IS CYBERSPACE THE NEW DEMOCRACY'S PANACE?

Daniel Abreu de Azevedo [a*] - David Melo van den Brule [b]

(a) PhD in Geography. Professor at the Federal University of Brasilia, Brasília (DF), Brazil.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5354-128X. **LATTES:** http://lattes.cnpq.br/6798175582732608.
(b) PhD in Geography. PhD at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife (PE), Brazil.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1158-7930. **LATTES:** http://lattes.cnpq.br/9707131744539866.

(*) CORRESPONDING AUTHOR
Address: Campus Darcy Ribeiro, ICC Norte, Mezanino, Asa Norte. Brasília (DF), Brazil. CEP: 70910-000. Phone:(+55 21) 98769-8343
E-mail: daniel.azevedo@unb.br

Abstract

It is common to find in papers about democracy, especially in Political Science and Sociology, internet as a possible weapon to overcome the dilemmas of representative democracy. The purpose of this article is to go towards opposite direction, that is, in a contemporary context marked by the defense of a digital democracy, we will reinforce the idea that democracy is made primarily in the materiality of political spaces, especially on a local scale. It will be demonstrated, from the case study of Juazeiro do Norte (CE), how democracy is built in geographic spaces that physically exist in the world without which the democratic system would be strongly affected. The article uses information compiled on the coverage of the mobile network and electoral participation and, later, primary and secondary data about Associations in Juazeiro. Based on Dalton's (2017) discussion of what he calls "sizeable socio-economic status participation gap" and contemporary discussions of Political Geography on political space, the article reveals the illusion of digital democracy in an extremely unequal territory and suggests that the existing gap in political participation among citizens in Brazil will not decrease by prioritizing cyberspace, but rather, political spaces should be strengthened and revalued at different scales, respecting the socio-spatial differences existing in Brazilian territory.

Keywords: Political Space, Democracy, Cyberspace, Inequality In Participation, Juazeiro do Norte.

Resumo / Resumen

CIBERESPAÇO É A NOVA PANACEIA DA DEMOCRACIA?

É comum encontrarmos em trabalhos que possuem a democracia como objeto de análise, especialmente na Ciência Política e na Sociologia, a internet como possível arma para superar os dilemas da democracia representativa. O objetivo desse artigo é ir na direção contrária, isto é, em um contexto contemporâneo marcado pela defesa de uma democracia digital, aqui reforçaremos a ideia de que a democracia se faz primordialmente na materialidade dos espaços políticos, especialmente em escala local. Demonstrar-se-á, a partir do estudo de caso de Juazeiro do Norte (CE), de que modo a democracia se constrói em espaços geográficos que existem fisicamente no mundo sem os quais o sistema democrático seria fortemente afetado. Para tanto, o artigo utiliza informações compiladas sobre a cobertura de rede móvel e de participação eleitoral e, posteriormente, dados primários e secundários sobre Associações (definidos na discussão teórica como espaços políticos limitados) presentes no município. Baseado na discussão de Dalton (2017) sobre o que denomina "hiato socioeconômico na participação" (sizeable socio-economic status participation gap) e nas discussões contemporâneas da Geografia Política sobre espaço político, o artigo revela a ilusão da democracia digital em um território desigual e sugere que o fosso existente na participação política entre os cidadãos no Brasil não será combatido priorizando o ciberespaço, mas sim, deve-se reforçar e revalorizar os espaços políticos em diferentes escalas, respeitando as diferenças socioespaciais existentes no território brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: Espaço Político, Democracia, Ciberespaço, Desigualdade Na Participação, Juazeiro do Norte.

ES EL CIBERESPACIO LA NUEVA PANACEA DE LA DEMOCRACIA?

Es común encontrar en investigaciones que tienen la democracia como objeto de análisis, especialmente en Ciencias Políticas y Sociología, la internet como posible arma para superar los dilemas de la democracia representativa. El propósito de este artículo es ir en sentido contrario, es decir, en un contexto contemporáneo marcado por la defensa de una democracia digital, aquí reforzaremos la idea de que la democracia se hace principalmente en la materialidad de los espacios políticos, especialmente a la escala local. Se demostrará, a partir del caso de estudio de Juazeiro do Norte (CE), cómo la democracia se construye en espacios geográficos que existen físicamente en el mundo sin los cuales el sistema democrático se vería fuertemente afectado. Así, el artículo utiliza información recopilada sobre la cobertura de la red móvil y participación electoral y, posteriormente, datos primarios y secundarios de las Asociaciones presentes en el municipio. Basado en la discusión de Dalton (2017) de lo que él llama "brecha socioeconómica de participación" (sizeable socio-economic status participation gap) y discusiones contemporáneas de Geografía Política sobre el espacio político, el artículo revela la ilusión de la democracia digital en un contexto extremadamente desigual y sugiere que la brecha en la participación política entre los ciudadanos en Brasil no se cerrará dando prioridad al ciberespacio, sino que los espacios políticos deben fortalecerse y revalorizarse en diferentes escalas, respetando las diferencias socioespaciales existentes en el territorio brasileño.

Palabras-clave: Espacio Político, Democracia, Ciberespaço, Desigualdad en la Participación, Juazeiro do Norte.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Internet and, more recently, social networking platforms have transformed social, economic and political relations, causing profound impacts on geographic space. These transformations have been and still are intensively analyzed by humanities professionals, from different analytical and methodological perspectives. It is common to find in papers that have democracy as an object of analysis, especially in Political Science and Sociology, the Internet as a possible weapon to overcome the dilemmas of representative democracy.

Inserted in this context, the article aims to go in the opposite direction, that is, in a contemporary scenario marked by the defense of a digital democracy, we will reinforce the idea that democracy is made primarily in the materiality of political spaces, especially on a local scale. While not denying the importance of cyberspace for the reinvention of the traditional way of doing politics, especially in the capacity of activating political spaces, it will show how democracy is built in geographic spaces that exist physically in the world, without which the democratic system would be strongly affected.

The coronavirus crisis (COVID-19) in 2020 revealed in the mainstream media something that official statistics already pointed out and we seemed to have forgotten: access to Internet and social networks is still very restricted to some social groups scattered asymmetrically in the territory. Whether in the attempt to adopt distance education for students of the public basic and higher education network, even in the opening of accounts at Caixa Econômica Federal to receive emergency aid, what was seen was the technological blackout that part of the Brazilian population lives until this day. On the other hand, we will demonstrate that even if there were a desirable expansion in Brazil's capacity to use the Internet, we should still view with caution the use of these means as substitutes for political spaces.

