

Reconsidering the concept of digital inclusion: an empirical grounded input

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1. Introduction

The information revolution is commonly talked about as a phenomenon that affects everybody, bringing fundamental changes to the way we work, entertain ourselves and interact with each other. Yet the reality is that for the most part, such changes have bypassed the majority of humankind, the billions of poor people for whom computers and the Internet are out of reach. The term digital divide refers to this gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology and those with very limited or no access at all. It includes the imbalances in physical access to technology as well as the imbalances in resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital citizen.

Over the past decade, this issue, the digital divide, has been the subject of much attention from development agencies, researchers, NGOs, governments and the private sector (Potter, 2006). To overcome the digital-poor state of countries, communities and individuals, a plethora of counter-measures and activities have been initiated. Sharing a common point of concern, an unusual alliance of academics, IT industry executives, politicians, social welfare organizations and multi-lateral donor organisations, have found together around these initiatives. Together they are pursuing the ideal of a (more) widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – albeit for very different reasons (Strover, 2003).

Yet, while substantial policies are being put into place and while numerous projects of digital inclusion and computer literacy are being realized, the concept of the digital divide itself is widely considered as problematic by both, practitioners and academics. The observed inequalities in access and in ICT-related skills are best understood as the result rather than the cause of poverty, these critics argue. As they point out, the phenomena subsumed under the term digital divide are a reflection of existing broader socio-economic inequalities and a symptom of much more profound

and long-standing economic and social divides within and between societies. This notion has significant consequences for attempts at digital inclusion. If ignored, efforts to ‘bridge the digital divide’ are running a substantial risk to divert attention and resources from addressing the deeper causes of the mechanisms of digital exclusion, the development communication consultant Roger W. Harris (2004: 12) among other critics has warned. In consequence, the ‘conceptually oversimplified and theoretically underdeveloped’ debates (Selwyn, 2004: 343) which surround much of the attention paid to the phenomena summed up under the term digital divide, may misguide respective attempts at social inclusion by bridging the digital gap. That is, although a broad political consensus exists around the common goal, the digital inclusion of citizens, communities and nations, the concrete objectives and meanings of this intervention remain all too often vague and unclear due to simplifications at work in the common understanding of the problematic, its consequences and causes (Potter, 2006; Selwyn, 2004).

In a first step, I will outline and propose a multi-dimensional framework that seeks to overcome some of the outlined theoretical and conceptual shortcomings of the digital divide debate. This framework, based on the principles of the participatory paradigm in development communication studies, advocates a focus on *digital empowerment* rather than *digital inclusion*, as elaborated, amongst others, by Mäkinen (2006). It provides, to my view, a more adequate concept to designate those ICT-facilitated processes by which “people gain new abilities and ways to participate and express themselves in a networked society” (Mäkinen, 2006: 381). In a second step, I then will seek to apply this theoretical frame of understanding analytically to the concrete experience made in two Brazilian, community based youth projects which I have visited and studied in spring 2008.

As I will argue, the new digital means of mediated communication can play an important role in attempts to socially include and empower young underprivileged people. ICT offers, for example, a considerable potential for increasing people’s possibility to participate in political decision-making processes. The lack of knowledge about existing problems and/or the lack of a possibility to connect with other people can be seen as a major obstacle for mobilizing underprivileged persons for common action. Without widespread mobilization it seems meanwhile impossible or, at least, extremely difficult to try to pressure otherwise irresponsive – or irresponsible – political decision-makers to be influenced by common people’s concerns. Thus, the ability to communicate with others and to access information about the factors affecting one’s life may seem like an ideal tool

for overcoming problems of political mobilization” (Lanki, 2006: 457; see also Clark & Themudo, 2003).

Not surprisingly, then, Western democracies have been investing in ‘democratic renewal’ initiatives, pursuing the re-engagement of their citizens with the governments’ political agendas, in recent years. While ICTs are perceived as having a pivotal role in this ‘empowering’ process, the outcome of these ‘digitally enabled’ attempts at new forms of political citizenship and deliberation are highly debated and far from secured. As such they constitute a core theme of contemporary political communication studies.¹

The contested concept of participation – central to any consideration of e-citizenship and digital empowerment – can by now be seen as fluid, moving beyond e-voting and the provision of e-government services to address, in a more radical way, the ‘crisis of voice’ (Couldry, 2008), which is at the heart of the widely lamented ‘democratic participation and motivation crisis’. However, the common practices of e-citizenship and e-participation, as realized in Western democracies, seem often to fall short of such more comprehensive, participatory ambitions.²

This common ‘failure’ of digital inclusion initiatives for citizenship and political empowerment in the ‘developed’ world, underlines the enormous challenges faced by comparable attempts at e-participation located in the developing economies and democracies of the Global South. Not only do these initiatives usually operate in a local environment characterised by a severe lack of all kind of material resources, but commonly they also face educational prerequisites, comparable only to ‘Western’ initiatives working with the most marginalized and socially excluded groups within society (Bure, 2005). As Lanki (2006) points out, the first issue is about independent access to information technology. Besides there is the (second) issue

of the widespread lack of capabilities to use this information technology, even where it would be physically and financially accessible. What comes to the foreground here is, first, the unmet need for basic education enabling the understanding of the content available via the Internet and, second, the even more basic unmet need for simple adequate literacy (Lanki, 2006: 457f).

¹ See, for example, Coleman, 2007; Rheingold, 2008; Kann et.al. 2007; Amadeo, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Livingstone 2007a & 2007b; Couldry, 2008; Hoff, 2006; Chadwick, 2006; Faris & Etling, 2008; Cook & Light 2006).

² For a number of studies conducted in the context of the interdisciplinary Danish Modinet research project see Hansen & Hoff, 2006; Olsen, Rieper & Torpe, 2006; Hoff & Jauert, 2008; Storgaard, 2006.

Finally, the developing economies and democracies of the Global South are commonly characterized by a general lack of legal security, public accountability and democratic stability, which fundamentally counteracts digital inclusion for empowerment attempts. From this perspective, the case studies that I will present suggest that ICTs will not achieve their full potential without suitable attention being paid to both the wider processes of community development that they are intended to assist and to the social context within which they are implemented. The design and implementation of an adequate media-facilitated intervention- and mobilisation strategy becomes thus a challenge that exceeds by far the mere selection of the right communicative applications and the development of some adequate software and e-literacy curricula to be used with them. The real challenge, I will argue, lies in designing and implementing an e-participation project that is able to challenge the constraining power structure and mechanisms of marginalization constituted by society, if not in an all-encompassing fashion, so at least punctually and to some degree.

More specifically, I will point out and discuss some of the pitfalls and ambiguities that social inclusion and digital empowerment initiatives are confronted with in their struggle against a rampant culture of crime related violence and the social destitution it originates from. As is well known, the pervasive presence of drug trafficking and a culture of youth gangs in the environment of the Brazilian *favela* (slum) is a consequence of the inhabitants' social marginalization and their impoverished living conditions. However, organized crime and the insecurity it creates amongst community members and society at large can be understood not only to be a consequence of, but also a cause for the continued marginalization of a majority of favela inhabitants. In other words, while not seldom infested with a pathos of resistance by the gang members themselves, the self-destructive violence and far-reaching lack of law and order, in vast parts of urban Brazil, perpetuates the blight of the *favela* communities from which the gangs originate. Hence, *a violência* constitutes a major impediment to processes of social change initiated at a local level and, in more specific terms, to the efforts of the mentioned change agents who strive to 'empower' young people by legal means.

