Microsoft's drug dealer: digital disruption and a corporate conversion of informal improvization

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Published online: 05 May 2020.

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Microsoft's drug dealer: digital disruption and a corporate conversion of informal improvization

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ABSTRACT

Over the last three decades, technology companies have promoted the "disruptive" potentials of the information age. Brazilian *favelas* (shantytowns) provide one of the most popular examples used to describe how digital disruption applies to informal urban communities. *Favelas* have been mapped by Google and surveilled by an IBM Smart City while hundreds of well-branded digital inclusion programs present themselves as alternatives to an informal economy and an illicit drug trade. However, corporate narratives of digital disruption fail to account for what scholars describe as an "insurgency" and practices of improvization (*gato*, *jeitinho*, or *gambiarra*) found in the *favela*. Describing a process of "converting" regulatory fines into well-branded social projects, this article provides an ethnographic account of a Microsoft-funded documentary about an ex-drug trafficker turned digital educator. Considering the role of ethnography in an urban "gray zone," this article asks: what techniques do global technology corporations use to take symbolic ownership of local knowledge? What does the dissonance between corporate and community-based narratives reveal about alternative forms of creativity in the digital age? And, how can we characterize the formalizing potentials of digital disruption in Latin America?

O traficante da Microsoft: disrupção digital e conversão corporativa de improvisação informall

RESUMO

Nas últimas três décadas, as empresas de tecnologia promoveram os potenciais "disruptivos" da era da informação. As favelas brasileiras fornecem um das referencias mais populares usados para descrever como a disrupção digital se aplica às comunidades urbanas informais. As favelas foram mapeadas pelo Google e vigiadas por uma IBM Smart City, enquanto centenas de programas de inclusão digital bem marcados se apresentam como alternativas para uma economia informal e um tráfico ilícito de drogas. No entanto, narrativas corporativas de disrupção digital falham em explicar o que os acadêmicos descrevem como uma "insurgência" e práticas de improvisação (gato, jeitinho ou gambiarra) encontradas na favela. Descrevendo um processo de

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"conversão" de multas regulamentares em projetos sociais bem marcados, este artigo fornece um relato etnográfico de um documentário financiado pela Microsoft sobre um ex-traficante de drogas que se tornou educador digital. Considerando o papel da etnografia em uma "zona cinzenta" urbana, este artigo pergunta: que técnicas as corporações globais de tecnologia usam para tomar posse simbólica do conhecimento local? O que a dissonância entre narrativas corporativas e baseadas na comunidade revela sobre formas alternativas de criatividade na era digital? E, como podemos caracterizar os potenciais de formalização da disrupção digital na América Latina?

El traficante de Microsoft: interrupción digital y una conversión corporativa de la improvisación informal

RESUMEN
Durante las últimas tres décadas, las compañías de tecnología han promovido los potenciales "disruptivos" de la era de la información. Las favelas brasileñas (barrios de chabolas) proporcionan uno de los ejemplos más populares utilizados para describir como se aplica la disrupción digital a las comunidades urbanas informales. Las favelas han sido mapeadas por Google y vigiladas por una Smart City de IBM, mientras que cientos de programas de inclusión digital de buena marca se presentan como alternativas a una economía informal y al tráfico ilícito de drogas. Sin embargo, las narrativas corporativas de la interrupción digital no tienen en cuenta lo que los académicos describen como una "insurgencia" y las prácticas de improvisación (*gato, jeitinho o gambiarra*) que se encuentran en la favela. Al describir un proceso de "conversión" de multas regulatorias en proyectos sociales de buena marca, este artículo proporciona una cuenta etnográfica de un documental financiado por Microsoft sobre un ex narcotraficante convertido en educador digital. Considerando el papel de la etnografía en una "zona gris" urbana, este artículo pregunta: ¿Qué técnicas utilizan las corporaciones tecnológicas globales para tomar posesión simbólica del conocimiento local? ¿Qué revela la disonancia entre las narrativas corporativas y comunitarias sobre formas alternativas de creatividad en la era digital? Y, ¿cómo podemos caracterizar los potenciales de formalización de la disrupción digital en América Latina?

1. Introduction

Microsoft produced a number of videos about the life of Wanderson Skrock. One video with nearly a million views on *YouTube* opens with the image of *favela* (shantytown) children playing in front of heavily armed police officers (Microsoft 2015). A collection of scenes flash on the screen: walls pocked with bullet holes, hilly *favela* landscapes, and a classroom filled with attentive students. Wanderson speaks over these images in English instead of his native Brazilian Portuguese. The idiomatic choice suggests the videos are intended for an international audience rather than the Rio de Janeiro *favela* that appears on screen. Wanderson recounts his life as a young drug trafficker.