As will be presented in the next sections, an apparent paradox is presented in today's world: it has been a growth in political participation in new participatory institutions (AVRITZER, 2009) and more intense use of the streets for demonstrations (HARVEY, 2014), but, at the same time, there has been a gradual decrease in voter turnout (DALTON, 2017), revealing a marked alienation of the voter (voter alienation) in the last decade[1]. Thus, the main means of participation in representative democracy has been losing its value, while other methodologies have emerged and gained strength, such as online petitions, councils, public hearings, pressure groups in social networks, among others. Our central argument seeks to demonstrate how, contrary to what critics of representative democracy claim, this apparent paradox further widens the existing gap between social groups as political actors.

In this sense, this article is divided in two main moments. In the first section, we will present two theoretical bases that provide subsidies for the central argument: (a) the discussion brought by Dalton (2017) on what he calls sizeable socio-economic status (SES) participation gap, which is, how new participation mechanisms have increased the distance between people with more and less resources, jeopardizing democracy[2]; (b) and the contemporary discussion in Political Geography about political space and the importance of its physicality (PARKINSON, 2012) (materiality) for democracy. In the second section, we will use Juazeiro do Norte and some of its neighborhood associations as a case study to analyze the fallacy of cyberspace and how the materiality of political spaces is fundamental to the deepening of democracy, especially on a local scale in a medium-sized city in a region with serious socioeconomic problems.

We thus defend the importance of looking at democracy from the socio-spatial differences that exist in the territory (AKOS, 2009), that is, it is up to Geography and geographers to defend the idea that it would not be possible to think of symmetrical political engineering (SARTORI, 1996) in a country as asymmetrical as Brazil, running the risk of legitimizing vicious institutional practices that threaten the entire democratic system. The article suggests, therefore, that the existing gap in political participation among citizens of different social groups in Brazil will not be fought by prioritizing cyberspace and its participatory mechanisms, but rather, political spaces should be strengthened and revalued on different scales, respecting social-spatial differences existing in Brazilian territory.

THE DILEMMA OF CURRENT PARTICIPATION

At the end of 2017, the American political scientist Russell Dalton published a book called The

Participation Gap: social status & political inequality, in which he enters the millennial debate on the importance of participation for democracy. According to the author, there is a current within the human sciences that follows the tocquevillian idea and, more contemporarily, of Robert Putnam (1996), in arguing that a democracy develops in proportion to the increase in participation and, for this reason, it would be necessary to build new mechanisms to deepen democracy.

For this perspective, one of the main problems of democracy today would be the lack of citizen participation in politics, which would result in their greater detachment and feeling of non-representation. In this group, there are those who see the capitalist state and democracy as incompatible phenomena and believe that to minimize the oligarchic tendencies of liberal democracy it would be necessary to expand participation (CASTORIADIS, 2004; HOBSBAWN, 2007; SANTOS, 2009; RANCIÈRE, 2014), building a participatory democracy (PATEMAN, 1970). New participatory institutions (AVRITZER, 2009) would thus foment social capital (PUTNAM, 1996).

At first, discussions on participatory democracy suggested that traditional methods of representation via periodic elections should be supplanted by new and creative strategies of direct participation, whether plebiscite/referendum or even thematic Councils on multiple scales (see, for example, PATEMAN 1970). Nowadays, the movements that formerly advocated the complete end of representative democracy has joined with others in stating that these mechanisms should be used as a complement to expand participation, without excluding the more traditional political spaces of representative democracy, such as Parliaments of different political scales (AZEVEDO, 2018).

However, Dalton (2017) points out that the defense of increased participation has argumentative and practical flaws that need to be emphasized. For the political scientist, these authors make a mistake by considering participation tout court as an indicator of improving democracy. According to Dalton, one should not focus only on how much participation increased/decreased, but on who began to participate more or less. We also add that where is also an important analysis variable, as we will highlight in this article. Dalton takes up the criticism made by Lijphart (1996) about representative democracy: unequal participation means unequal influence, the greatest problem of representative democracy. Thus, despite the optimism generated by the creation of new participatory institutions and digital democracy, the sizeable socio-economic status (SES) of participation gap, that is, the socio-economic gap of participation would have increased with "cyberspace" and the new mechanisms developed in the last decades, which makes it a phenomenon that needs to be analyzed critically and not as a solution to the already recognized problems of representative democracy. It is this argument that we will analyze in more detail below.

THE INCREASE OF THE SOCIOECONOMIC GAP IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (SES PARTICIPATION GAP)

It is evident in the literature a significant increase in the defense of what is commonly defined as "e-democracy", "digital democracy", "cyber-democracy" or "electronic democracy" (MAGRANI, 2014; TRECHSEL, 2012), so that the rise of the Internet would promote greater accountability and governance (DUBUS et al, 2010). In their defense, some authors claim that the development of Internet would also make the citizen a producer of information and would amplify vigilance in relation to its rulers, making possible the (re)construction of elements of direct democracy (AL-KODMANY, 2000; AVRITZER, 2009; CASTELLS, 2013; CASTORIADIS, 2004; 2012; MANIN, 1995; 2013; NADALES, 1996; RAMOS, 2013; TENÓRIO, 2016). Shirky (2008; 2011) was one of the researchers who passionately defended information technology, stating that social networks would be tools that would allow new ways of forming political groups. According to the author, "group-forming has gone from hard to ridiculously easy, we are seeing an explosion of experiments with new groups and new kinds of groups" (SHIRKY, 2008, p.54).

Contrary to what we can see in some interpretations, social networks do not function as a means of non-spatial participation, because no matter how organized they are in the network, the protests take place in the political spaces of the street. Moreover, more than activating geographic spaces in political spaces (AZEVEDO, 2019; CASTELLS, 2013; CASTRO, 2018), geographers have already pointed to

the very spatiality of cyberspace (SANGUIN, 2014), including the geographic location of the thirteen main servers of the Internet's root zone (PIRES, 2012) or IP (Internet protocol) (ISRAEL, 2020).

Thus, globalization and the Internet do not destroy the importance of geography, but rather build a new complexity of socio-spatial dynamics. This debate has already been widely held by geographers from different parts of the world, such as O'Tuathail (2000), Santos (2000), Massey (2005), Haesbaert (2007), Agnew (2012) and Sanguin (2014), becoming unnecessary to enter into this discussion. The central argument of our article agrees with the questions that Sanguin (2014, p.3) has made: "To whom does deterritorialization benefit? Which social class promotes deterritorialization? For whom is this world without borders?". We can, in the discussion about cyberspace as a solution to the problems of democracy, use the metaphor of the same author when he says that "neither smooth nor flat: the world is all sharp! (op. cit, p.3).