From this perspective, I will describe how the *Projeto Coque Vive* and the *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos attempt to confront the structural forces and dynamics of crime related violence that determine everyday living conditions and diminish the prospects of social inclusion for male and female youth residing in the neighbourhoods they are located within. Taking stock of the distinct approaches which inform both projects' activities, I will point out and question which role mediated

communication and digital participation strategies are assumed to play in each of them to further this process of social inclusion. Thus, I will raise some critical issues regarding the appropriateness of a social inclusion and digital empowerment approaches as realized in both projects.

2. Some general characteristics of the ‘digital divide’

The ‘digital divide’ is probably one of the most commonly used phrases in academic and popular writing about the Internet. While there is not a single divide but several, “the concept is a useful shorthand term for the persistent inequalities that exist between the info-rich and the info-poor. These may be viewed in terms of the global divisions between the developed, the developing, and the least-developed countries as well as those within even the most advanced post-industrial nations” (Chadwick 2006: 49).

Most fundamentally, the digital divide is about physical access to the Internet and its related hardware and software. However, while recognizing inequalities in physical access along racial, income, education, geographical, or gender lines, is vital for understanding and assessing the digital divide, there is a profound lack of studies which explore how social differences in skills shape what (young) people are actually able to *do* when they are online (Chadwick 2006: 51). In consequence, efforts to decrease the digital divide (marginalized young people, among others, are subjected to) are too often (mis)guided by assumptions by what Mark Warschauer (2003: 31) terms a ‘devices and conduits’ approach. That is, the belief that overcoming the digital divide is simply about providing people with access to computers and an ISP account.

Empirically, we can observe a boom of telecentre projects in the Global South, ‘targeting’ young people through a technology-centred ICT4D (Information and communication technologies for development) approach. These institutional attempts to close the digital gap produce insufficient results, as long as they fail to fully comprehend that inequalities in Internet access and use are shaped by broader social inequalities. Hence, scarce resources directed at the digital inclusion of marginalized youth are likely to be squandered, due to an insufficient understanding – on part of those who vest decisive powers over state, bi- and multilateral development funds – of the challenges that potential beneficiaries and the change agents working with them face in trying to ‘close’ the digital divide.

With Warschauer we can state, that while a basic understanding of the inequalities in physical access is essential, we also need to consider that they are “embedded in a complex array of factors encompassing physical, digital, human and social resources and relationships” (Warschauer 2003: 6). While the access divide seems to be contradicted by the explosive proliferation of Internet Cafes and telecentres in the Global South, the skills, opportunity and resulting computer literacy divide continues. It is therefore highly relevant to study the totality of individual and contextual level barriers which mean that some young people are more or less excluded from using ICTs while many more – and this is the group I will focus upon – use computer and the Internet only in restricted (and often predictable) ways.

This objective of study, I have pursued methodologically through a qualitative micro-study of young people everyday media and ICT practices in combination with an empirical case study of some of the existing institutional attempts to overcome these individual and contextual level barriers based on a participatory approach to communication for social change. To start with, however, let me summarize what is broadly agreed upon with regard to the individual and contextual level barriers Warschauer’s statement implies, and – not less important – let me point out the insufficient conceptualisation and understanding of the issues at stake, which result from such a generalised and not-context specific comprehension.

Jan van Dijk and Kenneth Hacker (2003) argue that there are four principal impediments to ‘real’ Internet access at the individual level:

- No possession of computers and network connections (‘material access’).
- Lack of elementary digital experience caused by lack of interest, computer anxiety, and unattractiveness of the new technology (‘mental access’).
- Lack of digital skills caused by insufficient user-friendliness and inadequate education or social support (‘skills access’).
- Lack of significant usage opportunities (‘usage access’).

Similarly, in their detailed study of the United States Karen Mossberger and colleagues (2003: 9) distinguish between:

- the access divide: inequalities in the basic availability of computers and Internet;
- the skills divide: inequalities in technical competence and information literacy;
- the economic opportunity divide: inequalities in the extent to which individuals are able to use information for the purpose of social advancement, such as getting a new job; and
- the democratic divide: divisions between those able to use the Internet for enhancing their political participation and influence (see also Norris 2001).

What more do we know about some of the individual level barriers, such as language, basic literacy and electronic literacy? Admittedly, research on this area is fairly thin, especially research directed at youth in the Global South. Not surprisingly, survey-based studies of Internet users conducted in the developed world indicate that the social groups that generally enjoy greater access levels – white, well-educated, younger individuals with above-average incomes – are also more likely to engage in a broader range of online activities and enjoy a much richer and more socially useful online environment.

The broader implication of this observation is that even in societies that reach saturation levels of Internet access, “there is likely to be a divide between those able to use the Internet for developing their knowledge, their personal, social, and professional networks, and those who simply use it primarily for entertainment purposes” (Chadwick 2006: 75; see also Bonfadelli 2002). While those lacking literacy skills in general are less likely to make productive uses of the Internet, it is also more likely that they will stop going online after being initially introduced to it, for example at school or extra-curricular courses.

As Chadwick remarks:

Dropouts [in the ICT saturated developed societies; *my remark*] are significant because their existence suggests that Internet diffusion may not reach full saturation levels due to certain inherent barriers that make it different from television, radio, and other household technologies. Dropouts ... This highlights a possible future divide between those who are able to take advantage of the many other spill over benefits of the Internet, besides entertainment, such as knowledge seeking, networking, content

creation, using the Net for political influence, and so on and those who stick with passive, one-to-many media like television” (Chadwick 2006: 75f).

At the other end of the spectrum, opposite from the dropouts, evidence suggests that levels of experience are crucial determinants of the number of activities that users typically undertake online. Thus ‘serious’ uses of the Net increase dramatically with experience: individuals are more likely to integrate it into their everyday lives, have more trust in online transactions, and are more comfortable using it as a means of serious communication (Rainie and Bell 2004: 49). This ‘experience effect’ is significant because it reinforces the skills divide identified previously. If we know that skills and confidence increase with experience, over time this will open up for an even greater divide between heavy users, occasional users and non-users.

Finally, there have been studies which indicate that the broadband divide accentuates the access divide. The significance of broadband lies in the kinds of activities in which people with fast, always-on connections typically engage. They tend to create their own content and tailor and manage the content of others according to their own needs (Horrigan and Rainie 2002). Thus the broadband versus dial-up divide reinforces the divide between those who are actively involved in creating web pages and blogs, contributing to discussion forums, sharing files, managing their own news feeds, on the one hand, and those for whom the Internet is a much more disjointed, passive experience, on the other.

Though valuable to enhance our understanding of some of the individual and contextual barriers at work in the structural unequal processes of Internet appropriation by youth that we subsume under the term of digital divide, the matter-of-factness of the demographic patterns of unequal ICT appropriation may encourage a deterministic and rather bleak view. Moreover, there is a common tendency among decision makers in the field of state- and donor-funded ICT4D initiatives to focus overtly on the provision of physical (broadband) access to the Internet through the establishment of community communication- and telecentres, for thereafter to declare that a more promising outcome of the projects could hardly have been expected, given the demographic predispositions of the target group. As these young people’s “principal impediments to ‘real’ Internet access” (Dijk & Hacker, 2003) are rightly understood to be shaped by broader social inequalities beyond the reach of telecenter initiatives, the initial aim of these digital empowerment initiatives, to further the target group’s social inclusion and empowerment, is then all too commonly declared as desirable but

unrealistic unless more resources are allocated into improvements of the centre's technological infrastructure. The outlined, generic approach to ICT4D, which is pursued in a majority of community communication- and telecentres worldwide, remains meanwhile unquestioned.