> When I was fourteen, I went to prison. It was there that I was introduced to computers. For the first time I saw opportunity. When I was released, I wanted to share that with others. Now I use

Microsoft technology to train people to use computers. Education is everything. It gives these kids a chance. Technology saved my life and I believe it can save others.

Microsoft's message is zealous: digital technology disrupts entrenched forms of structural inequality in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*. Digital technology appears as a singular force in Wanderson's life, capable of shaping a drug trafficker for the better without the provocation of external historical forces or a broader political will. Wanderson represents *favela* residents, disenfranchised youth, the working class, and educators. Technology, vis-à-vis Microsoft, gave people like Wanderson and communities like the Complexo a chance.

Reflecting on 40 months of ethnographic participant-observation in Brazilian *favelas*, that included 15 months of institutional ethnography with Wanderson's colleagues at a digital inclusion NGO named Recode, I explore a process called "conversion" that allows corporate actors to appropriate symbols of informality and illegality in marginalized communities. My research findings were at odds with the message, tone, and overall narrative of digital disruption presented by Microsoft. Microsoft conveys the message that social change comes from digital disruption ("technology saves lives") rather than the more grounded and localized social process that informs the use of technology on Rio de Janeiro's urban margins. The video of Wanderson, however, ignores a history of "insurgency" and auto-construction outlined by scholars such as James Holston (1999, 2008) as well as a well-discussed practice of improvization (*gato*, *jeitinho*, or *gambiarra*) endemic to the *favela*. The video of Wanderson also reflects a form of "bad faith" (Scheper-Hughes 1993) on the part of Wanderson's sponsors who, as I describe below, carried out a government-sanctioned "conversion" of fines that allowed corporate actors to transform their own misconduct into well-branded marketing campaigns.

At the heart of this article, I question a more global narrative of "digital disruption" that frames information technology as a tool of progress for informal communities. Technologies are considered disruptive when they redefine markets, cause previously technical paradigms to fail, and encourage alternative, non-authoritative representations of marginalized communities (Bower and Christensen 1995). Corporations, scholars, and activists often promote the idea of digital disruption by embracing technology as a universal good that disrupts exclusionary forms of expression and knowledge creation (Fattal 2012). I suggest that the process of "converting a fine" (*convertar a multa*), vis-à-vis a narrative of digital disruption, is not a singular or independent force of change but rather a social process tied to a number of political and economic interests that are ethnographically observable in the *favela*. Methodologically, I argue that visual ethnography provides a valuable compliment to institutional ethnography particularly for researchers hoping to gain a window into the more visible techniques that global technology corporations use to take symbolic ownership of local knowledge production.

2. Converting a fine

Corporations and NGOs often promote technology as, to borrow from Marcell Mauss (1966) and Bronislaw Malinowski (2002), "pure gifts" that are given to communities without the assumption of reciprocity. However, these same projects only arose because the Brazilian government permits corporations to convert regulatory fines, for infractions such as overcharging customers, into well-branded social projects in the

favela. Converting a fine allows corporations to spin a potential negative into a marketing positive.

Converting the fine involves a slow, grant-based process where government ministries allow corporations to support NGOs instead of paying regulatory fines. The process of conversion begins when corporations run afoul of Brazilian consumer protection laws and are fined for regulatory infractions that range from overcharging customers to selling defective products. As Wanderson's examples show, informatics corporations in Brazil often convert fines by embracing a technophilic logic that frames technology in terms of the potential to change but ignores its limits and ability to harm (Goldstein 2017). Corporations delegate the planning and implementation of social projects to middle-class NGOs that, in turn, help *favela*-based NGOs to acquire material resources, professional training, and institutional visibility. As a result, what started as a regulatory infraction transforms into social resources for a marginalized community.

Converting a fine allows a spectrum of social actors – the corporation, the NGO, the government, and the local activist – to share credit for the positive result of a social action. Furthermore, since the steps that go into converting a fine, such as video production and grant writing, are often the least visible part of a social project, those who take part impose their own classed meanings onto the process of digital disruption. Converting a fine requires a significant amount of institutional effort on the part of NGOs. For example, Recode, the NGO where Wanderson worked and with whom Microsoft partnered, hired four individuals that continuously reworked previous grants for new funding opportunities. Most of the grant writers at Recode had friends from university who worked in the private sector and often alerted them to corporations with eminent fines. One grant writer explained to me,

> They have to spend the money. The money is just there and if no one takes it, it goes right to the government. All you need is an idea that corresponds with (the company's) mission and experience implementing projects, and you can usually have a chance of getting the funds.

The grant writer then described this process as a necessity in a modern world and a positive step towards Recode's broader mission of digital inclusion. Converting a fine, then, is generally accepted and understood if not wholeheartedly embraced by those involved.

