

## **CIVIC MEDIA NETWORKS IN THE AMAZON AND THE DIGITAL COUNTER-HEGEMONY** **REDES DE MÍDIA CÍVICA NA AMAZÔNIA E A CONTRA-HEGEMONIA DIGITAL** ACILON CAVALCANTE, ANA CLÁUDIA CARDOSO

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## Abstract

This article is based on the role played by media practices in constructing a stereotyped idea of low-income districts in Brazilian cities and seeks to present, as a contrast, the potential reaction of digital-based movements made up of young people who wish to break with the media framework imposed upon their communities. The project developed in the Terra Firme neighborhood in the city of Belém in the northern Brazilian state of Pará has been adopted as a case study, within the scope of the public university and in partnership with the community - represented by young university students who entered the institution based on the quota policy. The project identified, characterized and supported emerging civic media networks within these communities, particularly during the 2010s, through participatory methodologies for the co-creation of knowledge. As a result, it produced collaborative cartographies, a web series on the history of the neighborhood narrated by residents, maps updated online and technical training that enabled actions and generated new agendas for the social media. These productions forced the mainstream to accept a new media contextualization of the neighborhood, thereby breaking away from the narrative monopoly by conventional media vehicles, and promoting social innovation in public policies. The actions presented herein are a sample of some of the reactions against the hegemony of social and urban development models that result in the marginalization and even concealment of entire sectors of society.

**Keywords:** The Amazon, Civic Media Networks, Media Practices

## 1 Introduction

Globalization has leveraged changes that have turned cities into the main stage of social, political, cultural and economic transformations. In these cities, the cultural industry, through media practices, has taken part in the diffusion and dissemination of an urban and economic development paradigm, which was instilled in a hegemonic manner, bringing about impacts on stereotyped and/or invisible populations (Canclini, 2008). Such practices were operated through printed content, radio broadcasting and television, with programs that, even until the present day, portray the peripheries of large cities as being scenarios of violence and precariousness, and that depict their population in a stereotyped manner, labeling them as a social minority. Hence, even though social plurality has been recorded in cities ever since the urbanization unleashed in the 1960s, the city has been represented by the media as “a much more homogeneous space than it really is” (Canclini, 2002, p. 45). It should be emphasized that such practices are a global phenomenon, since they not only occur in Latin America, but also in North America, with Latino and Afro-descendant minorities, in Europe with gypsies and immigrants, and across different parts of the world according to the local characteristics.

The media is an important tool for disseminating conceptions of urban, economic and social development that are currently hegemonic on the urban landscapes of the planet, despite the regional differences. Thus, informal settlements that have occupied a large part of the landscape of cities in the global South have become an antithesis of the hegemonic idea of the city and, for decades, the way of dealing with the population that inhabits these spaces has been to label them as criminals or as being situated on the margins of society (Cavalcante, 2020). Even so, over the decades, the resident population on the peripheries has demonstrated actions which counteract the imposed model, and which have resulted in urban revolts, in struggles for the right to housing and in several other forms of calling for visibility and civil rights. However, through the massification of communication technology networks at the end of the 2000s, these groups have advanced in agendas of autonomy and participation regarding their living space, with the so-called Civic Media Networks.

Civic Media are technologies that enable a participatory culture in public life with the emergence of a post-citizen (Zuckerman, 2014, p. 156), characterized by a deep feeling of revolt against the political and financial systems (Castells, 2017), and “an interest—perhaps a need—for participants to see their impact on the issues they’re trying to influence” (Zuckerman, 2014, p. 156). In addition, network actions, besides being political, perform activities of a cultural nature through the production of content potentialized by social media (Darchen, 2017, p. 3617; Kahne, 2014, p. 7). The first examples, that gained strength through digital media, were The Arab Spring and the Pots and Pans Revolution in 2008 (Castells, 2017) and, since then, this emerging organizational strategy of civic actions has spread across the world. In Brazil, such networks have evolved on the urban peripheries due to a number of reasons, two of which are particularly outstanding. First, with the end of the State

Telephone Monopoly in Brazil in 1998 and the popularization of mobile devices, data packages accessible to those in the lower income strata of society promoted their insertion into digital networks (Cavalcante, 2020). The second item is related to changes in the admission system to universities in Brazil, especially through the Law of Admission by Quotas (Federal Law 12711/2012), which began to guarantee fifty percent of places for students from public schools, and for indigenous and Black people and those with disabilities, thereby bringing public universities closer to the reality of the peripheries.

Although there is literature on Civic Media, studies regarding the Brazilian peripheries are still rare, which has therefore led to a series of assumptions concerning how they function, how they appear, and mainly, the impact that these media cause, both on the community and on society as a whole. For example: the research hypothesis expected that the topology of these networks would be horizontal and distributed in a type of democratic utopia or alternative society, which was not confirmed in the research, since, despite the topological decentralization they demonstrated, in structural terms, the civic media networks present certain nodes with a higher concentration of connections than others (Cavalcante, 2020).

The main motivation for the research was to discover ways to socially innovate and provide autonomy for peripheral communities regarding issues of urban management based on the characteristics of the groups that use civic media. Thus, the project began with the aim of characterizing and developing actions to strengthen active civic media networks and to identify the mode of operating and the potential impact of these networks on the relationship of the districts with society, the media and the government. An extension and research project called Data Firme was carried out, between 2018 and 2020, with groups that, at the time, were beginning to appear both online and in face-to-face activist actions in the streets of the city, protesting against the urban violence suffered by those living on the periphery of the city. A participatory design was used and, as a fixed team, twelve student members of the community, who had been admitted to university through the quota system, were mobilized, together with other non-student members, in addition to local residents invited for specific actions.

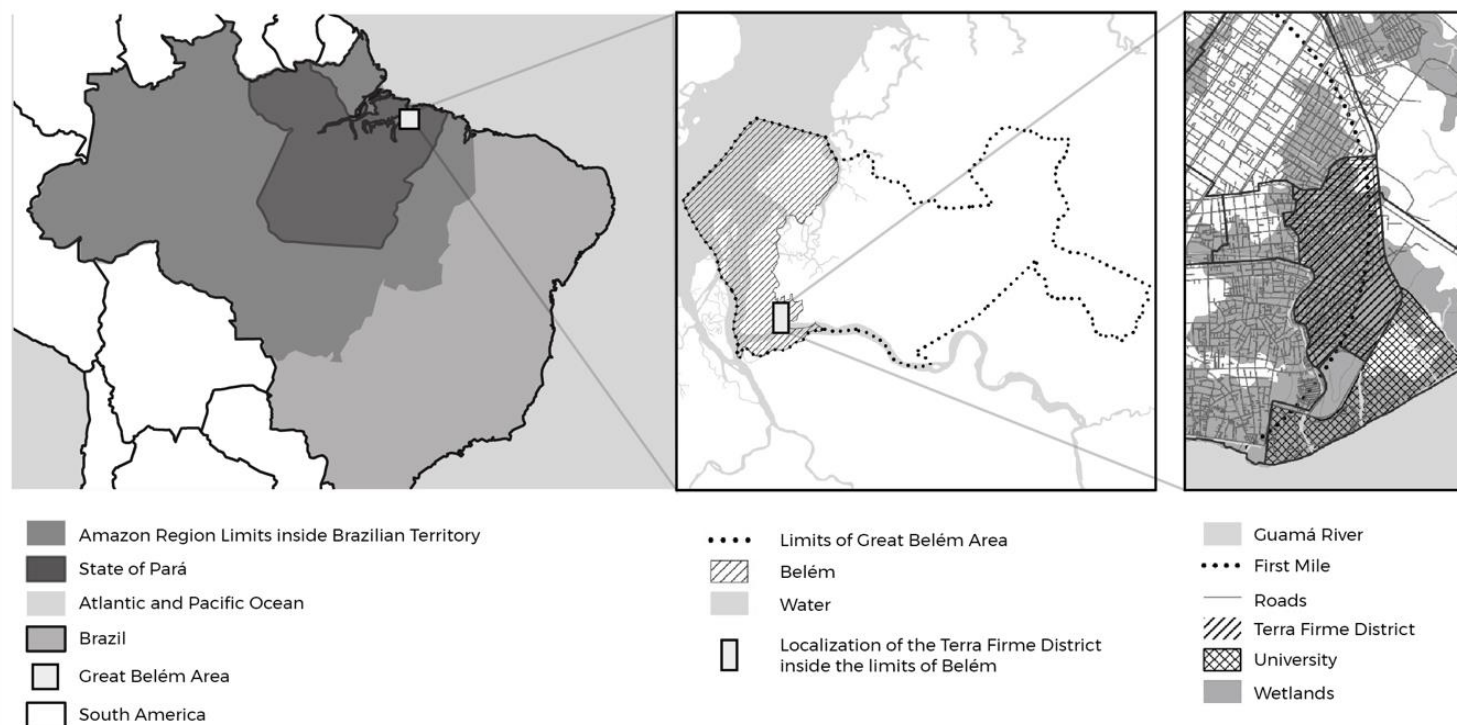
The project used the qualitative methodology of the focus group in order to develop collective tasks (Kitizinger, 1994). These activities created situations that have been experienced in the community and were oriented towards developing products that would help the community to modify its living space, as is typical of civic media networks. The main methodological tool used in the meetings was Design Thinking, understood as an "exploratory process; [which] done right, it will invariably make unexpected discoveries along the way" (Brown, 2009, p. 15). The work of interacting with people takes place in three stages: "An inspiration space, in which insights are gathered from every possible source; an ideation space, in which those insights are translated into ideas; and an implementation space, in which the best ideas are developed into a concrete, fully conceived plan of action. (Brown, 2009, p. 63).

This experience was consolidated in a master's dissertation, which is also the basis of this article. The first objective of the present text is to describe both the Civic Media Networks in a neighborhood called Terra Firme and the project developed in partnership with the university. The text also aims to explore the relationship established between the university education of the quota students and strengthening the civic media networks within their communities. Along this route, pathways have been sought that challenge the hegemonic and prejudiced view of low-income districts in Brazilian cities.

## **2 Terra Firme: From Occupation to the Civic Media Networks**

The urbanization of this neighborhood was undertaken in a spontaneous, unplanned manner on the periphery of the Brazilian city of Belém in the Northern state of Pará, in a wetland as presented in Figure 1. Improvised occupations in floodable areas, which were extremely high density because they were informal and populous, had received several improvements, but had remained precarious, and have been classified by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and statistics (IBGE - 2020) as subnormal settlements. Until the end of the 1960s, the population of Terra Firme was 4,250 (Penteado, 1967), which, by 1991, had reached 59,231 (Rodrigues, 1996). For comparison purposes, during the same period, the population of Belém leapt from 693,000 in 1970 to around 1.2 million in 1991. During this period, while the city presented a growth of 96 percent, the population in the neighborhood grew by an impressive 1,293 percent. Unfortunately, the 2010 census data does not provide an updated number, although the website of the municipal government of Belém estimates that the neighborhood has a current population of 60 thousand. Of the more than four hundred hectares in the neighborhood, 83.75 percent are floodable (Pegado et al., 2014) since they are located on the floodplain of the Tucunduba River. In the 1980s, a time of the greatest growth, the constructions were mainly on wooden stilts with no sewage or piped water. The population landfilled the

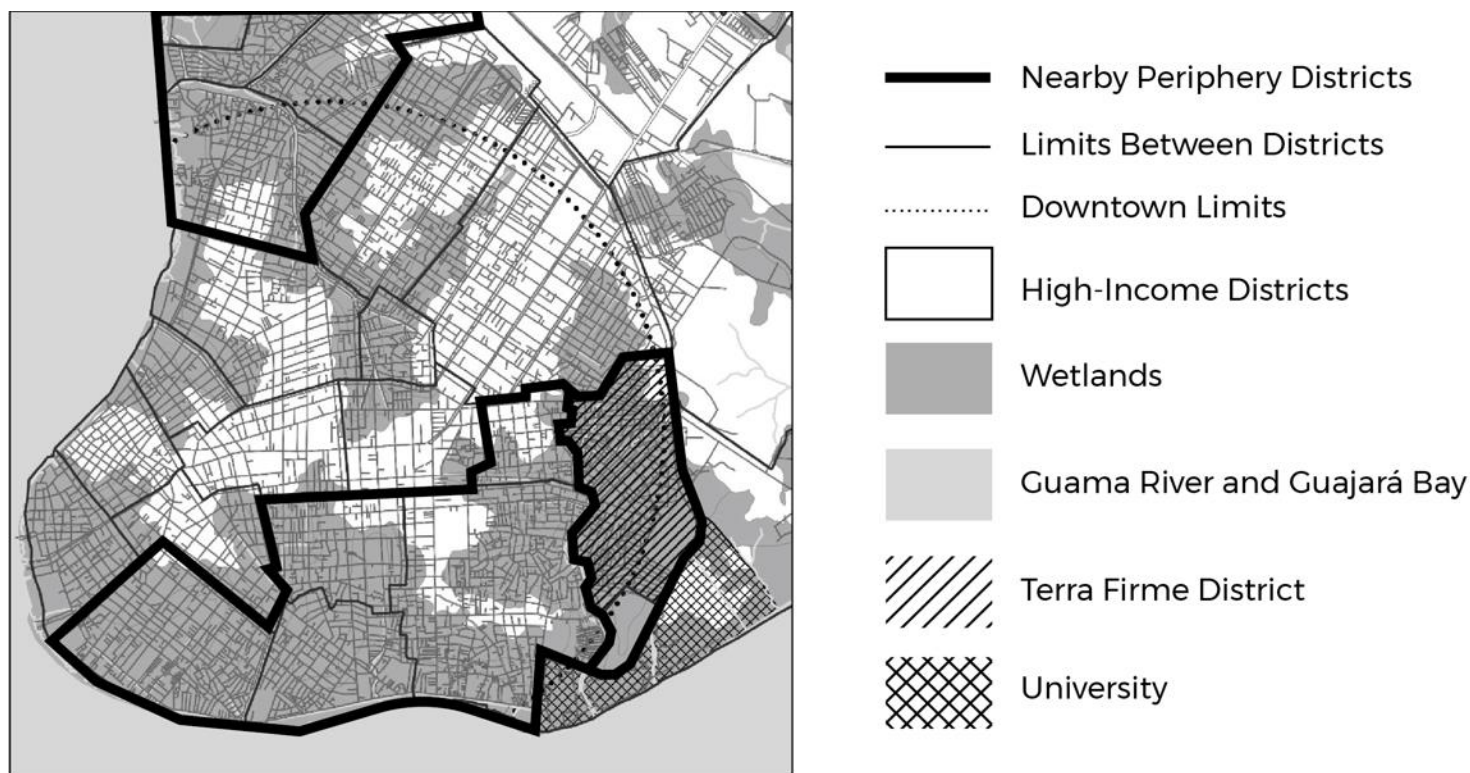
flooded area and consolidated the occupation with the solid waste that came from the formal city (Interview with Francisco Batista<sup>1</sup>, 2019).



**Fig.1:** Location of the Terra Firme District. This image illustrates: (1) The position of Greater Belém inside Brazil (2) The limits of Terra Firme inside Greater Belém (3) The proximity of Terra Firme to the Center of Belém, and the presence of the floodable areas. Source: Own elaboration, 2022.

This type of settlement became characteristic of the lowland areas of Belém, which extended existing districts and created low-income districts which, as presented in Figure 2, are interwoven with the up standards districts. This is called the nearby periphery, inserted into the metropolitan center (Lima et al., 2015, p. 161). This explains both the proximity between formal and low-income districts and the pattern of occupation in the southern portion of Belém. From the 1970s, during the occupation of the North region, migrants arrived in cities that were unprepared to receive them. The housing programs implemented were aimed at formal workers in very remote areas, while the migrant population remained in the lowlands, given the ease of access to public services and income generation opportunities in the formal city (markets, commerce, providing services), factors that influenced an increase in the income of families living in the area (Lima, 2000, p. 193 cited in Cardoso, 2007, p. 83).

<sup>1</sup> Francisco Batista is a resident of the neighborhood and one of the main exponents of the civic media movements present in the community.



**Fig. 2:** Situation of the Districts in the Nearby Periphery in the Metropolitan Center. Highlighting the Terra Firme Neighborhood, and the University, where the project took place. Source. Own elaboration. 2022.

Thus, the occupation of these lands was marked by both the precarious conditions that existed there and the conflicts with the large landowners (in the particular case of Terra Firme, the land belonged to the Union). This movement occurred against the natural conditions of the floodplain and against public opinion, which called such settlements “invasions” (Cardoso, 2007). This context was accompanied by a media spectacularization that framed this type of occupation within a strictly legalistic perspective, characterizing it as an unlawful action. Canclini (2008) categorized such media practices as being part of a strategy of disinformation, stating that “policies exist to distort and conceal information as a government and media strategy in order to concentrate and to exclude large sectors of society, thereby causing them to become invisible” (Canclini, 2008, p. 17, our translation). In fact, this idea exposes that the role of the media is to homogenize the image of the city, concealing everything that is outside the ideal (modernist) parameter of what may be considered a street, house, or neighborhood.

Despite this, over time, such settlements have been consolidated as low-income districts, which have become “improved, receiving social (education and health care services) and physical (water supply, sanitation and drainage) infrastructures” (Cardoso, 2007, p. 56), although from a physical viewpoint, this consolidation process was incomplete. In addition, residents of peripheral districts, such as Terra Firme, still live with violence: the highest homicide rates occur on the peripheries, which is also where militias and drug cartels operate. Faced with this context, in the 1990s, a type of media entertainment emerged in the country that explored urban violence in the outskirts, called community journalism, but which worked mainly with police news. Until the 2010s, in Belm there were five television programs, three radio programs, and two printed supplements dedicated to this type of content (Cavalcante, 2020, p. 75).

The turning point occurred in 2014, after the so-called “Belm Massacre” in which 11 youths from the periphery were killed by militia actions, in response to the death of a militia police officer. The so-called “Responses” had been taking place ever since 1996 in Belm, as actions to control the peripheral population through fear (Cavalcante, 2020). Media practices fulfilled the function of rendering this population invisible to public opinion, since, for the rest of the city, the victims of such massacres did not seem to matter. Ultimately, the idea existed that residents of the periphery had some connection with organized crime and therefore, according to the media, “got what they deserved”. However, after the 2014 massacre, changes took place in the elements of media practices and a process of transformation began to emerge regarding the image of the periphery. Media practices are composed of meaning, competence and materiality (Lunemborg; Raetzch, 2018, p. 22). These elements are interconnected and work in the way people read one another. However, once the connections between them have become broken, the practices in question also disappear, giving way to new practices that resurface from what had once existed.

In the case in question, there were two changes that promoted transformations: the first was the presence of the young people born into the neighborhood - university students and far more aware of their role within society - who rejected the archetype of marginalized people that had been imposed upon them. The second was the end of the narrative monopoly. The expansion of telecommunication networks on the periphery occurred with access to data packages designed for consumption by the low-income population. Among the metropolitan regions of Brazil, greater Belém is particularly outstanding, with 96.4 percent of connectivity, which is mainly due to the use of smartphones. Thus, fear gave way to outrage, followed by action. Through digital media networks, the youth movement organized protests and began to produce audiovisual content that, in some way, was able to sensitize public opinion. This is the type of action that characterizes the groups formed during Data Firme as civic media networks (Zuckerman, 2014; Castells, 2017).

### 3 The Civic Media Networks in Terra Firme

After the Belém Massacre, young people used email groups so as to organize protests and debates. It was through this articulation that the vast majority met and formed the first civic media group, Tela Firme. (Interview with Ingrid Louzeiro<sup>2</sup>, 2020). Tela Firme achieved some of its objectives, since a Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry was set up to investigate the action of militia police, and also verified that it had reached academics and artistic producers thanks to the clear visibility that the project achieved. However, it failed to reach public opinion and the mainstream. The framework produced by the main information vehicles remained the same, but Tela Firme maintained the production of content and activism via social media. As of 2017, an approximation began between the university and the Tela Firme group, driven by the presence of some of its members on undergraduate courses, such as arts, pedagogy and multimedia production, which culminated in the proposal for Data Firme.

### 4 Data Firme

The project was developed between March 2018 and May 2020 as an extension action of the Digital Languages Incubator at the Faculty of Visual Arts and as a research project on the Postgraduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism (PPGAU), both at the Federal University of Pará. Several meetings were held with the collective composed of university students and non-students, organizing them into work groups with programmed actions, objectives and goals according to three themes: promoting citizenship, increasing income and constructing social capital. Table 1 presents the desired impact for each of these themes, which are then discussed as dimensions. The dimensions were defined based on participant reports and their expectations concerning how they would like to impact the community, resulting from dialogues that took place during the Design Thinking workshops.

Dimensions	Desired Impact
Promoting Citizenship	Increased visibility of low-income people and excluded groups. Physical access to the market in order to sell low-income production.
Increasing Income	Best marketing channels for small businesses.
Constructing Social Capital.	Increased sense of belonging. Increased self-esteem related to presence in the neighborhood. Construction of a social network of trust, reciprocity and cooperation with development.

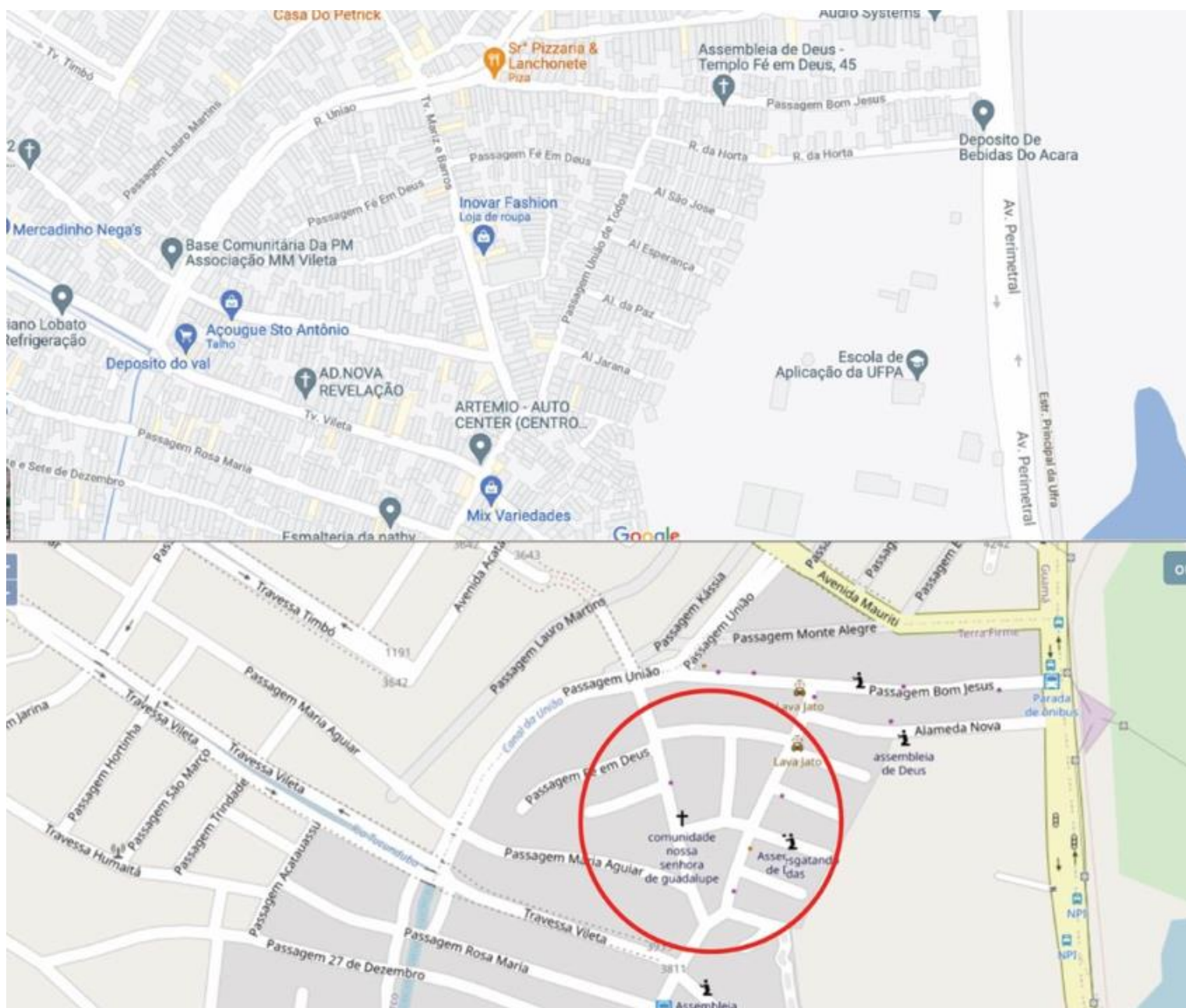
**Table 1:** Categories and Impact desired by the civic media groups that acted at the beginning of Data Firme. These categories are grouped according to the Practical Guide for Generating Artemisia Impact (Silva, 2017). Source: Own elaboration. 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ingrid Louzeiro is an educator and member of Tela Firme. At the time of the Belém Massacre, she was a teenager and was personally impacted by the actions of the militia across the neighborhood.

As the discussions progressed so the ideation and action plan unfolded for the development of products that the project needed to deliver: a web series with seven episodes recounting the history and culture of Terra Firme and the II Social Cartography of Terra Firme. Within the scope of the university, twelve undergraduate and postgraduate students were selected, all of whom lived in the neighborhood and were involved with civic media groups. In addition to the students, the project also included five audio-visual professionals, two geographers and received the collaboration of those living in the neighborhood. The participation should also be mentioning professors from the course on Technology in Multimedia Production, lecturers from the Graduate Program in Architecture for supervising the project coordinator, and another similar group based in Terra Firme, *Ame o Tucunduba* (Love the Tucunduba). This latter group was made up of eight female students from the university who worked on raising awareness on the Tucunduba River basin.

