8 - Dignity through self-image

Bernardo Sorj

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8 - Dignity Through Self-Image

Viva Favela

Since Viva Rio's creation, one of its goals has been to change the way the media portrays the *favelas*, to create news stories that do not simply concentrate on the issue of violence, but show the full reality of *favela* life -its cultural and human wealth and the efforts of the majority of its residents to develop a life of dignity. A first attempt at a publication was made in the first years of Viva Rio's existence, but ended up failing to materialize: the journalistic vehicles and private companies sought out by Viva Rio to invest in the project did not throw their weight behind it, and as such, Viva Rio decided to postpone its implementation.

The enormous demand among *favela* residents for computing courses and Internet access, and its experience with its Information Technology Clubs (which we will look at in more detail later), made clear to Viva Rio the possibility of transforming the Internet into a means of communication not only for *favela* residents and the press but also for society as a whole. The web portal vivafavela.com was made possible thanks to a US\$1,000,000 grant from the globo.com web portal. The dedicated staff of 31 professionals, trained as journalists, photographers, technicians, correspondents, and collaborators, in 11 different communities, has made transformed the website into an experiment worthy of international attention.

The first important question raised by the project was the name of the portal. Residents of *favelas* prefer to call their neighborhoods "communities", since the word *favela* raises negative connotations in some sectors of society. After analyzing a number of alternatives, it was finally decided to maintain the name Viva Favela. The reasoning was that in any case, this denomination would continue to be used for some time, and that the real challenge was to change the negative connotations of the word by showing the dignity, creativity, and human wealth of *favela* life.

Since its launch, the Viva Favela portal has offered on-line services, information, entertainment, and opportunities for business and employment, aside from free e-mail, chat rooms, and news. The site is also home to the Comunidade Viva electronic magazine, produced by community correspondents, *favela* residents who produce articles and photos about the *favela* and are paid for their work. To be a community correspondent, an applicant must have completed secondary education and have some work experience in local media, such as a community radio station or the newsletter of a residents' association. Before hitting the street in search of stories, these "community journalists" go through a training course and a writing workshop, and are given constant supervision by the editorial staff. The enormous interest in participating as a correspondent is shown by the many résumés, cover letters, and requests for internships that arrive every week via the portal.

The correspondents produce exclusive stories from their communities. Often, these stories grab the attention of the mainstream media, which then cover the theme themselves. Vivafavela.com is updated constantly, several times per day, with a wide range of relevant information on *favelas*, the city, Brazil, and the world. Sections include residents' profiles, sports, educational and work opportunities, health, transportation, and many other themes.

Since public organs and the conventional media do not have effective access to these communities, the portal has become an important source for information. The national press uses vivafavela.com to obtain news items that often end up on the national news circuit, and foreign correspondents have begun including it in their routine searches. Other important group of users is researchers in search of information on Rio's *favelas*.

Rio natives living away from home and Brazilians living abroad also access the web portal as a way to keep up to date with the news from their communities, as evidenced by the great number of messages the site receives daily from various parts of the globe. Viva Favela also caught the attention of the Hip Hop community throughout the country, and especially in São Paulo. Hip Hop musicians and fans have identified with the project, and today use the portal as a meeting point and a place to exchange information about this rhythm that has become a common musical protest on the peripheries of large cities and in low-income communities.

The website's most popular pages among internauts from low-income communities are those providing services such as job opportunities. The portal offers information on public health services, medical advice, immunization campaigns, emergency info, treatment of childhood diseases, hospitals and Center, and bus timetables. In the Citizens' Rights area, the site offers information on obtaining documents, consumer rights, civil law, and complaints about public services and abuse of authority (a daily occurrence in the *favela*). As we will see in more detail later, a partnership between Viva Rio and the Workers' Aid Center (Centro de Amparo ao Trabalhador, CAT) made it possible for *favela* residents to obtain information via Internet on internships and jobs offered by companies. The site also publicizes information on opportunities for the physically handicapped, guidance for interviews, advice on opening one's own business, and instructions for writing a résumé, requesting workmen's and unemployment compensation, and receiving a pension. The creation of a classified ad section greatly increased the number of visitors, and brought the culture of Consumer to Consumer (C2C) to the *favela*. Today, residents of these communities sell, buy, and trade all manner of goods and services over the Internet.