Alongside Microsoft, a number of multibillion-dollar corporations such as Unilever, Casa Bahia, O Globo, and Petrobras had been fined by Brazil's federal government and had subsequently sponsored digital inclusion projects in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*. Beyond the financial benefits of the process, NGOs also stood to improve their public image through converting a fine. Many of my co-workers at Recode considered the process of converting a fine to be a more transparent and ethical practice than the traditional practice of paying fines directly to government agencies, or the funding of NGOs with anonymous contributions that may have criminal connections. NGOs were often viewed as relatively elite institutions that lost appeal within the *favelas* they served (Treviño González 2010, 137). More than 700 NGOs were closed by Brazil's federal government for financial irregularities between 2011 and 2012. By converting a fine, NGOs leveraged the respectability of corporate brands and often placed corporate names front and center when advertising their programs. For example, a graduate of a digital inclusion program sponsored by Coca-Cola told me that "employers don't trust the name of an NGO on a working certificate. They trust Coca-Cola and know Coca-Cola. It makes my certificate worth a lot more to have Coca-Cola supporting my search for work."

As a volunteer at Recode, I was often asked to use my native English to translate grants, budgets, and communications between the NGO and partner corporations. In an ethnographic sense, this allowed me to follow the path and process of conversion, the various agents and actors involved, and the narratives constructed around collaboration. I found the visual products related to Wanderson to be a particularly useful window into the intentions of corporate actors in marginalized communities. Following the conversion of a fine requires not only the following of money but also the process and interactions of various classed actors. The appropriation of informality in the *favela*, vis-à-vis alignment with a former drug dealer, suggests just one way in which corporations can develop institutional connections with marginalized communities and justify the overall process of conversion.

3. Informality and improvization

Wanderson's symbolic transformation from a drug dealer to a Microsoft spokesperson shares a similar narrative arch regarding the mediating potentials of informal actors in Brazil's favela. For much of the two decades leading up to Wanderson's successful digital inclusion, the drug trade played a central foil to government interventions in the *favela*. Rio's drug gangs emerged during Brazil's dictatorship (1964–1985), when political prisoners shared prison space with common criminals. Political prisoners educated *favela* residents in Marxist ideology and insurgent military tactics that they could ostensibly use as a means to wage class war through the drug trade (Penglase 2008). Once out of prison, small time criminals formed increasingly sophisticated enterprises and began to violently claim *favela* territory street by street. Charismatic gang chiefs (*donos)* emerged to mediate the *favela*'s internal conflicts and to provide services not offered by the Brazilian State. By the 1990s, the Brazilian State and a handful of drug factions maintained parallel forms of sovereignties over urban space, leading many scholars to describe Rio de Janeiro as a "divided city" (Ventura 1994; Leite 2000). In this respect, Rio de Janeiro was governed by two divergent sets of public policy. One set of policies governed Rio's wealthy neighborhoods where the government had greater administrative reach and violent crime was less pronounced. Schools, main roads, and government services were overwhelmingly concentrated in these more formal neighborhoods. In contrast, favelas developed informally and with little public record. While the same laws technically applied in both places, the Brazilian State had far more difficulty controlling the market, providing services, and enforcing the criminal code in the favela.

Scholars have described drug trafficking organizations as "parallel states" in that they maintain pseudo-sovereignty over *favela* communities (Leeds 1996; Zaluar and Alvito 1998; Goldstein 2003; Arias and Rodrigues 2006). Following Max Weber's ([1919] 1965) criteria for a state, the *favela*'s parallel-state drug factions monopolized the legitimate use of force. Police made brief and deadly, yet relatively ineffective, incursions into *favelas*. Residents saw police as advancing elite interests while drug traffickers were seen as "local level protectors" of *favela* residents (Leeds 1996; Goldstein 2003). Traffickers ruled by a Hammurabian "*lei do morro*" ("law of the hill") that prohibited speech about drug traffic. Many of my interlocutors described thieves who lost hands and "X-9"s (informants) were publicly tortured and killed. The threat of force legitimized trafficker control of the *favela* and helped the police to brand drug traffickers as a threat to Brazil's internal sovereignty.

Despite this dominant categorization of drug dealers as enemies of the state, the line between legal and illegal is frequently obscured, muddled, and redrawn. The same group of scholars that describes the favela as a parallel state also suggest that the distinction between legality and illegality, formality and informality, is rhetorical and fails to capture a number of important lived social contexts. While drug factions operate outside of standard legal conventions, they are also recognized by community members as providing an alternative to an institutional rule of law (Goldstein 2003, 225). Many favela residents defer to drug trafficker organizations for activities often controlled by the government such as local market activity, civil conflict resolution, and street level security (Leeds 1996). Drug factions nonetheless depend on a tacit "lei do morro" that is assumed rather than codified into legal institutions. Furthermore, there are no written codes, declared policies, or rules of ascension regarding the leadership of drug gang organizations and leadership is most often tied to the street-level charisma of individual leaders (Penglase 2014). By lacking the ideological and institutional timelessness of the state, a condition described in detail by Weber (See Weber 2004 [1917 and 1919]; Waters and Waters 2015), drug trafficker organizations do not have the legitimacy and function that is most commonly associated with the rule of law, legality, and sovereignty of a nation state.

