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Article

Venezuelan Refugees in Brazil: Communication Rights and Digital Inequalities During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The article analyzes the experiences of Venezuelan refugees in the city of Boa Vista (Brazil) in exercising their communication rights in the context of social and digital inequalities aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This article outlines a perspective on digital inequalities from a rights-based approach, which focuses on granting the right to communicate to those who lack it rather than providing access to technology without highlighting the structural changes that are needed for promoting representation and participation of marginalized communities. Building on online and face-to-face interviews with 12 Venezuelan refugees, we identified three scenarios where inequalities regarding access and uses of ICTs are materialized: (a) reduction of digital communication interactions and affective networks due to the deterioration of connectivity in Venezuela and the suspension of local communication services provided by humanitarian agencies; (b) barriers to accessing information about rights and basic services, such as education, health, work, and shelter, given the reduction of communication channels and the closure of reference centers supporting refugees; and (c) increased exposure to fake news, scams, and hate speech in social media platforms and message apps, generating disinformation and enhancing risks of exploitation and marginalization of refugees.

Keywords
citizen communication; communication rights; Covid-19; digital inequalities; Venezuelan refugees

Issue
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1. Introduction

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the solutions found to live the "new normal" was the digitalization of human relationships in various scenarios and experiences. However, the disparities in access, domain, and use of ICTs in Brazil unveiled the bigger picture of digital inequality among vulnerable social groups, such as people in situations of forced displacement. In the current context of social and digital inequality aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the present article focuses on the exercise of the right to communication, through the experiences of Venezuelan refugees living in Boa Vista, the capital city of Roraima, which is a Brazilian state located in the Amazon region within the Brazil–Venezuela border.

Between 2017 and 2021, 305,000 Venezuelan forced migrants arrived in Brazil (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021), expanding the transnational route of this migration through the state of Roraima. The arrival of Venezuelans has produced spatial and human transformations that revitalize the debate around

migrant (in)mobility and the struggle for life, challenging methodological nationalism based on border containment (Velasco et al., 2021).

The cross-border movement in Northwestern Brazil established an institutionalized migration governance through the so-called "Operação Acolhida" (Operation Welcome), coordinated by the Brazilian army responsible for border planning processes, reception (related to shelter management), and relocation, which consists of providing mobility of refugees to other regions of Brazil. The operation relies on the work of actors from local governments, UN agencies, INGOs, and civil society organizations. As part of the Brazilian response to Venezuelan displacement (IOM, 2021), two "regularization" routes allowed Venezuelans to apply for a residency permit or refugee status, reflecting the complexities that drive human mobility and challenge the refugee/migrant binary. Despite awareness of the problematic application of these political categories and their implications on people's lives, the use of the term "refugee(s)" in this article is intended solely as a reference to the legal situation of the research participants.

Among the challenges faced by forced migrant populations, the access to continuous and reliable information, communication, and digital connectivity is a key issue in a context where one in two Venezuelans does not feel sufficiently informed and 69% do not have access to Wi-Fi (R4V, 2020). The report published on the information and communication needs of Venezuelan refugees in Boa Vista (REACH, 2018) reveals a general lack of accurate information on various services such as education, health, shelter, and humanitarian assistance—a situation that exposes this population to risks of exploitation and marginalization. Relevant evidence suggests that only 20% of the participants reported receiving reliable information from migration service providers, generating frustration as many stated that more and better communication channels should be provided (REACH, 2018).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are 50% less likely than the general population to have a telephone with internet access and 29% of refugee families do not have a telephone (Grandi, n.d.). An expanding literature has emphasized the critical importance of digital media for enabling refugees opportunities for education (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2018), employment (Alencar, 2017), health (O'Mara, 2012), and sociocultural interactions (Witteborn, 2018). Considering that 85% of refugees around the globe are in developing countries, many of whom are in extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2018), it is possible to understand the concern of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, stating that "connectivity is not a luxury, it is a lifeline for refugees" (WEFORUM, 2017). Although UNHCR has reflected in numerous reports on the relevance and forms of access to different kinds of information technologies and connectivity for refugees, in practice, fundamental issues about the right to communication remain to be accomplished when it comes to people in situations of social vulnerability. In Roraima, for example, none of the fourteen shelters for Venezuelans has access to connectivity or fixed spaces for phone calls (Cogo et al., 2021). Taking these factors into account, it is important to highlight that the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 for people on the move also generated restrictions regarding this common and vital right for all: the right to communicate.

Considering that communication and mobility, in contexts of forced displacement, walk the same path, the first restriction on Venezuelan mobility imposed by the Brazilian Government was the closure of Brazilian borders as a sanitary measure to prevent the spread of coronavirus (Martuscelli, 2021). Between March 2020 and June 2021, visas were excluded and additional reservations for Venezuelans were imposed, not allowing, for example, those who were outside Brazil, even with a residence visa or family members living in Brazil, to enter the Brazilian territory (Jarochinski Silva & Jubilut, 2020, p. 422). This episode was just one of the many contradictions and distortions that the Brazilian government successively adopted during the pandemic.

Against this background, this study builds on both online and face-to-face interviews with 12 Venezuelan refugees in Boa Vista, to explore inequalities related to the access and use of ICTs among Venezuelans and how this shaped their migration trajectories in Brazil in the context of the pandemic. No previous academic study has investigated how Venezuelan refugees navigate growing digital inequalities characterized by reduced connectivity and exacerbated (online) vulnerabilities during Covid-19 to engage in transnational family communication and obtain information, resources, and rights in their host society. Considering the theme of the thematic issue, it is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of the pandemic on refugees' communication rights in Latin America and beyond.

