Fig. 29 Peace without a voice is not peace, it is fear

7. Producing Visibility

After examining video production as it unfolds ›in the streets‹ in the previous chapter, this chapter shifts focus to the digital sphere – specifically, social media platforms as key networks for distributing online video content and their role as ›new‹ gatekeepers. It analyzes how visibility is produced through the dissemination strategies employed by bottom-up video makers in Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town, highlighting the tactics and strategies at play.[1]

The first section investigates what I term *topographies of visibility*, tracing the peaks and troughs that define the »attention economy« of online video distribution.[2] It reviews key factors that influence a video's visibility – such as duration, audio-visual quality, editing, and distribution channels. The second section examines the shift in gatekeeping power from local and national mass media to global social media corporations. While this transition has opened new avenues for video dissemination, it has also introduced new rules, regulations, and opaque control mechanisms. By analyzing cases of videos disabled by social media platforms, the chapter shows how video activists in Rio de Janeiro have grown increasingly disillusioned with corporate platforms. These experiences prompted efforts to establish autonomous websites, yet most attempts to bypass the social media oligopsony[3] have faltered due to limited

1 Journalist videos are discussed to a lesser extent, given the limitations of their emancipatory potential for bottom-up video making as discussed in the prior chapter.

2 Webster, *The Marketplace of Attention: How Audiences Take Shape in a Digital Age*.

3 Mejias, *Off the Network*, 33.

economic resources and the overwhelming influence of platforms like Facebook and YouTube.[4]

The third section looks at the tactics and strategies developed to distribute content and circumvent censorship by corporate social media. While these platforms have significantly expanded opportunities for audiovisual dissemination, they have also imposed a logic of commodification. Grassroots efforts to resist this commodification and promote *autogestion* in audiovisual representation – by producing and freely distributing videos as commons – have encountered substantial structural barriers. In the chapter's conclusion, the typology of journalist, witness, and activist videos is revisited to assess how new gatekeepers and their opaque mechanisms re-shape bottom-up video production. Without a doubt, the landscape for visualizing urban struggles has changed dramatically over the past decade, with for-profit social media emerging as dominant and powerful actors in this field.

7.1 Producing Visibility: Factors and Forms

Formative Factors Shaping the Topographies of Visibility

Several factors influence the number of viewers an online video attracts, including its upload date, duration, audio-visual and editing quality, distribution channel, content, and contextual relevance. While a systematic, quantitative evaluation of the extent to which each of these elements contributes to a video's visibility lies beyond the scope of this research, qualitative observations nonetheless support the formulation of preliminary hypotheses.

Whereas the immediate dissemination of a video increases its visibility, delayed uploads tend to have a markedly negative impact on viewership. Media activists in Rio de Janeiro repeatedly emphasized the urgency of sharing their material as quickly as possible. Immediacy is a defining characteristic of the fast-paced digital communication landscape.

A second general principle influencing viewership relates to video duration: the shorter the video, the greater its potential to attract a large audience. Another practical reason for to »[k]eep it short« is more surprising: the costs to stream lengthy videos.[5] In Cape Town, this constraint by high cost of mobile data mattered practically in the creation of visibility.[6]

4 Rohmann et al., »The Brave Blue World: Facebook Flow and Facebook Addiction Disorder (FAD)«.

5 Int. 27, Videographers, Cape Town, 9 August 2016

6 Strikingly, the most-viewed videos from my Cape Town sample are rarely longer than two minutes, with the exception of the documentary film *Luister and #Outsourced (*Vid. 28, Contraband, Luister; Vid. 44, RMF, #Outsourced)

Audio-visual and editing quality also play a role in enhancing a video's visibility, though their importance varies depending on the video type. While witness videos often feature low production quality – contributing to their perceived authenticity – activist videos longer than two minutes benefit significantly from high-quality visuals and editing.[7] As the examples in this chapter demonstrate, poor audio-visual quality or editing can substantially reduce the likelihood of such videos gaining widespread attention.

Another key aspect are the distribution channel, which significantly influences a video's reach. Video activist collectives in Rio or the Facebook page of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, for instance, could rely on an established audience that regularly engaged with their content. In contrast, videos uploaded by individual users often receive far less attention.

Beyond distribution, content and context are among the most critical variables shaping visibility. A notable trend is that videos depicting violence tend to attract the most viewers, whereas footage of peaceful protests rarely garners comparable attention.

In sum, numerous factors – each necessary but not sufficient on its own – contribute to the fluctuations in video visibility. The following examples from Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro illustrate how visibility emerges from the interplay of production choices, distribution networks, and the socio-political context of protest events. These include videos of the 2016 Women's March and service delivery protests in Cape Town, student demonstrations in Rio, and three videos recording the exact same incidence of a police threat during the 2014 World Cup. To trace the topographies of visibility, I first turn to Cape Town before looking to Rio de Janeiro.

Cape Town: The Asymmetries in Attracting Attention

»We want people to take note.«[8]

The reception of videos of protest marches in Cape Town clearly depends on the urban movement and the power of their communication channel established on social media as the following comparison illustrates. None of the first set of videos received more than one hundred views on YouTube; as such, these videos represent the floor of visibility in my sample of videos from Cape Town.[9] This contrast starkly with Stuart Buchanan's

7 The two-minute boundary is based on the observations from my sample. Short videos that are less than two minutes in lengths could be interpreted as the pendant to 140-character messages on Twitter – short and pointed communications to keep the audience attention.

8 Int. 26, NGO Activist, Cape Town, 9 August 2016.

9 For a detailed discussion of sampling techniques for videos, see Chapter Three on methodology.

video »Looting after Cape Town protest« and the thousands of views recorded for videos posted on the UCT:RhodesMustFall Facebook page.

A video[10] that presents impressions from the annual Women's March in Cape Town held on 9 August 2016.[11] It was uploaded to the Terrestrial One YouTube channel almost fifty days later on 27 September 2016. The edited video includes interviews with participants of the protest march as well as an intro and outro featuring the channel's logo: »Earth Huub. Reinventing the Wheel«.[12] Accompanied by the sort of music that is commonly used in commercials, the video's production is of rather high audio-visual and editing quality and with its duration of 2:23 minutes well-suited to catch attention. However, the video has remained almost unwatched as it has received no more than nine views since being posted on 27 September 2016.[13] During the interview with the two videographers, recording the video described, both of them expressed their unanimous frustration with the lack of media attention to peaceful protest actions.

During an interview at the Women's March, two videographers voiced their frustration about the lack of media attention to peaceful protest actions. As one explained, »[b]ecause [corporate] media won't share this peace. They say it is a boring topic. So when we do call media, it is very few times that they actually want to cover our story.« [14] This perception – that peaceful protests and topics such as women's rights rarely receive coverage unless they involve spectacular forms of resistance[15] – appears to be confirmed by two further examples.

10 Vid. 31, Fire Jungle, Women's Day

11 In South Africa, National Women's Day is a public holiday that is celebrated annually on 9 August. It deviates from International Women's Day, which is celebrated every year on 8 March, as it commemorates the Women's March that took place in Pretoria on 9 August 1956, when women took to the streets to protest the apartheid regime's introduction of the so-called pass laws (Cape Town Magazine, »Women's Day In SA and Why We Celebrate Differently From The Rest of The World«).

12 The name of the YouTube account was changed in 2018 from »Earth Huub« to »Fire Jungle« for reasons unknown.

13 At least three to four of these views must have been counted by me returning to the video on YouTube repeatedly. This relative effect of my research on view counts is small for most videos as it my clicks make up only a small share of the views, except videos that have such a low view count like this example.

14 The NGO representatives for International Women's Peace Group were equally filming during the demonstration on Woman's Day on 9 August 2016 but I was not able to find their own video (Int. 26, NGO Activist, Cape Town, 9 August 2016).

15 Protests tactics that transgress supposed socio-cultural boundaries – for example the naked protests by Ukrainian and French FEMEN activists – are effective in attracting attention. In Cape Town, the RMF Trans Collective that interrupted the opening of the exhibition ›Echoing Voices from Within‹

Fig. 30 Women's Day

The video *»service delivery protest cape town«* by Galaga – discussed in the previous chapter as a witness video – received only 13 views on YouTube.[16] It was posted on a personal channel that also features low-traffic videos of children, cats, and video games. Similarly, Kenny Nagel's witness video of another peaceful service delivery protest at Cape Town's Civic Center attracted little attention, with just 91 views.[17]

However, some witness videos do achieve high visibility on YouTube. Stuart Buchanan's video, for instance, recorded an impressive 38,115 views.[18] It captures a dramatic scene of a small group of people »looting,«[19] as the video describes it, and received more views than comparable footage from SABC and News24 combined.