Therefore, Dalton (2017) reveals that, unlike elections in which the fundamental principle is "one head, one vote"[3], the political participation that currently emerges on the Internet and social networks breaks with this logic from the moment that there are no limits to the creation of pressure groups, e-mails sent to congressional representatives, votes on online petitions, etc. If, in the first case, it is already the poorest and least educated classes that participate less and less in periodic elections (HESS & MCAVOY, 2015; DALTON, 2017), the latter makes the power of influence of people with more resources even greater.

Dalton's central argument (2017) corroborates the criticism made by Swyngedouw (2018) in what he called a "post-political city". In his recent work, the geographer revealed that the increase of certain participatory institutions in city management intensified the belief in technique at the expense of politics, disqualifying dissent in the name of consensus promoted by the "wise men". Research on municipal councils in Brazil points in the same direction (AZEVEDO, 2019a). Thus, although many times considered as institutions that would deepen and qualify democracy on a local scale (AVRITER, 2007), Councils, for example, composed by technicians in thematic areas and civil society organizations with little transparency, make the public administration more distant from the ordinary citizen and closer to an intellectual elite, characteristic already pointed out by different surveys (SANTOS JUNIOR et al, 2004; TENÓRIO & KRONEMBERGER, 2016).

Thereby, we agree with Dalton (2017) in stating that the defense of a digital democracy increases the socioeconomic gap in political participation (SES participation gap), especially in a society as unequal as the Brazilian one, presenting a process of info-exclusion (CASTELLS, 2013; RIBEIRO et al, 2013). On the other hand, even if there is a necessary and desired expansion of digital inclusion in the next few years[4], Political Geography may demonstrate virtual participation cannot replace the materiality of political spaces.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTER FOR DEMOCRACY: THE MATERIALITY OF POLITICAL SPACES

It seems anachronistic to affirm the importance of the materiality of political spaces in a time of expansion of the virtual world. Undoubtedly, we agree that the virtual world has introduced new elements to political practice, as became quite clear in June 2013 demonstrations in Brazil (CASTELLS, 2013; FERNANDES and ROSENO, 2013; SAKAMOTO, 2013). As Lee (2009, p.33) points out, "the end of public space" is a highly accepted point of view in the contemporary debate, which would have been promoted, among other reasons, by the increase of virtual space.

Parkinson (2012) also presents different authors throughout the 1990s and the 2000s who advocated for the greater importance that should be given to virtual social networks. However, we agree here with the author that while we pay attention to the media, we neglect what is being communicated. Revolutions are televised and these images and narratives are of a physical space and not of a cyberspace. The author uses the assumption of face-to-face contact to position himself favorably to the need for material spaces.

We share his concern by stating that "in a society where we all vote and decisions are made

online, I suspect that the debate would become less civil, more polarized and taken less seriously, because politics would become just more of a show" (op.cit. p.68). For this reason, we follow his defense by assuming that "democracy depends surprisingly on an availability of materiality [...] even in our undeniable digital world" (PARKINSON, 2012, p.2). Parkinson's demonstrates geographical sensibility and collaborates to spatialize democracy. Nevertheless, he is not the only one. A few works in Geography also go in this direction (BRINT & SALZMAN, 1988; LEE, 2009; MACHADO FILHO, 2018). Other authors have attempted to draw a typology of political spaces, qualifying them as open (streets and squares), limited (Councils and Associations) and exclusive (Parliaments at different political scales) (CASTRO, 2018) and also to build a methodology for measuring the quality of these political spaces for the democratic system (AZEVEDO, 2019). In any case, it is possible to affirm that the political space is materially built which serves as an intermediation and conditions the relations between State and society (AZEVEDO & LIÑARES, 2020).

It is worth emphasizing, once again, that defending the materiality of political spaces for democracy does not mean to say that the Internet and social networks do not play an important political role in the 21st century. As Gerbaudo (2012) states, social networks function as choreographies of assembly, since they perform a scene setting and build a script for the use of streets and squares. Although the author points out the benefits of social networks for democracy, he also highlights the risk of isolation if it is not accompanied by action on the streets and interaction with those people on the other side of the digital world, that is, people who "do not have a Facebook account" (GERBAUDO, 2012, p.15).

We agree with Parkinson (2012) when he asserts that deliberations which take place in political spaces tend to be more civic than virtual meetings, because we choose words more carefully in the presence of others. The before, during and after meetings held in political spaces have fundamental importance for the daily practice of democracy, using the time pauses for the development of ideas, friendships and to reunite with loved ones or supposedly enemies, for dissemination of the event – depending on the event, for example, it is possible that even informal commerce selling products and food can be established, attracting people who were not aware of it.

In this way, the virtual world is a comfort zone for its members, where you can speak and listen only to what you want. What is unpleasant is excluded. Being the result of environments with no regulatory norms for the coexistence of different people, this characteristic gains strength in the virtual world. The political space is a zone of risk, where the different meet, speak and need to listen to each other – that is, where democracy is built and strengthened, where people share actions and words. The virtual world is fundamental for bringing people closer together, and that is why the capacity for action has been expanded, since when men "live close to each other, the potential for action is always present" (WAGNER, 2000, p.53). The political space promotes the encounter between different people and face-to-face interaction, making possible the construction of a true pedagogy of democracy, where men accomplish their full humanity, "their full reality as men, not only because they are (as in private family life), but also because they appear" (ARENDT, 2009, p.47).

JUAZEIRO DO NORTE - THE FRAGILITY OF VIRTUAL PARTICIPATION AND THE NEED FOR THE MATERIALITY OF POLITICAL SPACES

Juazeiro do Norte was the city chosen as the object of analysis of this research because it represents an important medium-sized city in the second most populous region of the country. We believe that selecting a metropolis or a small city to answer the questions of this paper would lead us to the known mistake in qualitative surveys as confirmation bias (MASON, 1996; PERÄKYLA, 1997), because the greater or lesser access to the Internet and, consequently, to virtual political participation, is also directly related to the position of the municipality in the urban hierarchy (IBGE, 2016). It is worth noting that Juazeiro do Norte served as a case study to help us reflect on the issues proposed in this article and, therefore, inferences for other contexts need to be made with caution. On the other hand, based on the analysis of data and pursuing to escape the error of confirmation bias, we believe that the case of Juazeiro can be a very feasible example for the rest of Brazilian municipalities.

Known as a center of popular religiosity, Juazeiro do Norte has its image easily linked to Father Cícero Romão Batista and the Romarias phenomenon; its urban population in 1991 was 164,922 residents and rose to 202,227 in 2000, to 240,128 in 2010, corresponding to 96.07% of the total municipal population. It is estimated that by 2020, the municipality would have 174,681 voters (IBGE, 2018).

