nightmare of the stabbing and woke with the idea for an organization that could promote the voice of marginalized individuals through digital technology. Baggio presented himself as the vanguard of digital inclusion in Brazil. CDI started in 1995, "before there was Internet in Brazil," according to

Baggio. Brazil was plagued by a "digital divide": a poverty of digital technology linked to broader forms of social exclusion. Activists like Baggio believed that if a community was socially marginalized before the rise of a network society, the same community would be marginalized within a contemporary network society if efforts were not made toward making digital technology more accessible.

CDI built its first *favela*-based computer lab in 1995 and received a great deal of attention from Brazil's press. Soon after, Baggio received a letter from an inmate who had read about the computer lab and requested that one be installed in Rio's soon-to-be-demolished Frei Caneca Prison. According to Baggio, "Frei Caneca was the most successful prison in Brazil because everyone was required to have a job." In describing the prison in this way, Baggio reaffirmed the inclusionary message of CDI and suggested that digital technology facilitates access to the formal economy. Baggio also highlighted the fact that CDI's model could be scaled upward. By the early 2000s, CDI had projects in hundreds of community centers throughout the world and provided Internet access to millions of marginalized individuals. Dozens of international awards and profiles in the media described CDI as one of the world's foremost digital inclusion NGOs.

The relationship between CDI and corporate institutions came up one afternoon as Baggio and I sat in his office and practiced his TED Talk. I asked what he thought about the recent pacification policy that had destabilized powerful drug gangs in Rio's *favelas* and ushered in millions of dollars in digital inclusion projects. Baggio used the lens of information utopics to imagine an alternative to the government's more militaristic policies: "You know what I wish we did? What I always wanted instead of this 'pacification'? We should have invaded the *favela* with social projects, with activists, instead of police." Reflecting a techno-fetishism, Baggio imagined digital inclusion as an alternative to the exclusionary and violent government policies in the *favela*. Baggio viewed CDI as an agent of utopic disruption. However, I observed that digital inclusion NGOs like CDI shared a set of political goals with pacification and other government policies. Specifically, the liquid utopias of digital inclusion NGOs aligned with government policy that sought economic formalization and the growth of the new middle class in *favelas*. Whereas the government sought to enroll *favela* residents into the formal economy through jobs programs and business licenses, CDI offered a sense of social inclusion by promoting an ethically informed consumerism. As Baggio's hypothetical intervention into pacified favelas suggests, digital inclusion projects, in their quest for digital utopia, gave a heightened sense of social responsibility to middle-class NGO employees. Not only did CDI's employees often see market interventions like digital inclusion as more effective than security policy, they also believe that these interventions were morally correct.

Maintaining the middle-class spaces of digital utopia

My research with CDI paralleled a "second generation" of ethnographic research of NGOs that focuses directly on middle-class workers rather than on their so-

called target populations (Vannier and Lashaw, 2017). CDI's employees often described themselves as "volunteers" as a means to assert their non-economic interests in digital inclusion but also discussed their employment in terms of a salaried middle-class lifestyle (Watanabe, 2015: 469). My conversations about professional ambitions revealed subtle ways in which middle-class NGO workers exploited the political economic realities of digital utopia.

I spoke with a 20-year-old named Ingrid who had recently graduated from university and had worked at CDI for a little over a year. Ingrid carried out many of the same tasks that I carried out as a volunteer. She told me, "You need to get paid. Everyone here is paid." At this point in the conversation, I realized that I had been the only person working at CDI's headquarters who was unpaid. I explained to Ingrid that I felt a salary could compromise the ethical standing of my ethnographic research which was already funded by the United States' Department of Education. In response, she reiterated that, "Everyone at CDI is paid. The other employees probably think you are paid already. You should just ask for something." She pointed to a grant proposal that I was translating for CDI and noted the budget breakdown that included a large byline for employee salaries that were on par with middle-class wages in Brazil.