How can the relatively high view counts of the RhodesMustFall (RMF) videos be explained, given their minimal editing and low audio-visual quality? Despite these limitations, the RMF Facebook page consistently attracted the highest engagement in my Cape Town sample, with videos from the 21 October 2015 protest and the #Shackville

on 9 March 2016 by blocking it with their exposed bodies covered in red paint. For an account of events and the manifesto by the Trans Collective see: The Journalist, »Disrupting the Silencing of Voices.«

16 Vid. 29, Galaga, service delivery protest

17 Vid. 30, Nagel, Service delivery protest

18 Video15, Buchanan, Looting after Cape Town protest

19 The videos about violence in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro – discussed in the next chapter – have all received more several thousands and in some case ten thousand of views (see videography).

protest in early 2016 reaching thousands[20] – and in some cases tens of thousands[21] – of views.

These examples highlight the importance of distribution channels. The RMF student movement built a strong network on Facebook, where their videos consistently reached large audiences, while their YouTube channel remained largely inactive. Free internet access on campus facilitated both uploading and viewing, and the movement benefited from a built-in audience and near-guaranteed media attention – »UCT will always be covered,« as one student activist put it.[22] In contrast, organizers of the Civic Centre service delivery protest and the 2016 Women's March struggled to build such networks.[23]

Filming Protests in Rio de Janeiro: Individual and Organized Video Making

The following examples from Rio de Janeiro, where video activism is more active and diverse, offer a nuanced view of the factors shaping visibility. Unlike in Cape Town, protest coverage in Rio does not rely on urban movements organizing documentation. Instead, a vibrant bottom-up video production scene ensures that most demonstrations are filmed by both collectives and individuals. Comparing videos of the same protest event by independent videographer Thiago Oliveira and the collective AND highlights two key factors in video production: editing and, more importantly, distribution channels.

The day after a student protest on 28 March 2014 in central Rio, independent videographer Thiago Oliveira uploaded two videos to YouTube.[24] The first shows students in white school uniforms marching peacefully near the ALERJ building, chanting and drumming.[25] The second, filmed shortly afterward, captures a shift in atmosphere as *Polícia Militar* officers enter the crowd, search bags, and arrest a Black teenager. The situation escalates, and a second student is pushed to the ground,

20 Vid. 22, RMF, Protests continue; Vid. 23, RMF, We are holding hostage; Vid. 24, RMF, We have shut university down; Vid. 25, RMF, Azania will rise; Vid. 26, RMF, [untitled]; Vid. 27, RMF, Urgently plenary

21 Vid. 32, RMF, we will protect; Vid. 33, RMF, UCT right now; Vid. 34, RMF, as we demonstrate;

22 Int. 19, RMF Activist, Cape Town, 27 July 2016.

23 Certainly, the comparison between videos posted on Facebook and YouTube is not without its own problems. For example, that Facebook counts a video as viewed after it has been automatically played for two seconds, whereas YouTube videos counts a view only after five seconds.

24 Thiago Oliveira, »YouTube Channel«.

25 Vid. 35, Oliveira, manifestação pacífica

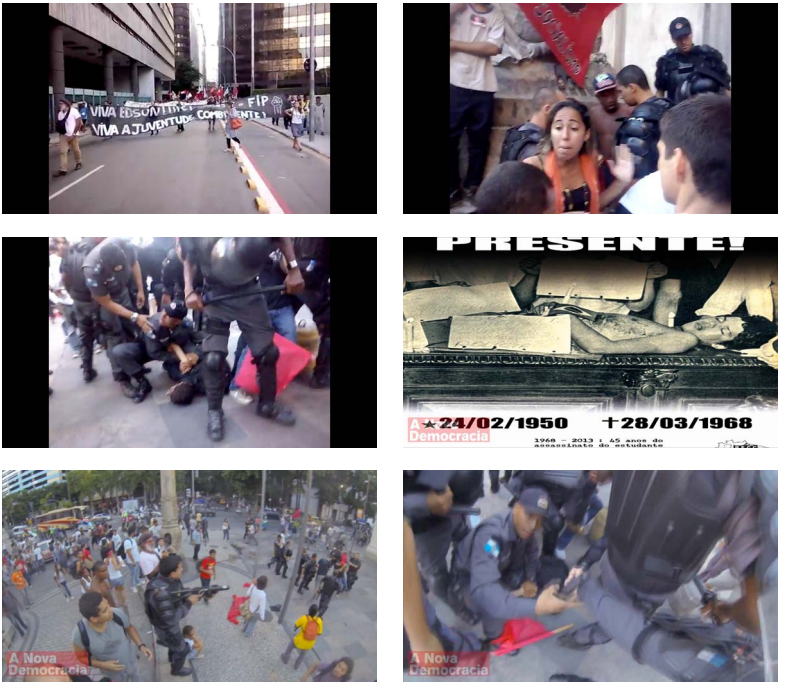

Fig. 31 Day of the Students

screaming, »You are killing me!«[26] Both videos are unedited, of low audio-visual quality, and presented without credits. Their descriptive titles – »peaceful demonstration on 28 March at the Central Station«[27] and »cowardly and arbitrary arrest of STUDENTS by the *Polícia Militar*«[28] – signal their content. Despite their relevance and emotional intensity, the videos received only 121 and 158 views, respectively.

A video of the same protest, published by *Jornal A Nova Democracia* (AND), received over 4,600 views – more than thirty times the views of Oliveira's uploads.[29] Before showing the 2014 footage, the video opens with a one-minute narrated segment explaining the historical significance of the protest date. On 28 March 1968, student Edson Luís

26 Vid. 36, Oliveira, covardia e prisões arbitrarias

27 »manifestação pacífica no dia 28 de março na Central do Brasil« Vid. 35, Oliveira, manifestação pacífica

28 »covardia e prisões arbitrarias da PM com os ESTUDANTES na manifestação do dia 28 de março de 2014« Vid. 36, Oliveira, covardia e prisões arbitrarias

29 In 2014, this was a significant number of views. Vid. 37, AND, Dia do Estudante Combativo

de Lima Soto was killed by the *Polícia Militar* at the Calabouço restaurant in Rio. Fearing the regime would conceal the body, fellow students carried it to the steps of the ALERJ, the same location as the 2014 protest. The AND video uses archival photographs and narration by Patrick Granja to connect past and present, before transitioning to edited footage that closely resembles Oliveira's second video.

A comparison of the two videos highlights the importance of audio-visual quality and presentation. Oliveira's footage, recorded with a lower-resolution camera and shaky handling, includes disorienting shots and lacks editing, which makes it harder to follow. In contrast, the AND video features steady camerawork, higher visual quality, and a well-edited narrative. It also includes contextual information in the video description, enhancing its clarity and appeal to viewers.[30]

A second reason – discussed earlier – for the AND video's broader reach lies in its distribution. While Thiago Oliveira's channel[31] had limited visibility and a fragmented audience, *Jornal A Nova Democracia* is a well-established platform for activist media in Rio, with a large subscriber base and millions of views. Its credibility and reach ensured that the video gained significantly more traction than Oliveira's uploads.

The second factor determining the videos' visibility are their respective distribution channels. It presents videos on a variety of topics ranging from computer tricks and private hikes to videos of airplanes landing at Rio de Janeiro-Santos Dumont Airport. While Oliveira is not a regular creator of activist videos depicting protests, *Jornal A Nova Democracia* is a key player in bottom-up communication on protests and police violence in Rio.[32]

30 While a detailed description is typical for AND's videos, Oliveira's second video supplies only a short description: »...the PM [military police] dropped a bomb, blamed the demonstrators [for the escalation] and began to shoot rubber bullets and arbitrarily arrest the STUDENTS...« »...a PM soltou uma bomba e pôs a culpa nos manifestantes e começou a dar tiros de borracha e prender arbitrariamente os ESTUDANTES... « Vid. 36, Oliveira, covardia e prisões arbitrarias

31 As of 15 May 2020, Thiago Oliveira's YouTube channel had attained a total of 97,000 views and attracted 248 subscribers. Thiago Oliveira, »YouTube Channel.«

32 With 56,700 subscribers and 17.9 million total views, the AND YouTube channel is certainly among the most viewed YouTube channels for counter-hegemonic information and critical debate in Rio de Janeiro. *Jornal A Nova Democracia*, »YouTube Channel«.

