9 – e-spaces for communication

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9 – e-spaces for Communication

Future Stations

The original idea for the Future Stations came from the need to create a space with Internet access for low-income communities to facilitate the integration of the *vivafavela.com* project with the local population. In July 2001, Viva Rio was ready to launch the Viva Favela web portal, but most *favelas* still lacked Internet access, without which the portal's content would not reach its target audience.

The principal obstacle was technical: even in the relatively developed *favela* Rocinha, where the first Future Station was to be installed, there was no way to install a large number of fixed telephone lines. Without phone lines there could be no connection to the Internet, and without Internet access there could be no Future Station. The solution arose unexpectedly, through a chance contact with a Brazilian entrepreneur who was importing to Brazil a radio-based Internet access system that operated without fixed telephone lines. This technology was originally employed in the first Gulf War, and today is used commercially in Israel. The system uses an antenna to provide broadband Internet access, though at prices that most *favela* residents could never afford. Fortunately, the Brazilian firm that provided the technology -Taho- decided that the cost of subsidizing its use in Rio's largest *favela* would be more than outweighed by the publicity that the Future Station would generate.

The project was a success and made headlines worldwide. Viva Rio, together with Taho, won the Best Social Project for Digital Inclusion prize from the Wireless Communications Association, a group of 530 of the world's largest telecommunications and consulting firms.

The Future Station is equipped with 25 computers with broadband Internet access (15 for browsing and 10 for courses and training), printing services, and fax capability. There are currently 12 Future Stations, and 3 more should be open by the end of 2003. The Future Station project, which is supported by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the European Commission, is not merely an Internet café. Centrally located within each community, the Stations are integrated with other Viva Rio social projects, offering services like Viva Cred (micro-credit), Viva Rio Insurance, Fair Trade, job search through the Workers' Aid Center, and many others. By incorporating these services, the Future Stations are being transformed into logistical bases for the economic, social, and cultural development of their respective communities.

Future Stations are open daily, and are sought out by residents for both individual use and for the courses they offer -on average 50% cheaper than those available outside the *favela*. Classes are offered in standard programs such as Windows, Word, Excel, Power Point, and Publisher, as well as classes in typing, Internet, and even the building, configuration, and

maintenance of microcomputers. Demand is growing for courses in advanced programs like Access and Visual Basic. The night courses are the most popular, since much of the population works during the day and take advantage of their evenings to invest in professional training. At the Rocinha Future Station, for example, 4,000 students have enrolled in courses since its inauguration, and an average of 300 users access the Internet per day. The course tuition is minimal, only enough to offset the operational costs of the station. As with other Viva Rio projects, there is a lack of in-depth, demographic study of the users of the Stations, in particular their place in the socioeconomic of the *favela*.

Future Stations – Changing Habits

Within the first few days after the opening of the first Future Station, more than 250 people signed up for courses, and long lines formed to access the Internet. Internet access at the Stations is priced at 1 *real* per half-hour, about one fifth the market price on the “asphalt”. These days, many children who used to spend a *real* on candy or pinball now prefer to spend their money surfing the web. Residents who cannot afford even this can go on-line in 15 minutes blocks, paying only 50 *centavos*, about 1/3 the price of a bus ticket.

With the installation of the Future Stations, there has been a change in the habits of many residents. For example, there is a large volume of traffic to the websites to lodge complaints with the public utilities, such as electric, water, and telephone companies. Some of the Station users have computers in their homes, but lack Internet access, while a few have both but still prefer the Stations for their pleasant atmosphere, the speed of the broadband connection, and the guidance provided by the staff.

Young people and adolescents have discovered chat rooms, and today the most trafficked sites for users in their age group are the chats at the commercial portals UOL, iG, and sites for romantic encounters such as “Soul Mates” and “The Perfect Match”. Chats have a special value for these youth; in them, it is possible to converse without necessarily introducing oneself, saying where one lives, or what one is like. Many young people, who still suffer from their own and others’ preconceived notions about living in *favelas*, prefer to omit their origins during the conversations. There are cases of relationships and even marriages over the Internet. In Rocinha, an interesting case came to the attention of the Future Station staff. A female resident met a Spanish man during Carnival. Once back in Spain, the man, in love, asked the girl to find the cyber cafe nearest her so they could communicate via e-mail, he himself suggesting the Future Station. The episode indicated the need for Viva Rio to invest more in publicizing the stations and the services they offer.

Most publicity is still word of mouth. Users end up bringing friends and family to the Stations. During the school year, the largest demand is for research-related websites; in some cases, the Stations themselves have produced a list of research sites on certain subjects. During vacation, the most commonly accessed sites are game- and entertainment related, such as the Cartoon Network, Fox Kids, Dragon Ball Z, and MTV. Other popular sites are

religious portal such as ELNET – for members of evangelical churches – and the ICP – for followers of the Assembly of God.

