TERRITORIALIZING INTERNET: WHATSAPP USE IN ANDEAN ARGENTINA

Martina Di Tullio
CONICET - Institute of Archaeology, University of Buenos Aires

Edgar Gómez-Cruz
School of Information, University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

This paper aims to present the history of WhatsApp's incorporation into the daily lives of rural-Indigenous populations in the Jujuy Puna, Northwestern Argentina. Internet studies have predominantly focused on the most recent technologies/platforms, leaving out many different ways to use internet that become invisible for mainstream studies. At the same time, the majority of internet studies are centered on urban populations of the Global North, leaving out populations and their use of internet in rural territories of the Global South. This paper presents a rupture with these trends contributing to a decolonial theoretical perspective for the study of digital technologies that has been developing in Latin America in the last decade (Couldry and Mejias, 2021; Siles et al. 2022; Gómez-Cruz et al. 2023). As well as these authors, we advocate for conducting internet research within local cultures, interrogating the logics of coloniality (Quijano 2000; Dussel 2008) behind this use, while recognizing their possibilities for joy and liberation.

Scholarly interest in WhatsApp has grown over the past decade, with numerous studies exploring its usage across diverse geographical regions, predominantly in the Global South where it has become the most commonly used app due to its costless availability and adaptability (Johns et al., 2023). The app has been considered particularly in its role as infrastructure (Plantin et al., 2018) and as "technology of life" (Gómez-Cruz and Harindranath, 2020). Latin America is one of the regions where WhatsApp has been widely studied due to its ubiquity, but research has predominantly concentrated on urban settings (García and Vivacqua, 2021; Matassi et al., 2019), with a notable absence of attention given to its usage in rural-Indigenous areas. Understanding the use of the internet by these marginalized populations, often characterized by unstable

connections, different worldviews and diverse traditions of engagement with technologies, represents a triple rupture.

Using Internet at 4000 meters high

In this paper, we will discuss the use of WhatsApp in two communities in the Jujuy Puna: Cusi Cusi and Lagunillas del Farallón. Both are situated at over 3800 meters above sea level, have populations of between 200 and 300 inhabitants, and identify as Indigenous Quechua communities. Their economies have traditionally been based on llama herding and small-scale agriculture, but in recent years, more people have taken up employment in the public sector, tourism, and nearby mining companies. This region has drawn the attention of major technology corporations due to its inclusion in the so-called Lithium Triangle, an area containing more than 60% of the world's lithium reserves, which are highly demanded for digital battery production and the energy transition. Its extraction and processing consume and pollute the region's scarce water supply, affecting the territories of Andean Indigenous populations, who are simultaneously excluded from the supposed benefits generated by this activity. The area lacks mobile internet coverage, locals struggle to afford digital devices, and a stable data connection only became available in local villages five years ago due to government policies.

Both villages received free internet from the government in 2019. Cusi Cusi was connected to the Federal Fiber Optic Network (REFEFO) and was provided with a free public Wi-Fi signal in the town square, with home connections only becoming available in 2023. In Lagunillas del Farallón, 40 satellite antennas were distributed to households, also providing free internet access. As a result, in recent years, the internet has become part of these communities' daily lives, with WhatsApp, in particular, becoming a vital infrastructure integrated into various aspects of everyday activities, including communication, governance, economy, health, and spirituality.

The objective of this study is to highlight the socio-technical adaptability processes through which the uses of WhatsApp in the Jujuy Puna expand communication practices and ways of being that are specific to the local modes of relating to others and to technology. To achieve this, we draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by one of the authors as part of her doctoral research on the incorporation of digital technologies in the area. The researcher has been working with these communities for eight years during which she conducted participant observation; 93 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with diverse actors; anonymized written surveys with local secondary school students; and organized two workshops in schools and community spaces on safe digital media practices. These experiences, combined with work on secondary sources, have led to the co-construction of complex knowledge with community members about the various ways WhatsApp is embedded in contemporary life in the Puna.

Andean-izing WhatsApp, WhatsApp-izing the Andes

The ethnographic approach enables us to trace continuities that shape the appropriation of WhatsApp in accordance with regional Andean ways of inhabiting and understanding the world. This is evident in the practices of care that are mediated through this single

application: through text and voice messages or calls, people care for their relatives, friends, neighbors, community, land, animals, and territory. In this way, kinship relations specific to Andean ontology, based on the notions of *ayllu* (a social, economic, and political unit of organization that includes bonds with non-human beings and objects and is based on reciprocity) and *uywaña* (mutual breeding), are extended, reproduced, and transformed through digital means. By using WhatsApp to manage social and economic relationships, sustenance remains within the same sphere as family, friendships, governance, education, and religion, enacting Andean views on the mutuality of being in contemporary globalized life. Only by understanding this framework within its own historical context is it possible to identify the actual disruptions that digital technologies introduce into local lives.

Our aim is to understand WhatsApp from the perspective of the territory—not merely through a relativist lens, but as a way to resist the coloniality of global discourses about the internet. We believe this type of research should be conducted in diverse Latin American geographies in order to apprehend the ways in which data technologies become vital for people in the region beyond the scale of traditional studies with data. We hope to encourage new and more diverse dialogues between Latin American anthropology, communication, information, and internet studies.

References

Couldry, N. & Mejias, U. A. (2021). The decolonial turn in data and technology research: what is at stake and where is it heading?. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(4), 786–802. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1986102

Dussel, E. (2008). Anti-cartesian meditations: on the origin of the philosophical anti-discourse of Modernity. *Tabula Rasa,* 9, 153-197.

García, A. C. B. & Vivacqua, A. (2021). Should I stay or should I go? Managing Brazilian WhatsApp groups. *First Monday* 26(2). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i2.10641

Gómez-Cruz, E. & Harindranath, R. (2020). WhatsApp as 'technology of life': Reframing research agendas. *First Monday* 25(12). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i12.10405

Gómez-Cruz, E., Ricaurte, P. & Siles, I. (2023). Decolonizing methods to study digital culture: a proposal from Latin America. *Cuadernos.info*, 54, 160-181. https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.54.52605

Johns, A.; Matamoros-Fernández, A. & Baulch, E. (2023). *WhatsApp: From a One-to-one Messaging App to a Global Communication Platform*. John Wiley and Sons.

Matassi, M., Boczkowski, P. J. & Mitchelstein, E. (2019). Domesticating WhatsApp: Family, friends, work, and study in everyday communication. *New Media & Society*, 21(10), 2183-2200. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819841890

Plantin, J. C.; Lagoze, C.; Edwards, P.N. & Sandvig, C. (2018). Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of Google and Facebook. *New Media & Society* 20(1): 293-310.

Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power, eurocentrism and Latin America. In Lander, E. (Comp.). *Coloniality of knowledge: eurocentrism and social sciences. Latin American perspectives.* CLACSO.

Siles, I., Gómez-Cruz , E. & Ricaurte, P. (2022). Towards a popular theory of algorithms Popular Communication, 21(1), 57-70. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2103140