

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world

Operational team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)

Alan Finlay (APC)

Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordination team

Valeria Betancourt (APC)

Cathy Chen (APC)

Flavia Fascendini (APC)

Alan Finlay (APC)

Leila Nachawati (APC)

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Maja Romano (APC)

Project coordinator

Maja Romano (APC)

Editor

Alan Finlay (APC)

Assistant editor and proofreading

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Assistant proofreader

Drew McKeivitt

Publication production support

Cathy Chen (APC)

Graphic design

Monocromo

Cover illustration

Matías Bervejillo



APC would like to thank the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) for their support for Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022.

Published by APC

2022

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Some rights reserved.

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022 web and e-book

ISBN 978-92-95113-52-7

APC-202211-CIPP-R-EN-DIGITAL-342

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of Sida, APC or its members.

BRAZIL

THE INTERNET, TECHNOLOGIES AND INEQUALITIES IN BRAZIL: THE INVISIBILITY OF BLACK WOMEN, TRADITIONAL PEOPLES AND COMMUNITIES, AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



Centro de Comunicação, Democracia e Cidadania da Universidade Federal da Bahia (Centre for Communication, Democracy and Citizenship at the Federal University of Bahia) and Intervozes – Coletivo Brasil de Comunicação Social (Intervozes – Brazilian Social Communication Collective)

Tâmara Terso,¹ Paulo Victor Melo² and Iraíldon Mota³
<https://ccdcufba.wordpress.com> and
<https://intervozes.org.br>

Introduction

This report has two motivations: the deepening of inequalities in access to the internet and other information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to look at race, gender, territory and accessibility as the underlying factors of these inequalities.

In this context, the government's decision to digitise access to public services aimed at vulnerable groups,⁴ even though they are the least connected groups, is questioned. At the same time, the invisibility of the issues that particularly affect rural Black women, traditional peoples and communities,⁵ and people with disabilities in the advocacy agendas of digital rights organisations is striking.

In light of this, this report aims to a) draw attention to the fact that inequalities in access to the internet and technologies are shaped by “colour, gender, address and accessibility needs” and b) point out the importance of digital rights networks attending to the demands of these groups..

“Have you ever seen them cry over the orixá’s colour?”⁶

On 13 May 2021, the anniversary of the day when slavery was abolished in Brazil over 140 years ago, the Brazilian Black movement protested that the effects of slavery had not been abolished in their entirety.⁷ On the same day in Palmares, one of the main historical territories for *quilombos*⁸ in the country, the Brazilian president announced that the Bolsa Família financial aid programme,⁹ with some 25 million families registered, would end. In its place the government would make services available to the most vulnerable families exclusively through an internet platform.

This decision is part of a broader approach which involves the platformisation of social services in a deeply unequal country, as a way to increase exclusion.

Although 70% of rural households have internet access, its quality is poor and its costs are unreasonable. Some 84% of rural people access it exclusively through mobile phones,¹⁰ with 41.24% of the quilombola and rural families that have internet access spending between BRL 51 and BRL 200 (between USD 10 and USD 39) per month on the service – and 56.20% have a monthly income of less than one minimum wage,¹¹ whereas 16.05% have no fixed income.¹²

1 Tâmara Terso, an American journalist, holds a master's degree and is a doctoral candidate in the graduate programme in Communication and Contemporary Culture at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). She is a coordinator of the Centre for Communication, Democracy and Citizenship at UFBA and a member of the board of directors of Intervozes – Coletivo Brasil de Comunicação Social.

2 Paulo Victor Melo is a professor and researcher of communication policies. He has a PhD in Contemporary Communication and Culture from the Federal University of Bahia, and is currently doing post-doctoral training at the University of Beira Interior/Portugal. He is a coordinator of the Centre for Communication, Democracy and Citizenship at UFBA.

3 Iraíldon Mota has a degree in Journalism and Public Relations from the State University of Piauí, and a post-graduate degree in Corporate Communication Management from the Federal University of Piauí. He also has an MBA in Business Management from the Getúlio Vargas Foundation. He is president of the NGO Comradio do Brasil and a member of Intervozes – Coletivo Brasil de Comunicação Social.

4 These pro-poor services had been the result of years of struggle by civil society for recognition of the needs of vulnerable groups. By digitising them, the government was effectively negating this political and policy struggle, and making the services unavailable to many.