The Stations have struggled to become self-sustaining. To accomplish this, Viva Rio has been studying the possibility of making the Future Stations into a franchise operation. Today there are already 12 Future Stations throughout Rio de Janeiro, in *favelas* such as Rocinha, Maré, Ramos, and in outlying communities such as Praça Seca, Campo Grande, and Santa Cruz.

Future Stations – Users

The Future Stations were created and designed to offer services to low-income communities, and, once installed, to adapt to local needs by diversifying their services. For example, in Rocinha, there has been large demand for courses in typing and web design. To meet this demand, Viva Rio has developed courses using language that is more colloquial, and hence more efficient explaining how to use these programs. In all the Stations, the users are mostly adolescents and youth between 13 and 29 years of age.

With 5.000 registered users existing Future Stations have an average of 2.000 users per-month. 49% of the registered users are man and 51% females. Viva Rio organizes monthly meetings on use of the Future Station, fidelity programs, and publicity for the services offered. The Internet access service can be either pre- or post-paid. Viva Rio's original thought was that with a post-pay system, users would feel more comfortable navigating, and thus would remain on-line for longer. Unfortunately, many users accessed the Internet and then left without paying for the service, which eventually created some losses for the first Station, in Rocinha.

Today, the Rocinha Future Station users still show a preference for the post-paid system, but with the implementation of a registration and monitoring system, the problem of non-payment has disappeared. The number of clients registered has risen considerably. In January of 2003, the Maré Station was the most successful, registering 130 new clients in that month alone. The Cesarão Station, inaugurated in July 2002, has already registered 646 clients, 59% of whom are female.

The average access time varies by month. During the school year -when schoolchildren use the Internet to do school projects- the average access time is higher than during the summer months of December, January, and February. In November 2002, for example, the users at the Ramos Station spent an average of 33 minutes each at the computers. In January 2003, the average fell to 29 minutes. The gender distribution of users also varies for each Station. While in Rocinha the split is nearly equal (49% men to 51% women), in Ramos the figure is far more lopsided (66% men, 34% women). Viva Rio direction and the Station managers have discussed alternatives for diminishing this gap.

In 2002, nearly 7,000 students have graduated from Future Station courses throughout the state. The Rocinha Future Station stands out for the large number of students enrolled in its

courses: 2,000 in 2002. In the same period, Praça Seca and Maré also registered many students, with 564 and 711 respectively.

Radio Viva Favela

Even with the arrival and popularization of TV, radio continues to have an important role as a medium of communication. Available at very low prices, radios can be easily transported and listened to at home, in the street, and at work, independently of listeners' literacy levels.

The democratization of communications media, starting with the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil, opened a space for new radio stations, many of a strictly community nature. In 1989, a nationwide movement of radio broadcasters fought to transform free radio stations into community stations, producing information on local themes and publicizing local artists and attractions. In only three years, broadcasters' union had registered 3,000 new community stations.

The number of community stations has rapidly grown, and today there are more than 15,000 throughout Brazil. Nevertheless, the market is dominated by commercial stations, which maintain tight relations with record studies, interested in publicizing their products. The executives of commercial stations have pressured the government to create regulation limiting the expansion of community radio stations, with some success: community radio stations are, for example, prohibited from forming national networks.

According to the study by the Favela, Opinion, and Market team, 64.2% of listeners in *favelas* tune to FM stations, while 20.9% listen to AM; of these 60.7% listen to the programming of community stations. Among community radio listeners, 62.5% found the programming good, 17.6% found it excellent, 17.6% found it average, and only 2% found it to be bad. 52.6% of this same audience said they listen to community radio because it provides news about the community, 23.9% because it plays music not heard on commercial stations, 10.5% because local artists can show their talent, and 10% because the broadcasting station isn't privately owned, so anyone can participate.

Social Radio

Viva Rio decided to invest in a community radio project to stimulate debate and communication between the *favela* and the "asphalt". Created toward the end of 2002, Radio Viva Rio AM 1180, whose slogan is "The Community: Here and Now", features programming that gives weight to the problems and needs of the city's poorest populations and content that can then be broadcast by other community radio stations.

Viva Rio's long-term goal is to develop a national network of community radio stations using the Internet. Such a network would lead to more diverse programming and better content,

increasing audience size, which in turn would attract more sponsors and investment. To get around the legal difficulty in creating national networks, Radio Viva Rio has sought out new methods for sharing content and information among community radios, without formally creating a national chain. To make the project viable, Viva Rio three major goals: to help other community broadcasters obtain the equipment and technical training needed for Internet transmission and training radio journalists; to create a production center for content and programming that is extensive, diverse, and focused on excluded communities; and to create a common space where community radio stations can meet and exchange ideas.

