

# Pay Television Among Low-Income Populations: Reflections on Research Performed in the Rio de Janeiro *Favela* of Rocinha<sup>1</sup>

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the results of a study performed in Brazil's most notorious shantytown (or *favela*), Rocinha, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Over 150 residents with pay television subscriptions responded to questions regarding their television viewing habits before and since subscribing. The author contends that pay television was used primarily to gain better or increased access to Brazilian programming and a small number of particular types of foreign programming. She questions whether pay television viewership in Rocinha should be characterized as evidence of cultural imperialism and suggests that, in places such as Rocinha, where having access to only broadcast stations can effectively mean having access to a single television channel, it could be useful to extend conventional notions of the "digital divide" to include non-"interactive" media such as television.

Keywords: shantytowns, television, pay television

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## RESUMO

O presente trabalho apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa realizada na mais famosa favela do Brasil, a Rocinha, localizada na cidade do Rio de Janeiro. Mais de 150 rocinenses, assinantes a serviços de televisão a cabo, responderam a uma série de perguntas sobre seus hábitos de assistir televisão antes e depois de assinar. A autora afirma que os participantes usaram a televisão paga, antes de tudo, para melhorarem ou aumentarem seu acesso a programação nacional e a alguns poucos tipos de programação estrangeira. Ela questiona se o hábito dos rocinenses de assistirem a televisão a cabo deverá ser caracterizado como evidência de imperialismo cultural e sugere que, em lugares como a Rocinha — onde ter acesso a somente canais abertos pode, efetivamente, significar ter acesso a um só canal — poderia ser de utilidade ampliar as noções convencionais da “brecha digital” para incluir meios não-“interativos”, como a televisão.

Palavras-chave: favelas, televisão, televisão paga

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche menée dans la plus célèbre favela du Brésil, la *Rocinha*, qui se trouve dans la ville de Rio de Janeiro. Plus de 150 *Rocinenses* (les habitants de cette favela) abonnés à la télédistribution ont répondu aux questions concernant leurs habitudes de visionnement de télévision avant et après leur abonnement au système payant. L'auteur affirme que les abonnés s'utilisent de la télédistribution surtout pour améliorer et élargir leur possibilité d'accès à des émissions nationales et à certaines émissions étrangères. Elle se demande si l'habitude qui ont les *Rocinenses* de s'abonner à la télédistribution doit être caractérisée comme évidence de l'impérialisme culturel et propose qu'à des endroits comme la *Rocinha* - où le fait de n'avoir accès qu'à la télévision diffusée peut effectivement restreindre l'accès à une seule chaîne de télévision - il pourrait être utile d'augmenter les notions conventionnelles du « *digital divide* » (« fracture numérique ») pour y inclure des médias non-« interactives » tels que la télévision.

mots-clés : Favelas ; Télévision diffusée ; Télédistribution.

## RESUMEN

El presente estudio analiza los resultados de una investigación desarrollada en la favela de mayor importancia de Brasil, Rocinha, ubicada en la ciudad de Río de Janeiro. Más de 150 residentes del lugar suscritos a servicios de televisión pagada respondieron una serie de preguntas con respecto a sus hábitos como telespectadores antes y después

de la subscripción. El argumento de la autora es que el servicio de televisión pagada fue adquirido principalmente para obtener mejor y mayor acceso a programación brasileña y a un número reducido de programas extranjeros específicos. Ella cuestiona si la audiencia de la televisión pagada de Rocinha se debe explicar como parte del imperalismo cultural y sugiere que en casos como este, donde el acceso a la televisión abierta efectivamente significa acceso a un solo canal, podría resultar de utilidad extender las nociones convencionales de “brecha digital”, de modo que incorpore medios que no son “interactivos”, como la televisión.

Palabras-llave: favelas, televisión, televisión pagada

In recent years, discussions on the Internet and the World Wide Web have tended to overshadow technologies that are generally considered unidirectional and hence of lesser interest to scholars whose interests lie in understanding culturally and socially situated human interactions with electronic technologies. Furthermore, discussions on the “digital divide” and practitioners working to “bridge” it, almost by definition, have tended to focus on newer technologies such as the Internet and sometimes digital television, overlooking older technologies such as broadcast television (see Comitê para Democratização da Informática 2003; Digital Divide Network 2003; Sociedade Digital n.d.). Additionally, it has been argued that television has contributed to cultural imperialism on the part of powerful nations, particularly the United States. This paper, in contrast, considers cable television viewership in the Rio de Janeiro shantytown, or *favela*, of Rocinha, presenting results from a study performed there in 1999, and attempts to demonstrate the continuing importance of the national in cable viewership choices.