5 Traditional peoples and communities represent a diversity of groups present in different parts of the country. Some of their common characteristics have been defined as their intrinsic relationship with nature, their relationship with territory, economic-productive rationality, interrelationships with other groups in the region, and self-identification (Dicionário da Educação do Campo, 2012).

6 From the song “Boa Esperança” by Emicida.

7 Brazil was the last country in the Americas to officially abolish slavery. Signed on 13 May 1888, the Lei Áurea officially ended slavery in the country. However, the law did not guarantee any rights or compensation to enslaved people and the slave mentality continues to structure political, economic, social and cultural relations in the country, and continues to sustain inequalities.

8 *Quilombos* are settlements formed by Black people who escaped repression during the period of slavery in Brazil. The current inhabitants of these communities, descendants of their founders, are called *quilombolas*.

9 Created in 2003, Bolsa Família was terminated on 11 August 2021.

10 According to a survey carried out by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee, available at: <https://cetic.br/pesquisa/domicilios>

11 In Brazil, the minimum wage is BRL 1,110 a month. This amount is roughly equivalent to USD 216.53.

12 <http://territorioslivres.online>

Similarly, it is alarming that less than 1% of the 28 million websites registered in Brazil are considered to be accessible to people with disabilities.¹³

Digital rights initiatives in the country seem to have difficulty in pointing out these issues. As an indicator of this: of the 22 statements published by *Coalizão Direitos na Rede (CDR)*,¹⁴ a coalition of Brazilian digital rights organisations, during 2021,¹⁵ none mentioned the government's moves to make social assistance programmes exclusively accessible through the internet¹⁶ and internet-enabled applications,¹⁷ or the authorisation of tele-assessments,¹⁸ moves that were criticised by social service organisations.

“Use the voice to say what is silent”¹⁹

The violation of the right to communication contributes to the worsening of symbolic and material violence against Black women, traditional peoples and communities, and people with disabilities.

From the invisibility of narratives and meanings (which Muniz Sodré called “semicide”) to the denial of the contribution of African knowledge in the construction of the cultural heritage of humanity, defined by Sueli Carneiro as “epistemicide”, there is an alignment of terror and necropolitics.²⁰ Some of its most perverse expressions are the production of poverty on a large scale, the murder of men and women who defend their traditional territory-bodies against exploitative policies, the lack of accessibility policies in public spaces, and the political determination to “let them die”, a sentiment directed at Black people, people with disabilities, and people from traditional peoples and communities. This has intensified during the pandemic.

There were practically no measures to minimise the effects of the health crisis on vulnerable

populations. While agribusiness received prompt state support²¹ and credit facilitation in public banks,²² the only measure to mitigate the damages of the pandemic for traditional peoples and communities was vetoed by the president. Bill 1.142/20,²³ which established an Emergency Plan to face COVID-19 in Indigenous territories and support measures for quilombolas and traditional fishermen, was overturned by the National Congress – but even so, it was still detrimental to the people, particularly due to the withdrawal of social security measures such as food distribution.

On one hand, the rescue measures for agribusiness made it possible for the industry to expand its activities, and on the other hand, the delay in the attention to the territories of Black populations and traditional communities resulted in an acceleration in the loss of lives, especially of elders, who keep the ancestral knowledge of these peoples.

It was in this context that the National Coordination for the Articulation of Rural Black Quilombola Communities (CONAQ) denounced the lack of information on prevention measures against COVID-19 in quilombo communities. The scarce information that was available – due to poor infrastructure, including a lack of electricity, and low access to communication devices – came from TV, radio, and on messenger apps, without any monitoring by health agencies. And when information was available, it was not translated and made relevant to the ways of life of the quilombos.

A consequence of the poor access to credible information was the high circulation of misinformation and disinformation, with consequences such as difficulties in building community trust in the efficacy of vaccines against COVID-19 in some traditional territories.

Using the motto “We for us” (*Nós por nós*) as being the only way to confront the multiple rights violations faced by communities, civil society organisations have built support networks such as “Indigenous Emergency” and “Quilombo Without COVID-19”, coordinated by the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB)²⁴ and CONAQ²⁵ respectively. To help with prevention efforts, these initiatives mapped cases of COVID-19 among Indigenous people and quilombolas by cross-referencing official databases and monitoring information coming from the territories themselves.