Many children who access the Internet from *favelas* visit the Cartoon Network website. Based on this fact, Viva Favela created a cartoon character based on *favela* children, portraying the routines, hopes, and violence that make up their day-to-day lives. Named **Cambito**, the character began life with a weekly strip. Cambito has grown along with a gang of characters, and now the Cambito site constitutes a truly Alternative Cartoon Network, presenting a humorous but distinct vision for the juvenile public.

Vivafavela suffers from lack of funds. Unlike other Viva Rio projects that have a clearly defined focus, the portal has had difficulty in attracting support from donors, who do not

realize the full importance of the project. As a strategy for keeping the site up and running, Viva Rio is now seeking partners to invest in specialized areas, segmented for different products and services. By employing theme-based sites, Viva Rio hopes to attract investors to these neglected markets, such as, for instance, a site about feminine beauty for *favela* women (Pure Beauty - *Beleza Pura*), a site dealing with environmental issues (Eco Pop) and with legal services (Clique Direitos - Click for Rights)..

The growth in number of visitors has been constant. In January 2002, 1,545,786 visitors were registered, while in January 2003 the number rose to 2,838,344. In February 2003, the portal registered another increase in visitors: 2,836,638, close to 105,060 visitors per day. 88,26% of the domains from which the portal was accessed were commercial, which indicates that the majority of visitors are using tele-centers or accessing the portal from places of work. The average visit lasted 12 minutes.

The number of foreign visitors also rose: in February 2003, for example, 6.65% of all visitors were from the U.S. This suggests that Viva Favela also responds to a desire by Brazilians living abroad for news and information on local popular culture.

The *Favela* Remembers

Since its creation, the Viva Favela portal has shown that *favela* life is about more than just violence. Behind each resident, there are trajectories and histories that together make up the jigsaw puzzle of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, their birth and expansion, and by extension, the city as a whole. The public archives have few documents and registries about *favelas*. At the urging of a group of journalists and community correspondents from Viva Favela, and in partnership with ISER, the **Favela Remembers** project was undertaken to research and rescue the iconographic history of Rio's *favelas*. The project, which has a link on the portal's home page, is carrying out a survey of data, photos, images, and oral history among local residents, with the goal of publicizing and promoting histories and images that strengthen the socio-cultural identity of these communities.

The researches visit the winding streets of the *favelas* and make door-to-door calls on residents, gathering material and listening to personal histories of important events and experiences that help reconstruct the history of the construction of these communities. The project operates in partnership with local institutions and centers such as the Rocinha Historical Center, the Maré Center for Solidarity Studies and Actions (Centro de Estudos e Ações Solidárias da Maré, CEASM), Núcleo Orosina, Centro Cultural Condutores de Memória, of Grande Tijuca and The Moreira Salles Institute and Mega Cidades. These bodies collaborate with the project by offering professional expertise and technology. Field research is carried out by the community correspondents from the web portal responsible for stories on local residents

Since the correspondents live in these communities and are well known to residents, they have easy access to story material. These people work in partnership with journalists and researchers who are responsible for structuring and transforming the text into a simplified and easy-to-read language for the public.

One example of The Favela Remember's "rescue" efforts has been the recovering of the histories of the names of Rio's principal *favelas*, whose nomenclature is of all kinds (geographical, poetic, religious, in homage to prominent figures, etc.); in fact, its quite common for there to exist more than one explanation for a *favela*'s name. These stories are collected in the section of the website called "A Small Dictionary of the *Favelas*", which relates, through anecdotes from residents, the birth of the *favelas*, and even the origin of the word "favela" (a hill in downtown Rio known as "Morro do Favela"). This section also serves as a repository for histories of *favelas* that no longer exist. Some *favelas* take their name from Brazil's *telenovelas* -widely popular evening soap operas- such as the *favela* "Salsa e Merengue", named after the eponymous *novela*, and the *favela* "Minha Deusa" (My Goddess), named after a character played by a famous Brazilian actress in the *novela* "Mandala".