The remainder of this paper will present some of the scholarship on television and cultural imperialism; discuss television in Brazil; present the study; and conclude with observations regarding cultural imperialism and the “digital divide.” This paper, in the spirit of work done in literary theory and library science to promote the valuation of fiction and in communication theory to raise appreciation of mass media products, argues that information and communication technologies, such as broadcast and cable television,

that have traditionally provided large quantities of entertainment resources must not be overlooked in discussions of unequal access to information and communication technologies.

## Why consider television in the “Information Age”?

It seems that with the emergence of each new medium, emerge the notions that this new medium will save or damn society, especially those members of society who are economically or otherwise disadvantaged.<sup>3</sup> For example, broadcast television was once hailed as a way of bringing cultural unity to nations and national identity to their citizens. Indeed, television in Brazil was designed and used, may would say nefariously, as a nation-building tool (Morais 1995; Straubhaar 1989; Wainberg 1997). Others have considered television a useful tool for the socialization of children (Winett 1986) and for community and economic development in underdeveloped countries.<sup>4</sup> Broadcast television, with its limited programming and lack of a built-in mechanism for informing producers of viewers’ reactions to programs, has since come to be associated with audience passivity, lowbrow entertainment, exploitation, and dulled senses. One of the most visible proponents of this point of view is Postman, whose 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* expresses such concerns. Furthermore, pay television’s technical ability to provide a wider range of programming has been identified as a potentially beneficial or liberating aspect of the various technologies that enable pay television, but warnings of social disintegration through audience segmentation also abound. The Internet and other new technologies that allow for (some would say, require) “interactivity” and bi-directional (and multi-directional) communication, although not without their own problems, make television appear an even poorer medium for fostering human growth, community, and social integration.

Uni-directional communication in general, and specifically television (setting aside for the present two-way television systems not in use in Rocinha), are often associated with entertainment or with low-quality news programs. Multi-directional communication, epitomized by the Internet, is often equally simplistically associated with the potential for gaining

information and, through information, learning. On the one hand, television audience passivity has been questioned for decades (e.g., Klapper 1960; Winett 1986; Fiske 1987); on the other hand, discussions of the Internet have perpetuated the idea of passivity in conventional television viewing by contrasting the supposedly (in more than the narrow, technical sense of the word) “interactive” nature of the Internet with the supposedly non-interactive nature of television (Owen 1999 is one example). In short, the deprecation of one-way communication blends with the privileging of information and the deprecation of entertainment, allowing us to ignore the ways in which members of an audience can make use of even the poorest of representations.

Culture, information, and entertainment are not simply transmitted from a source to a receiver. Cultures are lived; messages are interpreted, negotiated, contested, discarded, ignored; and people make choices, although admittedly not entirely autonomously. Much work in literary theory, communication, and library science, among other disciplines has been done in recent years on how people interact with messages of all sorts, whether they are presented as fictional or non-fictional (Baltimore County Public Library 1998; Eco 1979; Elasmir and Sim 1997; Louw 2001; Radway 1984; Smith 1998; Taylor 1986; and Tomkins 1980 are but a few). At least one author describes how the media can be used creatively to sustain national cultures (Lee 1980). Salwen (1991) notes that the cultural imperialism literature has tended to focus on development and political economy and that “these orientations ultimately construct formations concerning cultural heritage and behavior based on analysis of government and/or corporate practice and policy,” calling for the introduction of a focus on the actual behavior of media users (1991, 29). Mattelart and Mattelart (1990) take a closer look at the Brazilian situation and note the influence on television content of both ratings and more personal methods of measuring viewers’ reactions to programming, such as the use of focus groups and tapping into the personal networks of telenovela authors. What emerges is an understanding of the dynamic nature of television production, despite the many nearly inalterable genre conventions (37-44).

