Digital Access Amongst the Marginalized: Democracy Through Internet Governance in Rio de Janeiro

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This paper uses 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork to examine how Internet governance and policies intended to expand Internet inclusion are vital contemporary efforts to redefine the relationship between the Brazilian state and Rio de Janeiro’s urban poor neighborhoods. In April 2014, Brazil enacted the Marco Civil da Internet, an “Internet Bill of Rights” that seeks to bring democratic principles to the control and use of the Internet in Brazil. This law, which establishes rules on net neutrality, online privacy, data retention, and intermediary liability, regards Internet access as a requisite for civil rights in Brazil. Because understanding the connection between digital division and social inequality is paramount to economic and social inclusion in Brazil (Patry 2014), the Marco Civil’s promotion of Internet access for its citizenry positions the country as a pioneer in Internet governance among developing nations. Both a recent surge in smartphone use and tech policies implemented by the Brazilian state spurred an increase in Internet access among Rio’s marginalized communities. Yet access to digital technology is by no means a cure-all for the inequities experienced by the marginalized. In Rio de Janeiro, the virtues of access promoted by the Marco Civil are often co-opted both within the social dynamics of urban favelas and by the tech policies that attempt to further the law’s democratic objectives.