In addition to a photo gallery, with images of *favelas* from the end of the 19th century up through the present day, the website also foresees research into the music of the *favela*. The idea is to create a section where users can listen to music composed by *favela* residents -both famous and unknown¹². The salvaging of the collective memory of *favela* life is also accomplished through the publication of news items from the past.

The Northeast Here¹³

The São Cristóvão Fair in Rio de Janeiro is a living example of the resilience of *nordestinos* -people from Brazil's northeast region who make up the largest single group of immigrants in Brazil's large urban centers- cultural traditions and values. Created in 1949, when immigrants still arrived in covered wagons after traversing the Rio-Bahia highway -begun in that year-, with dreams of finding work and earning a living in the "marvelous city"¹⁴, the São Cristóvão fair was originally a depot for recent arrivals. In the space that is now home to the fair, *nordestinos* rested from their journey and waited for family members or employers to pick them up. Employers had a good reason to prefer *nordestinos*: they took jobs others refused, and accepted low wages.

¹² A large number of Rio's most famous composers of *samba*, as well as its performers and dancers, have been *favela* residents.

¹³ Brazil's Northeast region is rich in terms of popular culture and economically poor, suffering from endemic draught. Throughout the 20th century, large numbers of *nordestinos* have immigrated into the great industrial and commercial cities of Brazil's Southeast, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.

¹⁴ *Cidade maravilhosa*, a common nickname for Rio de Janeiro.

In open field at São Cristóvão, immigrants traded traditional goods brought with them from the northeast, such as manioc, jerked beef, sugar-cane *rapadura*, and many others. Business boomed, and today the São Cristóvão Fair receives 80,000 visitors every week to its many stalls offering everything from home cooking to professional services, from CDs and electronics to raw tobacco and artisan leather goods, all to the tune of *forró* a typical northeastern rhythm and dance. With an eye to this enormous audience, Viva Rio has installed a Future Station inside the São Cristóvão Fair. In addition to Internet access, the Station publicizes the “Northeast Here” project to the *nordestino* community and the fair’s visitors.

“Northeast Here” was created with the aim of remedying the lack of information about the social and cultural life of the *nordestino* diaspora, and is one of Viva Rio’s most original projects. The website, located within the Viva Favela portal, is a space entirely dedicated to the *nordestino* community throughout Brazil, with a special emphasis on those who live in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. “Northeast Here” functions as a kind of news agency on the Northeastern states, offering notices, reporting, interviews, recipes for typical *nordestino* dishes, music, events listings, seminars, life stories, and a virtual meeting place.

Under the heading ‘Cultural Agenda’, the site publicizes shows, expositions, and other events in Rio that could be of interest to the *nordestino* population. This section also has a bulletin board open to the public for posting event notices; a singer from a Northeastern state on tour in Rio could, for example, announce the dates and locations of his shows on-line. Viva Rio’s goal is to preserve and reinforce the many cultural identities of populations from the Northeast. Every immigrant arrives with a strong sense of his traditions, but these often give way to the dominant culture of Rio, not to mention all-too-common prejudices against *nordestinos*, even within the *favelas*.

The site also reserves a place where internauts can find relatives and friends who have arrived from the Northeast: the ‘Lost and Found’ page within the section ‘Meeting Place’. There, people can post messages as in the personals section of a newspaper. As a means of celebrating *nordestino* culture, the site publicizes new talents as well as already established professionals. Personal and professional life stories are also published, always emphasizing the difficult road traversed and the battle to win a place in the sun within the labor market. Another section of the website is dedicated to “cordel literature”, a form of cultural expression entirely native to the Northeast. Both “classics” of this literature and newer representatives are available on-line.

Favela, Opinion, and Market

The reality of the *favelas* is still largely unknown. From down here on the “asphalt”, society has no idea how *favela* residents live. What reaches the greater public is the information they receive from mainstream media – whose agenda is almost always violence-related. A large part of Rio’s middle class population has never set foot in a *favela*. In spite of social

scientists' emphasis on the social diversity of the world of *favelas*, a simplifying and homogenizing vision still reigns, in which residents are portrayed as living in a permanent situation of misery and violence.

Public research firms consider these areas to be of high risk for interviewers, and so do not carry out polls there. *Favela* residents are interviewed in the city center, or at public transport hubs, undifferentiated from the general public.