Instead it seems that this kind of restricted, technology and computer literacy-centred approach in response to an acknowledged 'failed' realisation of the human and social development goals of projects, often comes with a blaming of the young people, who are perceived to 'let down' the owners, managers and educators of the initiatives that are 'targeting' them. It is thus neither unusual to hear remarks on the line of "we provide them with free access, but all they use it for are Orkut (brazil's most popular Social Network Site) and MS Messenger, celebrity news and music downloads." So lamented by the change agents and educators, working with marginalized youth in some of the ICT4D initiatives and telecentres I studied as part of my research in Recife, Brazil.³

However, it can be argued, that the social and discursive structures of participation observable in these projects of digital inclusion do not sufficiently facilitate processes of digital empowerment. That is mainly so, I claim, because the interactional relationship between the project managers, change agents and educators, on the one hand, and the 'targeted' young people, on the other, is inadequately conceptualized and in consequence insufficiently realized. Despite the best intentions of those in charge of community communication- and telecentres and despite their declared intention to actively involve the users and the local community in the planning, creation and evaluation of the project activities, the de facto participation of the users and their community is often rather superficial, than really empowering.⁴ This suggest that, in terms of project design and implementation, a more comprehensive approach is required; an approach that seeks to enable you marginalized people to become self-expressive actors and civic participants in their local community and society at large.

3. Digital empowerment as the enhancement of a self-expressive participatory citizenship

Use of ICT does not necessarily entail 'meaningful use of ICT' or what could be termed as 'engagement' rather than merely use where the 'user' exerts a degree of control and choice over the

³ See also the official evaluation of the existing (seventy-three) *Casa Brasil* telecentres in June 2007, based on the self-evaluation of the unit coordinators, which states in summary a "general dissatisfaction of the unit coordinators of some units in terms of the [human] development achieved by individual users of the Brazil House" (*my translation*; Brandão & de Souza 2008: 63).

⁴ See Granqvist (2005) for his comparable critique directed at the realization of a large scale community information centre initiative in Latin America and the Caribbean.

technology and its content, thus leading to a meaning, significance and utility for the individual concerned (Bonfadelli, 2002; Silverstone, 1996). That is, engagement with ICT is less concerned with issues of access and ownership but more about how people develop relationships with ICTs and how they are capable of making use of the social resources which make access useable (Jung et al., 2001). In this sense, the consequences of engaging meaningfully with ICT could be seen in terms of the effect on individuals' and communities' 'social quality' – i.e. socioeconomic security, social inclusion, social cohesion and empowerment (i.e. Berman and Phillips, 2001).

Perhaps the most useful framework to utilize here is the various dimensions of participation in society that can be seen as constituting 'inclusion' (e.g. Berghman, 1995; Oppenheim, 1998; Walker, 1997). These can be grouped as:

- production activity – engaging in an economically or socially valued activity, such as paid work, education/training and looking after a family;
- political activity – engaging in some collective effort to improve or protect the social and physical environment;
- social activity – engaging in significant social interaction with family or friends and identifying with a cultural group or community;
- consumption activity – being able to consume at least a minimum level of the services and goods which are considered normal for the society; and
- savings activity – accumulating savings, pensions entitlements or owning property.

Thus the impact of ICTs could be seen in these terms, which reflect the extent to which technology use enables individuals to participate and be part of society, i.e. the extent to which 'ICTs enhance our abilities to fulfil active roles in society, or being without them constitute a barrier to that end' (Haddon, 2000: 389).

A digitally included person, in this understanding, feels like a full member of the community or society, and he/she has the competence to influence with or without using the new technology. An excluded person does not have these possibilities or the necessary competence. People who decide not to use digital technology do not belong to the group of disadvantaged or excluded, and neither do the people who could not substantially improve their well-being by using the new technology. That is, the excluded people of the information society are the ones who could increase their

welfare and prospects by using the information technology, but who don't have the chance or ability to use it. Excluded people are also the ones who are weakened or deprived by the information society and its characteristics such as consequences of globalization. They are finally the ones who are only in receiving and consuming roles, and who do not feel full participation in social decision-making processes (Mäkinen 2006: 383f)

Participatory citizenship requires both a new attitude towards cooperation and relearning new practices to act. A citizen should become visible not only for the administration, but also for himself/herself. Learning the skills of participatory citizenship in the information society is often called developing e-readiness. However, since this e-readiness is defined mainly as the skills of receiving and using, it is not enough for influential participation in society. Participation from a perspective of mechanistic policy making, for example as queries for the citizens, cannot include people in decision-making processes. At the worst the participation is only ostensible. Growing towards active citizenship is not only learning the 'e-readiness skills', but also learning to act as a subject, who has an equal role in interaction. Growing towards participatory citizenship is not only an individualistic process, where a person learns useful skills for himself/herself, but also an interactive learning process in the context of one's environment and community.

Citizens' activities in society can be of different kinds and levels. People act in their communities, in civic groups and in organizations; they may use institutional channels or try direct action. The activities can be political, concerning specific issues, communal activities in neighbourhoods or participating in wider social networks. The easiest forms of online action are related to receiving and using, more demanding ones require interaction and the most demanding forms require the abilities to create and provide new contents. The essential difference between these levels is a change from receiving object to a self-expressive actor.

The more ready and capable people are to participate the more competent they are to be influential in their society and to improve their environment. The levels of action may divide people, leaving 'the receiver-users' marginalized and without being heard. The readiness to participate meaningfully requires both technical abilities and civic knowledge about how to influence decision-making.

The potential power of the Internet is above all in its social interaction. By increasing access to information and by improving interaction, the social capital of a community increases at both individual and community level. Since online networks connect people and their resources quite easily, the Internet works well as technology, which assists in creating social capital. A collective benefit follows usually from individual interests, even though a communal benefit can also be seen as an aim (Katz & Rice, 2002, p. 351).

The Internet supports traditional forms of social capital, such as social networks, access to information, communal activities and political participation. The power of the Internet environment is in its ability to gather collective informative capital, which everyone may use without reducing access to it for anyone. Empowerment and increase of social capital correlates with commitment to a community. A community can encourage an individual in an empowerment process, in which case an individual wants to commit himself/herself to a community and work towards its aims. Thus a community role is essential within a process of digital empowerment. The mere presence of a telecentre or community information centre is not enough for community empowerment, if it doesn't lead to any relevant activities.

Information technology can be applied to support individual human development and community empowerment. Better even, it can start an empowering process in a community. By using information technology we can increase the competence of communities to be involved meaningfully in the information society. This increase of competence can help in bridging poor and marginalized communities to enable them to become part of the networks of communication and many kinds of welfare. Mäkinen understands this bridging as *a process of digital empowerment*.

Digital empowerment is an *enabling process*, which proceeds like a spiral from the prerequisites to the improvements in skills and knowledge, and then to the consequences, which are empowering for the community and its members. The changes happening during this process are not just one-way improvements, but they reflect and influence each other's. The spiral of digital empowerment is dynamic and changing because it keeps up with progress in the surrounding society.

The launching force for an empowering process can be a community development project, an ICT programme, or even individuals working as animators. However, the continuation of the process depends mainly on the community itself. That is why the key question, already in the early

stages of an empowering process, is to make it autonomous and independent from outside patronizing help. Thus the process has to happen horizontally and be community oriented.

After having outlined in detail a participatory framework of social inclusion based on the digital empowerment of individuals and communities I will now apply its principles with respect to two concrete examples.

4. The Local Context of Recife, Brazil

Both the case studies referred to in this paper, the *Coque Vive* project in Ilha Joana Bezerra (commonly known as Coque) the *Casa Brasil* telecentre in Peixinhos, are located in some of Recife's major favelas, located close to the centre of town. Both areas are characterised by their low human development index, however Coque has in addition the reputation to be one of the most dangerous urban settlements of Recife, notorious for its crime related violence and homicides.⁵

The *Casa Brasil* offices are housed in the historical site of *Matadouro de Peixinhos*, a former slaughter house that has been renovated and turned into autonomous community youth and art centre over the last decade. *Casa Brasil* is a relative latecomer (2007) in the *Matadouro* whose arrival indicates a progressive process of institutionalisation. Initially the long-term abandoned premises were squatted, among others, by the anarchistic *Boca de Lixo* movement. Nowadays the *Matadouro* Community Youth and Art Centre is part of the World Bank co-funded Recife Urban Upgrading Project.