Furthermore, identities are always multi-faceted and changing. No “community” has one single, “real,” static culture, and culture exists both

within and outside the market (Anderson 1983). Nor is the fact that a cultural product has been produced in one's country of origin sufficient to consider it necessarily part of one's own culture. It is imperative that we attempt to understand how people interact with cultural products of all sorts and not limit ourselves by romantic notions of real, folk, local cultural or facile understandings of either transmission of culture or resistance, or even by the assumption that "submission and resistance, opposition and complicity" need be mutually exclusive (Martín-Barbero 1993, 193). Marques de Melo insists that the most salient characteristic of social organization is its stratification, that societies are not "unicultural" (1970, 115). Martín-Barbero points to the importance of not believing, on the one hand, that we are forced to enjoy any particular cultural product or, on the other hand, that we are entirely free to choose. He criticizes North American analysts of mass culture, saying that, for the most part:

[T]heir cultural analysis is cut off from an analysis of the relations of power. . . . This leads to a culturalism reducing society to culture and culture to consumption. . . . [T]he theories of North American sociologies and psychologists have ended up coinciding with the aristocratic pessimism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on a crucial point: the incorporation of the masses in society, for better or worse, means the disintegration of social classes.

In this line of thinking, the modes of articulation of social conflicts within culture and the overlapping of layers of contradictory cultural demand in the production of hegemony are ignored. The result is a culturalism that shrouds the idealism of its propositions with the technological materialism of effects and the ahistorical inflation of mediation. (37)

Cultural capital, as understood by Bourdieu (1984), is accumulated over one's lifetime and involves tastes and what one knows of various cultural forms and expressions. Straubhaar (2000) observes:

[I]n most countries, only elites or upper middle classes have the education, employment experiences, travel opportunities, and family backgrounds that give them the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) required to understand and enjoy programs in other languages. In fact, this paper will argue that this also extends beyond language to culture, that the cultural capital required for wanted to watch many kinds of imported programs also tends to be concentrated in middle and upper classes. Thus, while cultural capital is separable from economic capital, the former is bounded and constrained by the latter, the economic aspects of social class (202).

Rocinha may seem an unexpected site for the emergence of pay television and offers the opportunity to explore preferences for cultural in ways in which these are not often studied. Why did residents with little in

the way of disposable income subscribe to pay television services? What were they watching? What were they most interested in watching? Did users of the various systems differ in any significant ways? What are some of the ways in which viewership of Brazilian and foreign programming changed with the advent of pay television in Rocinha? And what are some of the lessons can we draw from our answers to these questions?

## Television in Brazil

Television, followed by radio, is the dominant medium in Brazil, where illiteracy rates are high among the lower classes and the use of print media is low. This is borne out in the high levels of money spent on television advertising (Porto 1999, 2-4). One network, Globo, which supported the military government and was in turn supported by the dictatorships that lasted from the 1960s into the 1980s, has dominated broadcast television in Brazil for approximately forty years, although its influence has diminished significantly (Duarte 1996, 38-44; 54-59). To this day, Globo tends to have the strongest signals, and in remote places or places like parts of Rocinha, which simply have bad reception, it is not uncommon for Globo to be the only viewable broadcast channel. For further discussion of television in Brazil, readers may wish to consult Sérgio Mattos (2000), who provides an in-depth investigation of the history and literature of broadcast in Brazil, and Lopes (1991), who surveys much of the communication studies literature about that country.

The Brazilian economy is one of the most unequal in the world: the difference between rich and poor is staggering, but Brazil is a middle-income country by World Bank standards. One World Bank report notes that poverty in Brazil could be eliminated “for a cost of less than 1 percent of the country’s gross domestic product,” despite the Bank’s own estimate that 17.4% of Brazilians lived below the poverty line in 1990 (1995, x). It should come as no surprise, then, that many wealthy Brazilians gain access to new technologies, for example in their visits abroad. Penetration rates of technologies that require a critical mass of domestic users to be economically viable, including pay television, however, tend to lag years behind rates in the United States. Although cable television has been

common in the United States for decades and was introduced in Brazil in the 1980s, in the late 1990s it not surprisingly remained a somewhat new phenomenon to most of Brazil.<sup>5</sup> Porto (1999) provides penetration rate data, making it clear that in the late 1990s, pay television remained primarily an elite phenomenon in Brazil.