Scholars suggest that the rhetorical balance between legality and illegality is the product of a larger phenomenon that places drug traffickers as intermediaries between various social sectors (Arias and Rodrigues 2006). Michel Misse (2000) argues that trafficker organizations have played an important part in not only fulfilling a market desire for illegal goods but also serve as important negotiators of more legitimate political goods such as street level security. As the most dominant social and market actors in the community, traffickers also control a wide network of influence within local social movements, political parties, and governmental institutions. Through violence and other forms of coercion, drug trafficker organizations have developed regional and international networks that include arms dealers, police officers, and politicians. There is also an "episodic" reciprocity between police and drug dealers that suggests a more symbiotic relationship between legal and illegal actors in the favela; where constantly changing policing tactics provoke new techniques on the part of criminals and vice versa (see Guerrero 2020). The lack of fixity in trafficker authority is compounded by conflict between armed groups in the favela including three principle factions and an unknown number of "milicias" (illegal militias).

This fragile boundary between legality and illegality is not particular to Brazilian favelas. Ray Hudson (2018, 3) states,

> Rather than being an infrequent and marginal occurrence, illegal practices are common in and often integral to "successful" regional and urban economies in both Global North and South – defining success in terms of conventional indices such as the growth of output and profitability.

Hudson, in this sense, describes a licit illegality that either makes legal activities illegal for certain individuals (i.e. undocumented migrant laborers) or transforms illegal activities into socially sanctioned and licit activities (i.e. illegal mining). Hudson continues,

> in a range of cities and regions that have either never been part of mainstream capitalist economies, or once were but which have become marginal to, or totally excluded from, the

dominant circuits of capital, engaging in illegal economic activities beyond the scope of the informal economy can be seen as licit, as a necessary and socially acceptable element in strategies of survival and "getting by." (2018, 8)

Similarly, cultural and social logics in the favela have conferred traffickers such as Wanderson with the ability to negotiate constantly shifting notions of legality and, while Wanderson's transformation into a Microsoft spokesman is presented as unique, his story serves to evoke the blurred lines between the illegal and legal.

The cultural logic suggested by the narrative of Wanderson's individual transformation can be traced to political movements in 1980s Brazil when, following the return of democracy, the country's civil society slowly altered the "criteria for the admission to political life" (Holston 1999, 137). While the country embraced a democratic discourse, the promise of inclusion often conflicted with a more historical manifestation of prejudice and social exclusion. James Holston describes Brazil's working class as an "insurgent citizenship" that uses "autoconstruction," or the informal construction of homes and communities, in order to cultivate a marginalized form of democratic citizenship. Insurgent citizens are working class Brazilians that fought for "the rights and dignity of democratic citizenship rather than … patronage, favor, or revolution" (Holston 2008, 230). In this sense, autoconstruction is not just a material act of building one's home, but a political act that allows marginalized communities to establish a sense of political citizenship.

While Holston frames insurgent citizenship in terms of São Paulo's working class (*clase trabalhador*), these qualities can be found in Microsoft's telling of Wanderson's life. Favela residents who autoconstruct their homes and former drug dealers like Wanderson symbolize a similar sense of differentiated citizenship as well as a specific site of knowledge construction and creativity (Moreno-M 2018). Like the working class, drug dealers were provoked by poverty and institutional abandonment to subvert the rule of law. Both workers and traffickers feared the state-centric violence that results from the subversion of the rule of law, such as forced removals. Like autoconstruction's ability to generate democratic moralities in an unequal democracy, participation in the Complexo's drug trade provided an opportunity to gain cultural and economic capital. Through their influence on the day-to-day of *favela* life, parallel-state drug gangs influenced ideas of "good citizenship," and drug dealing ultimately reflected a set of ethical dilemmas thrust upon *favela* youth (Savell 2015). The Complexo's drug faction normalized and gave value to an informal market, allowing a young Wanderson to imagine a morally and ethically informed life under the Complexo's drug trade.

Nonetheless, for many observers, Wanderson's participation in the drug trade was more ethically problematic than the autoconstruction of urban space. The terms *bandido* and *traficante* are broadly applied to *favela* youth who participate in the drug trade, a fact that ignores individual agency by fashioning a ready-made enemy of the Brazilian State. Erika Robb-Larkins, invoking Giorgio Agamben (1998), describes how dominant state actors rationalize the suspension of qualified life in *favelas*; "the imagination and construction of traffickers (and *favela* residents more broadly) as killable, disposable bodies is at the heart of the ideology of exception in Rio" (Larkins 2013, 556). Suspected criminals killed annually by Rio's police force in "acts of resistance" ("*ato de resitencia*") reached an all-time high in 2007 at 1113 (Granja 2011; Lethal Force 2015). Prejudice towards *favela* traffickers paralleled other neo-colonial conflicts where sovereign authority was

maintained by defining internal enemies and by exerting control in marginalized communities (Hansen and Stepputat 2005). Though conflating workers with drug dealers on a policy level had deadly consequences, Rio's police were encouraged to use increasingly violent tactics with impunity.