Radio Viva Rio first step was to transmit its programming on the Internet in such a way that it can be accessed and retransmitted without difficulty by other community stations. Today, it is possible to access Radio Viva Rio and other community stations through the Viva Favela web portal. The station is only five months old at the time of this writing, but it already reaches the entire greater metropolitan Rio area, and trains and maintains community correspondents in various *favelas* and poor neighborhoods. The correspondents give hourly news reports on their communities.

The technology used is accessible, and it is relatively easy to train professionals in maintaining programming on the air. Through community radio, listeners discover new and old values and talents from their own community, as well as gaining access to a medium in which they can actively participate.

Citizen Defense

Community stations frequently receive denunciations and complaints from the local population. Government authorities are more responsive to denunciations that reach the general public, and tend to take action when problems are transmitted by radio. One example of this was the case of a convalescent woman from the town of Queimados, in Rio de Janeiro state, who decided to turn to her community station to ask for the prescription drugs she needed. The radio announcer read her prescription on the air, and within a few hours, public health officials had delivered the medication to her. During elections, the judges of Brazil's Regional Electoral Court¹⁶ also rely on community radio stations to organize political debates and educate the public about the importance of voting.

Public Security organs also work in partnership with community radio in combating urban crime. Police battalions have begun basing their patrols in part on the information gathered from area listeners' denunciations. In some municipalities, the crime rate has fallen in the wake of these partnerships between the military police and community radio.

Cultural Plurality

¹⁶ An independent Judiciary body that oversees Brazil's electoral system.

Without an obligation to the record industry, Radio Viva Rio has been able to create programming entirely dedicated to its target audience. It has invested in journalism focusing on local stories of use to the community, the cultural rescue of older songs and genres, and the discovery of new, native talents. It also offers, on a daily basis, a service to audiences often excluded by the mainstream media, such as blacks, *nordestinos*, and, to a lesser extent, women. Women prefer variety shows (40.41% of all female listeners) and music programs (71.5%) while men are in the majority when the theme is news (31.2% against 28% of women) and sports (19.5% against 4.94% of women). The morning hours have the largest audience. 18% of listeners tune in between 6:00 and 9:00 AM, 20.4% between 9:00 and 12:00. The first hour of programming is dedicated to the *nordestino* public. Traditionally and contemporary *nordestino* music is broadcast, in addition to coverage of events like the picturesque fairs and markets of São Cristóvão, Caxias, and São Gonçalo. Following this is programming dedicated to women, to housewives, featuring popular music, journalism, interviews, job tips, and community services.

When Radio Viva Rio was inaugurated, afternoon ratings were perpetually low. Over time, the programmers realized that there was a strong demand for alternative rhythms like Hip-Hop and *black music*¹⁷. Today, the afternoon slot is entirely dedicated to young audiences, and the programs have already begun to get higher ratings thanks to the many tribes who listen to everything from reggae to Hip-Hop, with *black music*, rock, samba, MPB¹⁸, and calypso in between.

In all, there are 17 programs produced by a staff of 20, including coordinators, electronic engineers, audio operators, announcers, and community correspondents. The station currently receives support from the Globo Radio Network and the firm .comDominio, and is searching for partnerships with other large companies. One idea is to create public service spots from public and private companies. One of the more successful experiments was during the dengue fever epidemic that struck Rio in 2001. The station created and sold to the Ministry of Health a 30 second *spot* on preventing the spread of dengue, which eventually was broadcast by community radios throughout the state.

Radio Viva Rio has listeners all over the world. The producers have received e-mails from such far-flung places as South Africa, where one listener tunes in over the Internet, and Finland, where an amateur broadcaster discovered the station by chance and now never misses the hip-hop programs. Many expatriate Brazilians tune in for contact with their native culture.

Children's Hope Space

¹⁷ The English-derived phrase *black music* signifies, in Brazil, a standard though inclusive genre that covers Soul, R and B, Rap, and other forms. As with many English loan words in Portuguese, its functional meaning in Brazil goes beyond its original denotation.

¹⁸ *Musica Popular Brasileira*, or Brazilian Popular Music.

The building that houses the Children's Hope Space was initially built to house an enormous luxury hotel known as the "Hotel Panorama". The building was erected on the top of a hill on the site of an old quarry in Ipanema, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, and right next to the hillside *favela* Morro do Cantagalo. Along with the hotel, two elevators were built that would carry guests from street level up to the hotel, which was to have a spectacular view of the Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon and Ipanema beach. Various problems led to the eventual abandoning of the project when it was already in an advanced stage, with both the main structure and the elevators built.