The implications for Brazilian society of the advent of cable and other pay television technologies have been hotly debated. Perhaps the biggest question facing researchers of pay television in Brazil is to what extent its introduction changes the general situation in which Globo dominates, followed by at maximum a handful of other networks. Will Brazil follow the model of the United States and undergo audience segmentation and loss of advertising revenues for the broadcast networks, or will the larger broadcast networks continue to dominate? Duarte (1996) predicts audience segmentation among the elites and that broadcast television will be relegated to members of the lower classes and Hoineff (1991) goes so far as to claim that pay television will revolutionize television in Brazil. Porto (1999) questions whether these and other researchers exaggerate the importance of pay television and the likelihood of audience fragmentation, noting that penetration remained low in the late 1990s and that one of the most important roles of pay television has been to provide improved signals from the broadcast networks. Furthermore, he notes that Globo's audience shares had already begun to decline before the advent of pay television and warns against believing that a shift away from Globo necessarily means a shift toward pay channels. Researchers, such as Ferreira (1996) and Porto (1999), have warned that a greater threat than audience fragmentation brought on by pay television comes from the continued concentration of ownership within both broadcast and pay television, which they see as negatively impacting democratic communication.

Telenovelas have historically dominated the prime-time slots in Brazil, along with the nightly news. American films are shown on a variety of networks, as are imported cartoons. Other imported programming, such as situation comedies, is largely from the United States. Straubhaar (1991) found that although there were many hours of such foreign programming available, most filled non-prime-time slots. Morales and Lobo (1996) found that over 70% of programming available on broadcast channel in São Paulo were of Brazilian origin (1996, 116). Some genres are more likely to



be produced in Brazil and some are more likely to be imported. Generally speaking, even in strong markets such as Brazil's, programs with high production values, most notably films, are often imported. Additionally, some genres cross cultures better than do others: those with violent, slapstick, or sexual content are easier to translate across cultures, and particularly across languages, than are programs that rely on deep cultural understanding or the subtleties of language.

## Rocinha

Rocinha, Brazil's largest shantytown – population estimates vary widely (TV Roc n.d.; IPLANRIO, 1996), but 150,000 residents appears to be a reasonable estimate, is a much-studied site. Located in Rio de Janeiro, it is easily accessible. It is also famous throughout Brazil, and its image is often evoked to illustrate any number of points, ranging from the idea of a class of hard-working poor to that of a consumer-oriented society to that of the outlaw marginal. Furthermore, an unusual number of foreigners perform research and other work in Rocinha.

Although Rocinha is wired with fiber-optic cables (with the potential for two-way communication), there is little evidence that in general the Brazilian lower classes will find their neighborhoods wired any time soon. Nothing more than tentative conclusions about favelas from what is stated here about Rocinha should be drawn. Rocinha, by Brazilian standards, is a relatively wealthy and established shantytown that increasingly would not fit the definition of *favela*, and indeed Rocinha is now officially an administrative region rather than a favela. Nonetheless, Rocinha's residents suffer from many of the problems common to low-income urban dwellers throughout the country and the world. Much of the housing and urban and social services remain precarious, Rocinha is famous for its history and continued prominence in drug trafficking and other criminal activities, and its residents are unlikely to see the stigma (or the associated difficulties of, among other things, securing employment and interacting with the police) associated with living in Rocinha diminish.<sup>6</sup>

Rocinha may be poor and its residents may for the most part lack first-hand knowledge of the world outside of their hometowns, Rio, or in

some cases, even of Rocinha itself, but the place and its residents are by no means isolated. Indeed, television is one of the main forms of gaining cultural capital and an understanding of what it means to be Brazilian. For those who cannot afford to learn about the outside world by visiting it, what can be gained from films, documentaries, and other programs takes a particularly central (if distorting) role in the accumulation of their cultural capital for understanding themselves and dealing with others, as well as seeking information and making further media choices. Nor can the rest of Brazil escape even the image of Rocinha; it is part of the culture, economy, and, in general, the reality of Brazil.

With the help of several residents of Rocinha, research was performed in July and August 1999 with over 150 participants who answered survey questions, primarily in the context of long face-to-face interviews. I performed most of the interviews myself, but, due to time constraints, several residents assisted me in interviewing cable subscribers. I was assisted throughout by one resident in particular, and we used at first a snowball method that eventually gave way to asking people on the beach or in the street for their cooperation in the study.