In the context of information society, the practice of auto-construction evolved to include the refashioning of legally procured internet connections (Pavesi 2017). Many favelas that I visited during my research were covered by "gatos" or bundles of clandestinely appropriated electrical wires that resemble the balls of string that cats play with. Communities were serviced exclusively by middlemen who spliced their own utility connections and sold them to hundreds of other residents. Much like the appropriation of *gatos* by internet service providers in the *favela,* Microsoft's presentation of Wanderson ignores the forms of legal and technological practices developed without the permission of corporations or the state. *Gatos* and *gambiarra* constitute techniques operationalized by *favela* residents that recombine and deviate from exclusionary socio-economic conditions (Rosas 2010). Viewed negatively for their association with criminality, *gatos* and *gambiarra* have recently received positive re-interpretations for their association with a *favela*-centric improvization, an alternative form of design that evolves from a unique set of cooperative objectives (Boufleur 2006). As an ethnographer, improvization reflected values, undocumented contributions of everyday favela residents, and the consequence of social exclusion.

Even as the government attempted to formalize the *favela*'s infrastructure, informal *gatos* built by residents were often legally appropriated by state-sanctioned utilities without the improvement of service or the development of new infrastructure. In this sense, I found that the corporate appropriation of informally developed favela infrastructure was often the norm and demonstrated the ability of the state to accept *gatos* as a paradoxical formal development.

The rise of left-leaning political parties, such as the Workers' Party or *Partido de Trabalhador*es, allowed *favela* residents to be increasingly humanized as an ascendant and essential part of Brazilian society. The insurgent citizen who auto-constructed land, the worker who provided the sweat necessary for progress, and the trafficker who scraped by on the urban periphery, all once ignored or demonized by Brazil's democracy, were now essential to its inclusionary narrative. However, positive examples of inclusion were often qualified not by democratic standards – an equally applied legal and political apparatus – but rather by the ability of the community to transform along new security and economic paradigms.

Many locals believed digital technology was a way to challenge the state while also sharing in its benefits (Scott 2016). The Internet and social media, in addition to giving hope and providing formal institutional connections, allowed residents to document violence and provide a counter-narrative to the euphemistic government narrative. Microsoft and the NGOs it used as proxies were no doubt aware of the broader culture of hope that was built around the *favela*. What I found ethnographically valuable was how Wanderson's supporters sculpted the image of a digitally disruptive ex-drug dealer, and often used this image to obscure the more problematic aspects of outside intervention.

4. Aligning corporate narratives with narratives of informality

Through an analysis of Wanderson's role in a broader political economy of disruption, I see the regulatory deviance of Microsoft paralleling the legal deviance of drug traffickers while

corporate reform parallels reform in the favela. Wanderson's position as an ex-trafficker-turned-digital-educator made him an ideal agent of change for Microsoft: a profoundly marginalized individual ready for transformation under a new social, political, and economic order. Wanderson was not alone with his transformative story, and he reflected a popular trope of the reformed *malandro* (scoundrel) who transformed from the undignified marginal into a dignified worker (Misse 2006). Stories of the reformed *malandro* were effective in that they opposed a historical imagination of marginality in Brazil and embraced a popular hope that both *favela* residents and drug traffickers could be integrated into mainstream Brazilian society.

As part of my institutional ethnography, I repeated the rhythms and habits of Recode's employees who worked out of a small home in one of Rio de Janeiro's "noble" neighborhoods. This led me to eating lunch nearly every day with Wanderson and his co-workers around Recode's cramped kitchen table. He was one of the more charismatic personalities in the room, often leading the table's conversations and providing anecdotes from his travels. Over the course of several dozen lunches I learned the details of his life that failed to appear in Microsoft's public relations campaign. I learned about his arrival in the Complexo at four years old. He told me, "I remember how crowded the Complexo felt. The winding alley-ways that go up the hill." He sometimes discussed the violence that defined his early child-hood. The year he arrived, 1994, Rio recorded 4,081 homicides, many of them resulting principally from *favela*-based drug violence (Zdun 2011). Wanderson's eventual entrance into the drug trade paralleled what Philippe Bourgois (1995) describes as a search for respect that opposed demeaning socio-economic conditions and a lack of dignified work – or, as Wanderson put it: "I wanted money and friends." Wanderson described his reason for joining the gang as "Just for fun. Just flying kites." At eight years old he became an *olheiro* (lookout), flying his kite and lighting firecrackers to announce the arrival of drug deliveries, the police, and rival drug gangs. Before he turned thirteen, he transitioned quickly from *avião* (delivery boy), to *soldado* (soldier) with a handgun, to *vapor* (street dealer). Low in the parallel state's hierarchy and working in entry-level sales positions, Wanderson avoided shootouts and arrest. He made R$200–300 (US$67–100) a week, which, at the time of my research ten years later, was four times the average income for the Complexo.