13 Forbes. (2021, 28 July). Menos de 1% dos sites brasileiros são considerados acessíveis, diz pesquisa. <https://forbes.com.br/forbeseg/2021/07/menos-de-1-dos-sites-brasileiros-sao-considerados-acessiveis-diz-pesquisa>

14 The CDR is a coalition of more than 48 organisations that work for the defence of digital rights, with a particular focus on access, freedom of expression, protection of personal data, and privacy on the internet.

15 <https://direitosnarede.org.br/categoria/notas>

16 CFESS. (2021, 27 January). A defesa do Suas é essencial para a defesa da vida! Defender o CadÚnico é também defender o Suas! <http://www.cfess.org.br/visualizar/noticia/cod/1785>

17 CFESS. (2021, 9 August). O acesso ao BPC pela população: vai ter audiência pública! <http://www.cfess.org.br/visualizar/noticia/cod/1832>

18 CFESS. (2021, 9 July). Teleavaliação: um retrocesso para a população usuária e para o Serviço Social do INSS. <http://www.cfess.org.br/visualizar/noticia/cod/1824>

19 From the song “Minha voz” by Elza Soares.

20 Necropolitics can be conceptualised as the state's institutional determination of how some people have the right to life and how others should die or are expendable through the establishment of mechanisms to eliminate those considered “enemies” of the state. Mbembe, A. (2018). *Necropolítica*. N-1 Edições.

21 Through the “CC-AGRO-COVID19” committee. http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/Portaria/PRT/Portaria-37-21-mara.htm#art8

22 PM 958 of 4/24/2020. http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2019-2022/2020/Mpv/mpv958.htm

23 Law 14.021/2020. http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2019-2022/2020/Lei/L14021.htm

24 <http://emergenciaindigena.apiboficial.org>

25 <https://quilombosemcovid19.org>

Black women and women from traditional peoples and communities played a leading role in the initiatives, such as Elza Ursulino, a leader from the Caiana dos Crioulos quilombo community in Alagoa Grande, Paraíba. She told us the following:

I am on vacation, I am a community agent, but I spent an hour on my mobile phone transmitting information about the third dose of the vaccine, which is now being offered to people over 60.

The lack of internet access in traditional territories has also impacted education. A survey by the Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Research reveals the severity of the situation: two million students in rural schools had no digital access²⁶ during 2020, with the distribution of printed content being the only alternative in several places.

Ednalva Rita, president of the community association of Caiana dos Crioulos, shared the reality of education under the pandemic in rural communities:

It was difficult for the remote classes to happen here in the community, because only 5% of the community has internet – we are 130 families here. There are 187 students in the elementary school. Imagine this number of students without internet connections to carry out online activities. So, the teachers come at the beginning of the week, hand out the materials, the students complete the printed activities at home, and return after eight days to deliver the completed activities and pick up new ones. The online classes couldn't happen here.

All these difficulties were worsened by a government policy of blocking proposals that aimed to minimise the problems. A change in the law of the Telecommunications Services Universalization Fund, in order to authorise investments in internet network expansion and guarantee the connection of all public schools in the country until 2024, and Law 14.172/2020, which provided for the transfer of BRL 3.5 billion from the federal budget to guarantee internet access in elementary education schools, were opposed by the Brazilian president, both through a veto and a claim in the Supreme Court, postponing the possibility of their enforcement until 2022.

Other testimonies of the difficulties that people have faced when trying to participate in discussions about their own lives, or to access public services, are emblematic of how the Brazilian state, by denying the right to communication, develops necropolitical actions that consolidate colonial projects in the country.

Another example is that access to emergency financial aid²⁷ during the pandemic was only available via subscription on a smartphone app and in Portuguese, creating another socio-political and economic barrier. An appeal by the Federal Public Defender's Office and the state of Rio de Janeiro Public Defender's Office to make the smartphone application accessible to people with disabilities fell on deaf ears, and Bill 3563/2020,²⁸ which requires the government to ensure that all information on COVID-19 is also published in accessible languages, had not yet been passed.

A survey carried out by the University of São Paulo revealed that more than seven million people who were eligible to receive the emergency aid had no way to access it conveniently because they live in households without internet access. Many of these are rural Black women and traditional peoples and communities. The result? Huge lines formed at the doors of the branches of the public bank with families – mostly Black women – having travelled from rural areas to the cities looking for information on how to use the application in order to receive the aid.