Ingrid, much like her colleagues, believed that a modest middle-class salary was justified if not necessary for the time she spent making digital utopia a reality. True to her belief that compensation was an important aspect of work, weeks after our conversation, Ingrid left CDI for a higher paying job at an international NGO with the possibility of international travel. Much like a Weberian work ethic (1996 [1930]), CDI's employees and clients promoted a "spirit of development" that combined concepts of moral and material prosperity (Bornstein, 2005). Over the course of my research, at least seven of CDI's 16 employees left for better paying jobs. When employees left CDI, their reasons were always for better pay and career advancement, a reflection of their ambitions as consumers, rather than due to a lack of faith in the NGO's utopian vision of digital inclusion.

Employees at CDI avoided the *favela*'s physical space in a way that conformed to long-standing classed subjectivities but contradicted the goal of creating a common digital space through consumer technology. When I would invite coworker to visit the *favela* where I lived, they would often resort to a "talk of crime" (Caldeira, 2000). For Teresa Caldeira, Brazilians often produce partial and misleading narratives concerning street-level violence. These narratives ignore the root causes of violence and help to reproduce racial and classed stereotypes concerning *favela* residents (Caldeira, 2000: 109).

When interacting with CDI's employees, I often discussed the 2 years I had spent living in a *favela* named the Complexo do Alemão. The Complexo was one of Rio's more infamous, violent, and economically underdeveloped *favelas* and, coincidently, by living in the community, I became one of the few individuals at CDI who actually had daily contact with the marginalized population that digital inclusion programs were meant to serve. I often mentioned the awkward tensions created by my privileged subject positions: North American, white, and

university educated. In response to hearing about my research, my middle-class co-workers often appeared amazed that I would choose to live in a *favela*. For example, one of CDI's office managers lived in a lower–middle-class neighborhood adjacent to the Complexo do Alemão. When I asked if he wanted to meet near the Complexo for a cup of coffee, he declined and explained to me, "I don't have anything to do there. I see violence on the news. You know. It's scary."

Unlike the *favela*-based grassroots organizations that CDI worked with, the NGO had little need for fieldwork. Similarly, while employees at CDI traveled throughout Brazil and the world, many told me that their job did not allow them to physically work in the *favela* and they could not imagine a personal or professional reason to go to a *favela*. Only four of CDI's educators physically worked in the field, two of whom were the only employees at the NGO who could claim to be *favela* residents.

CDI's employees were conscious of the contradictions that they produced and framed their work as an everyday practicality in a violent city. For example, I shared a cup of coffee one morning with one of CDI's grant writers named Theo. He was white and grew up in one of Rio's wealthiest neighborhoods. Following a pattern seen in NGOs the world over, Theo described his work as self-justifying (De Waal, 1997). He reassured me,

> I work with people from the *favela* and dedicate my life to improving their lives. The people I know in the *favela* accept me and appreciate me for what I do. I don't need to justify my actions to anyone else if those from the *favela* accept me. (Author's Field Notes, December 2014)

I asked Theo if his work as a grant writer would benefit from a physical visit to the *favela*. He explained that SWF was the first time he had entered a *favela* and added, "I have a family, I can't go to the *favela*. It's not safe for me and I am not going to take them in there with me." This conversation about the *favela* was one of many that I had with middle-class employees at CDI, where talk of crime often engulfed talk of a digital utopia. These types of conversations revealed an ideological distance between CDI's more utopic branding and the realities of maintaining middle-class spaces in a violent city.