The *Projeto Coque Vive* is run by a collective that has brought together three social change initiatives engaged with youth in Coque. Namely, the ETAPAS Consulting, Research and Social Action Team, a non-governmental organization created in 1982, NEIMFA (*Núcleo Educacional Irmãos Menotes de Francisco de Assis*), a voluntary Christian organisation and MABI (*Movimento Arrebrandando Barreiras Invisíveis*), a social action group formed by local youth. NEIMFA, MABI and ETAPAS share two premises – a public library building and a 'community centre' located in

⁵ With an annual average of 60 homicides 2005-2007, the neighbourhood which houses an estimated 40.000 inhabitants on an area of 1.33 square km, has become known as '*morada da morte*' ('dwelling of death') in the popular parlance.

the neighbourhood – and have worked together since 2006 on the realization of various cultural, media and educational projects (subsumed under the name of *Coletivo Coque Vive*) such as:

- *Biblioteca Popular do Coque* (2006); [Public Library of Coque]
- *Gestão e Processos Comunicacionais no Coque* (2006); [Management and Communication Processes in Coque]
- *Rede de Agentes de Educomunicação Solidária* (2007); [Network of the Agents of the Solidarity Education and Communication Initiative]
- *Programa de Formação de Agentes de Mediação Sociocultural* (2008); [Programme for the Consciousness Raising of Agents of Socio-cultural Mediation]
- *Rede de Comunicação, Educação e Cultura: Filhos e Filhas do Coque* (2008); [Network of Communication, Education and Culture: Sons and Daughters of Coque]

These activities have included the use of photography, print media, community radio, video, fanzines, graffiti, street art, music, weblogs, chat forums and net-exhibitions and were realized in close cooperation with faculty staff and students of the UFDP (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco), department of Journalism.

In contrast to the federal, state-funded *Casa Brasil* project in Peixinhos, which is one of 90 (planned) centres of its kind in the whole of Brazil, the *Coque Vive* initiative is highly integrated with the agency of some of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and social movements involved with the people living in Coque. A bottom-up organisational structure goes hand in hand with a primarily volunteer-based engagement of change agents from outside and within the community. This sets *Coque Vive* distinctively apart from the more top-down institutional approach of *Casa Brasil*, a difference which results in two distinct modes of understanding and pursuing a participatory approach to development-oriented communication. In consequence, while the overall declared objectives in both kinds of projects have a lot in common, the institutional prerequisites to achieve them favour the realisation of specific objectives in respectively the *Projeto Coque Vive* and the *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos.

In sum, the *Projeto Coque Vive* seems, on the basis of its institutional mode of operation, most in tune with objectives aiming at making use of ICT and other means of communication to further processes of political empowerment and collective action by local youth

directed at issues of social change in the community. The *Casa Brasil*, on the other hand, has the resources and organisational effectiveness to employ its communally, regionally and nationally connected educational capacities to further the individual skills and computer literacy of marginalized young people who seek to improve their qualifications on the labour market.

These generalised considerations put apart, the open question remains what type of marginalized young people both initiatives are able to attract and to which extent they manage to get these boys and girls involved and engaged in the ‘cultural’ activities designed to empower them to ‘develop’ themselves and their communities in what kind of anticipated ways? Obviously, this is a question too broad in its totality to be answered here, or in a single research project. I will therefore focus, in the remaining pages of this paper, on how the project has dealt with the one, all-pervasive challenge to the living conditions of (young) people in Coque and Peixinhos, the omnipresent lure and threat of gang-related criminal activities which shape and affect, as outlined above, the life trajectories of male and female adolescents in many consequential ways.

The main reason for this analytical focus is an acknowledgement of the fact, that the crime-related activities and (often deadly) violence are a major impediment to the realisation of social and human developments in the community (Freitas, 2005). Itself a consequence of the socio-economic marginalization of the inhabitants of urban Brazilian favelas, gang-related crime and violence perpetuates this marginalization by narrowing the range of realistic youth identity constructions, as Lucia Rabello de Castro (2006), has demonstrated most convincingly in her work. In an environment which denies the young the most elementary human rights, the criminal activities are not only a way to gain material goods, but also a source of symbolic gains, once that the fear that the criminal inspires is perceived as power. Such practices and behaviours are spread out in the community in indiscriminate and fast way, being easily imitated and internalized by adolescents.

As is easy to see, any initiative attempting to empower young people and thus to support them in their often desperate struggles for social independence and economic betterment, has to face, in one way or another, the trials and constraints which arise from working with young people in such an unpredictable and precarious environment. The project design and implementation may be judged against the initiative’s ability to work through the participatory challenges that arise under such conditions. Thus, we can ask how successful the studied social inclusion and digital empowerment strategies are, not only with regard to young people’s acquisition of digital literacy competencies, but also with regard to their appropriation of critical

reflective and communicative abilities in general and based on these the capacity to development into strong, self-reliant individuals. That is, youth who are able and willing to challenge the structural predetermination as victim and/or participant in illegal and illicit activities that affect, with a frightening degree of probability, youth growing up in a Brazilian *favela*.

The realisation of this broader ‘formative’ goal depends on the successful social embeddedness of the project, that is on a crucial process of community involvement, engagement and transition to community ownership which has to be achieved in the interaction between project staff and community based participants. However, the social inclusion and digital empowerment of young people through the agency of *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* is also a question of how, in specific, these ‘participatory’ CBOs conceptualize the outlined, persistent reproduction of a ‘local’ culture of crime and gang-related violence and in consequence seek to contain it.

Reproduction here, first and foremost, indicates the involvement and recruiting of new gang members of the same (age) group of young people that *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* strive to engage. Though only a minority of local youth end as hardened criminals “the psychological proximity that drug dealing [and other illicit activities] offers as a ‘career’ – both as an identity and as a perspective on life-chances – for poor youngsters who see very few [other] opportunities to ‘be somebody in life’ (de Castro 2006: 186), is truly omnipresent. In the phrasing of a 43-year old communitarian leader from Coque:

Você quase não encontra mais uma família aqui dentro que não tenham um parente ou um conhecido que se envolveu ou está envolvido com as gangues, ou que não tenha sido vítima delas [You almost don’t find a family here any longer, that neither has a relative or close friend involved with the gangs, nor become a victim of the gangs] (cf. Freitas 2005: 327).

Insulated from access to public services, favelas like Coque have been invaded by organized forces associated with illicit activities, such as drug dealing, robbery and arms smuggling. This means not only that the poor, living there “have to cope daily with the vicissitudes imposed by criminal organizations on their lives – one important issue being the fate of poor youngsters who see drug dealing as an opportunity to earn easy money and to buy commodities that are not usually available to them” (de Castro 2006: 186).

Evidence based on the work of Alexandre de Freitas echoes the empirical observations and conceptual understandings of work on youth and crime-related violence in other parts of urban

Brazil. With reference to the characteristics of Coque's contemporary gang culture⁶, Freitas gives a vivid account of 'ordinary' young people's increased enticement into non-capital crime (2005: 274-85). In her seminal *Violência e Democracia: O paradoxo brasileiro* (2000) Angelina Peralva also puts across this change:

Há uma parte de identificação entre os jovens favelados, em geral, e os bandidos. As fronteiras entre eles se tornaram menos claras do que no passado, quando trabalhadores e malandros constituíam duas categorias de indivíduos fortemente opostas uma à outra. Essa identificação é em primeiro lugar característica de uma geração: o bandido é um jovem e recruta entre os jovens [There exists an identification between the young ones living in the favelas and the outlaws. The borders between them has become less clear than in the past, when workers and *malandros* constituted two strongly opposing categories of individuals. This identification is most characteristic for a new generation in which the outlaw is himself a youth and enlists other young people] (Peralva, 2000, p. 129).