This demonstrates how a country shaped by structural racism and ableism leads to policies that are created from the privileged view of white people and of people without disabilities.

Conclusion

"I have neither good nor bad internet, and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to participate in online meetings," said Maria de Fátima, a shellfish gatherer and fisherwoman from the quilombo community of Tororó in Bahia. "When it comes to these electronic things, these advanced machines, my child, I don't know anything: where it goes, where it comes from. I am sorry," she added. Her vent demonstrates the culpability of technopolitics in unequal environments. It subjects digitally excluded people to the construction of digital architectures which are incomprehensible to the diversity of ways of life.

The digital exclusion of these communities is part of the same structural context that includes the absence of demarcating Indigenous and quilombola territories, the political determination of socio-environmental destruction, and the institutional permissiveness that supports megaprojects over community rights.

²⁶ <https://www.gov.br/inep/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/censo-escolar/divulgados-dados-sobre-impacto-da-pandemia-na-educacao>

²⁷ Law 13.982/2020 allowed financial benefits for informal workers, individual microentrepreneurs, the self-employed and the unemployed as emergency protection during the COVID-19 crisis. Created by the National Congress in April 2020, the aid was paid until October 2021, with progressive reductions in amounts paid. According to a Datafolha survey, the aid was the main or only income of 68 million Brazilians in 2020.

²⁸ Still being processed in the House of Representatives. <https://www.camara.leg.br/propostas-legislativas/2256479>

How can one not relate these actions to statements made by the Brazilian president and his ministers, such as: “I will not demarcate one centimetre of Indigenous land”; “Children with disabilities get in the way of other students”; and “I have been in a quilombo. The lightest African descendant there weighed seven arrobas”?²⁹

In this scenario, we cannot consider the denial of access to the internet and ICTs as if it is detached from the historical violations performed by the Brazilian state against the most vulnerable groups. In the same way, it is necessary to consider the demand for digital rights as part of the demand for the “right to exist”.

This understanding informed the approach taken by initiatives launched by communications organisations and rural workers, quilombola communities, fisherpeople and small farmer movements, such as the *Territórios Livres, Tecnologias Livres* (Free Territories, Free Technologies) project,³⁰ and the podcast *Ondas da Resistência* (Waves of Resistance).³¹ One of the main objectives of these initiatives is to struggle against the invisibilities of marginalised communities and groups.

These collaborations have managed to advocate in national and international forums for better connectivity policies, pushing for the self-determination of communities in the implementation of internet infrastructure and its governance. Their participation in the last two Internet Forums in Brazil³² and in a preparatory event for the global Internet Governance Forum 2021,³³ the preparation of a report on these issues³⁴ to international human rights bodies, as well as the election of a woman rural worker to the Committee for the Defence of Telecommunication Services Users are examples of advances they have made.

Action steps

The following steps are necessary to help shape a better future for marginalised communities in Brazil:

- Strengthen the capacities of Black women, traditional peoples and communities, and people with disabilities in order to help them develop digital rights initiatives and foster community-driven uses of technology, ensuring the autonomy of these groups.
- Disaggregate race, gender, territory and disability data in digital rights surveys.³⁵
- Conduct digital rights research on the intersectional relationships between communication, technologies, race, gender, territory and accessibility.
- Strengthen the participation of Black women, traditional peoples and communities, and people with disabilities in civil society and multi-sectoral forums and networks in order to discuss public policy on internet access and ICTs, both nationally and internationally.
- Guarantee prior and informed consultation with traditional peoples and communities in public policies on social assistance, education, health and territory, among others, as well as their participation in defining and monitoring processes that lead to the digitisation and platformisation of public services aimed at vulnerable groups.

29 Arroba is a term that refers to a unit of measure for weighing animals, especially cattle.

30 <http://territorioslivres.online>

31 <http://ondasdaresistencia.org>

32 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVGYM6sBeYc&ab_channel=NICbrvideos

33 <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2020-ws-343-imagining-an-internet-that-serves-environmental-justice#undefined>

34 Intervozes. (2020, 6 October). Governo Bolsonaro promove desinformação e acusa organizações da sociedade civil de censura na CIDH. <https://intervozes.org.br/violencia-e-divergencia-de-opiniao-e-desinformacao-e-liberdade-de-expressao-afirma-governo-na-cidh>

35 Currently this is not common practice in Brazil.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2021-2022 Report
www.GISWatch.org