At first, data on electoral abstentions in the municipality since the promulgation of the new Federal Constitution until the 2016 elections were compiled from the website of the Superior Electoral Court (TSE), in order to reveal whether there is a record of decreased electoral participation in the municipality, as well as authors who deal with democracy defend. Subsequently, we used data from the mobile network of the operator that has the greatest internet signal in the municipality, according to National Telecommunications Agency data (ANATEL)[5] and, using QGIS software, we mapped this coverage overlaying the delimited areas in four categories - high, medium, low and without urban infrastructure vulnerability, revealing the disparities in Internet access in the territory. For the construction of urban infrastructure vulnerability polygons, we used IBGE data on the existence or not of essential public services (such as electricity, basic sanitation, etc.), as defined by different authors (BARRIENTOS, 2017; MOLINA, 2016; SOTELO & AZEVEDO, 2019).

The choice for the use of data provided by ANATEL responds to the well-known fact that the population's access is greater on mobile devices than on home computers, especially among users from less favored social classes (PNAD, 2018; SERPA, 2017). Due to the postponement of 2020 Census due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we chose as another methodological triangulation option (DENZIN, 1970; HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 2007), the information brought by the journalistic media, data from PNAD-contínua and research already developed by other authors.

Finally, as a way to test the argument about the importance of the materiality of political spaces, we conducted a research on the associations existing in the municipality through data compiled during one of the authors' work period at the Secretariat of Planning and Urban Development of the Municipality of Juazeiro do Norte (Seplad/PMJN). We found and mapped 122 Associations to reveal their density in the territory, and subsequently we chose three associations to conduct semi-structured interviews (all held in the second quarter of 2019) with community leaders, selected from the combination of the following aspects: the vulnerability of urban infrastructure in the neighborhoods, the population incidence and the indication of some agents as we carried out our field work.

ELECTORAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE SOCIOECONOMIC GAP IN VIRTUAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
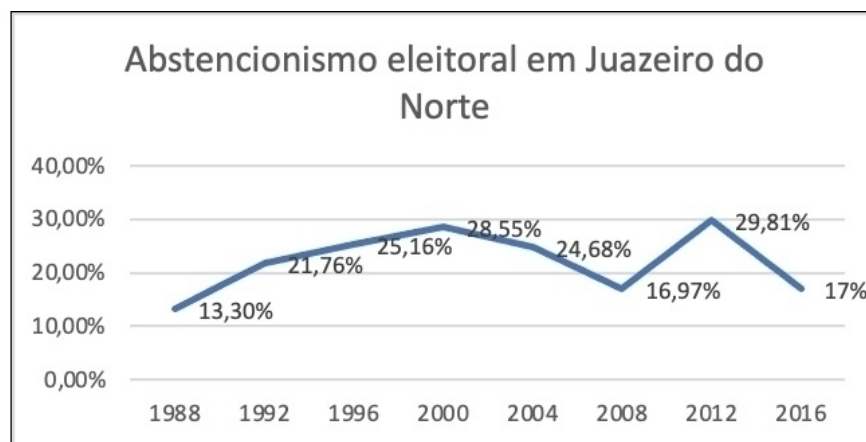

Figure 1 - Electoral Abstention in Juazeiro do Norte (1988-2016). Source: Supreme Electoral Court. Organization: authors.

According to data from the Supreme Electoral Court, there has been a significant increase in voter abstentions in Juazeiro from redemocratization to, especially, the years 2000, in addition to a slight increase in 2012, which corroborates the phenomenon previously portrayed of a decrease in voter participation. It is worth mentioning again that there was an expressive increase in population during this period, which means that the absolute number of citizens who abstained from voting is very expressive.

We emphasize that this structural process registered in different parts of the world is also cut by circumstantial contexts, as we can see in 2008 and the influence of the success of the Workers' Party (PT) on a national scale, electing, for the first time in history, a mayor of this party in Juazeiro do Norte, a municipality with a history of electing center-right parties. The influence of the national political context on local elections is known in political science (MILBRATH & GOEL, 1977; RYAN, 2004) and especially the case of PT in the 2008 municipal elections. Another interesting case is the 2016 election, marked by the massive presence of voters. It is possible to suggest that this case reflects the mayor's impeachment process two years earlier, stirring up the subsequent elections. Either way, Figure 1 reveals how difficult it would be to deal with this political deadlock through "digital democracy".
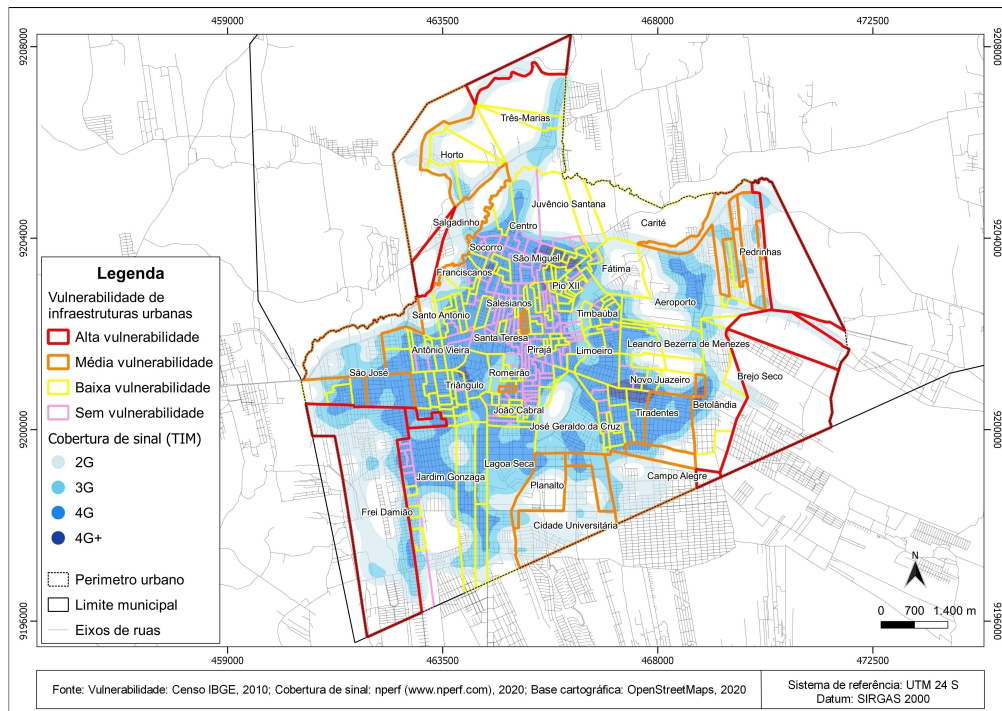

Figure 2 - TIM operator signal coverage in urban infrastructure vulnerability polygons in Juazeiro do Norte - CE. Organization: the authors.

