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Articles

Communication and citizenship of Venezuelan refugees in shelters on the Brazil-Venezuela border

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Abstract
This article analyzes Venezuelan refugees' communication and citizenship experiences in shelters of *Operação Acolhida* on the Brazil-Venezuela border. Based on the theoretical framework of communication, citizenship and migrations, we reflect on the agency of Venezuelan refugees to bypass the limitations of access to communication resources in the context of the tensions between control and mobility of migrants in border areas. The methodology includes observation and interviews with refugees and professionals that work in those shelters. The results indicate the relevance of

the debate on communication as a right of migrants in relation to the access and distribution of communication resources.
Keywords: Communication. Citizenship. Immigration. Refugees. Venezuelans.

Introduction

Between 2016 and 2020, approximately 261,000 Venezuelan migrants and refugees arrived in Brazil (R4V, 2021), expanding and consolidating a new transnational route for this migration through the state of Roraima, on the northern border of Brazil. The power disputes that resulted in this migration flow are producing spatial and human changes that have brought back discussions on migrant (im)mobility and the struggle for life, challenging the methodological nationalism based on border containment (ÁLVAREZ VELASCO; PEDONE; MIRANDA, 2021).

This cross-border movement in the northern region of Brazil established an institutionalized migratory governance by means of "Operação Acolhida", coordinated by the Brazilian Government's Presidential Office with the collaboration of various Ministries, local government actors, international agencies of the United Nations (UN), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), and civil society. The local organization in terms of humanitarian response is carried out by the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force of the Brazilian Army, responsible for all border management, reception (related to the management of shelters) and interiorization processes.

The Venezuelan population arriving in Brazil face countless challenges, including regular access to communication and information, which is a priority within a global context in which, according to a study carried out by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), one in two Venezuelans does not feel sufficiently informed, while 69% do not have access to Wi-Fi (R4V, 2020). In a previous study, Venezuelan refugees already pointed out the dissemination of misinformation as well as the absence of reliable sources of information in several areas, such as education, health care, reception, and humanitarian assistance, which exposed them to exploitation and marginalization risks (REACH, 2018).

Within this context, this article analyzes the communication and citizenship experiences of Venezuelan migrants residing in shelters in Boa Vista, capital city of the State of Roraima. The state has 13 shelters that were created in 2018 to provide services to Venezuelans in a situation of vulnerability. Two shelters are located in the city of Pacaraima, on the Brazil-Venezuela border, while eleven are located in Boa Vista, where approximately 7,900 Venezuelans live (UNHCR, 2021). Therefore, we seek to understand how Venezuelan refugees make "arrangements" to overcome the limitations of access to communication resources within the context of the tensions created by control systems and the mobility dynamics of migrants in border areas.

Research methodology

The research methodology included the observation, from 2018 to 2020[1], of the day-to-day activities of eight shelters for Venezuelan refugees in the city of Boa Vista, as well as open interviews with four professionals working as field assistants for organizations contracted to manage the shelters[2]. Furthermore, in June 2021, we carried out four semi-structured interviews[3] with refugees that lived in these shelters during the same period as the observation was carried out, as summarized in the chart below[4].

Chart 1 – Characteristics of the interviewees

Interviewee	Sex	Age	Education level	Marital status	Current city of residence	Length of stay in shelters
James	Male	46	Advanced Technical Degree	Married	Campina Grande do Sul-PR	Approximately 2 years
María	Female	33	Bachelor’s degree (ongoing)	Single	Boa Vista-RR	Approximately 1 year
Amparo	Female	41	Advanced Technical Degree	Married	Goioerê-PR	Approximately 1 year
Isabel	Female	23	High School	Married	Goioerê-PR	Approximately 1 year

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Below we present the theoretical reflections on the right to communication and the right to mobility that guide this article in order to propose a better understanding of how the tensions between control and resistance are configured in the experiences of Venezuelan refugees in these shelters. Secondly, we develop an empirical analysis of these experiences that take place from the “arrangements” made by these refugees in the shelters in the city of Boa Vista.