We identified four cable providers in Rocinha. One of these, TV Roc, created in 1996, was operating legally with investment from Net Rio, which is a subsidiary of Net Brasil, which in turn is controlled by the media conglomerate Globo Enterprises (Silva 1998). By offering a reduced number of channels compared to those available in other parts of the city and by relying on local workers who knew the terrain, Roc was able to gain access to Rocinha, with its unlabeled alleys and unnumbered houses, and to offer its services at greatly reduced prices. Roc's office is located in São Conrado, the upper-class neighborhood that borders on Rocinha, on the same block as a supermarket that is frequented by residents of Rocinha and São Conrado alike. The lobby, which is all most subscribers are likely to see of the office, in 1999 appeared spacious, immaculate, and modern; it had many computers; and it was not quite inviting. The office of at least one of the other cable providers contrasted greatly with that of Roc, the entire place appearing smaller than Roc's lobby.

The remaining three providers were "pirate" systems that apparently provided whichever signals they were able to obtain, which included the

freely available broadcast stations. These three providers seem to have made particular efforts to obtain the signals of the most popular narrowcast stations, most importantly the Cartoon Network, a sports channel, and a movie channel. The three “pirate” systems each competed with TV Roc but apparently not with each other: each seemed to have staked out terrain that did not overlap with the terrain of either of the other alternative systems. This observation was supported by a statement made by the owner of one of the “pirate” systems, but he was not a particularly reliable source. Still, we saw no evidence of competition among the three systems.

In April of 2001, an article in the *Jornal do Brasil* featured the three illegal cable operators in Rocinha (Ulisses Mattos 2001). The author claims that about thirty percent of Rocinha’s homes were hooked up to these systems and also makes two of the most important observations of this study. First, many residents felt they needed to subscribe because without pay television, they would have access to almost no television whatsoever. Since signals on the hill on which Rocinha is located are very weak in many places, access even to broadcast channels can be difficult without cable or satellite, the latter being available but expensive. Hence, short of tuning out, many residents had three television choices for their homes: poor reception, TV Roc, or an even cheaper but illegal cable system. Second, the article highlights the particular importance of the Cartoon Network, which residents said they believed kept children off, as Mattos put it, “going out on the streets to expose themselves to recruitment by drug traffickers.”

It would seem, then, that both Roc and the authorities are aware of the illegal systems but will not or cannot stop their activities. That the existence of the three is already public knowledge seems to indicate that harm is unlikely to come to residents from this study. Roc and the authorities do not appear to have the power to combat these activities, nor can Roc afford to alienate residents by doing so on a large scale.

## Study results

Just over 60% of the participants were women: since time was limited, many interviews had to be performed during the day, when more women than men were available. Participants ranged in age from thirteen to well over fifty.

Over half were migrants from the Northeast of Brazil, and many others had parents who had migrated from that part of the country, as is common in favelas in the Southeast. Many participants, particularly younger ones, had grown up in Rocinha or elsewhere in Rio, but few had come from anywhere except the Northeast or Rio. A little over half were Catholics and almost a third were evangelical Protestants, not surprising given the increased presence of Protestantism in Brazil, especially among the lower classes, in recent years.

Participants' educational experiences ranged from having had no formal schooling to holding undergraduate degrees, but the vast majority ranged from having begun but not completed primary school to having started but not finished high school. Two-thirds of residents said they read "well" or "very well." In short, although participants were not highly educated, they by no means represent the most disadvantaged of the Brazilian population, who tend to be uneducated, illiterate, and hungry.

Many of the women were homemakers, and their husbands and fathers, as well as the men who were interviewed, were often semi-skilled or skilled laborers. Among both the men and the women, there were a number of vendors and restaurant staff. There was also the occasional retired person, maid, or administrative assistant. Although a higher percentage of Rocinha's residents probably work outside the home than the sample would suggest because those who were interviewed were people who had the time to answer a long list of questions, these jobs are of the types one might expect residents to hold.

Just under half of the people interviewed subscribed to Roc, and almost all of the remainder subscribed to one particular alternative system, "Sat."<sup>7</sup> This prevalence of Sat subscriptions over subscriptions to the other alternative systems is due to the fact that it took some time to realize that Roc had more than one cable competitor and because the research was initiated in Sat's territory; this prevalence should not be taken as evidence of dominance on the part of Sat.