In sum, illicit activities such as drug trafficking stand out as an option for making easy money, and can be taken either as a 'career' or as an occasional or opportunistic task. This means, according to de Castro and others, that the domination of drug dealing in poor urban communities of Brazil invades households in such a way that is, in practical terms, impossible to keep oneself totally apart from it.

Youth see their own relatives, neighbours or colleagues 'entering the traffic', many of them having already been killed by the police on that account. Therefore, even for those who would want to keep out of illicit activities, drug dealing seems to mesh with their own lives. Above all, easy money and the possibility of enhancing consumption practices become attractive to come to terms with material deprivation in the present. For those who enter drug trafficking as a career, advantages in the present are obtained at the cost of medium-term survival and personal freedom.

The normative basis for illicit activities in drug traffic consists of a radical rejection of the work ethic.

Thus, taking up the 'career' offered by drug traffic and the identity of the drug dealer and outlaw is also

⁶ Coque has been known to be the homestead of criminals since its inception in the early 20th century. Known as *capangas* and *mascastes* the character of the social outlaw embedded within the community found its most emblematic representation in the infamous "Galeguinho do Coque". This character, who was pursued by the authorities in four Brazilian states, when only 16, was finally arrested in 1975, age 19. In prison the Galeguinho turned a devout Christian, but was murdered by unknown a year after his release. The 'Galeguinho do Coque' became a heavy mediated figure, occupying the public imagination mainly by way of the local press and promoting the 'fame' and negative reputation' that Coque has until current days. For the inhabitants of the community he personalizes the 'old style' local criminal, who respected the place he lived, in contrast to the present gang members, who seem out of social control (Freitas 2005: 274).

signified in terms of 'being smart' and bypassing conventional moral codes in favour of present fruition (de Castro 2006: 186f).

Given the outlined situation, one of the most formidable challenges *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* face clearly is how to handle the (young) people who contribute to the continued existence of this culture by playing peripheral or central roles and the prescriptive mechanisms that encourage the deceitful illusion of an alternative path to recognition, wealth and empowerment by involvement in a local criminal gang.

5. Lessons from the Ground

All 'communities' have different interests within them, and that is particular the case of those that have long struggled with the immediate problems of social existence. ... Listening more closely, one will normally hear conflicting voices, including those from within the community that articulate the problems in a different way and propose different solutions. The condition for action ... is that one chooses between these different, potentially contradictory voices, and devotes ones efforts and resources to helping one group or another to give a public communicative expression to its concerns. The problem is: which group to choose? (Sparks 2007: 217)

As the quote from Colin Sparks so aptly states, there is the imminent danger in efforts at participatory development communication (theory and practice) to conceptualize 'community' as a homogenous group of peoples, unified in their struggles with the 'surrounding' world. The painful lesson learned in many 'development' projects is, that internal power struggles and conflicts of interest are often the main hindrance to a realisation of the stated objectives. A profound awareness and comprehension of the asymmetrical matrix of power relations criss-crossing a particular community – including the external relations that individual members bring into play to strengthen their relative position in the hierarchical social order of the community – is therefore a crucial pre-condition to any attempt of community development and social change.

Applied to the case studies presented in this paper, one crucial matrix of power which has to be understood is the informal coercive authority created by those young men and adolescents who 'call the shots' in the majority of Brazilian favelas. That is, those heavily armed male youth,

who seem to belie the notion of the disempowered young inhabitants of the poorest urban quarters, by the sheer potential of violence they are ready to employ.

Given the material prosperity and masculine, aggressive self-assuredness these criminals are eager to display, it comes at no surprise that the most successful gang members figure as a role model to ‘success’ in the eyes of not so few local youth (de Castro 2006: 187), who almost without exemption face the prospect of unemployment or underemployment and in consequence the prospect of a sustained economic dependence on their impoverished families.⁷ Identity positions in drug trafficking and crime seem crystallized and centred round easier chances to survive and become included. That is, a ‘logic of survival’ seems powerfully at work, a logic that demands poor urban Brazilian youngsters’ to consume, as a ‘mode of inclusion’ in society, in order to achieve short-term gains that narrows down ‘alternative’ prospective visions of the self (de Castro 2006).

In consequence, institutions of formal and informal education, spanning from the local public schools to extra-curricular initiatives as offered by *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* compete directly with the opportunity structure offered by the criminal subculture that is ever-present in the daily lives of favelas youths. Running small, but lucrative errands for the local gangs or providing sex for favours and material gifts are more than a mere hypothetical possibility and often a first step to get further involved. Importantly, though the majority of poor Brazilian youngsters manage to stay away from illicit activities – as a ‘career’ – the institutional spaces created by *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* are no islands of bliss, but have to deal with the fact that a considerable number of local youngsters have intermittent links with the gangs, be it either to consume drugs or to earn a little ‘on the side’.

As several of the change agents interviewed were ready to admit, the venues of *ETAPAS* and the *Matadouro de Peixinhos* have not only become the occasional sites of drug trafficking, but face questions of safeguarding with respect to both their equipment and the security of their young visitors and participants. While the general security situation in these neighbourhoods has meant that courses and other activities are limited to daytime hours, a 24 hour security guard presence at the *Matadouro* is apparently considered a necessity to protect *Casa Brasil’s* valuable computer equipment, as well as to prevent the youth and art centre to become the site of crime related acts of

⁷ According to the Atlases of Human Development in Recife (2000), more than half of the population in Coque (57%), for example, are living by less than the minimum income.

violence.⁸ Also, a police car standing for hours in front of the *Matadouro* entrance was a common sight whenever we visited the *Casa Brasil* in Peixinhos. Conversely, the shared venues used by *Coque Vive* seem to manage without guards and police protection. This obvious difference indicates that the latter initiative may have been forced and more effective than *Casa Brasil* at establishing some report with the local gangs, in terms of being ‘tolerated’ and being afforded some guarantees of ‘non-interference’. While the concrete interactional relations and processes of negotiation at work in both cases are too multi-layered and complex to be discussed in detail, it seems appropriate to point out that this difference seems indicative for the divergent roads towards community involvement and social inclusion that characterize *Coque Vive* on the one hand and *Casa Brasil* on the other.

One of the less obvious, but concrete barriers to the digital inclusion of young people from Coque, Peixinhos and neighbouring areas is the question whether the mentioned venues are considered to be a safe enough semi-public space for parents to allow their teenage children to go there to participate in the activities of *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil*. If the answer is no, they will try to keep them away and encourage them to either stay at home,⁹ or to participate in other, less ‘dangerous’ activities. What is more, young people representing de Castro’s more ‘cautious’ type of youth identities – who turn for example to religion and religious activities as a ‘defence’ against the lure of the pleasurable (de Castro 2006: 189) – may keep away on their own accord, if they feel not at ease amongst the other youth who are present on the premises of *ETAPAS* and the *Matadouro de Peixinhos*.

It can be seen in itself as some measure of success, that both projects have managed to strike a balance in the composition of youth they work with, spanning from those who are strongly committed to stay clear from all kind of ‘bad influence’ to those who can be considered to be endangered and close to the edge. Thus, both *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* demonstrate a surprising ability to bring together a broad variety of seemingly rather different girls and boys in their teens and early twenties, across their various activities.

