

WhatsAppers for Social Good

Local Community Response to COVID-19 in Brazil



Source: Yoav Hornung, Unsplash.

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“I hope that 2021 will be the year when politics finally catches up with science, and when humanity learns how to use our immense powers wisely.” Yuval Noah Harari

Abstract

The so-called “WhatsAppers” constitute a local community of activists and concerned citizens who use WhatsApp to promote networks of solidarity in Brazil. Since the app’s launch, WhatsApp is increasingly appropriated for social good by activists, not only for “hanging-out” with like-minded people, but it has also become a key platform for twenty-first century politics, particularly in the Global South – when compared to other Western countries. Embedded in the literature of digital activism and digital sociology, this policy brief analyses the role played by WhatsAppers to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Brazil. Data was collected between March and July 2020 through digital ethnography. The aim is to capture how WhatsAppers communicate at the local level, while enhancing a common agenda of solidarity and care. Finally, this brief provides some recommendations for governments to engage with WhatsApp groups endorsed by local communities.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

Introduction

Over the last decade, chat apps such as Signal, Telegram and WhatsApp have become gamechangers for twenty-first century politics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when real face-to-face contact was limited in order to minimize the spread of coronavirus, social interactions happened mainly on chat apps. These are useful not only to collect information about the virus, but also to exchange messages at high-speed worldwide. This process is facilitated by low costs, high rates of access, and thanks to the predatory zero rating fees², mainly in the Global South (Belli and Zingales, 2021). On the one hand, scholars emphasize the role of WhatsApp as an open space for civic engagement (Abubakar and Dasuki, 2018; Baxter, 2018; Milan and Barbosa, 2020). On the other, chat apps can be used for spreading malicious content and disinformation through private and public groups (Barbosa & Back, 2020; Evangelista and Bruno, 2019).

To understand the way activist groups mobilized on WhatsApp around COVID-19, this policy brief investigates the broader political context in Brazil. Jair Bolsonaro the far-right president who won the Brazilian

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² “Zero-rating plans exempt particular data from counting against a user’s data cap, or from accruing any excess usage charges.” (McSherry, C. et al., 2016). Here, I denominate it as “predatory” because telecom companies allow users to access WhatsApp “for free”, instead of more expensive short-text messages. This process kept Brazilian users without accessing information published outside platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Brazilians do not have “data free” navigation, rather telecom companies offer unlimited use of WhatsApp.



Figure 1: UCG's profile picture on WhatsApp private group.

Source: Author's digital ethnography.

elections in 2018 – called the spread of COVID-19 a “little flu” and was recognized worldwide for his irresponsible and denialist behavior (Barbosa, 2020a). Among other disinformation, the Brazilian president has repeatedly recommended the use of hydroxychloroquine, a drug that has been shown to be ineffective in preventing the spread of the disease (Oliveira et al, 2021), and was revealed to be largely dangerous (White, 2020), and failed to sign vaccine contracts timely (Biroli, 2021). As Szylovec et al. argue, “the absence of a coherent discourse between the president and the Ministry of Health, governors, and mayors caused political insecurity” (2021: 14), namely: Bolsonaro replaced two health ministers who disagreed with him about a science-based approach to deal with the pandemic (Fishman, 2020) and, lamentably, did not create a national protocol to strategically stop coronavirus. At the time of writing (October 2021), Brazil reached the alarming milestone of 600.000 deaths from COVID-19, registering more than twenty-one million infections so far (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2021). Considering the failed strategy of the Brazilian federal government, this policy brief looks into two questions: what has been the step-by-step process of appropriating WhatsApp to promote local responses to COVID-19? How can we explain the emergence of a chat app-based activism anchored in caring strategies and bottom-up solidarity?

To reflect on these two questions, I focus on social interactions inside a private WhatsApp group of activists entitled United Against the Coup (henceforth UCG, for *Unidos Contra o Golpe*), that survived from the struggle against the ‘soft coup’ that removed Dilma Rousseff of Brazilian presidency to resist and oppose *bolsonarismo* (McKenna, 2020). The group was created on the 30th of March 2016 by a concerned citizen from Florianópolis, a mid-sized capital of the state Santa Catarina in the south of the country. UCG is a heterogeneous group composed of activists, educators, journalists and members of civil society from southern Brazil. It includes both experienced activists (e.g., trade unionists) and non-experienced activists.

Method

Since entering the WhatsApp group in 2016, an extensive digital ethnography was performed, logging information daily in order to investigate the UCG group. After registering no-opposition of group members, I kept running the digital ethnography and was transparent about my researcher identity and the goal to share research outputs with participants. Informed consent was sought at regular intervals, mindful of the fluctuating membership and intermittent engagement inherent in groups of this kind (see Barbosa and Milan, 2019). Data for this policy brief comes from a digital ethnography from March to July of 2020 to identify and analyze the practices of social actors, focusing on a “long zoom” perspective on social interactions inside the chat group. The goal is to capture how dynamics and strategies were organized on a WhatsApp behind-the-scenes. At the time of writing, there are around 135 members in the group.