Liquid conclusions to a digital utopia

As my research progressed, CDI once again demonstrated a liquid notion of digital utopia by transitioning to an almost entirely online model. To facilitate this rebranding, CDI recruited a number of social media celebrities from the Complexo do Alemão as spokespeople. Many of these celebrities had passed through a CDI program years before and had since used their online profiles to critique police abuse in their communities. The ability to challenge police abuse through technology was definitively utopic for some. One of CDI's collaborators, Raull, had tens of thousands of followers on social media and was recently profiled

in the *New York Times*. He turned this notoriety into a full-time job at Brazil's largest news network *O Globo*. The social media activist explained, "I know the idea of digital utopia sounds unrealistic, but it is possible, and we are working with CDI to make it a reality." (Author's Notes, 19 May 2016). Much like Claude, who I spoke about at the beginning of this article, Utopia was a process and a belief, both of which could be exemplified in the life of an activist who was able to find social inclusion through technology, the help of an NGO, and middle-class employment. Much like Bauman's framing of an ideal world, the activist's interpretation of digital utopia was "active" and liquid, representing the incremental ways that technology can shift socio-economic perspectives in marginalized communities.

Studying concepts such as digital utopia and digital inclusion as they relate to institutional settings is a first step to improve our understanding of the political and cultural dynamics of poverty reduction among the new middle class. Recent scholarship addressing the global rise of populist politics has pointed to the economic grievances of the traditional middle class and the new middle class (Wietzke, 2019). Indeed, after 10 years of economic growth, Brazil's prolific commodity markets contracted and the Brazilian real lost significant value in 2016. Brazil's democratic socialist President Dilma Rouseff was impeached, much through the ferocious support of the nation's traditional middle-class electorate (Boito and Alfredo, 2016). An austerity-oriented government led by a new president Michel Temer slashed numerous social welfare programs that targeted *favelas*. Pacification policy officially ended in June 2018, while seven digital inclusion projects closed in the Complexo alone. In January 2019, the authoritarian leaning Jair Bolsonaro was elected president under a policy platform that made it easier for police to kill favela residents with impunity. Online "Fake news," shared widely across Brazil and notably within my social media network of middle-class and favela-based Brazilians, was cited as a factor that "poisoned" the election in favor of the austerity-oriented Bolsonaro (Tardáguila et al., 2018). Falsified photos, conspiracy theories, and hate speech appeared as some of the more common pieces of information that Brazilians consumed and were motivated by during the election. These ominous conditions reflect the more global reality of consumer technology that provides a pathway for political deception (McGranahan, 2018) and government surveillance (Masco, 2017). That same year, Casa Bahia was robbed and subsequently closed. Taking into account Brazil's recent history, the digital utopia discussed at SWF appears to have faded or, possibly, transformed into something new. Concepts of an new middle class and digital utopia appeared to be impermanent constructs, examples of market conditions but not of a more lasting class identity.

The nature of digital technology is constantly shifting and, as such, scholars will be required to frequently reassess the potentials to digitally include and exclude (Escobar, 1995). With Silicon Valley and its patron institutions becoming increasingly influential in our discussions of utopia, a broader public appears skeptical about the idea of information technology's inherent banality. Scholars should remain skeptical as to whether corporate and middle-class pedagogies are the

best way to foster new types of democratic participation, if inclusion can mean equality, and if digital worlds produced by institutions that are indebted to capitalist consumption can mitigate the social traumas of economic inequality. Furthermore, additional ethnographic observation may reveal how digital inclusion and other technology paradigms reproduce forms of gender, ethnic, and racial bias, issues that were not made entirely clear during my observations. In this sense, researchers should pay close attention to those classed exclusions that remain as new technologies promise to radically reshape life on the urban periphery.

Ultimately, the institutional ethnography described above is partial, incomplete, and only a small example of how a consumer society influences narratives of digital inclusion. With populations in slums projected to reach one billion by 2020 there will undoubtedly be more scholarly interest in these communities as consumer markets and sites of socio-economic inclusion (UN-HABITAT, 2013). *Favela* residents will take on new and influential roles of digital technology, industrialized food, healthcare, housing, and infrastructure. Future observers will be needed to identify the idealized classed beliefs that emerge as informal and marginalized communities become a larger base for a global consumer economy.

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ORCID iD

Jason B. Scott https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7924-8479

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Author Biography

Jason B. Scott is an instructor of anthropology for the University of Colorado. The research discussed above was carried out with the help of a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship.