

# Among Communities

## *The collective construction of hybrid spatialities through remote communication*

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**Abstract.** *This paper presents considerations and reflections based on experiments conducted in the course of cultural activities within the Hybrids Territories Project for Public Policies, financed by FAPESP and in force at Nomads.usp since March 2011. Starting from previous experiences using classical methods of qualitative research, such as semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, other ways of approaching and understanding the complexity of urban and social realities were sought. The reflections here presented were formed from the trial of methodological procedures, derived from other fields of knowledge and practices already recurrent in some communities. The aim is to verify the limits and potentialities of previously tested procedures and instruments, structured through digital media, to understand the diversity of ways of living in social housing estates with housing units similar to each other and located in the outskirts of two different cities.*

**Keywords.** *Communication; digital media; communities; diversity; ways of living.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces considerations and reflections based on experiments conducted in the course of cultural activities and which seek to verify the use of communication mechanisms, in digital media, among communities in different locations and of different social realities. The aim is to explore the possibilities and limits of the use of these mechanisms in cultural activities in order to promote the coexistence of diversity in these hybrid spaces, created collectively from the communication by digital media. The reflections and results presented in this paper derive from various meetings held throughout the second half of 2011 and the first half of 2012, and they point towards an understanding of the potential of the

use of tested communication media in order to contribute to the understanding and perception of the diversity of ways of living in social housing estates.

### ***On the Hybrid Territories Project***

The experiences that make up part of the reflections here presented were made possible and carried out under the Hybrid Territories project, which is positioned today in the public policies promotion line of FAPESP (Sao Paulo Agency for Research Funding) and are developed at Nomads.usp - Centre for Studies of Interactive Living, University of Sao Paulo.

The project is articulated through partnerships with third sector entities, such as collectives, NGOs, bands as well as culture-related public agencies

and universities, also international, expanding the scope of the project and bringing together different worldviews from its organization and production to the completion of actions. It is hoped that the project will enable the emergence of innovative and more democratic experiences; grounded in less centralized practices and more effective in promoting common good and social change. What has been traditionally coming only from public authority institutions can now emerge from communities and cultural movements that are attentive to local needs, often starting from experiences and practices that already exist in communities. The creative question, from where cultural initiatives emerge, becomes influenced by other gazes, other issues, and not just by public authorities, providing a smaller fragmentation of cultural policies and fostering greater articulation among its promoters.

### ***On diversity and communities for the conducted experiments***

The implementation of this type of project requires some prior care, such as the attention that needs to be given to local needs of the researched areas and activities that emerge from different realities. This represents one of the key issues of this research, the introduction of methodological procedures that look at the diversity of ways of living, the coexistence of differences within and among communities, understanding how are they present and which are the attitudes towards this diversity.

Understanding diversity within a community means watching it from the perspective not of a homogeneous whole, but seeking to observe the diversity that forms it, and that turns it into a plural whole and with countless possibilities of comprehensions. In this paper, we refer to community as 'a variety of articulations, ideals and social practices' among them. (Hall, 2003, p.52).

These communities are mainly composed of people of different cultural origins and charges that remain as influences to 'communitarian self-definitions', understood as aspects in constant review and change. (Hall, 2003, p.66)

In this research, the casted look seeks to apprehend diversity both among individuals within a same

community and among different communities coexisting in shared spaces, being them physical or hybrid.

### ***Communication as recognition of differences from digital media***

*'What we think, and how we think, become expressed in [...] communications systems.'* (Castells, 2000, p.31)

If relations of coexistence happen in some spatial ambit, communicational instances are contained in them and with the use of digital media they assume a mediating role of this communication and interaction changing, in one form or another, the perception of diversity of ways of living in this research, and not just that, they mediate the understanding and exchange of information among communities that are interacting through them also reaching the perception that they have of themselves and of other communities.

In the case of actions here presented, information and communication technologies are facilitators of this interaction, from which conflicts or approaches may emerge, as we will report. However, what we want to learn and experience is the diversity of procedures and methods employed, as well as the possibilities and limitations of each for the basic purpose of this research.

Since long the informational role in society has assumed a character of relevance, since the proposition of Flusser (2010, p.56), '[...] the focus of interest in information is unprecedented in history' formulated in the mid-1980s, which already anticipated a search for accumulation and domination of information. Today, not just the information itself but also the streams by which it is shared the interaction and articulation of them by digital media assume a role that needs to be thought, considering the mediating presence that is assigned to them.

If according to Castells (2009) communication consists in sharing meanings, senses, through an exchange of information, the apparatus that mediates this exchange and interaction, in this research the digital media, is sustained by various supports (videos, being digital graffiti or non-verbal, being synchronous or asynchronous), that contribute towards enabling a plurality in the exchange of information between different cul-

tural backgrounds. These technologies do not any longer present themselves as mere instrumentals to be tested, more than this: they are part of a process to be developed. Considering the diversity of these combined forms of communication, a rich field of research to be tested is obtained, a field that arises as an enhancer of cultural expressions.

In the ambit of information manipulation and of information and communication technology an inversion of actions and interactions is present. Other possibilities for users and producers of technology are opened; the hierarchical/of functionalities scale does not present an accurate rigidity. Users are now able to control these technologies, to intervene, as in the case of the Internet (Castells, 2000). This new user posture, to the scope of this research, allows to talk and to think about the unpredictability of the results to be expected. These are new inputs to be considered, ideas and different backgrounds that are coexisting in a hybrid instance, collectively formed by connected communities.

While there is greater freedom of action and interaction by the user, the instance of mediation is still present and it does not consist only of researchers and promoters of cultural action.

### ***Formulation of methodological instruments: an experiment in understanding the diversity of ways of living***

*'[...] It is possible to think the unity of a social formation as something that is constructed from the difference'* (Hall, 2003, p.151)

If the central issue is to understand the diversity of ways of living and to observe their coexistence in hybrid instances, the methodological approach in this case needs to cope with these demands and this complexity, in addition to the opening of a larger expression of these communities, therefore tested methodological procedures prioritize the interaction at different levels through communication. Thus, if communication presupposes a specific language, it is through this language that an individual or group of individuals feel able to communicate, express different realities, work their coexistence and assert its own expression in a uni-

verse of homogenizing trends (Flusser, 2010, p.16).

According to Hall (2003, p.360), 'language is an articulation of differences' and in this sense the collective creation of hybrid instances that promote communication, as proposed in this research, are actions that promote the coexistence of these differences in a shared environment, a space promoted to and through the negotiation among different worldviews, interaction and exchange.

If we start from Flusser's idea (2010, pp.16-17), in which the individual can be understood as a "node" in the midst of a web of interactions, among a network of possibilities, we can consider that these are direct influences on 'individual experience of the world' and then, later, perhaps also in the collective, to the extent that these specific expressions convey the diversity present even in a community, that differences are the forming core, and that single, unidirectional procedures may tend to a homogenizing gaze, opposite to the reality that we seek to understand.

Among the important events and workshops for this paper are:

- \* October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – STREET RADIO IN TIRADENTES CITY.
- \* November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – STREET RADIO AT CDHU HOUSING ESTATE, SAO CARLOS, STATE OF SAO PAULO.
- \* November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – REMOTE COMMUNICATION
- \* October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 - DIGITAL GRAFFITI

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES AND SOME APPLICATIONS**

### ***Why look for other procedures?***

Nomads.usp has previously conducted experiments of qualitative research using classical methods. The public policies project Communities Online, conducted from 2004 to 2007, was one of these experiments in which a wide recognition of the population of a specific area of Cidade Tiradentes, east of Sao Paulo, was undertaken through questionnaires and interviews.

The Hybrid Territories project was born from the intention to explore new forms of recognition and approaching of researched populations, new methodological approaches. For this purpose we will introduce



Figure 1  
Diagram of the of Street Radio operation.

some experiments conducted from 2011 to present, involving the use of digital media, from video production, communication through music, graffiti, etc.

### ***Street Radio as a means of bringing together communities through asynchronous communication***

The activity of Street Radio has already been developed for years by the Instituto Pombas Urbanas (Urban Doves Institute) in Cidade Tiradentes, with the aim to publicize events and provide interactions between the actors of Pombas Urbanas and the borough residents.

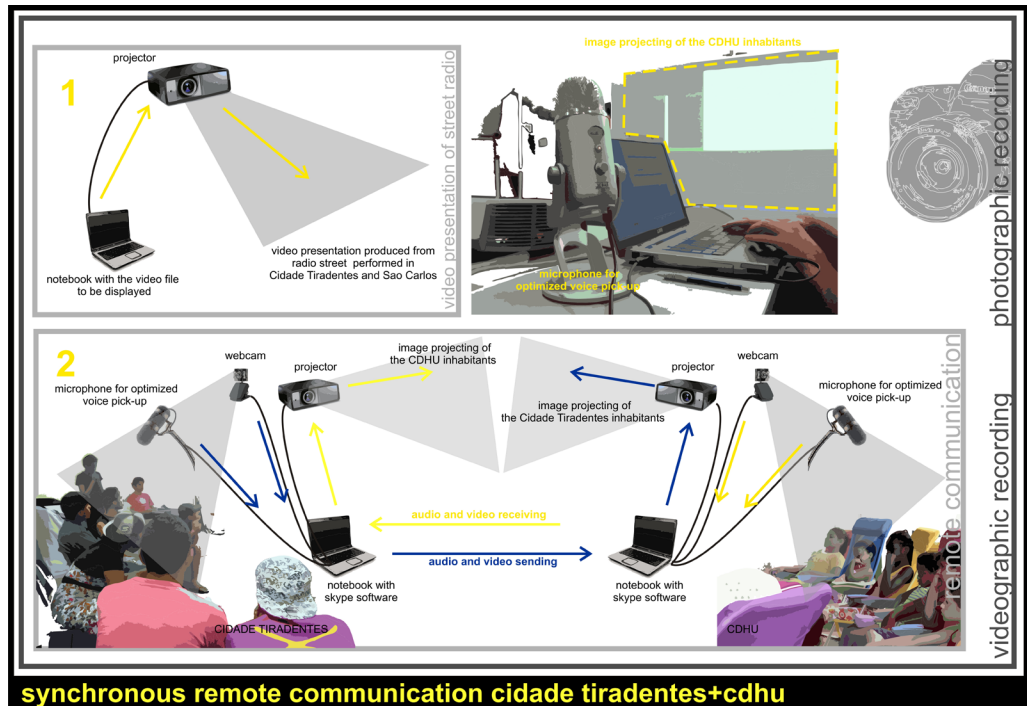
With this Street Radio based experiment, it was intended to test an unusual methodology in addressing the population for the gathering of views on the housing estates. Researchers disguised in circus costumes also enhanced this recreation.

Two street radios were created in two locations: the housing estate Waldomiro Lobbe Sobrinho (known as and called by locals CDHU) in the district of Vila Isabel, city of Sao Carlos, state of Sao Paulo, and a specific area of district Cidade Tiradentes, east of the city of Sao Paulo. Both are low-income housing estates, both are built by public authorities, in the outskirts of quite different cities. However, the building typology and the housing unit are very similar.

The theme that guided the interviews conducted on the street radio was the gaze of residents on life in their community, and the impression they had about living in the other community presented.

It was observed that this form of dialogue and interaction was given in two instances: one was an interview carried out with a loudspeaker, through street radio; the other consisted in informal conversations favoured by the atmosphere of casualness and relaxation created by the presence of

Figure 2  
Diagram of synchronous remote communication structuring.



the radio and costumed actors and researchers.

In the first instance, with questions been formulated on a microphone with loudspeakers, the answers obtained were shorter and influenced by the personal view of the interviewee. These answers allowed us to understand some aspects of daily life and to obtain impressions about life in these social housing estates, and possibly find out some of the social, political and economic changes that were experienced in recent years by residents. When being interviewed, residents did not feel inhibited to publicly expose issues related to life in social housing estates, such as the mention of internal conflicts or issues related to privacy among neighbours, often compromised by physical problems in the apartments and buildings, as well as the issue of drug use by youth, among others. Interviewees had different profiles, from conservative people living since the beginning of the housing estate constitution to young skaters,

for example, who reported perceiving a change in general in the neighbourhood. As people manifested their point of view on a microphone so that the whole community could hear, it was possible to observe the richness of this method. As a communicational instance between a resident and his/her community, each comment broadcasted by street radio echoed in the conversations of people around them consequently generating parallel conversations.

Accordingly, and in order to appreciate the repercussions of interviews broadcasted by street radio, some researchers remained in the surroundings, prepared to listen and to talk to residents who felt involved in the conversation. Due to their informality, conversations originated from there contemplated moments of greater deepening in which various issues were raised spontaneously, making people feel more comfortable talking about their daily lives and their personal experiences. In most cases reported

and recorded in the field journal, it was possible to reach a wealth of information and depth rarely reached with more traditional and somehow more intimidating methods such as questionnaires or semi-structured interviews. These informal conversations refer to procedures derived from ethnography, such as the field journal, where every detail of what is talked is recorded and contributes to other approaches of the research, based on the knowledge that can be obtained from some phenomena and social structures of the community in question.

Interviews conducted by Street Radio were filmed and from them it is possible to design a comparative balance between the residents' views of both places, CDHU and Cidade Tiradentes. Videos produced on Street Radio were shown in both cities, so that views and recorded reports could inspire new perspectives in residents, about themselves and about the place where they live,

and that could relativize the view that they had on the other community and its inhabitants.

**Synchronous remote communication  
CDHU and Cidade Tiradentes, a few issues**

With the presentation of the final video, from the Street Radios in both locations, another happening was organized in order to give residents of both communities the opportunity to communicate and, this time, the conversation was guided by impressions and interviews recorded on street radios in which residents of each place had the chance to expose their points of view, worldviews and to relativize many impressions of a community over the other.

From the footage taken during Street Radios, videos were produced with the aim of showing, to residents of each locality, the impressions of the inhabitants of another location about life there. The purpose was to promote the perception of differenc-

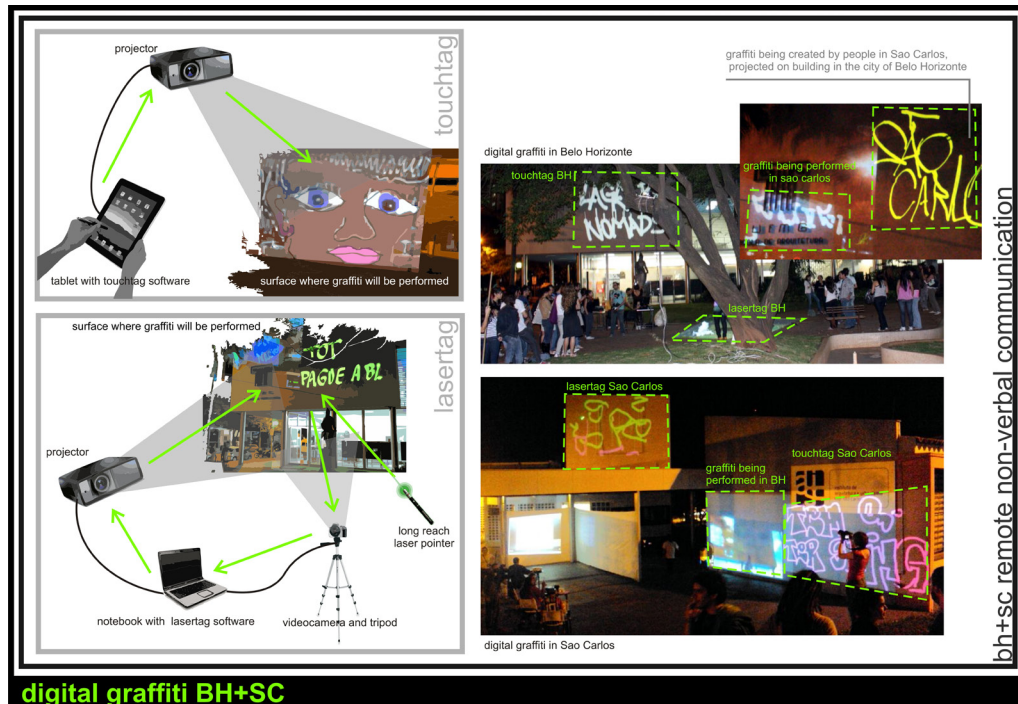


Figure 3  
Diagram of digital graffiti structuring.