1 Carried out by one of the authors, who lives in the city of Boa Vista and participated in extension activities organized by Universidade Federal de Roraima (UFRR) and aimed at migrants/refugees.
2 The interviews were carried out in person by one of the authors of the article before the COVID-19 pandemic.
3 These interviews were carried out by the three authors of the article via videoconference through WhatsApp.
4 To protect the identity of the interviewees, we chose to use fictitious names, and we also omitted the names of the shelters.

Right to communication in migratory routes

The right to communication belongs to all individuals, as well as to the groups and communities they comprise. The right to communication, a concept proposed by Paulo Freire, appears in this author's work as the understanding of communication as knowledge, which is not only granted, transmitted, or imposed, but also socially built and shared. Thus, Freire advocates that communication is a human premise in terms of its sociocultural and political aspects, without failing to warn us about the inequality processes that permeate communication experiences that attempt to be governed by dialog, participation, and reciprocity. Freire's concept is thus vested with an ethical, humanitarian and civic scope that indicates the need for a fair social distribution of resources, including technological resources, which are necessary for exercising the right to communication (COGO, 2021; FREIRE, 1983; LIMA, 1981).

Within a Latin American context, the right to communication has been incorporated into the debate and mobilization agenda of social movements, especially after the redemocratization processes that marked the end of dictatorships in various countries in the 1980s. This agenda advocates that communication is also a human right, as the right to education or health care; therefore, communication needs to be democratized based on the participation of society in the ownership, management, production and distribution of communication resources, especially those related to the media and communication technologies, as summarized in concepts such as communicative citizenry (MATA, 2006). In its political scope, media and communication technologies are conceived, based on this perspective, as strategic spaces and systems for power struggles and collective projects in society.

Moreover, Latin American social actors will start claiming communication as a human right within the sphere of organizations United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which articulated a debate in the 1970s about a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). This debate resulted in the publication, in the 1980s, of the report "Many Voices, One World", also known as the MacBride Report (MACBRIDE et al., 1993). This report proposes a diagnosis, as well as alternatives to the concentration of mass media in the world in the hands of a few, imbalances in information flows and technological inequalities between the global North and South.

When it comes to the specific sphere of migration studies, exercising the right to communication requires an approach with reflections on the concepts of agency and autonomy of migrants. Lacomba Vázquez and Moraes Mena (2020) recall that the epistemology of agency is the heir to contributions from the so-called "decolonial turn", feminist theory and transnational approaches to migrations, contributing to the understanding of strategies, struggles and resistance of migrants, as well as their intervention and transformation processes in various social, economic, cultural, artistic, and political instances. It is an epistemology that challenges the very notion of integration of migrants into their destination societies, by characterizing

them either as the recipients of assistance policies and beneficiaries of resources from the State and local organizations or as labor force absorbed by the labor market.

Contrary to these dominant views on integration, concepts that recognize migrants as active parties in their migratory processes recently began to stand out in migration studies, without ignoring, however, the fact that the idea of agency and autonomy of migrants does not imply only empowerment, but can also represent disempowerment. Consequently, the migration autonomy approach seeks to emphasize that, within the scope of migratory movements and struggles, migrants do not want to become citizens, but already act as such, regardless of their legal citizenship status (MEZZADRA, 2012).

The perspective of migration autonomy has also guided a whole set of reflections, such as the ones proposed by Mezzadra (2012, p. 168) regarding the concept of "right to escape" as a human right to mobility that migrants dispute within the contexts of migratory regimes [whose] function consists of controlling borders, making distinctions between citizens and foreigners and, fundamentally, determine who is admitted into the national territory. In the field of migrant struggles and mobilizations, the author highlights especially the tensions between structural forces and the migrants' subjective capacity for action, demanding special attention "to the way in which subjection systems and subjectivation processes (coercion and freedom) come into play in the constitution of the field of migration experiences" (MEZZADRA, 2015, p. 13).

From the perspectives of the right to communication and mobility, we once again look towards people in a situation of forced displacement and located in institutionalized reception spaces. Even though the literature in the area of communication and migration indicates the relevance and the challenges of media production and consumption by and for migrants, little research has been focused on the context of detention centers, reception centers or shelters for refugees. The studies dedicated to the consumption and production of news in these spaces have highlighted the scarcity of regular and reliable access to media sources by refugees, as well as the need to invest in projects that mitigate disinformation (JACK, 2017).