The figure above reveals what Milton Santos (2007) already pointed out about the impossibility of thinking the technique without the constraints of the territory, which makes it most likely an agent of isolation and segregation. By observing the figure, we saw that the geographic center and its closest areas are covered with greater infrastructure and consequently less urban vulnerability, while the peripheral areas lack different basic essential services. Analyzing the crossroads of how many times the neighborhood was marginalized (considering the indices collected above) and the amount of population, we saw that Frei Damião neighborhood had the worst rates, followed by Pedrinhas and Horto neighborhoods.

As it is possible to see on the figure, the areas with high urban vulnerability coincide with a small internet coverage, reaching the case of having none in some places, while the neighborhoods without urban vulnerability the signal coverage is total, that is, the socio-spatial inequality is also revealed in the "virtual" plan. In the figure, it is possible to notice that areas with high vulnerability predominate without signal and when there is signal, 2G coverage prevails. As for the medium vulnerability, 2G coverage predominates, in few areas 3G coverage, reaching up to 4G in an even smaller area. As for 4G coverage, we find it in greater incidence in areas with low vulnerability, which confirms studies on

internet appropriation in Northeast region (SERPA, 2017).

Data from Internet Steering Committee in Brazil from 2015 point to significant inequality in connection speed between the regions of Brazil, reaching in that year 40% of homes in the Midwest with speeds greater than 8Mbps, while in the Northeast reached a maximum of 15% of households. Once more, data from PNAD-continuous reinforce this inequality in the state of Ceará: the state is 23rd in the percentage of homes with internet access in the country, the same position in relation to the use of cell phone. There is also a gap in the use of Internet in the comparison between Fortaleza and the interior, between age groups and in the capacity of data use (PNAD, 2018).

The decrease in electoral participation seems to have been accompanied by a multiplication of other types of participatory institutions in the municipality. Data from IPEA (2018) point to a significant growth of associations and other civil society organizations in Juazeiro do Norte, which would demonstrate, at least in firsthand, the growing level of political participation beyond ordinary elections at the local scale, which could suggest an improvement in social capital (PUTNAM, 1996). Among these institutions, 122 associations stand out, among which there is the predominance of development and advocacy associations, mostly community associations and neighborhood residents' associations, followed by cultural and recreational associations. The spatialization of these associations (Figure 3) reveals an evident spatial concentration of associations in the territory, especially in the city center and in neighborhoods with less urban vulnerability. Although many of the associations not explicitly representative of a territory (such as those related to the defense of a broad right) may use Juazeiro's downtown as a strategy to raise financial resources, obtain greater visibility from residents of the entire municipality, or even facilitate displacement and mobilization in central areas, it draws attention to the absence of Residents' Associations in different peripheral neighborhoods, despite the historical importance of neighborhood associations for the poorest populations (SOARES, 1989; FONTES, 1995).
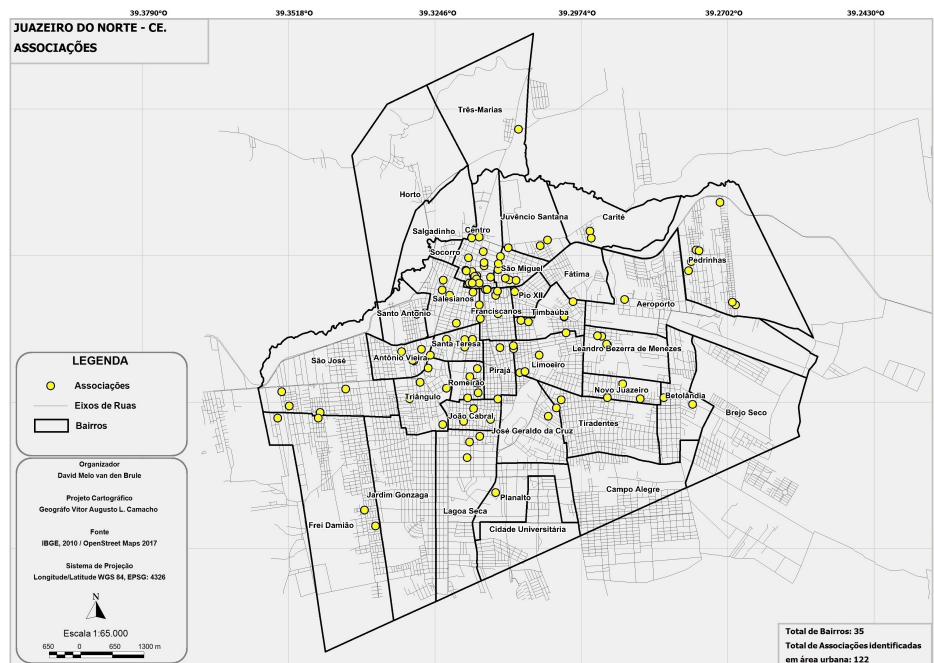

Figure 3 - Concentration of Associations in Juazeiro do Norte - 2018. Organization: made by the authors.

Thus, the arguments brought by Dalton (2017) about the importance of analyzing not only whether there was a general increase in participation in diverse participatory institutions, but also who came to participate more. By spatializing these data, we also highlight the importance of analyzing where participation has increased, especially when socio-spatial inequalities are known. Undoubtedly, this information from the Associations in Juazeiro do Norte deserves more attention in future reflections, which would escape the scope of this work.

Finally, three associations were selected from the criteria already highlighted above in order to analyze the importance of political space's materiality. The associations chosen were Frei Damião Neighborhood Community, Asa Branca Cultural and Educational, and Community Center for Art, Culture, Sports and Citizenship. The following is an informative chart about the leaderships, needs, purpose and condition of the association's building.

Name/Neighborhood	Jozelucia Pontes de Araújo (Frei Damião)	Aurineide Almeida Barbosa (Triângulo)	Maria Rosário Fátima Sousa (Campo Alegre)
Age	52 years	50 years	58 years
Education	Complete Graduation	Concluding High School	Complete High School
Association	Comunitária do Bairro Frei Damião	Educativa e Cultural Asa Branca	Centro Comunitário de Arte, Cultura, Esporte e Cidadania
Year of Foundation	2008	2008	2009
Condition of the association's building	Rented	Area provided by the State	Rented

Table 1 – Informative of leaders and associations. Source: made by the authros.