⁸ The same circumstances of operation are obviously a reality for the local public schools, where metal detectors and armed guards are the most visible measurements to keep crime and violence away.

⁹ For a more detailed consideration of this protective ‘strategy’ of parents in Recife see Dalsgaard et al. (2008) and Gough (2008).

In the case of the *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos this enlargement of the base of the *Matadouro*'s clients appears to have been achieved by the joined effort of all the various initiatives housed by the Community Youth and Art Centre. Over the five years (2003-2008) that I have visited the *Matadouro* on various occasions its public image has in fact developed from being recognised as a place squatted by a bunch of 'dopeheads', to a widely respected venue for all kind of 'sober', social, educational and cultural activities.¹⁰ To my view, it is the unique mix of communal and state-funded initiatives, on the one hand, and more autonomous social action groups with 'street credibility' amongst a broad spectrum of youth, on the other hand, that creates promising conditions to solve the problems involved.

In the same way, in the case of Coque it seems evident that initiatives of digital inclusion and communication for human development and social change depend heavily on supportive participatory relations with other NGOs, CBOs and social movements active in the locality and with a long-standing reputation, in their attempt to successfully establish themselves. It is through these 'partners' that the necessary acceptance of the project by the local community is often initiated; a co-operation that then has to develop into more developed forms of participation and to the involvement of individual members of the community who are able to further strengthen the initiative's reputation.¹¹ If handled successfully, the outlined security impediment to young people's participation in initiatives of digital inclusion may then even work in the initiatives' favour. Both *Coque Vive* and *Casa Brasil* give by now the impression to have succeeded in building their local standing as a trustworthy space and NGO. That is, the nature of their efforts and the localities in which these participatory activities unfold are seen to constitute a space which is beneficial for young people's 'development'. Moreover, it is deemed to constitute an environment

¹⁰ Amongst the other CBOs located at the *Matadouro* are an Afro-Brazilian ballet, a community radio, a public library and literacy action group, an annual rock festival and a theater-dance company, all of them with a strong social educational dimension. Finally there are a number of communal social welfare initiatives involving teenage mothers, drug addicts and other 'jeopardized' groups of youth.

¹¹ Admittedly, this means, at times, to find a working compromise with those who head the local criminal gangs, though this is a subject most project leaders will be most reluctant to discuss openly or even in a face-to-face interview. It is however my impression that regular public events, like music concerts and street art performances, are one way to 'further' the goodwill and non-interference of the local drug-dealing gangs which is another reason for the above stated strategic efficiency of bringing together various social and cultural initiatives under one roof.

that is safer and less prone to the lure of the local drug and gang culture, than most other public and semi-public places in the neighbourhood, such as the street, bars and probably even school.

The opposite scenario – neither encountered in Coque nor Peixinhos, but at some of the other sites of my (2008) field research in Nepal and Brazil – may be exemplified by the kind of digital inclusion projects that are realised in the form of an externally initiated and run community communication centre. Due to their partial ‘detachment’ from the community in which they are placed, these telecentres function, at their most, as subsidised substitutes for commercial cybercafés, phone centres and computer education courses. Hence, they are without a possibility (and at times neither the ambition) to contribute meaningfully to the collective process of social change and human development which result in the community members’ empowerment.

6. Casa Brasil and Coque Vive seen in a Comparative Perspective

After having outlined some of the common experiences in *Coque Vive* and the Peixinhos *Casa Brasil*, I now will specify what, in my view, sets them conceptually apart. This endeavour draws, on the one hand, on interviews, conversations and observations carried out in spring 2008, on the other hand, on secondary sources like the published nationwide self-evaluation of the then (June 2007) forty *Casa Brasil* centres.¹²

In the self-understanding of *Casa Brasil*, as expressed on its national website, the initiative seeks to further the digital inclusion of the underprivileged segments of Brazil. This aim is defined comprehensively and with a strong focus on forms of communicative deliberation and participatory empowerment:

Com unidades funcionando em áreas de baixo índice de desenvolvimento humano, o projeto Casa Brasil leva às comunidades computadores e conectividade, e privilegia, sobretudo, ações em tecnologias livres aliadas a cultura, arte, entretenimento, articulação comunitária e participação popular. As atividades desenvolvidas estimulam a apropriação autônoma e crítica das tecnologias, como por exemplo o software livre, a democratização das comunicações e o desenvolvimento local orientado pelos princípios da economia solidária. [With its units functioning in areas of low human development,

¹² The *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos has not been included in this sample as the centre was in planning and under negotiation throughout 2007. However, as confirmed by the project coordinator (leader) and some of its instructors, experiences made during the first months of operation corroborated to a high degree the observations and the points of critique made in this comprehensive report.

the project Casa Brasil takes computers, connectivity and access to these communities, but most of all, [it enacts] a free technology approach that brings together culture, art, entertainment, community articulation and popular participation. The initiated activities [seek to] stimulate the independent and critical appropriation of [digital communication] technologies, as for example open source based computer software, the democratization of communication and local development based on the principles of economic solidarity] (Casa Brasil, 2008).

The range of activities and courses that the by now eighty *Casa Brasil* units offer for free participation substantiate declared intentions. Besides basic and advanced courses in online and off-line computer use, technical-scientific classes, collective mediated memory projects and artisanal, IT-based workshops constitute the core of *Casa Brasil's* nationwide curriculum. In addition, the *Casa Brasil* units offer their visitors (week)daily two hours of free Internet access, with an option for help and supervision.¹³

Taking the totality of these features into consideration, the initiative's claim to promote forms of digital inclusion that reach beyond the provision of access and the teaching of computer skills, can be avowed to manifest itself not just as a declaration of intent but on *Casa Brasil's* concrete level of agency, so in the *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos. However, what remains questionable is whether the implemented range of activities adds up to constitute an integrated strategic approach of social inclusion and digital empowerment on a community level. That is, whether the participatory communication and digital inclusion practices of *Casa Brasil*, as observed in the Peixinhos unit, de facto live up to the declared 'educational' objectives and approach of intervention, that the initiative has stated in accordance with the commonly accepted principles of e-participation:

O foco não é a transmissão de conhecimentos, mas a descoberta, a conscientização e o testemunho de vida, valorizando a autonomia e fortalecendo identidades, tanto do participante quanto da comunidade. Para isso, promove formações voltadas ao desenvolvimento da autonomia, em ações de educação não-formal. A educação não-formal associa-se ao conceito de cultura e, por isso, é ligada fortemente à aprendizagem política dos direitos de cidadãos e cidadãs e à participação comunitária. [The focus is not the transmission of knowledge, but the discovery, the awareness-raising and witnessing of life, valuing

¹³ For an overview with regard to the, so far, 18 different workshops and five (certified) courses supposed to be offered by each of its units, see Casa Brasil's national website (*Cursos* and *Oficinas Livres*). From this site participants are expected to download workshop materials and instructors their detailed course manuals (see <http://www.casabrasil.gov.br>). At the time of my visit the Casa Brasil of Peixinhos had not yet run all the available courses, but planned to do so within its first year of operation (2008).

the autonomy of identities and strengthening them, both of the participant and the community. Thus, it [Casa Brasil] promotes 'formative education' directed at the enhancement of [individuals and communities] autonomy, through forms of non-formal education. Non-formal education associates itself with the concept of culture and, therefore, is linked strongly with the learning of political deliberation, of citizenship rights and communitarian participation] (Casa Brasil, 2007).