Seuferling (2019) offers a historical perspective on how the pre-media digital practices of refugees in German camps between 1945 and 2000 tackled the spatial restrictions of those places. Even though refugees were provided with spaces and access to media practices and technologies, these opportunities were limited by the very structure and administration of the refugee camps. At the same time, these limitations collaborated to engender, through the refugees themselves, the creation of communication spaces in a movement called "activism media" by the author.

When analyzing the digital experiences of Syrian refugees in refugee camps in Jordan, Wall, Campbell and Janbek (2017, p. 247) coined the expression "precariousness of information" to define "a state in which access to news, as well as to personal information, by refugees is unsafe, unstable and unreliable, leading to potential threats to their well-being. In an analysis of refugee detention centers in Australia, where cell phones and other means of communication are restricted or prohibited, Leung (2010) ascertains that the availability of phone services is essential to the emotional well-being of the refugees. Similarly, Kivikuru (2013) discusses the

possibility of creating “small media” or community media created by Congolese women in refugee camps in Rwanda.

Based on this brief theoretical review, we analyze below the communication experiences of Venezuelan refugees in shelters associated with Operação Acolhida in the city of Boa Vista, Roraima.

Communication experiences in refugee shelters

The understanding of communication experiences in a reception context requires a brief reflection on the conditions for the appearance and materialization of this system of reception for migrants and refugees. In the case of the Venezuelan nationals in Roraima, we understand these dynamics by means of the territory-safety-population triad – title of one of the courses given by Foucault (2008) at Collège de France (1977-1978), in which the author went through the initial steps of a political knowledge centered on the mechanisms of population control.

The analysis proposed by Foucault in the 1970s provides an argument to reflect upon the substantial increase in restrictive tendencies associated with the entry, the stay and the transit of migrants and refugees at the beginning of the 21st century. More recently, combined with new digital technological devices known as smart monitoring systems (biometrics, facial recognition, data crossing and storage, use of drones, etc.), the control of migrants transposes state border territories, penetrates reception territories and is introduced into the migrant’s own body in movement (MBEMBE, 2018). The confinement of populations, in their different architectures, as is the case of the shelters discussed herein, has been the focal point of various academic perspectives, which, in common, show the ambivalences of the exclusion-inclusion binomial in political practices on people’s bodies.

The construction of different barriers, materialized at militarized border posts or in detention, control, reception or shelters for refugees is referenced by Agamben (2010) through the concept of “field”, understood as the space that appears when a state of exception begins to become the norm, when the regular order is suspended and when emergency situations become long-lasting. The field, as stated by the author, is “the hidden matrix, the *nomos* of the political space in which we still live” (AGAMBEN, 2010, p. 162).

Agier (2015) uses the expression “in between” to characterize the indeterminate spaces in which migrants/refugees live, such as waiting areas, borders, refugee camps or transit camps. “It is a *locus* between the world that was left behind and the other one where people intend to arrive, a place of suspended temporality, of survival and of pushing time” (AGIER, 2015, p. 73).

In this article, we also adopted as an interpretation key for dynamics of shelters for refugees in Boa Vista the concept of “territorial containment” (HAESBAERT, 2014), which refers to a control process for different unwanted flows (migrants, refugees, poor workers etc.) that takes place in a dispersed way through partial or temporary enclosures in order to create a barrier effect. Based on the Foucauldian perspective, Haesbaert (2021) argues that the closure

of these spaces is relative and temporary, and that there is always a way to cross the barrier and enter or flee. The author defines the concept of "contouring"[5] as a tactical movement of populations in a situation of vulnerability that aspire to transpose situations of precariousness of life within limits that are restrictive and generate agglomerates of exclusion.

From this double movement of containment and contouring, we observe that the day-to-day life in the shelters for refugees in Boa Vista is marked by a particular space and time, driven by rules of coexistence and limited permissions. Even though there are variations in each one of the shelters observed, these rules cover, among other elements, the control and supervision of the daily activities of the people living in these shelters, the implementation of routines regarding entry and exit times, the provision of three meals a day, the circulation in common areas at specific times and the use of bathrooms.