Three Videos, One Scene: Creating Viral Videos

On 15 June 2014, during the first World Cup match at Rio's Maracanã Stadium, a protest unfolded nearby and was captured in three videos by different collectives. Although all three depict the same dramatic scene[33] – a plainclothes police officer pulling a gun and hijacking a car – their visibility varied widely. The CMI video received just 172 views,[34] the AND video 78,686,[35] and the MIC/Mariachi video 1.35 million.[36] This stark contrast offers valuable insights and allows to discuss the most popular video of all videos in my sample.

The CMI video opens with over four minutes of loosely edited footage showing clashes between protesters and police, including tear gas and stun grenades. Only at 4:43 minutes does the central scene appear: a plainclothes officer, identified by a blue circle and caption, pulls a gun and fires four shots. The cameraperson, positioned at a distance, ducks behind a car and captures the officer entering a vehicle and firing again before driving off. The video then returns to general protest footage. Its long runtime, lack of narrative structure, and delayed focus on the key moment likely contributed to its low visibility – just 172 views.

The CMI video opens with over four minutes of uncut footage showing protesters clashing with police, who respond with stun grenades and tear gas. At 4:43, a man appears between two lines of cars. A blue circle and caption identify him as an undercover officer: »Armed undercover policeman threatens protesters and fires four shots with a lethal weapon.« [37]

As the police officer in plain clothes fires the first shot, the CMI cameraperson ducks behind a car, about ten meters away. From there, the video captures activists confronting the officer. The camera briefly pans away, and when it returns, the officer has moved forward.[38] Still images are then inserted: one of him holding a gun, a portrait, and a bullet casing in someone's palm.

The officer enters a car and fires three more shots into the air before driving off. The video then returns to the clashes, with rapid pans and

33 The scene as filmed by MIC/Mariachi, was reproduced in numerous documentaries and videos. For example: Vid. 05, Mariano, Desde Junho 3; Vid. 70, MIC, Cidade Marvilhosa

34 Vid. 38, CMI, Copa dos Protestos

35 Vid. 39, AND, Policiais disparam tiros

36 Vid. 40, MIC, Civil saca arma de fogo

37 »Policial à paisana armado ameaça manifestantes e efetua quatro disparos de arma letal« Vid. 38, CMI, Copa dos Protestos 4:43

38 The manner in which the camera pans backwards must be attributed to a camera being affixed to the cameraperson's helmet. The way in which he/she looks towards the other side of the street is presumably to check for any further danger.

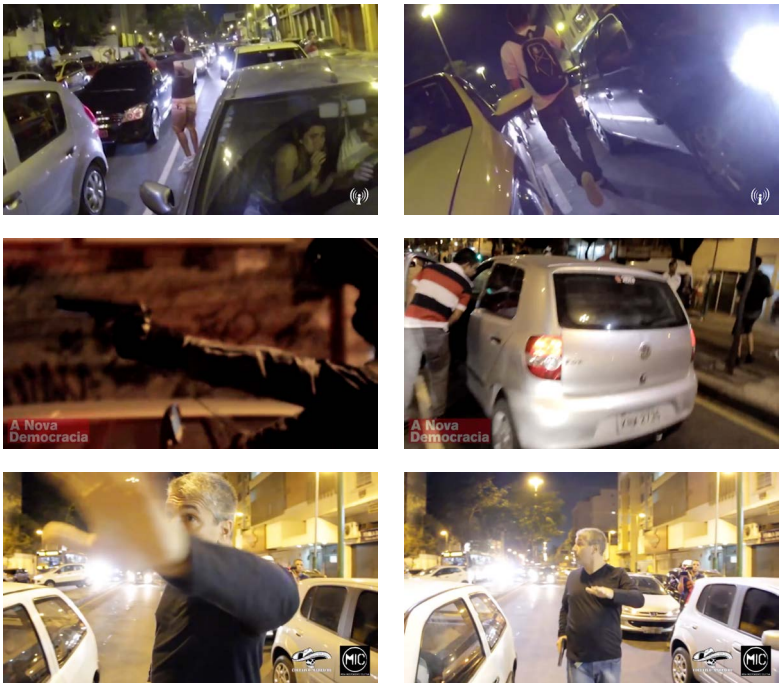

Fig. 32 Armed Officer in Plainclothes

long, shaky shots, and a lack of a narrative arc makes it harder to follow – a style seen in other CMI videos.[39] Despite being posted just two days after the event, the video received only 172 views, failing to gain traction on social media.

The AND video as second recording presents two key scenes. First, a uniformed police officer on a motorcycle is shown firing his pistol toward a crowd of protesters.[40] After a cut, the video shifts to the plainclothes officer standing among parked cars. In this version, the cameraman can be heard demanding to see the officer's ID. Another cut follows, revealing the getaway car from the side, with a clear shot of its license plate which offers evidence for potential journalistic or criminal prosecution.

39 Two other examples of CMI videos, both from April 2015, are a 17-minute video documenting the police's eviction of residents from the CEDAE residential building in Flamengo and a 21-minute video about the resistance at Aldeia Maracãna, both of which have received less than 200 views. Vid. 41, CMI, Mobilização Internacional Indígena; Vid. 42, CMI, Mobilização Internacional Indígena

40 A scene that does not appear in the two other videos.

Unlike the CMI video,[41] the AND video uses its description section to contextualize the protest, highlighting earlier clashes and further instances of police violence.

> »On Avenida 28 de Setembro, a policeman from the Tropa de Choque approached a group of demonstrators on a motorcycle, pulled out his gun and fired in their direction, without any fear of the camera. Moments later, a protester approached our team saying that he had been hit in the ankle by the shrapnel. Soon thereafter, an undercover policeman pulled out his gun and threatened a group of protesters. Then he got out in a car driven by another man, who aimed the vehicle at the crowd, while [the policeman was] firing shots from his gun.«[42]

The MIC video, the most-viewed of the three, focuses exclusively on the plainclothes police officer. It opens with a stark caption: »[Police officer dressed as] Civilian pulls out a gun, threatens journalists and discharges [his weapon] against protesters.«[43] The footage shows the MIC cameraman approaching the AND filmmaker, who is arguing with the officer. As in the Maré rebellion video (see Chapter Six), the AND and MIC teams stay close for mutual protection.

The officer is seen holding a pistol, while a man in a striped shirt approaches and appears to receive instructions. The officer then pushes the MIC videographer and threatens them with his gun before entering a car, where the striped-shirt man has taken the driver's seat.[44] As the car drives off – crossing a red light – the officer fires three shots into the air. The MIC cameraman runs after the vehicle, capturing shaky footage that heightens the sense of urgency. During this sequence, the audio fades into silence. Then, after a few seconds, a black screen is enlightened by the logos of the MIC and Mariachi.

While the audio-visual quality of the three videos is comparable, the camerapersons' positions differ significantly. In the CMI video, the videographer keeps a safe distance, ducking behind a car as shots are fired. The AND videographer confronts the officer directly, demanding identification and filming the getaway car. The MIC activist moves in even closer, capturing the pistol at close range while shouting at the officer. These differing angles are more than stylistic choices – if one of the videographers had been harmed, the multiple perspectives could serve as crucial evidence, as often demonstrated by investigative groups like Forensic Architecture.

41 The CMI video's YouTube description proclaims with a few lines in Portuguese and English that the »Cup of Protests« has started, but it does mention the incident with the civil police officer. Vid. 38, CMI, Copa dos Protestos

42 Vid. 39, AND, Policiais disparam tiros

43 Vid. 40, MIC, Civil saca arma de fogo

44 »sair daqui!« Vid. 40, MIC, Civil saca arma de fogo, 1:02

The differing levels of attention each video received offer valuable insight into how visibility is produced within digital networks. MIC's video – released immediately, focused on a single dramatic incident, and featuring unedited, close-up footage of the officer's pistol – garnered by far the most views. Its raw authenticity, the danger of filming in real time, and the activists' success in exposing and confronting armed police violence made it especially compelling. The video's same-night release on YouTube helped it go viral. Remarkably, it accounted for over half of the 1.95 million total views on MIC's channel, which hosted 122 other videos[45] – illustrating the »winner takes all« logic of social media. Ultimately, the video's affective immediacy produced one of the most significant peaks in visibility in the history of Brazilian video activism.[46]

7.2 Gatekeepers in Video Distribution

This section shifts focus from the factors determining a video's visibility to the infrastructural and institutional forces that govern its circulation. In particular, it examines how for-profit social media platforms have emerged as powerful new gatekeepers, shaping not only what becomes visible but also how the architecture of visibility itself.

