Beyond Internet Access: a study of social and cultural practices in *LAN Houses*

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Abstract

LAN Houses, for-profit internet cafés, have been one of the main strategies from the Brazilian government to promote the internet access in marginalized areas.[1] Although the internet is the main purpose of such businesses, LAN Houses provide an important space for Brazil's urban poor areas, known as *favelas*. Drawing from critical ethnographic research in the favelas of Vitoria, Brazil, this study sheds light on the social and cultural practices that happen in these establishments. In addition, it highlights the complex relationship between the LAN Houses and the government.

Keywords

LAN House; internet café; digital inequality; community technology center; critical ethnography

Background

LAN House is a for profit establishment, similar to a cybercafé, where the majority of Brazilians access the internet and play multi-player games. The term "LAN" stands for local area network. The concept of LAN House originated in South Korea and had its first units in Brazil around 1998 (Lemos & Martin, 2010). At that time, internet in Brazilian homes was expensive, rare and poor quality, which motivated the quick spread of the LAN Houses in urban, richer neighborhoods. The customers were mostly youngsters who used the LAN houses to socialize and play computer games such as Counter-Strike and FIFA.

Over the years, LAN Houses became practically a rarity in these areas for two main reasons: users were able to afford internet in their homes because broadband was becoming cheaper, and the Brazilian government, at federal and state levels, was passing several bills that attempted to keep the youngsters away from such facilities. For example, the bill RJ 4.782/2006 prohibited LAN Houses within 1 kilometer from any school and bill 3.437/2004 required every underage user to have a special authorization signed by their parents. Such bills were designed under the assumption that the users were ditching school and spending long late hours in the LAN Houses playing games.

Around 2004, LAN Houses gained great popularity in the poorest areas of Brazil, especially in the favelas – slums located in urban areas (Lemos & Martin, 2010). Since the marginalized people were not able to afford personal computers and the telecommunication companies didn't provide them with proper internet infrastructure, LAN Houses became the communities' main gateway to the online world. With their proliferation in the poor communities and favelas, the Brazilian government saw in the LAN House phenomenon a way to promote the digital and social inclusion of the marginalized. Politicians, who once perceived such facilities as "bad guys" in richer neighborhoods, now are trying to revoke past bills in order to promote the spread of more LAN Houses in poor areas.

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[1] In this paper, "internet" is spelled with a small "i" instead of a capital "I". According to Markham and Baym (2009) capitalizing means that "internet" is a proper noun and implies either that it is a being or a specific place. Both metaphors lead to granting the internet agency and power that are better granted to those who develop and use it.

Research Questions and Methodological Approach

Due to the relative novelty and uniqueness of such internet facilities in poor communities, this exploratory study asked the following general research questions: (1) what is the experience of the marginalized people in LAN Houses? (2) What is the current relationship between the Brazilian government and LAN Houses? Most studies done on community technology centers (CTCs), such as telecenters and libraries, have been focused on measuring the wrong outcomes, overemphasizing traditional economic indicators and macro numbers while neglecting other outcomes that are more difficult to quantify (Gomez & Pather, 2012; Kleine, 2010). Such quantitative models treat people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of "progress" (Escobar, 1995).

In order to find answers to these questions, this study was driven by qualitative exploration – using critical ethnographic methods such as observation, interviews and surveys – designed to focus on the perspective of the local users and owners of LAN Houses. Critical ethnography is aimed to give voices to the locals and allow the researcher to understand the issues and conflicts on their terms. Also, it moves to uncover and foster non-Western and nonconventional modes of knowing – accounting for the creativity embodied in the notion of "hybrid cultures" of resistance combining "traditional" and "modern" elements in new and promising ways (Escobar, 1995).

In the summer of 2012, I spent two months in the favela of Gurigica, located in the city of Vitoria, Brazil. The study focused on three LAN Houses. Ten semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the views of the locals, and participant observation assisted in gaining a greater understanding of the context. The interviews aimed to understand the locals' experience in the LAN Houses. The following findings are the outcome of this exploratory study.

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LAN Houses are places where the locals socialize, host birthday parties and can be safe from the constant conflicts involving the drug cartel. Users often said that LAN Houses are seen as a "sacred" and vital place by everyone - just like the local school, market and church. The mothers from Gurigica preferred to leave their children playing games there than let them play in the streets where they have a high risk of being recruited by the drug cartel. They claimed the criminals don't go into these facilities because they are owned by the locals and understand them as being beneficial to the community.

The services provided by LAN Houses also go beyond providing internet access. The locals can pay their utility bills, buy cellphone recharge cards, play video games (Xbox and PlayStation), print and copy their documents. Printing costs about $0.10 a sheet of paper (black and white) and $0.50 colored. The users are charged by the hour to use the computers and video games, one hour costs around $1.00. Adults mostly visit LAN Houses to use e-Government services, specifically to print their criminal background so they can visit their relatives that are in prison. They also sought other e-Government services such as filing taxes and applying for government issued documents, but beyond these services there aren't many others. The locals often visited the LAN Houses to type their CVs and seek for jobs online.

Facebook is also one the most used online services. This was surprising since just last year, Orkut used to be Brazil's number 1 social networking site (SNS) (Nemer & Das, 2012). Currently the drug cartel inserted in Gurigica is in a war against other cartels as they attempt to expand their territory. Therefore, the locals from Gurigica are not allowed to visit their friends and family members who live in other rival slums since they would be in great danger. Facebook was used as a way to break the drug cartel blockage and keep in touch with their ties.

Although the Brazilian government recognizes LAN Houses as beneficial social and technological centers, policymakers haven't been successful in providing support to them. In 2011, the congress passed the bill 4361/2004 which finally recognized LAN Houses as formal businesses and aimed to provide special benefits, such as partnerships with the government and access to credit lines with low

interest rates to their owners. Unfortunately, the LAN Houses owners in Gurigica weren't able to take advantage of such benefits because they were not recognized as formal businesses due to the state bureaucratic flaws. Policymakers need to have a closer understanding of the reality in the marginalized areas so better policies can be implemented based on the local needs.

Looking at the LAN Houses in terms of their relationship to the culture of the people in the slums and the government's involvement with them, it becomes clear that the value of such institutions is far greater than is formally recognized. LAN Houses serve important functions to the people such as providing a safe location from cartels and providing access. These technological spaces have come to have a far greater meaning ascribed to them than the quantifiable advances often associated with technology. Shedding light on people's experiences in LAN Houses broadens our view of different ways that technology and internet is used, and perhaps thereby do a better job of developing appropriate policies and technologies for these people.

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