He was arrested once, went to jail, and, under Brazil's relatively lenient juvenile criminal code, was quickly released. Wanderson returned to the Complexo and was promoted to *gerente* (manager) of a *boca* (distribution point). The work was simple and relatively monotonous.

> I received cocaine, marijuana. They would come in big packages. A few kilos. I separated it into ten reais (~US$2.50), 30 reais (~US$7.50). So it could be sold individually … I worked 60 h a week. Sorting and standing on the street … Sometimes I went to the *baile (dance)* … But it was work. I learned loyalty for my boss … I never lacked the truth. I was a person that always told the truth. I also learned a lot about accounting, all the math that I didn't get in school. [He paused and chuckled.] Most importantly, I learned to mediate conflicts. (Author's field notes, December 2015)

Wanderson found the fact that he learned important skills amusing given the violent repu-tation of the drug traffickers and the possibility that each conflict could involve dozens of young men with weapons.

After meeting Wanderson and becoming involved in his work, I found myself discussing his life story with my informants from the Complexo. I showed them social media pictures

of Wanderson and they would often laugh and call into question the authenticity of his story based on his appearance. More specifically, my informants explained how Wanderson's skin color and his dress did not align with local racialized notions of drug traffickers. These aesthetic expectations were based on well-discussed prejudices experienced by dark skinned men from the favela. According to a report written by Amnesty International, victims of police homicides in Brazil were 99.5% male, 79% black, 75% youth between the ages of 15 and 29, and usually from a *favela* (Lemos n.d.). Wanderson's appearance – *branco* (white) or possibly *pardo* (lighter skinned), *louro* (blonde), and *olho azuis* (blue eyes) – contrasted with popular representations of Rio's drug traffickers. Crime in Brazil is often represented and experienced in racial terms (Drybread 2014; Goldstein 2003, Penglase 2011). As a light-skinned man, Wanderson's experience as a drug trafficker avoided the daily prejudices faced by others in the predominantly afro-Brazilian Complexo. I frequently heard complaints from Complexo residents about how corporate news sources described light skin drug offenders in terms of middleclassness (de *clase meia*) and education (*universitários,* or university students), while they presented black *favela* youth simply as *traficantes* (traffickers).[1] As a lighter skinned man, Wanderson could circumvent racial prejudice through the embrace of dominant markers of education and market participation.

This racial passing, something that appeared both unintentional and aesthetically convenient for Microsoft, prompted some of my informants to question the authenticity of Wanderson's message of digital inclusion. My informants also questioned Wanderson's ability to represent the favela regardless of skin color. They sometimes pointed to his clothes: jeans and a polo shirt, or gelled hair, as markers of difference. Often, residents of the Complexo laughed and said that Wanderson looked like a "playboy" or *crente* (devout evangelical). Because of popular beliefs relating to class and racial aesthetics, they struggled to imagine him as a drug trafficker.

Beyond physical attributes that made Complexo residents hesitate to accept Wanderson's story as authentic, I could not find a local activist in the community who knew him personally or professionally. This was surprising to me, given that the Complexo's activist community was inclusionary and tight knit, and found a common identity through a narrative of digital transformation. Despite millions of video views on social media and speeches in front of thousands at Microsoft events, Wanderson had not shared his story with the informal community he hoped to support the most.

I mention these doubts and incongruences not to call into question the veracity of Wanderson's experiences as a drug trafficker or to suggest that his transformation was an insignificant experience. Rather, I see Wanderson's anonymity within the community as an example of how his narrative of digital inclusion was shaped by outside actors and what it meant for non-local audience. Furthermore, I see ethnography as a way to verify and examine the multiple perspectives that are used to understand dominance, informality, and improvization. The racialized and classed issues tied to his identity within the *favela*, I believe, demonstrate that Microsoft intended his message for non-*favela*, non-Brazilian, and international audiences that would more easily consume the image of a light-skinned, smartly dressed, and highly educated young man.

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[1]See http://veja.abril.com.br/noticia/brasil/mpf-denuncia-cinco-por-droga-encontrada-em-helicoptero-dos-perrella.

Over one lunch at Recode, I sat with Wanderson as he recounted his second arrest. He awoke one morning to the sound of fireworks, a warning of a surprise police operation. Hanging his hands over a plate of ground beef and yucca puree as he spoke to me, he tested the weight of two phantom firearms. "There was an operation, and shootouts with the police everywhere. I grabbed two handguns. I was huddled on the floor when they found me. That was it. Everyone got arrested. My boss. My friends. It was over" (Author's field notes, October 2014).