Ninety-seven, or 63%, of the 154 participants who answered the open-ended question, "why did you subscribe?" said they did so to obtain better reception, suggesting that media imperialism was not strongly at work among these participants, since they were interested in local and national channels, which air almost exclusively Brazilian programming during

prime-time hours and primarily Brazilian programming at other times. The remaining 37% noted that they had subscribed in order to have more programming choices (often because they believed Sunday television offered them nothing worth viewing), in order to gain access to specific types of programming, because others had subscribed, because of the low price of subscriptions, or for some other reason. Additionally, parents often noted that their children watched cartoons and that such behaviors were preferable to playing in the streets or alleys. Indeed, several parents commented that they could no longer imagine getting by without the cartoons to help keep their children off the streets and at least somewhat out from under foot. (See the appendix for data on sex, age, education, literacy, primary pay television system, and primary reason for subscribing.)

Subscribers to Roc and to the alternative systems did not have noticeably different viewing habits. Preferences centered on Brazilian products, including prime-time nightly news and soap operas, as well as on particular types of foreign programming broadcast on late nights, weekends, and weekdays. These foreign programs included not only cartoons (available at all times and viewed primarily by children), but also sports (mostly a weekend phenomenon), films (aired late nights and weekends), and, to a lesser but important extent, the Discovery Channel (available at all times but not necessarily viewed during prime time), which airs nature programs.

It was expected that indicators of cultural capital would both be greater with education and wealth and would correlate with greater interest in foreign programming. Insufficient quantitative data were collected to attempt to show any such statistical links, but the qualitative data suggest that the younger, better educated, and generally more worldly participants did indeed exhibit greater preferences for some foreign content (and ability to identify such content) than the older, less educated, or more isolated participants.

Subscribers to the alternative systems appear to have been much less likely to be aware of the origins of programs, particularly Latin American programs from outside of Brazil. Often, when they were asked to name their favorite television shows or networks from a particular geographical area, they mentioned programs or networks that were inappropriate to the question. Those who had difficulty answering these questions tended to

have completed little or no primary school. Confusion over the difference between pay and broadcast channels affected users of Roc and alternative systems alike (apparently in part because of the unavailability of some broadcast channels prior to subscription), although again those with less education tended to exhibit greater confusion. In both cases, age does not appear to have been an important factor, except in that older participants tended to be less educated. Younger participants with less education seemed to be as easily confused by these distinctions as the older participants with less education did.

Participants were asked if they watched telenovelas before subscribing. The overwhelming majority, 120, or 77.4%, of the 155 who answered the question said they had tended to watch them before subscribing. Of the 156 who said whether they watched more, less, or about the same ones with pay television, 100, or 64.1%, said their viewing habits had not changed. The remainder were split: 31 (19.9%) said they watched less, while 25 (16.0%) said they watched more. It is possible that those who said they watched more after subscribing did so because they now had an improved signal, while those who said they watched less may have chosen newer options. It is also likely that many of those who said they watch them more or less often were simply watching television more or less often, which may have been related to factors external to the scope of this study, such as changes in familial or job-related responsibilities. The data offer no discernible patterns, except that 60 participants gave the same answer for the questions regarding whether they watched more television and whether they watched more telenovelas.

As for habits regarding the viewing of Brazilian television programs in general, 91 of 153 (59.5%) said they watched no more or less Brazilian television at the time the survey was taken. Nearly a quarter (36 participants, 23.5%) said they watched more, and the remaining 26 participants (17.0%) claimed they watched less. It should be noted that several participants commented that they were watching less television in general because they had to work longer hours. The Brazilian economy had recently taken a downturn and it appears employers were requiring more from their workers and people were more willing to take on extra work to make ends meet. Men in particular complained that they no longer had as much free time.

When asked to name the three Brazilian television programs they most liked, participants had very little difficulty. More participants had some difficulty mentioning the three programs from the United States that they most liked, but this also did not appear to be particularly burdensome. However, questions regarding programs originating in other parts of the world were overwhelming met with answers that did not fit the question, statements expressing little to no interest in such programs, or confusion. Overall, preferences were first for Brazilian programs; then for particular formats or genres, particularly motion pictures, and programs that had been present in Brazil for decades and had to some extent been naturalized; then for programs from the United States (which overlapped significantly with the previous category); and only then to programming from other parts of the world.