Jozelucia Pontes de Araújo[6] is a social worker, has lived in Juazeiro do Norte-CE since the age of nine and currently lives in Frei Damião neighborhood. She is the president of the Frei Damião Neighborhood Community Association, created in March 2008 with the initial demand to take care of children while their mothers were working. Even in a situation of absolute need in different areas, the leader pointed out that one of her main demands is to acquire her own association's building. According to her, "what I struggled the most and still struggle for is a association's building of my own". It has a central location in the neighborhood represented by the association, however, due to lack of infrastructure, Jozelucia needs to use her own house, a shed lent by the town hall and the precarious land of the Association for possible meetings (Figures 4 and 5). It is on this place in the figures that, often, the meetings take place with some chairs in circular format. According to the interviewee, the lack of adequate physical space for the Association makes its proper functioning impossible, even diminishing its visibility and credibility to residents. If advertising is a fundamental element of the materiality of political spaces (AZEVEDO, 2019), it is important to reflect on the consequences for the democratic legitimacy of a political space with these structural deficiencies.

Regarding the issue of internet use, Jozelucia pointed out that she uses it to communicate only with distant people, "with people who are close to us, we really like to go and call, to invite and to be face to face". The leader also outlined that the importance of her work is guaranteed by being known personally by people in the neighborhood and internet would be important only to inform about events and meetings.

Figure 4 – Place for the meetings. Figure 5 – Community Association of Frei Damião's Neighborhood. Source: the authors, 2019.

Aurineide Almeida Barbosa comes from a very poor family and serves as president of Asa Branca Educational and Cultural Association, located in a neighborhood with better social indicators (Triângulo). The place offers food, conflict mediation, theater and music classes, among others (Figures 6 and 7), serving approximately 300 people and opening doors almost every day.

Figure 6 - Courtyard. Figure 7 - Office.Source: the authors, 2019.

The register above revealed a much better material structure than Frei Damião Neighborhood Community Association. At the place, multiple activities are carried out, allowing the participation and interest of a larger number of people from the neighborhood. According to Aurineide, the association started "for the need of a people" when she gave up the space of her house in 2008 to develop a rehearsal of a quadrilha junina⁷ called Asa Branca. Governor Cid Gomes (at that time) was responsible for ceding the new space, which reveals the fundamental role of public power in the formation of limited political space. Aurineide states that it would be impossible to maintain the Association's activities if it were not for the space provided, since the Association's effectiveness would be intrinsically linked to the existence of its physical space. The interviewee, when asked about the use of the Internet, revealed: "I don't usually use it. This is something I don't use, only a little, but I have someone to use it".

The fieldwork revealed that, in addition to providing services to the community, these Associations function as an important channel of mediation between public authorities and the residents. That is why it is possible to say that these Associations are configured as potential political spaces, thus presented in the previous theoretical discussion. Joselúcia stated that "public power does not know a third of what a community leader knows" and, therefore, there would be, according to her, a conflict with the Mayor who would fear the loss of his power. However, she affirms that "there are many who don't reach the Mayor, because they don't have the prestige to get to him, they don't know how to search for it; while the community leader can take the request to him or to the secretary". Aurineide responds to these statements by saying that she feels invested in the "power of the community" when she seeks something on behalf of the neighborhood. As it is known in literature, the Association can serve as a trampoline for access to traditional politics: both Jozelucia and Aurineide are currently candidates in the 2020 elections for the position of city councilwoman of Juazeiro do Norte. It is also interesting to note that both leaders currently have active Instagram accounts, which demonstrates the importance of the Internet when there is a need to increase the scale of publicity of the impact of actions – fundamental for a municipal election.

At the age of 58, Maria Rosário Fátima Sousa gave us an interview at Centro Comunitário de Arte, Cultura, Esporte e Cidadania - hereinafter referred as CCACEC, formerly called Associação Produtiva do Bairro Timbaúba. In this interview, she declared that she started the association in 2009 with a cultural movement of a quadrilha junina for children. Her transfer from Timbaúba neighborhood to Campo Alegre neighborhood (note on the figure that the change of neighborhood is something recent) occurred due to the budget cut made by Raimundo Macedo's administration (then PMDB), because it was with that government incentive that Rosário paid the rent of the house where he lived and operated the association. As she commented, since the beginning she is the representative of the association. Rosário affirms that in the change, she took with her the association to another neighborhood. According to the interviewee, her main claim for the CCACEC is to have its own association's building, since the space would be very important for the development of the Center. Rosário was the interviewee who spoke in a more excited way about the use of internet and her relationship with the associates, since, according to her, a Facebook page created for quadrilha junina reached more than five thousand people, being necessary to create another page.

The case of CCACEC invites us to reflect on another important aspect of the materiality of political spaces: the depersonalization of local politics. The construction of a fixed space connected to the Association would make it impossible to change the CCACEC's address with its leader. Something

common to all three cases researched and already pointed out by different surveys and reports in other municipalities (AZEVEDO, 2016), is the lack of rotation of presidency, making the Association often a domination space of certain leaders. In the third case analyzed here, this worrying situation has reached an extreme: the association and the leader get blurry, becoming one. Without a doubt, the existence of a physical space would not be enough to eliminate this problem and make the associations more democratic, but it is an important start. As argued in previous sections, the exercise of democracy is not limited to voting. In this sense, the better the qualification of the materiality of the limited political spaces, the more likely it is to foster participation in these important channels of mediation.

The three associations show distinct elements that help us understand the importance of the materiality of political spaces for democracy, especially in the local scale. The second case pointed out the need for agreements between the public power and the associations, giving spaces and demanding social counterpart from the leader. Regarding the use of the Internet as a tool for communication, we saw that the first two share the values of face-to-face communication, such as figures and projects, while the third reports the use of Facebook page as a way to encourage participation in the meetings. Researches also reveals that the use of these technologies is related to age and sex, noting that women use less than men and the older the age, the less use[8].

In summary, according to the leaders, the existence of better physical conditions would encourage the expansion of the number of members, the acquisition of more resources, the promotion of systematic meetings among the members, serving a larger spatial scale, among other aspects. In the field research, we saw that the existence of the association's building means a greater legitimacy for participation in several projects and with this to raise good results, making all leaders interviewed present motivation, organization and interest in acquiring an infrastructure capable of enabling a greater number of materials to move forward with their activities.