This control also includes the environment of these shelters. A female participant of the study reported that her time at the shelters was very important for her and her family, who were homeless when they arrived in Boa Vista in 2019. Nonetheless, one of the rules she was reluctant to follow was the prohibition on donating surplus food to refugees and migrants who, being homeless, were camping on the sidewalks, waiting for food to be handed out or for an opportunity to get a place in the crowded shelters:

> There was plenty of food left [at the shelter]. What I didn't like was that the military personnel told me to throw it all in the trash, telling me I couldn't donate the food to those living on the street. There were a lot of people in front [of the shelter]. But I didn't throw it away. At the [Boa Vista] bus terminal, there were a lot of hungry people. [...] When there was leftover salad and I was about to throw it away, they'd come to me saying "mother, mother, mother, come here" while holding bags and containers [to grab the leftovers]. I let them. But the military personnel came and pressured me (Amparo, 31 years old).

At the time of the field study, the entry and exit of the shelters was controlled by military personnel linked to Operação Acolhida who were responsible for issuing a kind of personal identification card made by UNHCR that had to be presented by the refugees in order to access the shelters. Conflicts between the refugees and the military personnel at the shelters regarding freedom of movement restrictions have been reported quite often in the Brazilian media (MELLO, 2021; LAZZERI, 2020). It is worth highlighting that the management of the shelters by the military goes against the grain of the new Brazilian Migration Law (Law No. 13.445/17), clearly based on the premise of replacing the national security paradigm with the logic of human rights. This fact led the National Human Rights Council (CNDH), in a visit to the reception centers in 2018, to request clarification on the functions of the army in those

5 Use of the term in the sense of movement while searching for other possible paths in order to overcome difficulties.

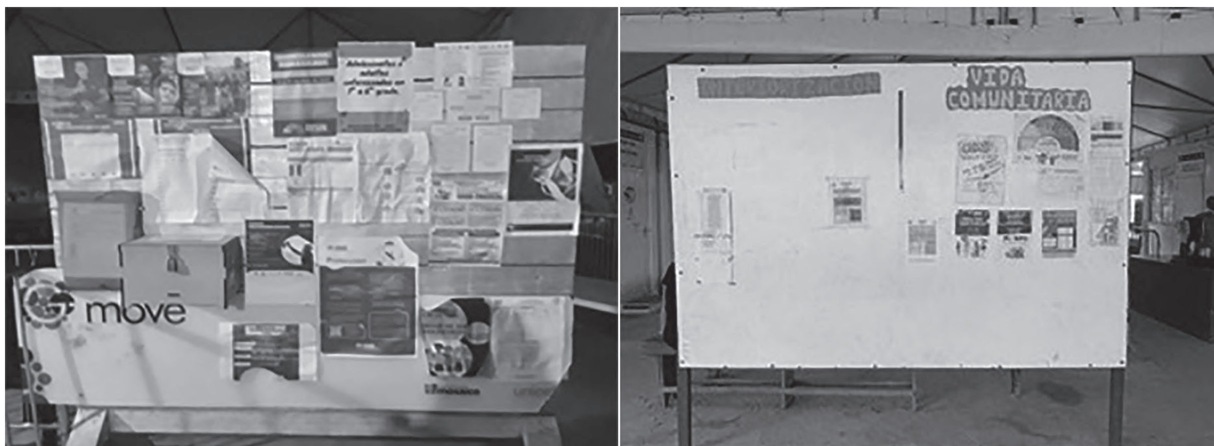
territories and to suggest the urgent transfer of those places to civilian public bodies, responsible for social assistance (CONSELHO NACIONAL DE DIREITOS HUMANOS, 2018).

Daily conflicts between managers and Venezuelan refugees in connection with the dynamics of daily communication in the shelters have also been reported by the interviewees. One of the interviewees, who lived at a shelter for two years, said that interpersonal communication was one of the elements that most marked their experience in these spaces, especially in connection with the military personnel that managed the shelter.