What causes me to draw attention to an apparent discrepancy between *Casa Brasil's* actual practice and its normative intention is, among other evidence, the observation that the outlined problematic of crime-related violence as main impediment to individual and community development seems neither particularly articulate in the curriculum, nor explicitly included in *Casa Brasil's* (community) participation strategy. While the omnipresence of drug trafficking and criminal youth gangs is dealt with at the *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos on a pragmatic, organizational level – so for example in terms of the security demands this situation requires – its potential negative effect on the identity formation of local youth, their human development and their community's living conditions, is conspicuously absent in *Casa Brasil's* everyday operationalization of 'educational' efforts directed at digital empowerment and social change.

Arguably, this 'reluctance' is the consequence of a perceived (and in all probability factual) vulnerability the *Casa Brasil* of Peixinhos deals with, as members of its staff admitted hesitantly in informal conversation. After all, the initiative is a relative newcomer to the neighborhood and the *Matadouro* Community Youth and Art Centre and still in the process of defining its legitimate place and role in the local matrix of power-saturated structure of social relations and interactions. To 'fade out' some of the most perilous dynamics of interactions amongst youth and in the community as a whole, associated with the hazardous terrains of drug-trafficking, extortion, gang wars, bribery and an at times disproportionate response of the executive, may thus be the unwelcome but inevitable prerequisite of local presence and of being able to run the project at all.

Here it is useful to contrast *Casa Brasil's* situation with the modus operandi of the *Coque Vive* initiative. As I will show in a moment, the latter is characterized by a seemingly less cautious approach, which puts the challenges stemming from the pervasive presence of drug trafficking and crime-related acts of violence at the heart of its conceptual considerations and strategic interventions. Admittedly, *Coque Vive* is neither in a position to pursue a confrontational approach, nor under the illusion that its social change agents can and should focus their efforts at the

containment of local crime. Rather they seek to tackle the root causes that make for a social environment that allows this subculture to inflate. Moreover, the mere fact that they dare to put on their agenda – a social reality known to everybody and talked about in private, but often obscured in the community's more public articulations and debates – is in itself remarkable.

No doubt, attempts to explain the postulated difference between *Casa Brasil* and *Coque Vive* demand a more detailed and comprehensive study. The argument I will put forward is in this sense preliminary and not sufficiently based on empirical evidence. Nonetheless, it seems to my judgment reasonable to draw attention to the fact that *Coque Vive* incorporates two well-established local NGOs (NEIMFA and ETAPAS) and a genuine CBO run by young activists grown up and living in the favela, in its organizational setup. In contrast, *Casa Brasil*, is in the neighborhood (and by other change agents) basically seen as the branch of a centralized, governmental digital inclusion initiative, run by outsiders who are still have to prove that they are committed to the broader objectives of social inclusion, genuine participation, individual and community empowerment that they have announced to work for. The less stringent, still developing report and forms of cooperation with several local NGOs and a youth-run CBO (*Boca de Lixo*) that *Casa Brasil* had commenced by April 2008 was primarily based on their co-presence at the venues of the *Matadouro* Community Youth and Art Centre. Hence, a present state suggests itself that has the potential to develop, but lives not yet fully up to the initiatives own participatory intentions as announced:

Para garantir a participação popular e comunitária, um Conselho Gestor, formado em sua maioria por membros da comunidade, organiza a utilização de cada unidade do Casa Brasil. Sendo um espaço público e comunitário, de uso gratuito e de acesso irrestrito, o projeto estimula a apropriação da unidade pela comunidade, transformando-a em espelho cultural do local em que foi implementada, fomentando a gestão participativa e ampliação da cidadania, e fortalecendo a ação da sociedade civil. [To guarantee the popular and communitarian participation, a Managing Advisory, formed in its majority by members of the community, organizes the use of each unit of the Casa Brasil. Being a public and communitarian space, of gratuitous use and unrestricted access, the project stimulates the appropriation of the unit for the community, transforming it into a cultural mirror of the place in which it was implemented, stimulating participatory management and amplifying citizenship and the agency of civil society].(Casa Brasil, 2008).

This impression of hazy participatory promises that are inadequately realized on the ground, is substantiated by some of the findings of the aforementioned national evaluation report, according to

which a vast majority (90%) of Casa Brasil units admits not to have accomplished the formulation of a concrete action plan for communitarian attendance (Brandão & de Souza; 2008: 40). In other words, the involvement of the community is wanted while concrete measures to encourage communitarian participation are lacking. Only four units had by then formulated a plan – not in general and abstract terms, but in specific concrete relation to the particularities of local conditions – how this objective could be achieved. Also, only 45% of the responsible coordinators thought that the units they were in charge of were living up to the declared digital inclusion strategy, when it came to ‘community involvement’ (Brandão & de Souza; 2008: 56). Last but not least, the fact that all the *Casa Brasil* courses and workshops are designed and respective learning materials developed and produced on a national scale, seems to inhibit a more ‘localized’ programme adaption; an assessment which is substantiated by the *Casa Brasil* evaluation stating that three out of four coordinators judge the scope for community-related content insufficient:

... encontramos em apenas 10 (25%) das Casas a opinião afirmativa sobre a implantação do ambiente virtual de aprendizagem para capacitação da comunidade. Esse fato evidencia a necessidade de rever o ambiente virtual em uso para atendimento comunitário ou a necessidade de ampliar as possibilidades de oferta com outros recursos, meios e ferramentas de suporte. [... in only 10 (25%) of the units we find a affirmative opinion on the implantation of the virtual learning environment for the empowerment of the community. This fact evidences the necessity to review the virtual environment in use for communitarian attendance and the necessity to extend possibilities of offering other resources, ways and tools of support] (Brandão & de Souza; 2008: 41).

No wonder then, that the challenge constituted by the negative influence of a criminal subculture is neglected in the *Casa Brasil* units’ de facto approach. Though not outright ignored, but accounted for pragmatically on a daily interactional level by the coordinator and instructors of the Peixinhos unit (according to statements made when interviewed), a well thought-out and coordinated strategic approach, guiding the activities of *Casa Brasil* in Peixinhos as a whole, seems to lack.

This ‘flaw’ in the implementation of an ambitious e-participation and digital empowerment strategy becomes even more evident if put in a comparative perspective. That is, if the agency of the Casa Brasil unit in Peixinhos is analytically put side by side with both, some of the projects realized recently under the umbrella of the *Coletivo Coque Vive*, namely the ‘Programme for the Consciousness Raising of Agents of Socio-Cultural Mediation’ and the ‘Network of Communication, Education and Culture: Sons and Daughters of Coque’ and with the latest project

(under implementation), a fully-fledged digital studio (*Projeto Estação Digital de Difusão de Conteúdos*) aimed at musical, video and net-based content production.¹⁴

In their official description of the latter, the NEIMFA/UFPE team in charge of planning and implementation elaborates with reference to the local situation:

The existing reality of social exclusion becomes even bigger due to a long history of criminal groups present in the community, connected, most of all, to drug trafficking. The escalation of violence and involvement of a part of the young people of the community in illegal activities is ever more worrying, as it has become the biggest challenge for the governmental and not-governmental institutions engaging there.

Based on studies on the genesis of violence in Coque, as well as on the existing social relations in the community, sociologists, as Freitas (2005) affirm that the low self-esteem of the inhabitants generates a revolt of demobilization which further nourishes the violence. Freitas also evidences that the young are being systematically discriminated on the job market in the neighbouring areas, because they are seen as ‘potential delinquents’. They end, therefore, to be more vulnerable to the co-options of existing criminal groups in the quarter. In this space of violence, the young without perspectives see in crime a chance of respect, identity and action, if only fleetingly (NEIMFA/UFPE, 2008: 2; *my translation*).