CONCLUSION

Although different scientists who deal with social phenomena are already openly criticizing the Internet as a panacea for all problems, this article aimed to reinforce this criticism and add a geographical perspective on this issue related to democracy. Although we do not intend to abandon the revolutionary role that the Internet and social networks have in activating political spaces or even in promoting better accountability, by bringing the recent work of Dalton (2017) on the increase of the social gap in political participation, we emphasize that cyberspace as a "digital democracy" can further deepen social differences in the democratic system, especially in countries with serious socio-spatial inequalities, such as Brazil.

However, Geography's contribution to this debate goes beyond pointing out the asymmetries of technology appropriation in the territory. We also sought to reveal the importance of the materiality of political spaces, even if the desired expansion of Internet use in Brazil would come to occur in the next decade. Daily democracy is built spatially.

Finally, our analysis also demonstrated the importance of thinking about the democratic system in a scalable way, which means, although the global phenomenon of declining electoral participation is felt even in the medium-sized city of Juazeiro do Norte, reasons and solutions go through different and related scales. It is on the scale closest to the citizen that the materiality of political spaces is perhaps most necessary. It is, therefore, in the use of Internet as a way of activating and revaluing political spaces, that we find an effective way to requalify democracy.

NOTE

1 - It is important to distinguish what is considered to be voter alienation and voter apathy. The first implies an active rejection of the political system, when the voter believes that there is no difference between the choices presented in a clear sense of rejection of the whole system, while the second means the lack of individual responsibility, without the feeling of personal obligation to participate (CREWE et al, 1992).

2 - Other important criticisms of the role of the Internet in current politics have already been made and are also important in this debate, although, due to practical features of an article, they are not our focus. The phenomenon of fake news and the problem of slacktivism are salutary. The first is pointed out as a new dubious way used to elect candidates in recent years (EMPOLI, 2020) and the second refers to the illusion of having a great political impact in the world just by participating in a political group on social networks like Facebook (MOROZOV, 2011).

3 - It is important to emphasize that this theoretical discussion of democracy gains new contours in the configurations of the political-administrative systems of countries. In Brazil, the electoral system does not follow this rule in the formation of the Senate, neither for Federal Chamber of Deputies, whose demographic representation generates an under-representation of the most populous states and an over-representation of the least populous states. Authors have already stated (NICOLAU, 2002; CASTRO, 2005) that, although this fact distorts, at first, the basic idea of democracy, it would be fundamental in a geographical context of immense regional disparities in the national territory.

4 - See, for example, the statement of office of the new Minister of Communications, affirming that his main goal is to expand digital inclusion in Brazil, because its precariousness had been denounced by the coronavirus crisis. https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/politica/noticia/2020-06/em-posse-fabio-faria-diz-que-buscara-pacificac ao-e-inclusao-digital Accessed on June 18, 2020.

5 - There were 1090 geolocalized points and a radius of 50 meters.

6 - All the people interviewed here authorized the use of their real names.

7 - Quadrilha Junina is a cultural group dance manifestation that happens in a traditional festivity in Brazil between June and July.

8 - Acesso em 16 jul 2020.

REFERENCES

AKOS, Jakobi (2009), «Diverse Approaches to the Importance of Geography: The Death of Geography or Geography Matters in the Information Age!», in DONERT, Karl, SCHMEINCK, Daniela, ARI, Yilmaz, ATTARD, Marie & Gerry O'REILLY (sous la direction de), Celebrating Geographical Diversity, Berlin, Mensch und Buch Verlag, pp. 190-195.

AL-KODMANY, K. Public Participation: technology and democracy. In: Journal of Architectural Education. Vol. 53, n. 4 (May 2000), p.220-228.

ARENDT, Hannah. O que é Política? Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2009.

AVRITZER, Leonardo. Participatory Institutions in Democratic Brazil. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009.

AVRITZER, Leonardo. Democracy beyond aggregation: the participatory dimension of public deliberations. Journal of Public Deliberation. vol.8: Iss. 2, article 10, 2012.

AZEVEDO, D. A. A democracia participativa como um sofisma: uma interpretação geográfica da democracia. Tese de doutorado. PPGG, UFRJ, 2016.

_____. Modelos de democracia e espaços políticos: o caso da democracia participativa. Revista Geografares, n.26, v.1, p.126-146, 2018.

_____. 2019a. "Evaluation of the democratic system from the qualification of political spaces: the case of Cuauhtémoc (Mexico)". L'Espace Politique 39(3): 1-25. https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.7563

AZEVEDO, D. A.; LIÑARES, D. E. H. 2020. Geografía de la democracia: espacio politico abierto en la elección presidencial de 2018 en Mexico. GEOgraphia, v.22, n.49.

BARRIENTOS, P. Un factor de Riesgo para la salud de la población del estado de Veracruz: presencia de aflatoxinas en ganado bovino y su ingesta a través de la leche. Tesis (Doctorado en Geografía),

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2017.

BRINT, Steven; SALZMAN, Michele Renee. Reflections on political space: the roman fórum and capitol hill, Washington D.C. Places: Volume 5, number 1, 1988.

CASTELLS, M. Redes de indignação e esperança: movimentos sociais na era da internet, 2013.

CASTORIADIS, C. Figuras do Pensável: as encruzilhadas do Labirinto VI. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização brasileira, 2004.

CASTRO, I. E. Geografia e Política: território, escalas de ação e instituições. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2005.

_____. Espaço Político. GEOgraphia, v.20, n.42, p.120-126, 2018.

CREWE, I 1992, 'Changing votes and unchanging voters', Electoral Studies, 11, 4, p. 335-345, Scopus®, EBSCOhost, viewed 12 January 2018

DALTON, R. J. The participation gap: social status and political inequality. Oxford Editor, 2017.

DENZIN, N. K. The research act: a theoretical introduction to sociological methods, New York: Aldine Transaction, 1970.

DUBUS, N.; HELLE, C.; MASSON-VINCENT, M. De la gouvernance à la geogouvernance: de nouveaux outils pour une démocratie local renouvelée. L'Espace Politique, (10), 2010-1. https://espacepolitique.revues.org/1574.

EMPOLI, G. Os engenheiros do caos. São Paulo, Vestígio, 2020.

FERNANDES, E.; ROSENO, R. F. Protesta Brasil: das redes sociais às manifestações de rua. São Paulo: Prata Editora, 2013.

FONTES, B. A. S. M. A estrutura organizacional das associações políticas voluntárias: um estudo de caso das Associaçoes de Moradores no Recife. Anais Encontro Nacional da ANPUR, v.6, 1995, p.979-1007.

GERBAUDO, P. Tweets and the streets: social media and contemporary activism. Plutopress, 2012.

HAESBAERT, R. O mito da desterritorialização: do "fim dos territórios" à multiterritorialidade. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2007.