After years of legal battles, part of the space was used for the construction of a public school. The building was outfitted by UNICEF, and in conjunction with the Globo Television Network, the Children's Hope Space project was created, and eventually extended to São Paulo and another Rio de Janeiro location. Viva Rio assumed responsibility for the execution and administration of the project, which offers artistic and sports activities for children and adolescents from low-income communities. The goal of the program is to fill the after-school free time of these children with healthy and productive activities.

The Children's Hope Space team in Rio de Janeiro is made up of 40 professionals, among them schoolteachers, coordinators, and educational agents, all trained by Viva Rio. The project benefits 15,000 residents of the Cantagalo and Pavão/Pavãozinho communities. One in every two children from these communities has already participated in Children's Hope Space activities, and 90% of all program participants are from these communities.

The Space possesses a "Future Library", created with support from the National Library, the Post Office, and the Division of Libraries and Documentation of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). In the Future Library, residents have access to a video library, language lab, and 32 computers with Internet access. The Library has a Children's Space for encouraging reading in children from 5 to 12, and promotes lectures and visits from prominent literary and artistic figures. Expositions, debates, lectures, video sessions, and visits from storytellers are common. There is also the Mothers' Club, which receives 350 mothers every month for athletic and artistic activities, as well as classes in sewing, crochet, and elementary education review.

Today, the Space boasts 2,000 students between the ages of 4 and 18 enrolled in its sports classes and art workshops, and a total of more than 7,000 visitors per month. In all, there are 86 different classes in activities such as soccer, indoor soccer, basketball, volleyball, swimming, drama, dance, and environmental discussion groups. Another 500 youth over the age of 18 have formed soccer teams that compete in weekly tournaments. The space also promotes art exhibitions from both residents and outsiders, as well as field days and "peace tournaments" with the participation of businesses, universities, and public schools.

Recently, 45 youth from the project entered a new system to monitor the first job project at the Space. The monitors are scholarship winners 14/15 years old, 16/18 years old, and all are students of the project from the previous year. They will work 20 hours a week, and will continue to visit the school and activities at the Space. Their performance in the school and

in their project activities will be used as a criterion for renewing their contracts the following year.

Box J – Experiences at the Future Stations and the Children’s Hope Space

The Cabbage

In the *favela* of Maré there was a curious case: a boy, with no money, showed up at the Future Station with a cabbage. He wanted to trade the cabbage for a few minutes of Internet access. He got to surf the web – for the first time in his life – without paying, and took the cabbage back home. Today, the boy is a faithful Station client.

Internet Shopping

Until his first visit to the Future Station, supermarket cashier Antonio Manoel, 35, had never sat in front of a computer. He learned to surf the web with the help of the staff, and today he goes on-line three times a day. He uses the Internet to visit chat rooms, exchange e-mail, hear music, and shop. “It’s cheaper and more practical. I don’t have to go down the hill to buy what I need,” explains Manoel, who has already introduced his children Simone, 8, and Marcelo, 4, to the Internet. Marcelo has already learned to play computer games and navigate the Cartoon Network site.

The View from Outside

Alexander Salvador, a student of 21, traded Buenos Aires for Rio de Janeiro. Rocinha, to be exact. Resident of the *favela* for one year now, he uses the computers of the Future Station to read Argentine newspapers and maintain contact with family and friends back home. What most impresses him at the Future Station is the demand for chats. “It is incredible the need to communicate with the outside world. Even if the outside world means ‘over in Copacabana,’” jokes Alexander, who is always helping new internauts get their bearings.

Virtual Chat

Aline, 18, is addicted to chat rooms. She learned of the Future Stations from friends and became part of a clique that frequents chat rooms. There, Aline likes to get creative with her appearance: “You don’t have to show yourself, say who you really are, so you can kind exaggerate a little,” confesses this otherwise timid girl. Besides MTV’s website, Aline also uses the Internet to visit job search sites like the Worker’s Aid Center (CAT) and the electronic magazine of the Viva Favela web portal.

Office

With only six months as manager of the Campo Grande Future Station, young Aline Ramos, 23, is already proud of the numbers she has produced. “400 people pass through here, on average, every day,” says Aline. The demand for the Information Technology Club courses and Internet access is so high that the staff are hardly able to keep up with all the requests to post their résumés with the CAT. “Our Station is located right in the center of the town, and this explains the intense demand. Just in résumés we receive about 50 a week,” explains the manager. She says that many Station regulars are workers, who use the Station as an office. “They send faxes, print up reports, do research, and exchange e-mails,” she reports.

Sewing Class

Member of the Mothers’ Club, young Andréia Antunes, 30, saw in the sewing classes at the Children’s Hope Space a chance to learn a trade. “It’s difficult finding a job, so I decided to enroll in the course,” she explains. In her class there are 12 students of all ages, all hoping to find work. After 3 months, Andréia is already making her first pieces. “This skirt came out crooked, but you have to start somewhere. I am training to be a professional seamstress,” she adds.