Hence, as in the preceding activities under the *Projeto Coque Vive* great deal of attention has been given to the negative consequences of the strong preconceptions under circulation in society at large with regard to the generalised criminal ‘character’ of the (young) people from Coque. This prejudiced image is heavily reproduced by the local media, so for example in the daily television crime shows *Bronca Pesada* (Heavy Quarrel) and *Ronda da Cidade* (Patrol of the City), as in the tabloid *Folha de Pernambuco* (Paper of Pernambuco). Its consequences are understood as diametric to the social inclusion of the target group of the NEIMFA/UFPE digital empowerment initiative.

The preconception against ‘the dangerous people of Coque’ is such that NGOs with more than 20 years of engagement in the quarter, as the *Núcleo Educacional Irmãos Menores de Francisco de Assisi* (NEIMFA), have started to consider communication as serious a social problem as all the others. And with good reason: Radio and TV programmes refer, with naturalness, to the “dangerous people of Coque” and, in local media, the quarter is commonly presented as the ‘homestead of death’ (*morada da morte*). The preconception stimulated by such kind of representations contributes directly to the

¹⁴ The ‘digital studio’ has secured some public funding in spring 2008 and has been under construction since then.

maintenance of a vicious circle of exclusion and violence of which the young ones are the main victims (NEIMFA/UFPE, 2008: 2; *my translation*).

Based on such an understanding of the structural dynamics of a vicious circle of discrimination, social exclusion and self-fulfilling identification of the (male) youth of Coque as ‘potential’ criminals, the change agents behind *Coque Vive* and the *Estação Digital* have suggested that:

... the construction of social nets, from strategic points such as NGOs, Christian groups and youth collectives, may contribute decisively to the struggle against violence and for the improvement of quality of life in those communities that have become hostages to the actions of criminal groups which easily co-opt the young ones for their action, helped by those youth’s lack of perspective and their low self-esteem (NEIMFA/UFPE, 2008: 2f; *my translation*).

In concurrence with the above outlined framework of social inclusion through participatory forms of mediated communication, the change agents which come together under the umbrella of the *Coletivo Coque Vive* have identified practices of ‘symbolic empowerment’, directed at and involving local youth, as the central dimension of their development and social change strategy.

The *Rádio Coque Livre*, the elaborate *Coque Vive* website (containing photo albums, videos, a debate forum, an elaborate blog and a project news board amongst other features)¹⁵ and the production of the *Jornal Coque* in print and later as free downloadable electronic version¹⁶ are all vivid examples for the creative and social productivity of the pursued approach. The *Jornal Coque* stands particularly out, as it consists primarily of first-person accounts by young girls and boys from Coque, describing their living situation and reflecting on the consequences of the ubiquitous gang culture with respect to their quotidian live and identities.

To sum up: *Coque Vive*’s self-reflexive approach to media education and digital empowerment seeks to explore the role of (digitally mediated) communication beyond the well known practices and theoretical understandings of digital inclusion understood as the conveyance of computer literary skills. Most importantly, digital communication is understood and put into practice as a process of educational awareness raising and identity formation (*formação*) and not conceptualized as a mere tool or field of skills. The aim of this participatory approach to digital inclusion is to

¹⁵ Accessed at <http://coquevive.wordpress.com/> and <http://experienciaemdigital.wordpress.com/>.

¹⁶ Accessed at <http://coquevive.wordpress.com/projetos-2/jornalcoque/>.

enable young people to develop the competence to use forms of digital communication and creative expression in a process of individual and collective self-empowerment.

7. Concluding Considerations

Some e-participation and digital inclusion initiatives, such as *Casa Brasil* steer clear of the crime and violence problematic in that they de facto concentrate their activities on (young) peoples' appropriation of computer literacy skills and therewith only indirectly seek to change the social realities of the community they are located within. Thus, as we have seen, they abstain from direct efforts to empower those young who may act as a potential counter model to there same age neighbours involved in illicit activities. In consequence, they attract young people, not only from Peixinhos but also from other areas in town, who participate in their courses with the main motivation to improve their ICT proficiency (including technical and communicative skills) and thus to promote their job qualifications.

Evidently, such an approach has its strengths and limitations. Given, the prevalence of 'exit strategies' – fuelled by mediated representations and personal narratives of a bright future 'somewhere else', compared to the perceived lack of rewards and opportunities in the community – the 'individual' bias of the skills approach may contribute rather than work against this trend. In consequence, the most promising participants might be encouraged to leave their life in the community behind. Moreover, this not improbable 'brain drain' goes hand in hand with a 'narrow' motivation structure amongst the course and workshop participants, focussed on immediate personal benefits. The instructors' repeatedly stated observation of refusal of majority of young participants to engage critically with the social realities of their local community may have its cause in this dynamic. That is, the appropriation of creative media and computer competences are understood as a possibility to leave the community behind, not to change it and the de facto execution of the *Casa Brasil*'s curriculum reinforces this orientation by default.

More self-expressive, politicized and counter-hegemonic creative media engagements that give a voice to a specific group of youth within the community and possibly to the community within broader society seem only to evolve if a collective of young people working with communication in all mediated forms, is formed, encouraged and supported consistently over a considerable period of time. This empowerment process is based on four basic prerequisites, namely, *awareness, motivation, technical access* and *competence*. Motivation is an essential

element in all kinds of learning and development. It is an individual factor, but the social environment has a significant impact on it. Social encouragement has a motivational impact especially in the first phase of using new technology. The limited community involvement in the *Casa Brasil* project may therefore explain the greater individual goal orientation of its participants and their less pronounced community development aspirations.

The projects' participants' recognition as a legitimate group to give 'voice' to the experiences and demands young people in the neighbourhood is vehemently challenged by other youth within the community. The most influential group amongst these other youth is highly self-expressive in terms of the coercive power they command. Conflicting role models and identity casts are the undecided outcome of this discursive struggle. Projects of social inclusion and digital empowerment like *Casa Brasil* and the *Coletivo Coque Vive* will only succeed in empowering those young people who advocate a non-violent, community-oriented, collective approach to social change and human development, if a broad social encouragement for their position is facilitated in cooperation with the community, local authorities and state agencies. Mediated forms of communication, including ICT, can enhance young people's inclusion in information networks, in social interaction and in participatory activities. However, if the new inclusion practices, developed in these projects, do not get connected to the existing institutionalized systems, they stay marginal without making too much difference (Anttiroiko, 2003).

The key issue, here, is to get all stakeholders involved in developing new participatory and inclusion practices. Likewise technical skill improvements and improvements in receiving and producing information are in themselves insufficient, if not accompanied by widening social network improvements and improvements in learning new courses of interaction. Digital empowerment has thus to be facilitated in the sense of enablement – enabling (young) people to do what is important to them, and enabling them to grow as competent subjects who have control over their lives and surroundings by non-violent, civic means. Digital empowerment, is thus best understood and pursued not as a direct consequence of having and using the technical facilities, but as a multi-phased process to gain better networking, communication and cooperation opportunities, and to increase the competence of individuals and communities to act as influential participants in the information society.

Change agents working with youth and also the young people involved in these projects themselves tend to 'avoid' some of the most threatening realities and pressing issues of their everyday in their media-centred creative practices. However, with growing confidence both groups seem able and

willing to challenge these taboos. For this purpose - as hopefully evidenced by the presented case studies – it is not enough to provide online access and to put appropriate content out, no matter how good it is made. It is neither enough to encourage young people to produce their own media presentations (‘participation through creative engagement’). Rather, the learned lessons from the ground strongly suggest that the process of mobilisation must be accompanied by a broader process of social formation. In this sense, the pursued reconstruction of identities must be interlinked, by critical reflections, for example, on media images and counter-discourse as a learning process. Levels of experience are crucial determinants of the number of activities that users typically undertake using ICT. ‘Serious’ uses increase with experience. A ‘playful’, leisure-oriented practice may be the most productive entry point to their empowerment, that is, if it is complemented by a sustained ‘formative’ strategy.

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