Looking at cultural proximity, as described by Straubhaar (1991), one might expect to see an interest in Latin American products over those from the United States, since Latin American products would seem to be more culturally similar to Brazil. Several factors may account for participants' clear preference for American programming, on the whole, over programming from other parts of Latin America, again on the whole. First, it is not clear to what extent Brazilian culture can accurately be described as more like other Latin American cultures than it is like that of the United States. Secondly, preferences tended to be for certain types of programming from the United States, namely cartoons, films, and, to a lesser extent, music, not for drama or comedy series. All three of the former have to some extent been naturalized and cartoons and films are not available in large quantities in Brazilian incarnations. The U.S. motion picture industry, for example, has not always acted honorably to secure Brazilian audiences, and it seems to have succeeded in dominating the movie market in Brazil, both in theaters and in homes. Finally, the available foreign programming comes largely from the United States.

As for programming from Mexico and the rest of Spanish-speaking Latin America, it comes almost exclusively in the form of telenovelas and the series "Chaves" (Duarte 1996). Both of those were mentioned by participants, but Brazil has its own telenovelas with which the other Latin American ones must compete during prime time.

## Conclusion

In general, participants were not using their access to new channels to move away from Brazilian shows but rather to gain better access to Brazilian programs and a handful of types of largely foreign programs. Participants watched, enjoyed, and benefited from programming that is generally considered informational (e.g., the news), programming that is generally considered entertaining (e.g., feature-length films), and programming that fits conventional notions of both informational programs and of entertainment programs (e.g., nature programs). Participants speaking of the Discovery Channel often noted that they liked programs about Africa and sometimes mentioned Brazilian nature documentaries and the Amazon channel in conjunction with the Discovery Channel. While participants who talked about the origins of films were more than aware that most of these programs came from the United States, discussions of nature programs focused on the exotic places and animals that were featured rather than the nationalities or origins of producers. Indeed, participants noted that they enjoyed these programs because they liked to learn about such distant lands as Africa and the Amazon, exotic places to Southeastern urban Brazilians. Additionally, several women mentioned cooking shows or other programs that they enjoyed watching and that provided them with fun or helpful tips. The cooking shows and films, as well as some of the sports, were often available over broadcast channels, although these stations would not always have been available had no one in participants' homes chosen to subscribe to a pay television service.

Subscribers were, then, overwhelmingly using cable television to gain access to cultural products of which they had already been aware when they subscribed, that are generally considered to be freely accessible to the public, and that were largely Brazilian. The major exceptions were children watching cartoons; viewers of all ages but especially young adults watching "edutainment" programs such as nature documentaries; and men watching sports, especially soccer, on cable channels. Yet, broadcast television reception depends greatly on geography. The various local and national broadcast channels, particularly Globo's competitors, had been barely accessible to many subscribers, many of whom complained about reception



problems they had encountered prior to subscribing. Thus, more than contributing greatly to media imperialism, or cultural imperialism in general, the advent of cable opened to Rocinha's residents programming that was already freely available to users of broadcast television elsewhere in the city (or even elsewhere on the hill) who were fortunate enough to receive good signals over the air, and cable-channel-induced audience segmentation during prime-time appeared to be small to nonexistent: the increased prime-time audience segmentation that was apparent was associated with better access to broadcast channels that allowed participants to watch more than Globo.

Cultural transformations are slow processes. It is quite possible that a similar study to this one done in 2020 would show a greater interest in foreign programming and possibly ill effects of such changes. We do not mean to advocate an "anything goes" attitude toward programming choices with the assumption that only the culturally interesting will be viewed and that viewers will resist all cultural change. Rather, we wish to point out that static cultures do not exist, that in the short term media and cultural imperialism do not appear to threaten to tear apart the fabric of Brazilian culture and society, and that viewing choices are complex, culturally and socially situated choices that cannot simply be imposed on others. Furthermore, what Rocinenses will take away from foreign programs they watch, now or in the future, as Ang (1996) reminds us, cannot so easily be determined.

But, in this age of digital gadgetry, apparently convergence of technologies, and interactivity, why, in the end, should we care about pay television in places like Rocinha? Discussions of the "divide" between technological "haves" and "have-nots" often center on access to "interactive" technologies such as the Internet, leaving ostensibly uni-directional technologies to the market with the implicit assumptions that (a) one-way technologies will remain largely unavailable to the poor, and (b) lack of access to uni-directional technologies is of little concern to society. A facile distinction between entertainment on one hand and informative or education programming on the other seems to reinforce the position of non-interactive narrowcast television as of inherently lesser importance than other technologies. As community technology centers, public libraries, and simi-