Since 2004,[47] social media corporations have increasingly challenged the dominance of the ›old‹ gatekeepers of mass media across the globe, including in Brazil and South Africa. What Dal Yong Jin terms »platform imperialism« describes a situation in which the »hegemonic power of American-based platforms« such as Google, Facebook, iPhone and Android – and subsidiary services like Facebook-owned WhatsApp and

45 These numbers refer to an analysis of the MIC YouTube channel on 13 January 2020.

46 It is important to keep in mind here that video activism is still a niche movement when its viewing figures are compared to those attained by popular entertainment and sports videos on social media platforms such as YouTube. For example, the official highlights of the World Cup match between Argentina and Bosnia-Herzegovina that took place in Rio's Maracanã Stadium on the day of the protest had received more than two million views. That means despite the video of the match only being posted three years after the event, it has attained more visibility than the most viewed video by the MIC collective. Vid. 43, FIFA TV, Argentina vs. Bosnia; Vid. 40, MIC, Civil saca arma de fogo

47 Facebook went online in February 2004, YouTube in February 2005, and Twitter in July 2006. This period, which followed the dot-com crash in 2001, was characterized by a remodeling of the internet into what became known as Web 2.0, a less static and more participatory form of online communication. For a definition and critique of Web 2.0, see: Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*.

Instagram and Google's YouTube – have come to dominate online communication by occupying the strategically powerful role of »digital intermediaries« for a variety of functions and services.[48] Since »intellectual property and commercial values are embedded in platforms«,[49] the hegemonic position that these US-based corporate social media giants have secured for themselves in audio-visual distribution has a direct effect on video activist practices.[50] As Yong Jin argues, intellectual property rights are »the most significant form of capital accumulation in the digital age«.[51]

Organized video activist collectives in Rio de Janeiro[52] have consistently criticized the for-profit logic of social media and expressed skepticism toward dominant U.S.-based platforms. This section examines how platforms like YouTube and Facebook have censored activist content through mechanisms such as copyright enforcement and politically motivated takedowns. One video critical of Globo was removed under copyright claims, while another by Rafucko was similarly taken down after pressure from the broadcaster. The disabling of the Mariachi Facebook page shortly before the 2016 Olympics further suggests possible collaboration between corporate platforms and the state. In response to these experiences, activists began developing their own websites to regain control over distribution.

The Intertwining Histories of the Corporate Media and Political Power in Brazil: »Brizola x Globo«

The video »Brizola x Globo« recounts the long-standing conflict between Brazilian politician Leonel de Moura Brizola (1922–2004) and the

48 Yon Jin, »The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era«, 145.

49 Yon Jin, »The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era«, 153.

50 In the »Top 100 Sites on the Web« ranking referenced by Yong Jin, Google, Facebook and YouTube occupy the top three positions (Yon Jin, 155–157). In 2020, the »Top 500 Sites on the Web« ranking released by Alexa – the latest version of the ranking to which Yon Jin referred – is still dominated by Google and YouTube but now includes an increasing number of Chinese competitors (Alexa, »The Top 500 Sites on the Web«).

51 Yon Jin, »The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era«, 145.

52 Empirical cases of Cape Town are not discussed in this section, because the collected data offers an insufficient basis to draw analytical conclusions. In Cape Town, neither concerted efforts to question the hegemony of corporate social media nor experiences of having their online content disabled was brought to my attention in interviews with activists.

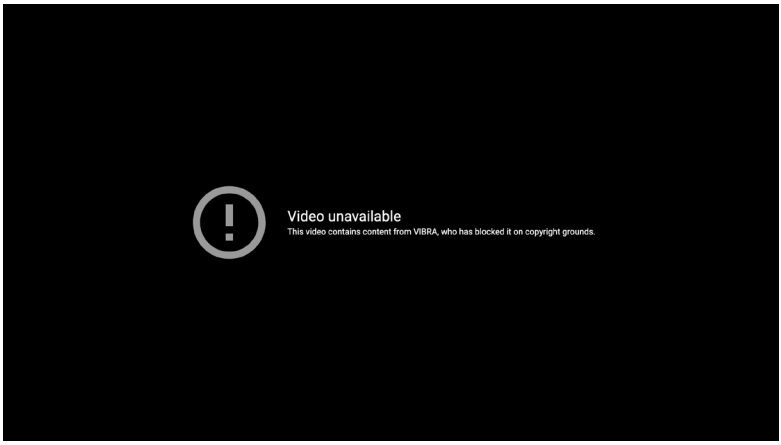

Fig. 33 Video not Available

media conglomerate Rede Globo. Produced by the MIC collective, the video highlights the continuity of Globo's media practices from the dictatorship era into the democratic period. It illustrates how traditional mass media gatekeepers like Globo have historically used their broadcasting power to shape political outcomes. At the same time, it shows how newer gatekeepers – such as YouTube and Facebook – have become entangled in these power struggles by siding with Globo against bottom-up video activism. Both platforms ultimately removed the video after a request by Globo. I first describe the video's content and narrative before turning to the circumstances of its deletion.

»There must be some kind of way outta here, said the joker to the thief,« sings Jimi Hendrix over the opening of the video, as white text on a black background introduces the intertwined histories of Brazil's military dictatorship and Rede Globo.[53] A photographic collage follows, showing protesting youths, mounted police, officers attacking students, the front page of Globo's newspaper after the 1964 dissolution of the National Congress, scenes of torture, and the murdered journalist Vladimir

53 The Globo television network was founded in 1965, one year after the military had seized control of the Brazilian state with external support from the USA. Thereafter, Globo came to function as a crucial mouthpiece for the military dictatorship. As the »usurpers« found television to be one of their strongest »arms«, the ruling generals struck a partnership with Roberto Marinho, the owner of the Globo Group from 1925 to 2003, and the US-based Time-Life Corporation to provide the technology to expand the country's television network in the late 1960s. This ultimately allowed Marinho to establish a privileged position as the head of what remains the biggest media conglomerate in Brazil.

Herzog.[54] The next two minutes feature an interview with Brizola, in which he accuses Globo of manipulating public opinion and operating as a cartel.[55] After serving as governor of Rio Grande do Sul until 1963, Brizola became a prominent opponent of the military regime. He resisted the 1964 coup and denounced the repression that followed – repression supported internally by Globo and externally by the United States. These political alignments repeatedly brought Brizola into conflict with Globo, which had become a powerful media ally of the dictatorship.

To illustrate Globo's history of political intervention, the video shifts to Brazil's first televised presidential debate in 1989. Roberto Marinho, a close ally of Fernando Collor,[56] used the Globo network to »smear Lula's candidacy, accusing him and his party of being communists working for the Soviet Union.«[57] The debate between Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Fernando Collor de Mello marked Brazil's first democratic election after the end of the dictatorship.[58] Globo's edited broadcast of the debate portrayed the conservative Collor in a significantly more favorable light than the left-wing Lula.[59] As Wilkin argues, faced with »the threat of a newly revived left in Brazil,« Globo's intervention marked the moment it »moved to the position of gatekeeper in Brazilian politics.«[60]

As Jimi Hendrix's guitar riffs return, white text on a black background introduces the 1982 Proconsult scandal. Brizola, having reentered politics, won the 1982 vote for governor in Rio de Janeiro – the state's first free election since 1964.[61] His victory came despite efforts by Proconsult,

54 Vladimir Herzog was a public intellectual who was active in the resistance to the military junta before being tortured to death in 1975.

55 Vid. 45, MIC, Brizola X Globo 1:07 to 3:04

56 Globo's staged edited footage of the 1989 presidential debate has been the subject of major criticism. Channel 4's 1993 documentary film *Beyond Citizen Kane*, which uncovered the background to this story, was suppressed from public broadcast in Brazil for over two decades (Hartog, *Beyond Citizen Kane*).

57 Wilkin, »Global Communication and Political Culture in the Semi-Periphery: The Rise of the Globo Corporation«, 105. See also: Lima, »Brazilian Television in the 1989 Presidential Election: Constructing a President.«

58 Leslie Bethell presents an overview of the history of elections in Brazil, arguing that »the influence of the media, especially television« has mattered more for electoral success than the candidates themselves and the parties which they represent. Bethell, »Politics in Brazil: From Elections Without Democracy to Democracy Without Citizenship,« 23.