Over another lunch at Recode, a television news story aired about overcrowding at Rio's juvenile detention center in the Bangu neighborhood where Wanderson served both of his prison terms, he explained,

> It was a difficult moment for me. I never had to do this, stay in one place the whole time. Not being able to choose where I could go. You know? They beat you in prison. They don't give you a bed, just sheets on the floor. There's no toilet. Just a hole in the ground. I was without perspective. (Author's field notes, October 2014)

Wanderson was not allowed to continue his high school education and the only officially sanctioned activity was a Recode-run course where he used a personal computer for the first time. When I asked what he had learned, he stressed skills beyond the technical aspects of the course and paraphrased a quote from Gandhi that he had learned during Recode's training, "I learned I could be the change that I wanted for the world. I could help people and make others feel like they weren't just prisoners."

While an arrest and imprisonment may not have given Wanderson hope, like Microsoft did, he was nonetheless shaped by a set of economic rationales and prison policies that placed him in prison. Wanderson's time in prison also reflected the evolution of Western carceral rationales over the previous two hundred years. Much like prisons throughout the modern world, Rio's prisons focused on security and containment over reform and education (Feeley and Simon 1992; Simon 2007; Foucault [1988] 2008; Cunha 2014). Brazil underwent a carceral boom between 1992 and 2012 with prison populations more than quadrupling. A "*favela*-prison" pipeline was structured around the idea of punishing individuals from Brazil's periphery (Larkins 2015). The Frei Caneca, Rio's only prison that prioritized reform and education, and where Recode had one of its first programs, had been demolished a few years before Wanderson's arrest in order to build a downtown housing project. The remaining prisons expanded but quickly became overcrowded. By installing a permanent anti-gang police in Rio's largest *favelas*, prison populations swelled and drew resources away from more reformative efforts. The technology course that Wanderson took part in was a rare experiment in a return to prison education and a principle example of what steps some in civil society took to reform rather than punish criminal offenders from Rio's favela.

Encouraged by his experience in the computer course, Wanderson volunteered to be an educator for Recode's next round of prison workshops. He led his fellow inmates through the basics of computer use. Wanderson remembers a fellow prisoner who stood up in a workshop and said, "I think when I become a computer teacher, just like you, I'll know how to give good classes." While speaking in front of classes and meetings, Wanderson frequently mentioned that this was the most important moment of his life. He wanted to inspire other young people, pull them from the depths of marginality, and show them that they had opportunities beyond what society had given them. The interaction

between educator and student was particularly important in the narratives that Recode and Microsoft presented about Wanderson's digital transformation. A post on Microsoft's website titled "Back in Prison but Not Behind Bars" tells of the impact that this interaction had on Wanderson. "Wanderson isn't so different from the young man he taught. The drive to help others surpasses nearly everything else … He is living proof that change is not only possible; it's within reach of even the most dis-advantaged Brazilian" (Microsoft n.d.). He transcended the historical social limits of a prisoner, trafficker, and insurgent citizen and found a place as an educator in a formal society. This reflects not only the distance between multinational corporations and the everyday life of *favelas*, but also the transformative faith that they bestow upon their products for the purpose of marketing.

5. A visual ethnography of conversion

Through my long-term ethnographic research, I found myself living in Wanderson's community, the Complexo do Alemão. Recode's communication director asked me to guide a film crew who had been hired by Microsoft around the Complexo. Wanderson felt uncomfortable returning to the Complexo and the communication director implied that it would be inappropriate for us to broach the subject to him. There was also concern that Wanderson would be mistaken as a police informant or a returning drug dealer. The crew consisted of all non-*favela* people: a middle-class Brazilian producer, an American director, a German cameraman, and myself, an American ethnographer. Without Wanderson present, I quickly realized that Microsoft lacked a representative from Complexo that could take part in the production of the video. I asked a local named Elisabete, a disarming, motherly, and well-known figure who had carried out 30 years of work in the Complexo, to guide us around the Complexo.