Table 1 WhatsApp group’s repertoire of communication

 <p>Information for health literacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activists posted - and shared content based on scientific information (including audio messages, videos, photos, links) and material written by local journalists. • Diffusion of news that was undermined by the Federal Government. • The hashtags “#Stay healthy”, “#Stay home”, “#Trust science” and “#UseMask” with expressive function to stay home respecting social distancing protocols (when possible) are shared through networks. • Call for streaming lives on Instagram
 <p>Interpersonal dialogue as citizen agency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Direct replies” as dialogue between individuals within the group. • Absence of formal leadership: the vast majority of members were listed also as ‘administrators’, which allowed them to add new members or exclude existing ones. • Decentralized structure: bottom-up solidarity and decision-making based on heated discussions between group members.
 <p>Hyper local initiative to promote care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call to caring strategies: mutual help, listen to the other and trust cultivated relationships. • Provide responsiveness within the group to settle care everyday practices to assist others. • Local and joint actions as collective initiatives (e.g., quick delivery of groceries to distribute for neighborhoods nearby; crowdfunding; donation of clothes and masks).
 <p>Small arena to combat COVID-19 related disinformation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activists discuss the kind of disinformation they received about COVID-19 via WhatsApp, playing “small arenas” to research the content and discuss it with group members. Meanwhile, they agreed to take care to ensure whether, information is accurate or not before forwarding any content to other group chats.

Source: Author’s elaboration.



Figure 2: Call for streaming live on Instagram. The goal of this activity was to discuss the impact of virtual education on teenagers' mental health.

Photo credits: Consuelo Brito.



Figure 3: Local actions such as the donation of groceries to target vulnerable population.

Photo credits: Lise Rafaela.

WhatsAppers for social good: caring strategies and networks of solidarity

Taking advantage of WhatsApp's high penetration all over Brazil (Reuters, 2021), alongside a powerful combination of bottom-up solidarity, UCG appropriated WhatsApp as primary platform to organize and communicate. The chat platform provided a space to find like-minded individuals, that were not necessarily politically engaged beforehand. Since UCG was born, group members started to express indignation and organize joint actions. Thanks to the a-geographical nature of the app, the network expanded well beyond the borders of the state of Santa Catarina, and at the time of writing included participants from all over Brazil. Information about protests and other events spread through message posts and many received information about local events close to home through the group chats. The diverse cohort of supporters survived to oppose the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro, and simultaneously put in a collective effort to stop the damage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Activists were much more than passive consumers of a commercial platform – and cooperatively worked in the public-interest over WhatsApp, and connected to broader social media channels, such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, etc. They organized in the “backstage” of WhatsApp, thanks to the intimate and immediate qualities of the chat app infrastructure and, with the help of local communities, promoted internal decision-making processes (Barbosa, 2020). Specifically, group members promoted small arenas where participants advocate for plural participation. Table 1 shows how these digital communities paved a repertoire of communication to “oxygen” Brazilian democracy.

The networks of solidarity extended during the pandemic, as UCG activists shared news and information about the spread of coronavirus with group members. Via the private chat, vulnerable population were supported in accessing to health information, money, and donations of groceries, clothes, and masks.

Moving Forward: policy recommendations to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil

This study showed that WhatsAppers promoted a micro-scale repertoire of communication connected with social media platforms through local actions, in which diverse actors engage in popular projects to foster social change. The group members appropriated a commercial platform to mitigate the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Based on this ongoing research, social good does not derive from naïve intent, as alleged by the so-called GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft) big tech companies, and criticized by recent studies (Magalhães and Couldry, 2021), but instead from the everyday practices of political actors being agents of social intervention and raisers of critical consciousness (Freire, 2004), as well as promoters of bottom-up solidarity.

To conclude, I list three recommendations to local governments interact and communicate with WhatsApp groups of grassroots, local communities, and everyday citizens:

1. **Disseminate accurate information:** Tackle bad content uploaded on chat apps with accurate information to foster trustful relationship between the local government and citizens. Local authorities should promote the revitalization of citizens' democratic agency at the core of society, undertaking at least three practical actions:
 - a. Posit "everyday citizens" as the central component of society, which allows for making education campaigns to foster digital literacy³ amongst them.
 - b. Avoid reducing knowledge to a selected group of experts, as the sharing of expertise and research needs to move to the digital space, including the realm of chat apps.
 - c. Endorse a dialogic process that engage everyday citizens about which "kind of information" they share on chat apps like WhatsApp.
2. **Spread popular messages adapted to local contexts:** Flows of messages depend on socio-historical conditions, including local, social, cultural, political, geographical, and historical incorporated contexts. Local government, for instance, could post reliable messages supervised by scientists and educators on chat apps (in the form of videos, audio messages, and posts) to disseminate public trust in scientific expertise, while producing popular messages adapted to each one of these local contexts.
3. **Promote creative collaboration:** Local governance can be part of the (emerging) civic movement led by WhatsAppers, working side-by-side with everyday citizens through creative collaboration. To do so, local authorities' members should facilitate needed resources and suppliers for the organized activities on WhatsApp groups.

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³ "Digital Literacy means having the skills you need to live, learn, and work in society where communication and access to information is increasingly through digital technologies like internet, platforms, social media, and mobile devices" (Western Sydney University, 2020).

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