59 Miguel, »A Eleição Visível: A ede Globo Descobre a Política Em 2002«, 290.

60 Wilkin, »Global Communication and Political Culture in the Semi-Periphery: The Rise of the Globo Corporation,« 105.

61 As governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro from 1983 to 1989, Brizola invested in the building of public schools in favela areas. He also brought

Fig. 34 Brizola X Globo

the company responsible for vote counting, to manipulate the outcome.[62] In a talk show clip featured in the MIC video, Brizola holds up a copy of the Globo-owned newspaper and declares: »Globo has been a pillar of the dictatorship […] They have helped to establish the dictatorship and maintain it.«[63]

The MIC video continues in black and white, jumping forward to the 2013 protests. A crowd of activists marches toward Globo's headquarters in São Paulo. A montage from the *Jornadas de Junho* shows police forcing a man to the ground by striking his face, indiscriminately spraying bystanders with pepper spray, beating protesters with batons, and a

about the transfer of land rights to favela residents as well as an end to forced evictions in favelas. In effect, Brizola attempted to translate Darci Ribeiro's slogan that »shanty towns are not part of the problem, but part of the solution« into concrete policies (Riberio, *O Povo Brasileiro: A Formação e o Sentido Do Brasil*).

62 Globo's *Jornal da Tarde* reported live results from districts where Brizola had performed poorly, aiming to discourage his supporters from voting. These results had been selectively passed on by Proconsult to Globo.

63 Vid. 45, MIC, Brizola X Globo 3:28

Globo-owned newspaper front page labeling individuals as provocateurs and blaming them for the violence. The protest footage echoes scenes from demonstrations against the military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. Subtitles highlight Globo's role in downplaying police violence – both past and present – and in delegitimizing the *Jornadas de Junho* movement. The video closes with Brizola's voice, urging Brazilians to form their own autonomous views about Globo and its ties to the country's political and economic elites.

The video was published on YouTube on 9 September 2015 but was quickly removed due to copyright complaints.[64] After complaint it was reinstated and has received only 222 additional views since then, allowing algorithms to push it down in searches due to a lack of popularity, which is a key factor in determining search results.

The video effectively demonstrates how media power is deeply intertwined with political and economic power. Globo, with its long-standing hostility toward urban movements and its role as a »gatekeeper« to power, continues to wield significant influence over Brazilian politics. While the ›old‹ gatekeepers like Globo operated nationally and were overtly invested in shaping local, regional, and national politics – as the MIC video illustrates – the ›new‹ gatekeepers of corporate social media, based in Silicon Valley, regulate public communication on a global scale. Although they may have less direct interest in local political affairs, their operations are driven by a strong profit motive. Today, Globo and other traditional media actors must appeal to these new gatekeepers – such as YouTube – to suppress criticism, often by invoking the economic logic of copyright infringement, as both the current and following examples show.

64 When I accessed it from my computer in Switzerland in 2016, YouTube displayed the following message on 12 March: »This video contains content from SME, who has blocked it in your country on copyright grounds. Sorry about that.« Today, YouTube states that the video is unavailable because it »contains contents from TV Bandeirantes (Brazil).« The last time that I was able to access this video was on 9 September 2015, the same day on which it was uploaded. According to one of the creators of the video, it was deleted within 24 hours. This, he argued, may indicate that there is close co-operation between Rede Globo and YouTube (Int. 4, Video Activist, Rio de Janeiro, 14 October 2015).

»[Mirrored Copy] [Original Censored] William Bonner is being reviewed in a live broadcast«[65]

»Professional journalism always looks for the essence and what is at the heart of what is happening,« declares renowned Globo newsreader William Bonner in a commentary broadcast on *Jornal Nacional* on 10 February 2014.[66] Reflecting on the death of cameraman Santiago Andrade during a protest, Bonner's editorial is met with a sharp response in a parody video by Rafucko, who critiques what he sees as the »hypocrisy« of Bonner's remarks.[67] Mimicking Bonner's co-presenter Patrícia Poeta, Rafucko delivers a live commentary from in front of a blue screen set up in his living room, attempting to insert himself into the *Jornal Nacional* newsroom and disrupt Globo's narrative.

The mockery video by popular video artists Rafucko, continues with Bonner's assertions that democracy depends on professional, impartial, and informative journalism. Rafucko in his role as poeta replies: »It might be for this reason that Rede Globo is not very informative. Because you guys love dictatorship.«[68] When Bonner claims that Globo offers »[p]rofessional journalism [that] is going to be there without taking a position for any side,«[69] Rafucko as Poeta, reminds him that Globo is funded by BRADESCO.[70] Toward the end of the video, Rafucko mocks Bonner's distinction between »peaceful« and »violent« protests – a central theme of the editorial – by swinging a pendulum from left to right and repeating, »Minorities of vandals, minorities of vandals, minorities of vandals,« in an attempt to hypnotize the audience. The video concludes with hyperlinks to four related videos exploring Globo's history, two of which appear to be disabled.[71]

65 This refers to the title of a repost of Rafucko's video by Eli Vieira: *[Espelho] [Original Censurado] William Bonner é Corrigido Ao Vivo [via @Rafucko]*. The bracketed terms »Espelho« and »Orignial Censurado« indicate that this is a »mirror« of Rafucko's video due to the »original [having been] censored«. Vid. 46, Vieria (Rafucko), [Espelho] [Original censurado]

66 For a detailed discussion on the death of Santiago Andrade and its consequences for (video-)activism in Brazil, see Chapter Eight.

67 Int. 14, Video Activist, Rio de Janeiro, 8 December 2015.

68 »[D]eve ser por isso que a rede Globo não informa tão bem, porque a gente adora a ditatura.« Vid. 46, Vieria (Rafucko), [Espelho] [Original censurado] 0:52.

69 »E jornalismo professional vai estar lá sem tomar posição de lado nenhum« Vid. 46, Vieria (Rafucko), [Espelho] [Original censurado]

70 BRADESCO is one of the third biggest bank operating in Brazil and has been linked with corruption and tax evasion allegations as part of the »Operation Zealot« investigations.

71 The links to the video »A prisão de Arthur Couto: o que realmente aconteceu« does not function without further explanation than »video not

Fig. 35 Rafucko and William Bonner

Rafucko's parody was also removed from YouTube due to copyright claims, although mirrored versions were quickly reposted by numerous users.[72] In one copy uploaded to YouTube and Vimeo, the video description includes a statement from Rafucko responding to apparent censorship:

> »Last week we saw the channel [Globo] dedicating extensive reports and commentaries to the topic of freedom of expression. Since the beginning of the demonstrations, Rede Globo has systematically used images from independent media collectives without giving credit or asking for prior authorization. However, my video satirizing Jornal Nacional was taken off air less than 12 hours after its publication.«[73]

Eli Vieira, who uploaded one of the mirrored versions, voiced strong opposition to the use of copyright as a tool for censorship: »I play this

available«, whereas the account to the linked video »Rede Globo mente sobre protesto« has been deleted. The other two video links function. One goes to a documentary from 1975 while the fourth link directs to the montaged video »Vandalismo, Vandalsimo, Vandalismo«. See videography: Vid. 47, A prisão de Arthur Couto; Vid. 48, Rede Globo mente; Vid. 49, Gomes, Exaltação e propaganda; Vid. 11, Marcos, Vandalismo

72 Vid. 46, Vieria (Rafucko), [Espelho] [Original censurado]

73 »Na última semana vimos a emissora dedicar extensas reportagens e editorias para versar sobre a liberdade de expressão. Desde o início das manifestações, a Rede Globo utiliza sistematicamente imagens de coletivos de mídia independente sem dar créditos ou pedir prévia autorização. Entretanto, meu vídeo satirizando o Jornal Nacional foi retirado do ar menos de 12h após sua publicação.« Monalisa Moreira in Vid. 46, Vieria (Rafucko), [Espelho] [Original censurado]

video in solidarity with Rafucko. To use copyright to censor him is ridiculous, as his video fits ›fair use‹.«[74] In my interview with Rafucko, he argued that Globo is highly sensitive to criticism and uses »whatever reason it finds« to request the removal of videos from YouTube.[75] This second example of censorship reinforces the pattern: traditional gatekeepers like Globo continue to suppress criticism, while new gatekeepers such as YouTube and Facebook appear to support these efforts by swiftly invoking copyright claims to remove critical content. Yet, as Rafucko's case illustrates, user communities have developed ways to resist such censorship – most notably by reposting mirrored versions of videos that have been taken down.