lar institutions – as well as governments, world bodies, non-governmental organizations, and community organizations – that work to reduce social inequalities and injustices continue to focus their energies increasingly on electronic technologies, we should actively seek not to become blinded by the newness, “interactivity,” and multi- or bi-directionality of the Internet and its various related technologies. Nor should we become so enthralled with bits and bytes, or even with the term “information,” as to overlook the many other ways in which resources, cultural products, and services are unequally and inequitably distributed. Pay television may remain a largely elite phenomenon, as Porto (1999) predicts, but it also seems to be making inroads in Rocinha and at least some other favelas. In this context, cable television, which is as much a vehicle for broadcast television signals as it is for narrowcast, should not be overlooked by those intent on understanding or reducing social inequalities. The information and communication technology divide, if it can even be adequately termed a “divide,” includes technologies such as broadcast television in places like Rocinha. As such, it is not solely a “digital divide.”

## Appendix: Selected Data

There were 161 participants who completed a substantial part of the questionnaire, of whom 156 answered all questions; in several other cases, potential participants began the process but soon refused to continue. Of the 161 forms, 2 had some illegible responses. Except for data on gender, all data were self-reported.

Variable	Percentage of Cases
<b>Gender (n=161)</b>	
Female	62.7
Male	37.3
Total	100.0
<b>Age (n=159)</b>	
Under 19	8.8
19-25	25.2
26-35	36.5
36-50	23.9
50+	5.7
Total	100.1
<b>Education (n=156)</b>	
None	6.4
Some primary	47.4
Completed primary	9.0
Some secondary	16.0
Completed secondary	19.2
Some university	1.3
Completed university	0.6
Total	99.9
<b>Literacy (n=156)</b>	
Illiterate	5.1
Reads with difficulty	6.4
Reads more or less well	21.2
Reads well	41.0
Reads very well	26.3
Total	100.0
<b>Pay television system (n=161)<sup>i</sup></b>	
TV Roc	47.8
Sat	39.8
Festa	6.2
Carangueijo	3.7
Satellite	2.5
Total	100.0
<b>Primary Reason for Initial Subscription (n=154)<sup>ii</sup></b>	
Improve image quality or reception	63.0
More variety in programming	21.4
Specific types of programming (cartoons, educational, films, music videos)	7.8
Bandwagon, price, or other	7.8
Total	100.0

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## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the Tinker Foundation for its generous financial support during June-August 1999, as well as Joseph Straubhaar, Philip Doty, and Jennifer Jobst for their support during the research and writing phases of this and related texts.
- 3 Winston (1998) convincingly asserts that media technologies begin to emerge well before they and the hyperbole associated with them become common among the general public and that technologies can be rejected for various reasons before or after they become familiar to the public. We are concerned here with the emergence of media technologies among critics and the general public rather than among scientists and technicians.
- 4 Radio and television have played central roles in development communication. Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner are among the most noted proponents of communication for development. Both rethought some of their earlier ideas as they witnessed failures in the field. Readers may wish to consult the 1967 and 1977 volumes edited by Lerner and Schramm, as well as Schramm's (1964) *Mass Media and National Development* and Lerner's (1958) *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Stevenson's (1988) *Communication, Development, and the Third World* and Hornik's (1988) *Development Communication* both provide overviews of development communication theory and practice.
- 5 Pay television in Brazil is by no means limited to cable television, but, since in 1999 cable was the only type of pay television in Rocinha with a sizeable presence, I will focus primarily on that technology. Where the term "pay television" is used, it is meant to refer to a greater variety of technologies, including satellite television in particular.
- 6 Perlman (1975; 1976) was among the first to discuss this stigma and the tension between what some see as the marginalization of favela dwellers (and what she terms the "myth of marginality") and their central importance to the Brazilian economy and society. For a more complete discussion of the popular image of Rocinha, see Letalien (2002, pp. 42-46).
- 7 Except for the names of companies that operate legally and Rocinha itself (which is too large, important, and famous to disguise), all names, including those of the illegal cable systems, have been changed.
- 8 Some participants had two systems, but all were able to say which one they thought they watched more often. The more often viewed system was considered the primary one.
- 9 This was an open-ended question: "Why did you subscribe?" Some participants gave more than one answer, and the first answer was coded as the primary reason except in cases in which participants expressed a desire to change their answers. The thesis for which this research was originally performed (Letalien, 2002) contains a detailed discussion of secondary responses and their relationship to primary ones.