The project was executed in four stages: planning, research, production and post-production. Quantifiable goals were established at each stage, which were then assessed at the end. During planning, training activities were held for the selected team, with script workshops, planning and management of the Agile project and meetings with university students. The research phase included documentary research, and filming interviews with exponents of the neighborhood's first waves of occupation, totaling more than twenty hours of recorded interviews. There was also a Data Firme Hackathon, by *Ame o Tucunduba* with the support of Tela Firme, and the II Social Cartography of Terra Firme, commanded by Tela Firme, under the supervision of the geographer and local leader Francisco Batista. The proposal for the Social Cartography came about through the initiative of the residents themselves, since ten years before, a first social cartography had been elaborated with the help of the university. This was a process of collective construction "that brought together the researchers and mapped social agents with the same degree of importance" (Santos, 2017, p. 2, our translation) and that, therefore, enabled the residents' knowledge regarding the mapped spaces and characteristics to be incorporated.

As a result, the cartography field work mobilized the neighborhood residents, who collected information according to six categories: Religion, Community and Cooperative Entities, Education, Commerce, Services and Leisure, in addition to reviewing the databases referring to the road structure (As shown in Figure 03, Comparison between Google Maps and OpenStreetMap, 2022).



**Fig. 3:** Comparison between Google Maps and OpenStreetMap. In this image, a comparison is made of the differences between the neighborhood's road network according to Google Maps and to OpenStreetMap. It may be noted that the logic of streets as structures followed by sidewalks for pedestrians and vehicle traffic is not respected in the neighborhood, where the streets often run over rivers. The project included "invisible" routes. Sources: Google Maps and OpenStreetMap, 2022.

The cartography data, compiled in spreadsheets, served as material for the web series videos and were made available through digital networks by means of pen drives and printed matter<sup>3</sup>. At this point, the use of OpenStreetMap (OSM) is highlighted, which is basically a Wikipedia of Maps (Meier, 2015, p. 14), since there is an international community of collaborators that feed it. OpenStreetMap was chosen because it has advantages over other cartographic tools for this type of survey (such as ArcGis), since, as it is online, it allows contributions to be collaborative and shared, in addition to providing cloud storage and enabling the development of mobile applications. At the end of the project, three hundred boxes with the products were shared in schools and with social actors who replicated these data within the community. Engagement during the process was so intense that it attracted the attention of the city's main communication vehicles and contributed to achieving the impacts that were desired in the community.

## 5 The Impact of the Civic Media Networks

It is common for impact assessment to be based on quantitative indicators. However, during the duration of the project, it was only possible to measure the visualization and engagement data generated on Facebook, since, in order to infer an

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www.cartografiasocial.com.br/>.



Increase in Income and the Construction of Social Capital, it would be desirable either to have updated census data or to conduct a survey on the associations in the neighborhood. As an indicator of increased visibility throughout the duration of the project, there is concrete data demonstrating that, in 2019, on the Tela Firme fan page there were seven thousand followers and no post content had reached more than twenty-six thousand people. By May 2020, the page had reached thirteen thousand followers, and between January and May of that year, there were twelve posts that had reached between seventeen thousand and six hundred thousand people. The post with the most views was exactly that which, on the day that the public university selection results were announced, presented a party which had been thrown for the young people of the neighborhood who had passed the university entrance test. For the purposes of comparison, the most outstanding program among the television programs of community journalism - which, until then, had only illustrated the periphery in its precarious aspects - reported peaks of fourteen audience points, which, according to the Kantar Ibope Institute, in Greater Belém, corresponded to an audience of 21,619<sup>4</sup> people, (Cavalcante, 2020, p. 108).

It is also possible to infer other impacts generated by the project from the empirical observation of the growth in the dissemination of content produced by the neighborhood through social media and the effective change in media practices. The first sign of change was the journalistic coverage of parties on the periphery for those had passed the university entrance test, which until then had received little visibility. The second was the inclusion of members from the civic media networks in constructing journalistic agendas for the periphery.

Three events that directly participated in the Data Firme project illustrate these new practices. The first was the production of an article on precarious settlements in Belém, for which Tela Firme appointed university professors linked to the project to talk about the subject on the main local television news program. The second was an action by *Ame o Tucunduba*, which used a digital media campaign to call for social control over the macro-drainage works in the Tucunduba Basin, which became the agenda of television news programs. The last was the launch of the results of the II Social Cartography of Terra Firme, which took place on October 16, 2020, when interviews were given to radio stations, television programs, and articles were published in the city's printed newspapers.