In light of this, Viva Rio decided to create a public research group specially directed at these populations that today make up close to 20% of all habitants of Rio. In partnership with ISER, the "Favela, Opinion, and Market" group was launched. Through polls and market research, the group hopes to reveal a consumer market little known to companies, and a political space with a wide variety of opinions and affiliations, a deeper knowledge of which is surely in the interest of the media and political parties.

The first step was guaranteeing the researchers access to the *favelas*. To get around the problem of suspicion among gangs with links to drug traffic, Viva Rio recruited residents of each community to act as researchers. Of the first nine researchers, five had already been Community Caretakers of Citizenship (see below). The first poll was carried out in the middle of 2002, during the campaign for Brazil's presidential election, and asked what people's intention to vote were.

The second poll carried out by the project, on access to consumer goods, income levels, and education, and whose results were presented in the previous chapter, was widely reported both in the mainstream press and in local reporting. A third research is underway aims to identify the profile of the user (and not user) of the Internet in Rio de Janeiro poor quarters and the impact of Viva Rio's digital inclusion projects

The studies carried out by Favela, Opinion, and Market have also been instrumental for Viva Rio's own projects. For example, a study on community radio produced important data on the habits of low-income populations that was fundamental in the implementation of the Viva Rio Community Radio project, and its choice of programming.

Box I - Community Correspondents

Exemplary Histories

Resident of the Complexo do Alemão *favela*, schoolteacher Bete Silva, 45, saw in the Viva Favela web portal the chance to publicize the best aspects of her community. Hired as community correspondent by the portal, she produces an average of four articles a month. “Each story is a life lesson. These are people who would like to scream, but know that normally they are not heard,” says Bete. She remembers an article she wrote called “Men in the Kitchen”, in which she interviewed unemployed men who, their wives employed outside the home, had taken over the command and the duties of the house. “In a *macho* society such as ours, it is impressive to see the conscientiousness of these men, learning that we have to share the duties,” she notes. The teacher, who also works at a community day care center, has gone back to school and is now enrolled in a university course in social work. “I want to work more in this area,” she says. In her opinion, the web portal has raised residents’ self-esteem. “I feel like door, opening up new paths for the people of this community.” Often, residents she has interviewed do not have Internet access, and so cannot visit the site to see their name or photo appear in an article. When this happens, Bete goes to the Complexo do Alemão Future Station and prints up the articles. “They get radiant with happiness,” she says.

Cry for Justice

Tony, a photographer and community correspondent from the *favela* Cidade de Deus, will never forget the day he photographed a woman whose son had been killed by police. The title of the article was “A Life Lost”, and Tony shot the photos by candlelight, in the shadow of a set of scales. “I borrowed the scales from a fishmonger on the corner. I wanted to use an element that would symbolize Justice, that would show the pain and the cry for help of this mother feels,” he explains. Well-known in his community, he says that this familiarity helps him in his work of recording quotidian life there. To him, the region is an endless source of topics. The beauty of the women of Cidade de Deus, for example, drew the attention of the photographer, who eventually organized a fashion show for the community’s youth. “The girls paraded on an improvised catwalk made of wood. Everybody stopped to admire them,” he remembers. The event yielded an offer to work for a British fashion magazine. “Residents have no idea of their own value. It’s only now that they are learning.”

In Perfect Tune

Housewife Neide Alvadia, porter Paulo de Oliveira, and assessor Antonio Pereira live in different neighborhoods, but they meet on the radio dial, where they are all tuned in to Radio Viva Rio. “This station provides a service to society. I like knowing what’s happening in my

community,” says Paulo. Neide likes the music: “We hear music that has to do with us. There is *forró*, *samba de raiz*, and *pagode*¹⁵,” she explains. Neide calls the station every day to make requests, and has become friends with the programmers. “The station is cheerful, funny, and only plays good music. I used to listen to a station nearby on the dial, and ended up listening to Radio Viva Rio and liking it.” Antonio Pereira sees in the station an efficient means of communication. “No other station talks about the problems of poor communities like this one. People can call, participate, denounce wrongdoings, and know about important events in the area,” he points out.

¹⁵ Popular music forms in Brazil, sometimes underrepresented on commercial radio stations.