Facebook's removal of Mariachi in the run-up to the Olympic Games

When I asked Rafucko about the differences between YouTube and Facebook as major gatekeepers of video content, he responded that censorship is more common on Facebook. As a result, he prefers to upload his videos to YouTube.[76] A video activist and documentary filmmaker echoed this view, noting that YouTube is not only less associated with censorship but also serves as a more effective archive and repository. In contrast, Facebook privileges recently posted videos that gain rapid traction, making it less reliable for long-term access.[77]Rafucko explained in the interview that Facebook's flagging system has become a tool for silencing dissent.[78] Religious groups, right-wing activists, and Globo supporters, he claimed, have used it to target his content.

This experience is shared by an artist and activist from Cape Town, who told me that her friends' Facebook pages were regularly disabled.[79]

74 »Reproduzo este vídeo em solidariedade ao Rafucko. Usar de copyright para censurá-lo é ridículo, pois o vídeo dele se encaixa em ›uso justo‹ (›fair use‹).« Vid. 46, Vieria (Rafucko), [Espelho] [Original censurado]

75 The silencing of critiques appears to go beyond attempts to block content on the base of copyright allegations. One example includes an respondent, detailing experiencing exceptional difficulties in finding a job in the media industry, with more than one company telling him that they would not offer him any work for fear of losing their contracts with Globo if they hired him (Int. 14, Video Activist, Rio de Janeiro, 8 December 2015).

76 Int. 14, Video Activist, Rio de Janeiro, 8 December 2015.

77 Interview with Vladimir Seixas on 23 August 2016 after the screening of his films about forced evictions and the militarization of Rio de Janeiro in a cinema in the Botafogo neighborhood of the city.

78 Int. 14, Video Activist, Rio de Janeiro, 8 December 2015.

79 Int. 19, RMF Activist, Cape Town, 27 July 2016; Int. 7, Video Activist, Rio de Janeiro, 24 October 2015.

She described how systematic flagging by organized right-wing groups has led to the removal of activist pages in both Cape Town and Rio – while fascist and racist content often remains untouched. »Ja, the internet... I keep realizing how fucked up it is!« she laughed away her frustration.[80] While my research can only offer anecdotal evidence[81] for claims about systematic censorship. However, the following story of the takedown of the Mariachi Facebook page in Rio de Janeiro warrants closer attention and raises concerns for the potential power of manipulation by corporate social media as ›new‹ gatekeepers.

One act of censorship that sparked particular outrage within Rio's video activist scene occurred when the Coletivo Mariachi Facebook page was deactivated three weeks before the start of the 2016 Olympic Games. Mariachi had been a key source of critical reporting on protests and police violence since 2013:

> »The videos produced [by Mariachi] have been watched by over 8 million (youtube) and 50 million (facebook) users respectively and have been the subject of articles by the main media outlets across the country and the world, including major newspapers such as HuffPost Brazil, El País, The New York Times and The Guardian.«[82]

The suspension followed the sharing of a meme criticizing the homophobic stance of the Catholic and Evangelical churches (see screenshotted meme). On 15 July 2016, the account was disabled for over a week until a wave of online protest and criticism, forced Facebook to stop its censorship measures. The meme that triggered the ban depicted Jesus alongside a caption condemning Christian »homophobia« toward the LGBTIQ+ community. As Neo Baudrillard wrote in an article published on the website of Mídia Coletiva:

> »This is Zuckerberg's good boy version, different from his portrayal in the movie The Social Network (in Brazil: A Rede Social), in which he steals the ideas of others and tramples over God and the world to get where he is.

80 Int. 19, RMF Activist, Cape Town, 27 July 2016.

81 Out of all videos listed in the videography, more than every fifth video is not available on YouTube on 17 August 2025. The sample size can only indicate the levels of videos disappearing. Anecdotal evidence by video activist – generally critical of the tech giants form the USA – points to numerous incidents of censorship.

82 »Os vídeos produzidos já foram assistidos por mais de 8 milhões de pessoas (youtube) e 50 milhões (facebook) sendo tema de matérias dos principais veículos de comunicação do país e do mundo, incluindo grandes jornais como *HuffPost Brasil*, *El País*, *The New York Times* e *The Guardian*.« https://web.archive.org/web/20170403214422/http://midiacoletiva.org/voltamariachi-pelo-fim-da-censura-praticada-pelo-facebook/

> Well, this second version is already well-known among the media activist movement. Almost all pages and members of this community who use Facebook to expose a narrative different to the one conveyed by the mainstream media are already used to censorship.
>
> This time, one of the main pages of the Carioca media activist movement, the page of the Mariachi Collective, with 122,000 followers, was taken down because of a meme that defended the maxim of Jesus: »love one another«. The moralism of Zuckerberg's social network accepts many things, but it does not accept that Jesus's maxim should also be directed towards the LGBT community.«[83]

The reinstatement of videos or entire channels following public backlash, along with tactics like mirroring content across platforms, demonstrates the potential for resisting censorship on corporate social media. However, these forms of resistance should not obscure the deeper structural power imbalances that shape content distribution on these platforms. Ultimately, proprietary social media companies control the underlying technology and infrastructure, and their accountability lies primarily with investors and executives. Those most invested in advertising revenue – typically based in the Global North – are the ones who benefit most from this system and who in the end have an outseized influence. Consequently, Rio's video activists attempted to find alternatives channels to disseminate their video contents.

The shift from the old media gatekeepers such as Globo to new gatekeepers in the form of corporate social media platforms has had significant effects on the production of visibility. Organized video activist

83 »Esse é o Zuckerberg versão bom moço, diferente da versão do filme ›The Social Network‹ (no Brasil: A Rede Social) em que ele rouba a ideia alheia e atropela Deus e o mundo pra chegar onde chegou.
Pois bem, essa segunda versão já é bem conhecida pelo movimento midiativista, quase todas as páginas e membros desta comunidade, que utilizam o Facebook para expor uma narrativa diferente da veiculada pela grande mídia, já estão acostumados com a censura. Desta vez, uma das principais páginas do movimento midiativista carioca, a página do Coletivo Mariachi, com 122 mil seguidores foi retirada do ar por conta de um meme que defendia a máxima de Jesus, ›amai-vos uns aos outros‹. O moralismo da rede social de Zuckerberg aceita muita coisa, mas pelo jeito não aceita que a máxima dita por Jesus seja dirigida também para a comunidade LGBT.« This quotation is from the article »For Facebook ›Love Each Other‹ is not for Gays« on the independent website mdiaindependente.org, which itself had to be closed down after running out of sufficient funds to maintain its URL. An archived version can be accessed through https://web.archive.org/web/20170402033458/http://midiacoletiva.org/para-facebook-amai-vos-uns-aos-outros-nao-serve-para-os-gays/ (accessed on 21 March 2020).

collectives initially blossomed by appropriating for-profit social media platforms and using them as distribution channels for their videos.

However, new gatekeepers like Facebook and YouTube have shown that they are open to disable contents under the banner of presumed copyrights violations. The disabling of their content fueled suspicion among video activists in Rio de Janeiro that Globo has a ›hot wire‹ to Facebook and YouTube. Indeed, critical videos about Globo on both platforms were repeatedly removed on the basis of copyright infringement.[84] Mirroring videos by uploading them again has been one effective counter-tactic used by video activists, as the example of Rafucko's video showed. However, organized video activist collectives like MIC and CMI ultimately decided to opt out of what they saw as »imperialistic and capitalist«[85] corporate social media by establishing their own websites. Sustaining these websites and regularly generating new content, however, proved to be an impossible task for most video activists. The decision by collectives such as MIC and CMI not to accept external funding so as to maintain their independence meant that video activists had to generate an income for themselves outside of video activism. This drained their capacity to commit to the levels of engagement necessary to support independent websites.

At the same time, the revenues of social media corporations have skyrocketed as much as the private fortunes of shareholders of these corporations. For example, Facebook's annual revenue exploded from USD 17.9 billion in 2015 to USD 70.7 billion in 2019.[86] Google, the parent company of YouTube, saw its annual revenue and profit shoot up from USD 29.3 billion in 2010 to USD 160.74 billion in 2019.[87] In contrast, Globo has seen a slight but steady decline in annual revenue from BRL 16.24 in 2014 to BRL 14.68 billion (USD 3.78 billion) in 2020.[88] In 2020 video activist Fernando was literally having no money to for basic grocery shopping during the Corona crisis, while CEOs of the corporate social media such as Facebook's Marck Zuckerberg gained up to USD 30 billion within three months.[89]

84 All my interviewees claimed that they had never received a response from YouTube or Facebook when they requested further explanation as to why their videos had been deleted.