> I would change the way they deal with people. I know it's complicated working with different people, but that's what I would change. An example: there are lots of military personnel that talk to us in a prejudiced way because we're foreigners and they believe that they can arrest us. They say a lot of bad things about us. I'd tell them not all of us are bad. There are good people here (James, 46 years old).

In addition to the precariousness of communication, these shelters are also characterized by the frailty of the structures that make possible a more fluid and independent communication, either due to the scarcity of communication resources or to the social restrictions built around resources that already exist in those spaces. During the observation carried out in the shelters, we were struck by the existence of boards on which it was only possible to hang institutional brochures about coexistence rules regarding cleanliness, health, issuance of documents, courses, and reports on interiorization, among other subjects (Figure 1). This verticalized structure, which limited this type of communication, was pointed out by one of the interviewees, who stressed the impossibility of refugees participating in the selection of the information to be shared on these boards.

Figure 1 – Boards at a shelter for refugees in Roraima



Source: Image captured by Julia Camargo.

Regarding digital technologies, even though internet access is a highly requested demand, the sheltered Venezuelans could not have access to it unless they had individual data plans. The use of broadband connection in the shelters was restricted to humanitarian workers, who were not allowed to give the Wi-Fi password to the refugees. All the interviewees said they had arrived in Boa Vista with a single cell phone for the entire family, but since these were not smartphones, their cell phones did not work in the Brazilian territory, as stated by the interviewees, which restricted their communication opportunities with friends and family members not only in Brazil but also in Venezuela.

In cases where they manage to get a new cell phone, the Venezuelan refugees had to navigate the scarcity of resources in order to purchase data plans. Some interviewees reported the need to travel long distances on foot in order to find free Wi-Fi spots, deeming essential having access to smartphones in different areas of their migratory journeys: communicating with relatives, learning Portuguese, getting around the city, seeking job opportunities and finding information concerning their migration status.

A female interviewee said that her cell phone was a very important tool to obtain information on the city to which she and her family would be moving, considering the fact that she had not received sufficient information from the humanitarian response team before moving:

> When I made the decision to come here, I was very scared because I didn't know where I was going, who was going to welcome me, how it all worked. And I didn't have any money. My daughter was researching on her cell phone what the city we were going to live in was like (Amparo, 31 years old).

In the interviews that were carried out, the civil administrators of the shelters also recognized that refugees faced obstacles in terms of having access to digital devices such as computers and smartphones, also saying that they used to share with the refugees information that required an online search, such as addresses, administrative processes etc. One field assistant said that, when possible, they discreetly allowed the youth at the shelter to use the desktop computer for educational research activities. The professionals also explained that, even though it was not recommended, they oftentimes lent their phones so that the refugees could have urgent and important conversations with their families.

In addition to the restricted internet access and restricted access to digital devices, another element that limited communication was the fact that the shelters did not have any public telephone services. Once a week, the International Committee of the Red Cross's Restoring Family Links program would provide free national and international call services and online messaging services at the shelters. According to the project's guidelines, the refugees had three minutes for each call, users were entitled to only one slot per day, private spaces were not provided for making calls, and refugees were not allowed to talk about political matters.

Regarding the use of these call services, the Venezuelan interviewed talked about the very short conversation time allowed and the long lines they had to face in order to make a call. Two interviewees recalled that they managed to use the call service several times on the same day, after dedicating their time almost entirely to waiting in line. One interviewee, 31-year-old Amparo, said “there was very little conversation time, we couldn’t say everything we wanted to because the call would end”. Another interviewee, 23-year-old Isabel, pointed out that she had to “wait for a long time to make a call” and that sometimes they “would spend the whole day in line trying to call more than once”.

In order to circumvent the three types of control that permeate the communication experience of those who need to use these call services – limited time, prohibited topics and lack of privacy – a common tactic among the Venezuelans at shelters was sharing cell phones. During the observation at the shelters, we saw refugees lending their cell phones to other refugees (relatives or not) in exchange for a contribution to pay for the data plan. The cell phone served as a communication hotspot (ALENCAR, 2020).

This sharing situation also included the implementation of many principles and rules by the refugees in order to organize the collective use of these cell phones and guarantee privacy. Among these rules, the interviewees highlighted the following: not open WhatsApp messages sent by and for other people; include the cell phone number in resumés only with authorization of the owner; view or make calls, as well as receive calls for other people, only at established times; use the phone within the stipulated time limit; help monitor the cell phone while it is being charged at the electric power points in the shelters; make a joint purchase of credits.