es and similarities between these two realities, discerning preconceived impressions and deepening the perception that people had in relation to their own community and that of others. In this case, so that views and recorded reports could inspire other comprehensions in residents, a remote communication session via Skype was conducted, where videos and the above mentioned issues were commented.

That which often led to the formation of critical thinking about their own ways of living, also led to a generosity in the understanding of other communities practices. Practices that once seemed distant in many ways, at a later time it was realized that expectations and perceptions crossed and were shared at some point.

These crossovers were also enriched from records in field journal, born from moments in field and from informal conversations with residents of both social housing estates.

### ***Remote non-verbal communication: the experience of digital graffiti***

The idea of bringing together different gazes on activities such as digital graffiti and painted graffiti was one of the prerogatives of the event held among graffiti artists who live in the cities of Belo Horizonte - with two million inhabitants - and Sao Carlos - with 200.000 inhabitants - 800 km apart. The purpose of this action was to involve audiences that were initially resistant to the presence of graffiti in the city, in the hope of provoking reflection from an estrangement. It was also wished to use the potential of digital media in order to convey to graffiti artists the feeling of painting on walls of a distant city, remotely, and a city of very different size of their own. It was tried to reach these goals through graphic expression and through the possibility of such an expression to be in a different urban context, in the case of a digital graffiti created in Belo Horizonte but displayed in Sao Carlos and vice versa.

The drawings were produced in tablets and shown in real time in another city where it was watched by other graffiti artists and by other audiences. The act of creating graffiti on the wall of a distant city allowed a kind of communication, in this case non-verbal, with an audience

that was not known directly, but that somehow was living its mark in another territory.

Through graphic expression, it was possible to observe the emergence of several issues related to the universe of graffiti such as questions about "pixo" - "pixo" consists in the stylized spelling of words in the public spaces of the city. This graffiti has a peculiar shape, with straight lines and angular and it differs from what would be the American-style of graffiti, called tag (PEREIRA, 2010, p.146) -, graffiti, the ephemerality of digital graffiti and about relativizing the differences between digital and painted graffiti. It was produced, in that way, an environment conducive to the visualization of differences and different understandings about the practice of graffiti and about the use of digital media to bring together fragments of distant discourses.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS**

The exchange of information through communicational processes in digital media entailed, in this research, an expansion of methodological procedures that would allow and comprise, in these exchanges and interactions, the coexistence of different expressions of ways of living and worldviews. The reflection of these experiences to us, researchers and architects, entails in reviewing certain impressions a priori with respect to worked communities, in relation to digital media and their uses. Possibly these procedures can be worked on and have the potential to be applied to research in other fields that also work with diverse ways of living, seeking to approach people and groups.

An important aspect of this study was that of rethinking the position of researchers in the field, understanding the diversity of backgrounds and experiences in a same action, the different perceptions of each person on the same event and on the same communicational process. This already indicates the importance of bringing together these realities through digital media. To researchers, it was also possible to carry out a review of the research process itself, of the gaze on communities and on forms of rapprochement among them as well as on ways of looking at the diversity of ways of living in distinct groups.

With respect to digital media in these experi-

ments, it is possible to glimpse the approaching of different social realities through the use of these technological devices as mediators of differences.

The different perspectives introduced in the research, such as the ethnographic dimension related to the field journal, influenced the gaze and perception of the researchers in relation to residents of social housing estates and in relation to the actions of participants in general. This contributed to the viability of a more transdisciplinary gaze on the details of everyday life and more open to differences in ways of living.

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