85 Unrecorded focus group discussion with members of the CMI-Rio collective on 17 October 2015.

86 Clement, »Facebook's Revenue and Net Income from 2007 to 2019.«

87 Clement, »Annual Revenue of Google from 2002 to 2019.«

88 Statista Research Department, »Revenue Generated by Globo from 2005 to 2019.«

89 Leskin, »Zuckerberg Is Now the 3rd-Richest Person in the World.«

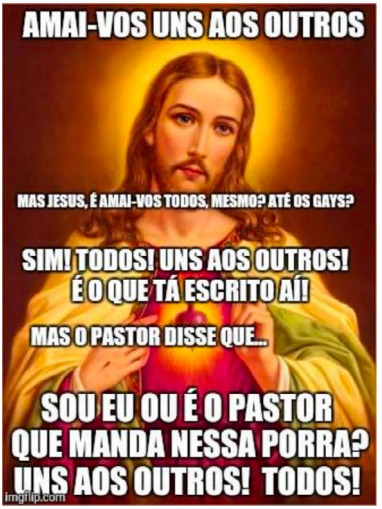

Fig. 36 Meme by Mariachi

Establishing Independence: Collective Attempts to Bypass Social Media

For Rio's media activist community, the censorship of Mariachi confirmed long-held suspicions about the new gatekeepers – YouTube and Facebook. No longer willing to rely solely on corporate platforms to distribute their content, activists began pursuing the most radical form of resistance: escape.

Several Rio-based collectives responded by creating their own websites as autonomous distribution channels, aiming to break free from the political unaccountability and exploitative economic models of corporate social media. For example, the tech-savvy members of the CMI collective chose to host their site via Tokelau, a small Pacific island territory with around 1,500 inhabitants that generates a significant portion of its GDP by offering one of the world's most sought-after country code top-level domains.[90] The site, *cmirio.tk*, was online from December 2014 to December 2016.[91]

90 In 2012, Tokelau was the third biggest host of websites worldwide, ahead of countries such as China, India and France. Its business model, which was designed by Joost Zuurbier from Amsterdam, was to offer free registration of website URLs (Andres, »The Tiny Island with a Huge Web Presence«).

91 https://web.archive.org/web/20141231200247/http://cmirio.tk/ (accessed 21 March 2020). According to the regulations in place for URLs registered in Tokelau, these are automatically disabled when there is no traffic detected, which appears to have been the case for the CMI-Rio website.

In 2016, CMI-Rio contributed to building the new CMI-Brazil website[92] – an overhauled successor to the early 2000s Brazilian Indymedia site. This redesigned platform launched under a new URL, *midiaindependente.org*, in November 2016, replacing the old CMI-Rio site and continuing the effort to establish independent media infrastructure.[93]

The MIC and Mariachi sister collectives joined forces to launch their own website, registered under the URL *midiacoletiva.org*.[94] This platform, which went online in October 2015[95] and remained active until December 2017,[96] featured in-depth critical articles and videos. Both collectives downgraded their Facebook pages to serve primarily as link repositories directing users to the new site.

In an effort to maintain independence and street credibility, the MIC-Mariachi collective declined external funding from organizations such as the Ford Foundation. However, the challenges of sustaining an independent platform soon became apparent. The collective's non-hierarchical structure, the significant time investment required, and the difficulty of competing with the addictive design and reach of corporate social media ultimately led to the decision to discontinue the site. These experiences proved disillusioning for organized video activism, revealing the limits of bypassing corporate platforms through autonomous infrastructure alone. The independence-inexistence dilemma finally resulted in the inexistence of the independent website.

7.3 Tactics and Strategies in the Production of Visibility

So far, this chapter has examined two intertwined dimensions of visibility in bottom-up video production: the factors shaping *topographies of*

92 http://web.archive.org/web/20160817233055/http://www.midiaindependente.org/ (accessed 21 March 2020).

93 http://web.archive.org/web/20161202140345/https://midiaindependente.org/ (accessed 21 March 2020).

94 The similarity in the naming of the CMI and MIC websites is no coincidence. It reflects the history of two groups that split to form separate collectives, maintaining only partial collaboration. As a result, both their names and websites closely resemble one another, each claiming lineage from the Indymedia movement that emerged after the Battle of Seattle in the early 2000s.

95 https://web.archive.org/web/20151029234641/http://www.midiacoletiva.org/ (accessed 21 March 2020).

96 In late 2017, one of the editors called me and informed me that the website was about to go offline again after previous attempts by the collective to keep it going had failed. For the last available snapshot about of the website see: https://web.archive.org/web/20171224113519/http://midiacoletiva.org/ (accessed 21 March 2020).

visibility and the mechanisms of *visibility suppression*. A brief review of the tactics and strategies used to disseminate marginalized voices and document police violence reveals a clear imbalance. While certain practices can enhance visibility or circumvent censorship tactically on a case-by-case basis, the broader strategic landscape is increasingly dominated by powerful actors. The shift from ›old‹ gatekeepers like Globo to the ›new‹ gatekeepers like Facebook is likely to deeply reshape digital video activism.

Tactics to gain visibility

There are two common tactics employed by videographers in both Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro to increase the visibility of their content. This tactic is typically used by individual users and independent videographers, who often feel compelled to produce sensational content that provokes strong emotional reactions. Given the overwhelming volume of videos uploaded to social media platforms, only a tiny fraction go viral – most remain in the long tail, barely seen by users. The algorithmic design of corporate social media reinforces this »winner-takes-all« logic: videos that quickly gain views are more likely to be recommended to others or included in automated playlists.

The second tactic involves building a strong distribution network – typically through regularly updated social media channels and/or dedicated websites – that can reliably reach a solid audience. Examples include the *UCT:RhodesMustFall* Facebook page or the YouTube and Facebook channels of video activist collectives in Rio de Janeiro. These established platforms help ensure a baseline level of visibility, even for videos that are less sensational. This is particularly important for content documenting non-violent protests or videos lacking provocative elements – such as nudity – which rarely attract more than a few hundred views on their own.

While this dynamic may not be solely the result of profit-driven platform design, it raises important questions about how algorithms shape video popularity and, by extension, political mobilization. In my discussion of visibility, I have relied heavily on view counts. However, using YouTube and Facebook view metrics as indicators of visibility comes with significant limitations. First, the two platforms apply different criteria for what constitutes a »view,« making direct comparisons problematic.[97] Second, view counts are imprecise and tend to exclude marginalized viewers on the

97 YouTube counts a view when a video has been played for at least five seconds, while Facebook registers a view after three seconds. A second major difference is that Facebook's default function is for videos to be played automatically, unlike the YouTube default setting, which requires users to click on a video to start playing it.

»wrong« side of the digital divide.[98] For instance, they do not account for collective viewing – such as groups of friends watching together on a single device or public screenings – which are more common among urban populations who cannot afford personal data plans or devices. This suggests a systematic undercount of viewership among marginalized communities.[99] Finally, the view count employs a »technology of distance«[100] that abstracts subjective experiences of watching a video into quantifiable numbers ready to be traded in the attention economy.[101] Despite these limitations, view counts remain the most accessible and widely recognized indicator for analyzing *topographies of visibility* in bottom-up video production.

Video activists themselves frequently reference view counts in their discussions, indicating a clear awareness of which videos gain traction. Whether they intentionally tailor their content to align with the rules, algorithms, and incentives of for-profit social media platforms cannot be definitively answered. However, the role of corporate platforms as architects of *topographies of visibility* should not be underestimated. These platforms create feedback loops that videographers learn from and adapt to. As a result, the mechanisms of corporate social media tend to privilege the *spectacle of resistance* over the careful contextualization of complex struggles and claims.

Strategies to manage the ›new‹ gatekeepers

As new gatekeepers, for-profit social media platforms have transformed public communication – not only by shaping what becomes publicly

98 Warf, *Global Geographies of the Internet*.

99 This is of particular relevance to South Africa, a country with extremely high mobile data rates. For example, viewers who watch videos on shared screens or using improvised methods such as video sharing via Bluetooth – a means of avoiding paying for video streaming or the downloading of data – are systematically overlooked. Videos shared via private messenger applications such as Telegram or WhatsApp are also not counted (Int. 27, Videographers, Cape Town, 9 August 2016).