For Venezuelans that had a cell phone or other rechargeable devices, charging the batteries was a collective endeavor carried out at charging stations that operated until 10:00 PM, not being allowed to charge the devices after that time. At some shelters, the outlets were turned off at 10:00 PM. The housing units – known as Better Shelters – did not allow connection to the electrical system because they were considered installations with high flammability risk. Because of this, there were rules that penalized the use of individual TVs, radios, or lighting at these units. Nonetheless, the interviewees revealed that, despite this prohibition, they used to make use of electrical devices such as TVs, radios, crock pots and fans in order to alleviate the high temperatures inside the housing units. Furthermore, one interviewee recalled that after the new housing units were implemented, the use of small electrical appliances was not allowed, but even so, many refugees made use of some sort of appliance:

> After everybody went to sleep, they turned on the TV. My wife had a [crock] pot to make instant noodles for our son. They [the military personnel] didn’t like that stuff very much (James, 46 years old).

These communication restrictions also extended to the use of the collective TV found in some shelters. For many Venezuelans that had just arrived at these shelters, the TV was the

sole source of information and news to which they had daily access, as well as one of the only options of entertainment. Although these rules varied according to the shelter, in the morning the collective TV was usually broadcasting a children's show, for about one hour, and, in the evening, various shows and programs for all ages, including news programs. Both during our observations and in the interviews, we were able to notice that there were disputes regarding TV use at the shelters.

> The first person to wake up in the morning would grab the remote [...] I came to witness times when very heavy movies, movies for people over 16 [years old], would be on TV. I would personally talk to an employee [in charge of organizing the shelter] so that we could change the channel, since there were many kids running around, also saying there had to be a person to be in charge of this (María, 33 years old).

Despite the fact that what was shown on TV was decided with the participation of the refugees, conflicts and disagreements regarding what was shown could result in penalties such as the cancellation of TV time, as told by the professionals who worked in the shelters. Moreover, regarding the obstacles faced when trying to stay informed at the shelters, the Venezuelan refugees interviewed reported a significant number of rumors and false information related to promises of employment or jobs in their destinations in the countryside, or even regarding the possibility of the Venezuelan government being overthrown.

One interviewee recalled a time when false news made many residents of the shelter celebrate the fall of the government of Nicolás Maduro, as a result of the actions of North American and Colombian troops:

> […] a long time ago [there was] a practice by some Colombian military employees, which had nothing to do with the border, that someone recorded. And they said that "at this precise moment" they were crossing the Colombian border and they were going to remove Maduro [from power] (María, 33 years old).

Another interviewee stated that, as a consequence of these rumors and false news about politics that circulated at the time he lived in the shelter, he picked up the habit of checking and verifying such facts with his son, who lives in Venezuela, via WhatsApp.

Conclusions

Based on the reflections gathered in this article, we hope we can contribute to the discussions surrounding the intersections between the right to mobility and the right to communication within the context of the tensions created by control systems and the mobility

dynamics of migrants in border areas. Although they cannot be generalized, the singularities of the communication experiences of Venezuelan refugees in the shelters in the city of Boa Vista suggest that, despite the institutional regulation and control mechanisms, the Venezuelan refugees create spaces of autonomy in order to circumvent the limits imposed on the exercise of their right to communication.

Even so, the reflections presented herein do not allow us to lose sight of the deep asymmetries and inequalities that have marked the access and use of digital technologies by these migrants, in border contexts and in institutional spaces, in which displaced persons are in conditions of greater vulnerability, as well as subjected to greater control.

The verticalized model of communication, extensively used by various institutions for digital monitoring, surveillance and control of human mobility and migrant bodies, seems to be normalized, while the discussion on communication as a right of migrants and refugees remains forgotten or undervalued in migration policies. This right includes aspects related to the participation of migrants and refugees in the ownership, management, production and consumption of communication and technological resources, as well as the fight against digital inequalities that affect migrant populations.

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Conflict of interest

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