Another indication of the impacts caused by the Civic Media Networks is the change in the relationship between the population and the government, which established practices called Grassroots Social Innovations (García et al., 2015). Such types of innovation occur when initiatives by citizen collectives result in new agreements with the government, triggering new urban and social management practices (García et al., 2015, p. 93). For this, it is possible to highlight the new practices designed for the government program *Ter Paz* [Be in Peace] ([www.terpaz.pa.gov.br](http://www.terpaz.pa.gov.br)) which, until 2020, was placed as the main social program of the Government of the State of Pará for peripheral areas of Greater Belém. The organizers of the program faced great difficulty in engaging the population of low-income districts, since the program had been based on top-down strategies, dependent on selected replicators in the communities for disseminating actions and on the adherence of residents to social programs. In 2020, after two years of the program, the results demonstrated the ineffectiveness of this strategy. This was when the idea emerged at the Citizenship Secretariat to promote social innovation, based on addressing and activating partnerships with civic media groups. Tela Firme was hired to promote *Ter Paz* within the communities by repeating the Social Cartography. Since August 2021, when it was contracted, the project has operated in seven districts using its collaborative networks and partnership with other civic media groups, helping to train more than fifty young people and to map out actions in four axes: Education, Culture, Associativism, and Sports and Leisure<sup>5</sup>. The expectation is that such results will help to engage the population and also to develop social policies that are more appropriate for each reality.

However, the most important impact of all has probably been the transformation of the people involved in the project. The partnership with the community has imposed many challenges onto the academic team. First, because there is an elitist history at the university regarding treating the external public, it is common for professors, despite being well-intentioned, to believe that they have the answers for social problems simply by being part of the academic structure. On this point, one of the main merits of the project has been to maintain the civic media groups as protagonists, thereby ensuring equality for both the university and non-university voices and, thus, having cooperated so that actions evolved as they were deemed necessary. Another challenge corresponds to the very precariousness of the situation. The work projects were carried out

<sup>4</sup> Referring to one audience point according to the Kantar IBOPE.

<sup>5</sup> The results of this project made available at <https://terpaz.cartografiasocial.com.br/> in August 2022.

professionally, but with students who, for the most part, had never had experience with multimedia projects on the job market. Therefore, the role of the professionals and professors who were involved in any of the phases of the project was also to supervise and wait for the results to reach the best possible level within the technical and operational limitations. Even so, the quality of the productions was very high, even with delays.

The high quality of the products was mainly due to the level of engagement of both the students and the Terra Firme community. Data Firme contributed to the training of students, not only in terms of using technological resources, but also in terms of how they understand their role in the world. This has consequently led to changes in the relationship between the community and the media, and also between the community and the government. Moreover, among those who participated in the project, two of them began university studies, having been inspired by civic media: Izabela Chaves, in Cinema, and Walbster Martins, in Multimedia Production. These students continued their academic activities, approaching the area of human rights and assumed a perspective of reality where they see themselves as protagonists of the ongoing changes. Another student, Ingrid Louzeiro, one of the founders of Tela Firme in 2014, obtained her master's degree during Data Firme. Not only was she one of the students most engaged with the community and with the development of work, but she also took what she had learnt to the city hall, where she is currently working to develop an adult literacy program. These three students are an example of the profile of the twelve who were welcomed into the project and are indicative of the university's action in the lives of young people who enter through the special access regime.

## 6 Conclusion

Much is said about the negative impacts that social media algorithms have on society, such as aggravating filter bubbles and their consequent effects on the radicalization of ideological and political groups. However, it is necessary to emphasize that any technology may have either positive or negative effects, depending on the purposes of the groups that employ it. In the case of digital media, the premise is that “in the early stages of its development, any technology is messy and uncertain” (Duarte; Alvarez, 2021, x) and this makes it possible to experiment them and take advantage of the power of the so-called big techs, bringing them to the base, where innovations emerge from the real needs of society. It is based on these assumptions that the actions of the Civic Media Networks stand as a counter-hegemonic pathway for the paradigm that has been maintained for decades and that has generated such harmful effects for marginalized communities. As seen in the results of Data Firme, breaking the narrative monopoly may result in practices of grassroots social innovation which thereby enables both market products and public policies to place citizens, even those hitherto invisible, at the center of their actions.

The research results have demonstrated the importance of inclusive education policies, both in constructing a counter-hegemonic narrative, and in strengthening networks and using the media. On this point, Data Firme would not have managed to achieve the desired approximation if the university students themselves had not been part of these networks. Thus, it should be emphasized that all project participants entered the university via the quota system and, with that, were able to contribute toward the knowledge through exchanges between technical and academic knowledge and their own experiences and daily practices. Lastly, the transformations perceived in the relations between the community, the media and the State are also the result of actions by the public university, committed to creating a more inclusive and socially just Amazon and to expanding the opportunities offered to groups that have historically been made invisible by the lack of public policies and exclusionary media practices.

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