100 Porter, *Trust in Numbers. The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, ix.

101 Viewer perceptions of the same content are influenced by attitudes and past experiences. For example, a viewer who is acquainted with activists who are being attacked by the police in a video will react differently to a viewer who has never been to a protest march and is generally skeptical towards bottom-up forms of organizing. For studies on perceptions of videos of violence, see: Razsa, »Beyond ›Riot Porn‹: Protest Video and the Production of Unruly Subjects«; Friis, »›Beyond Anything We Have Ever Seen‹: Beheading Videos and the Visibility of Violence in the War Against ISIS«; Askanius, »DIY Dying: Video Activism as Archive, Commemoration and Evidence«.

visible, but also by redefining the very notion of »the public.« The strategy of escaping corporate platforms to avoid turning resistance into a spectacle for consumption and profit-making, has shown limited success for video activist collectives.

Social media companies have found effective ways to monetize all forms of video content, including those produced by emancipatory urban movements and documenting police violence. This commodification of video activism reinforces Jodi Dean's argument that even anti-capitalist struggles have been absorbed into the neoliberal capitalist economy.[102] As one activist and campaign organizer put it: »In order to be successful, protest has to become capitalist itself.«[103]

In response, collectives like CMI and MIC/Mariachi attempted to resist platform dependency by reviving the ethos of Indymedia and creating their own autonomous websites. While this strategy offered protection from censorship by both ›old‹ and ›new‹ gatekeepers, it did not resolve the *independence-inexistence dilemma*. The lack of financial resources soon made it unsustainable to maintain and update these sites. Moreover, while independent websites offer a degree of autonomy, they are poorly suited to the dynamics of Web 2.0. Although such sites were central to Web 1.0 and some still serve as important nodes in digital communication, the rise of a corporate media oligopoly has shifted most public attention to proprietary platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. This push for establishing a small group of platforms owned by few corporations is a critical element of »data colonialism« and »platform imperialism«.[104] Centralized control of the corporations from the US and increasingly China has sidelined radically independent and autonomous projects such as Indymedia as decentralized, global network.

Having outlined key tactics and strategies for distributing videos of protests and police violence online, this final section examines how the emerging *topographies of visibility* shape the visibility of journalist, witness, and activist videos.

102 Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*.

103 Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, 9–10. Personalized algorithms undoubtedly affect perceptions of video activism. However, given the research design of my study, there is insufficient evidence for me to further investigate the effects of filter bubbles, although my interviewees did confirm that they struggled to reach audiences with political opinions that differed from their own. Filter bubbles and their implications for video activism would be a fruitful topic for future research.

104 Couldry and Mejias, »Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject«; Yon Jin, »The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era.«

7.4 The Politics of Visibility

Creating visibility to counter hegemonic narratives lies at the core of video activism. As this chapter has shown, while the act of recording by activists and witnesses is essential, it is the distribution of these audiovisuals that determines their impact – whether in amplifying marginalized voices, documenting protests, or exposing police violence. Little surprisingly viral videos receive outseized attention, but they require a long tail of video production as I argue first. Secondly, I provide a brief reflection that connects back to the previous chapter by asking: how does video distribution – and the generation of visibility – function differently for journalist, activist, and witness videos?

Viral Videos and the Long Tail of Video Production

To fully grasp the topographies of visibility, we need to look beyond single videos and instead take into consideration the emerging media landscape in which video activist dissemination aims to find a place.

Bottom-up video production about protests and police violence is in general a niche phenomenon. In my sample of 140 videos, their numbers of views are almost negligible compared to the attention received by videos from the world of entertainment, sports or other commercial offers. Yet even among videos of protests and police violence, there is a huge range in the number of views that different videos attain.

The difference between videos that barely receive more than one hundred views and those that cross the threshold of 10,000 or even 100,000 views can be explained by the ›long tail‹ model popularized by communication and media studies. In the digital economy of corporate social media, the majority of videos receive very little attention, while a few attract the bulk of views. One of the most prominent claims of the long tail model is the so-called 80:20 ratio, according to which 80 percent of videos receive only 20 percent of all views, whereas the remaining 20 percent of videos account for the other 80 percent of views.[105] In consequence it would be short-sited to discard videos that do not receive significant attention. Instead, a sustained and critical volume of video production around protest and police violence increases the likelihood that a few will break through, go viral, and enter broader public discourse.

105 Hai-Jew, »Exploring ›User,‹ ›Video,‹ and (Pseudo) Multi-Mode Networks on YouTube with NodeXL«, 244.

The Visibility of Journalist, Witness, and Activist Videos

The videos discussed least in this chapter are journalist videos circulating on social media. Nevertheless, they constitute a significant portion of online content, reiterating that ›old‹ and ›new‹ gatekeepers are not simply replacing one another. In contrast, traditional mass media has effectively adapted to the new media environment, and its reporting on protest and police violence has successfully integrated the use of witness videos. Thanks to professional editing and the networking effects of channels with broader viewership, traditional journalist videos have established strong distribution networks on social media. In doing so, they continue to reinforce dominant narratives – especially in the case of Brazil. As some examples of censorship have highlighted, their reach extends beyond the dissemination of their own narratives; they also manage to silence critical counter-narratives by invoking copyright infringements. Nevertheless, the tax avoidance strategies[106] employed by social media corporations play a significant role in reducing funding for public services such as journalism and have contributed to the overall decline in journalism revenue.

Second, the distribution of witness videos is significantly more unpredictable. However, their dissemination follows certain recognizable patterns. The majority of witness videos – especially those portraying peaceful protests – tend to receive little attention.

One type of video presents a notable exception to this rule: videos of graphic police brutality. Filmed by eyewitnesses who simply »happened to be there,«[107] such videos are either directly uploaded to private social media pages or passed on to journalists or media activist collectives. Especially in the latter case, these videos may rapidly gain traction and go viral, not least due to their ›aura of authenticity‹ and the absence of alternative evidence. Algorithmic governance, which emphasizes spectacle over content, enables the rapid spread of such audiovisual recordings. However, these very recordings pose a serious threat of retaliation for the witnesses themselves, as the next chapter will show.

Finally, activist video distribution is significantly more systematic than the individualized efforts of witnesses. When video activist collectives – to some extent, the RMF movement in Cape Town, or more significantly, collectives like Midi Ninja, MIC/Mariachi, or AND – manage to build a base of followers, their chances of reaching wider audiences increase significantly. Videos uploaded by such organized video activist collectives

106 For a detailed analysis of the tax avoidance strategies employed by Google and Facebook, see: Fuchs, »Google and Facebook's Tax Avoidance Strategies«.

107 Int. 38, Researcher, Rio de Janeiro, 8 September 2016.

or urban movements allow for the presentation of more complex narratives that move beyond the spectacle of violence, questioning the fundamental causes of violent outbreaks and pointing to forms of structural violence.[108]

The advent of corporate social media platforms initially offered activist videographers entirely new opportunities to make their audiovisuals publicly accessible.[109] With just a few clicks, videos could be uploaded, circumventing the monopoly on public communication once held by the old gatekeepers – mass media. However, the new gatekeepers have implemented their own control mechanisms, imposing an economic logic on public communication. Especially in Rio de Janeiro, there have been several instances where videos were disabled due to presumed copyright violations. Tactics and strategies to remain independent of corporate social media and circumvent censorship have shown momentary success but appear unsustainable in the long term. Growing discontent with for-profit social media has motivated media activist collectives in Rio to establish independent websites. However, these efforts to create autonomous distribution networks have largely ended in disillusionment.

Overall, the emerging topographies of visibility are shaped by distribution systems that are heavily influenced by corporate social media as ›new‹ gatekeepers. Visibility is political, and its creation is only partially in the hands of urban movements and their videographers. Re-examining the topographies of visibility through the lens of the video typology introduced in the previous chapter reveals nuanced and complex mechanisms that determine video distribution. What is seen, by whom, and to what end depends significantly on powerful actors such as corporate media entities and the opaque mechanisms they can deploy. The »illusion of transparency,« as Lefebvre examines it in *The Production of Space*, and the »illusion of opacity« appear to merge and complement each other in the creation of a digital representational sphere – one in which everyone is told they can access everything (transparency), while at the same time, algorithmic governance by corporate social media remains privatized and opaque.

108 Besides videos, such online channels typically also publish photographs, short written posts, longer critical analyses, and other forms of content, but analysis thereof is beyond the scope of my research.

109 Video activists no longer had to depend on organizing public screenings in independent cinemas or elsewhere, which massively broadened their potential audiences. Nevertheless, video activists still organize public film screenings, such as at *Cinema na Rua in Rio de Janeiro*. As such, the new distribution channels have expanded rather than replaced older audio-visual distribution repertoires.