   Almost every aspect of filming revealed a source of tension between the corporate film crew and local assumptions relating to space and technology. We met the crew at a sporting complex called the *Vila Olimpica* (Olympic Village). The crew arrived in a large Mercedes van full of tens of thousands of dollars in camera equipment. Elisabete, wary of the ostentatious appearance of the equipment, led the crew to her local school. The crew's director used the school's patio and flew a small camera drone over the Complexo's stadium-sized valley. Implying that their small camera drone was in danger, I reminded them that traffickers were known to shoot down police helicopters. The crew's director had spent the last few years filming inspirational videos for Microsoft in slums around the world and told me that while filming in Mumbai he learned to navigate children flying kites. Elisabete led us to a plaza where the government had recently built a cinema. The crew filmed a group of children as they ran up and down a snug alleyway. While filming, the director noticed three male teenagers looking on from a distance, who appeared to be sending text messages on their smartphones and holding walkie-talkies. The director asked if he could invite them over so he could film them. I refused to ask them to participate. Elisabete also politely refused to make the introduction. Both the favela resident and I assumed the traffickers would refuse. The American Director, who did not speak Portuguese began to walk over. Seeing this as a sign of mortal risk, the resident intervened by explaining Microsoft's project to the youth. The confusion caused the director to pack up in frustration and announce that the day of filming was done. Beyond a well-documented culture of silence (Taussig 1989) and a favela-centric "law of the hill" (Penglase 2009), I see, as an example

of ethnographic "refusal" (McGranahan 2017) both on my part and the part of my informants, an attempt to divert from the neo-colonial narrative of Microsoft, an ethnographer's gatekeeping for the sake of my interlocutors. Elisabete, the youth we approached, and I refused to indulge in the most superficial aspects of the favela's illicit realties. Microsoft's film crew sought to coopt this illicitness, the improvization and insurgency, and apply it to the corporate goals of disruption, ultimately embracing an othering and neo-colonial narrative about the violent favela.

A few months after I guided the crew around the Complexo, Microsoft released an initial three-minute video. The opening title read "In A Place Where Little Hope Remains … One Man Inspires" (Microsoft 2015). Wanderson appeared on screen in a *favela* that is not the Complexo. He spoke in Portuguese and described working as a drug dealer, his time in prison, and how he had lacked the motivation to leave a life of crime. Then the video cut to one of Wanderson's former students. She weeps and tells the camera how hard it is to live with the violence in her community, and how Wanderson's guidance made life easier. Wanderson spent the final minute of the video praising the transformative power of Microsoft technology. The video ended with a bombastic title screen: "Microsoft and the work we do, saving lives across the globe" (Microsoft 2015).

Viewing the finished video, I noticed that most of the images were staged after my involvement. The police officers carrying out arrests were actors and their guns were fake. The video showed non-existent classrooms and students. The images were shaped and directed; the evidence of digital disruption fabricated. Refusals made mute. Microsoft, with the power of economic capital and technology, imposed its own vision of disruption on Rio de Janeiro's pacified favelas. These fabrications were all the more problematic given Wanderson's own non-scripted understandings of digital technology.

In one of our last lunchtime conversations, Wanderson suggested that Microsoft's influence on his life was accidental and that other opportunities could have led him down an equally transformative path. Most ex-traffickers, rather than being given employment opportunities by corporations or NGOs, were forced into manual labor. According to Wanderson, most traffickers would be happy to leave a life of crime and find value through more legitimate work. "Traffickers want their sons to be police officers, not drug dealers, workers with working papers. They understand the limits of the drug gang and hope that one day they can find hope beyond it." As Wanderson suggests, of the thousands of individuals who participated in the Complexo's drug trade over the previous ten years, there is a possibility that most would have accepted more legitimate work if the opportunity was available.

6. Conclusion

With more than one billion individuals projected to reside in *favelas* and other urban gray zones across the globe by 2020, informal communities will become increasingly important as corporations seek to expand their influence. As I show above, familiar and popular symbols of informality such as the drug dealer may become important features of the formal, global, and corporate economies of the future. Insurgency and local forms of technological improvization, although often running against the dominant state, may be reworked, re-tooled, and appropriated to allow powerful institutions avenues into marginalized communities. Converting a fine provides one of the clearer examples of how

corporations attempt to bridge the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal, through well-branded marketing campaigns.

Methodologically, this article finds the combination of visual ethnography and institutional ethnography as providing a window into the techniques that global technology corporations use to take symbolic ownership of local knowledge in marginalized communities. My ethnographic analysis of corporate conversion shows the types of peripheral institutions, such as NGOs, that facilitate relationships between marginalized populations, drug dealers, ex-prisoners, and a global consumer market. Institutional ethnography examines not just the relationships within and between institutions but also individuals' experiences (Smith 2005). Visual ethnography, in part, allows for researchers to see the political significance of images through their production and receptions (Bleiker 2015). Visual aesthetics, such as the *favela* or the drug trafficker, provide important symbolic references for institutions attempting to assert their presence in social and economic "gray zones." Combining institutional and visual ethnography reveals the intentions of corporations in aligning themselves with informal actors, the reactions of these actors to being filmed, and agreeing with a narrative of digital disruption. The research outlined above shows how aesthetics are filtered through institutional logics and, in a similar respect, how corporations shape the narratives we use to make sense of both the formal and informal.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributor

Dr. Jason Bartholomew Scott's research explores policing policy, digital activism, and pedagogy. He is currently developing an ethnographic project that compares social justice movements in Brazilian favelas and the American Rust Belt.

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