HAMMERSLEY, M.; ATKINSON, P. Ethnography: principles in practice. 3a ed. London, 2007.

HARVEY, D. Cidades rebeldes: do direito à cidade à revolução urbana. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2014.

HESS, D.; MCAVOY, P. 2015. The political classroom: evidence and ethics in democratic education. New York: Routledge.

HOBSBAWN, E. Globalização, democracia e terrorismo. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2007.

IBGE – INSTITUTO BRASILEIRO DE GEOGRAFIA E ESTATÍSTICA, Arranjos populacionais e concentrações urbanas no Brasil. Disponível em: Acesso em: 15 jun. 2020.

ISRAEL, C. B. Território, jurisdição e ciberespaço: entre os contornos westfalianos e a qualidade transfronteiriça da internet. Geousp – Espaço e Tempo (Online), v. 24, n. 1, p. 69-82, abr. 2020.

LEE, Nelson K. How is political public space made? – the birth of Tiananmen Square and the May Fourth Movement. Political Geography 28 (2009), 32-43.

LIJPHART, A. Modelos de democracia: desempenho e padrões de governo em 36 países. Civilização brasileira, 1996.

MACHADO FILHO, G. F. Dos espaços da sociabilidade aos espaços da ação política: transfiguração de ruas e praças em espaços políticos. Revista Geografares, n.26, p.214-234, 2018.

MAGRANI, E. Democracia conectada: a internet como ferramenta de engajamento político-democrático. Curitiba: Juruá, 2014.

MANIN, Bernard. As metamorfoses do governo representativo. Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais, vol.29, 1995, p.5-34.

_____. A democracia do público reconsiderada. Novos Estudos, n.97, 2013.

MASON, J. (1996). Qualitative Researching. London: Sage.

MASSEY, D. Pelo Espaço. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil, 2005.

MILBRATH, L.; GOEL, M. 1977. Political Participation. Chicago: Rand McNally.

MOLINA, I. Segregación residencial en los límites de las instalaciones petroleras en Salina Cruz, Oaxaca. XXII Congreso Nacional de Geografía, San Luis Potosi, del 5 al 7 de julio de 2016. México, 2016.

MOROZOV, E. (2011). The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom. New York: PublicAffairs.

NADALES, A. J. P. (org.). El debate sobre la crisis de la representación política. Madrid: Editorial Tecnos, 1996.

NICOLAU, J. Sistemas eleitorais. São Paulo: FGV Editora, 2002.

O'TUATHAIL, G. (2000). Borderless Worlds? Problematizing Discourses of Deterritorialization, in KLIOT, Nurit & David NEWMAN, Geopolitics at the End of the Twentieth Century. The Changing World Political Map, London, Frank Cass, pp. 139-154.

PARKINSON, J. R. Democracy and Public Space. Oxford University Press, 2012.

PATEMAN, Carole. Participation and Democratic Theory. Londres: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

PERÄKYLÄ, A. (1997). Reliability and validity in research based on tapes and transcripts. In D. Silverman (Ed.), Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice (pp. 201–220). Sage. London.

PIRES, H. F. Estados nacionais, soberania e regulação da internet. Scripta Nova, v.XVI, n.418 (63), 2012.

PUTNAM, R. D. Comunidade e Democracia: a Experiência da Itália Moderna. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1996.

RAMOS, C. La Democracia Hacker – el poder de los ciudadanos. Madrid: Algon Editores, 2013.

RANCIÈRE, J. O Ódio à Democracia. São Paulo: Boitempo, 2014.

RIBEIRO, L. C. Q.; SALATA, A. ; RIBEIRO, M. ; COSTA, L. G. Desigualdades digitais: Acesso e uso da Internet, posição social e segmentação espacial nas metrópoles brasileiras. Análise Social, v. XLVIII, p. 288-320, 2013.RYAN, J. 2004. "Decentralization and Democratic Instability: The Case of Costa Rica". Public Administration Review 1(64): 13-33. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-7373.2012.00069.x

SAKAMOTO, L. Em São Paulo, o Facebook e o Twitter foram às ruas. In: Cidades Rebeldes: passe livre e as manifestações que tomaram as ruas do Brasil, 2013, p.95-100.

SANGUIN, A. L. Fim da geografia ou vingança da geografia? As sociedades humanas entre um mundo liso, um mundo pontudo ou um mundo plano. Confins, 22, 2014, posto online no dia 08 fevereiro 2015, consultado o 07 maio 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/confins/9809 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/confins.9809

SANTOS, Milton. Por uma outra globalização. São Paulo: Editora Record, 2000.

_____. O espaço do cidadão. São Paulo: Edusp, 2007.

SANTOS, B. S. (orgs.). Democratizar a democracia: os caminhos da democracia participativa. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2009.

SANTOS JUNIOR, O. A. S.; RIBEIRO, L. C. Q.; AZEVEDO, S. Governança democrática e poder local: a experiência dos conselhos municipais no Brasil. Rio de Janeiro: Revan, Fase, 2004.

SARTORI, G. Engenharia constitucional. Brasília: Ed. da UnB, 1996.

SERPA, A. Justiça espacial e cidade digital: espaço como meio operacional no Brasil. Boletim Goiano de Geografia. V.37, n.3, p.409-428, 2017.

SHIRKY, C. (2008). Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations. New York: Penguin Press.

_____. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media. Foreign Affairs, January/February.

SOARES, M. T. S. Movimentos sociais urbanos: as associações de moradores de favelas no município do Rio de Janeiro. Revista Brasileira de Geografia, v.51, n.4, out./dez., 1989, pp.97-108.

SOTELO, L. S. P.; AZEVEDO, D. A. La ciudad puerto de Salina Cruz, Mexico: Escenarios de vulnerabilidade socioambiental. GEOUerj, Rio de Janeiro, n.35, 2019, p.1-30. | doi: 10.12957/geouerj.2019.40477

SWYNGEDOUW, E. Promises of the political: insurgent cities in a post-political environment. The Mit Press, 2018.

TENÓRIO, F. G.; KRONEMBERGER, T. S (orgs). Gestão social e conselhos gestores. Volumes 3. Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2016.

V. TRECHSEL, A. et al. Evaluation of the use of new Technologies in order to facilitate democracy in Europe. In: FARIA, Cristiano Ferri Soares de. O Parlamento aberto na era da internet: pode o povo colaborar com o legislativo na elaboração das leis? Brasília: Câmara, 2012. p. 96.

WAGNER, E. S. Hannah Arendt & Karl Marx: o mundo do trabalho. São Paulo: Ateliê editorial, 2000.