2. Right to Communication, Citizenship, and Human Mobility

The right to communication is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enacted in 1948 by establishing, in article 19, that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, n.d.). Over the last decades, communication has also been claimed as a fundamental human right by institutions such as UNESCO. In the 70s, UNESCO led the debate about a "new world information and communication order," which resulted in the publication, in the 80s, of the report *Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow*, also known as the MacBride Report (United Nations, n.d.). The document formulates a diagnosis and proposes alternatives to the

concentration of communication and media worldwide, to the imbalances in information flows and technological inequalities between the so-called developed and developing countries.

The right to communication belongs to individuals as well as to their groups and communities. In Freire's (1983) seminal work *Liberation Pedagogy*, the right to communicate is linked to an understanding of communication that is not only granted, transmitted, or imposed, but one that is socially constructed and shared. Freire supports the view of communication as a human vocation in its sociocultural and political dimensions, while at the same time calling attention to inequality processes that cut across communication experiences aiming at promoting dialogue, participation, and reciprocity. In this sense, Freire's conception takes on an ethical, humanitarian, and citizen dimension that emphasizes the need for a fair social distribution of resources, including technological assets, which are required for the exercise of the right to communication (Cogo, 1998; Freire, 1983; Lima, 1981).

The theoretical perspective of Paulo Freire inspired experiences and practices of citizen communication developed by popular sectors and movements in Latin America under the different designations of popular, community, dialogic, participatory, and resistance communication (Lima, 1981). Research shows that, in the context of citizen communication, practices that took place in Latin America, especially in the 1970s, social movements began to focus on communication as a human right, such as education or health (see Suzina, 2021). This perspective on communication highlights the idea of social participation in the appropriation, management, production, and distribution of communication resources, in particular those related to media communication technologies, as summarized in notions like citizen communication (Cogo, 2010; Mata, 2006).

Building on Freirian ideas, citizen communication practices sought to promote a shift in the model characterized by vertical mass communication, including the banking model of education that prioritizes the diffusion of contents and the effects of these contents on recipients. These practices privileged a perspective that considers communication as a process in which different social sectors have a voice and act not only as recipients but also as producers of citizen media content developed in relation to the lived experiences and knowledge of these sectors. Here communication is understood and exercised as a horizontal and participatory process situated in the framework of broader political disputes for social change and struggles for equality and democratization of Latin American societies (Cogo, 1998; Peruzzo, 2021). In the Latin American perspective, exercising the right to communicate takes on specific contours when it comes to the experiences of displacement and refuge as this exercise relates to the existence of horizontal spaces of refugee participation in the design and implementation of projects concerning access and uses of communication technologies in forced migration contexts. It is about a form of participation that further implies recognition of refugees' voice and agency, as their own migratory condition leads them to live through continuous precarity and systematic exclusions that undermine their right to speak (Spivak, 2010). Being denied the rights of formal citizens which are given by the government, Leung (2018, p. 26) argues that refugees engage in informal, flexible modes of citizenship, or "bottom-up citizenship," through acts of participation and agency mediated and shaped through digital technologies to claim and expand rights in their communities.

The institutionalization of migration governance through the work of supranational organizations, such as UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations, in collaboration with national and local governments has, in a limited way, allowed the adoption of horizontal processes of participation in refugee reception and integration dynamics. In his research on development communication for social change, Tufte (2013) reminds us that most agencies emphasize the development of vertical spaces of participation where "target populations" through strategic communication interventions are "invited" to engage, obtain knowledge, deliberate, and take part in debates and behavior changes (p. 63). Despite the ability of refugees to exert agency (Lacomba Vázquez & Moraes Mena, 2020; Mezzadra, 2015), the action of international organizations towards migrants has been characterized by power asymmetries and mismatches between institutional approaches that define and control refugees' access and uses of technologies and spontaneous and deviant practices and tactics of technology appropriations by refugees, which are more aligned with their desires, needs, and situated realities. In the framework of an epistemology of migrations, Mezzadra (2015, p. 13) had already highlighted the tensions between structural forces and the subjective capacity for migrant agency, reinvidicating special attention to "the way in which the subjection tools and the subjectivation (coercion and freedom) come into play in the constitution of the field of migration experiences." Further, the author argues for the importance "to bring to light subjective practices of negotiation and contestation of power relations" in specific contexts whereby migratory dynamics unfold (Mezzadra, 2015, p. 13).

By analyzing digital inclusion initiatives in the context of Latin American migration, Cogo et al. (2015) already demonstrated existing discrepancies between the supposed necessities and desires of social groups underpinning these initiatives and the concrete experiences of digital appropriations by end receivers. A focus on the digital practices of Latin American migrants in the cities of Barcelona (Spain) and Porto Alegre (Brazil) allowed the authors to identify creative and "spontaneous" tactics (De Certeau, 1984) in which migrants often dribbled the challenges of access or the lack of knowledge through alternatives that were not foreseen by public policies of digital inclusion. Examples of these creative

tactics are the sharing of technological devices, the use of phone booths and internet cafes, as well as dynamics of informal digital media learning through family members and friends. Specifically focusing on mobile phone appropriations, de Souza e Silva and Xiong-Gum (2020) introduce the concept of "mobile networked creativity" to refer to creative practices emerging from the tactical uses of phone devices by displaced and emplaced populations in the face of digital deprivation and hardships. The authors contend that "mobile networked creativity" as a survival strategy has the potential to challenge power asymmetries and foster community solidarity and care through networks of socio-technical relations (de Souza e Silva & Xiong-Gum, 2020, p. 15). The studies carried out by Alencar (2020), Smets (2018), and Wall et al. (2017) showed how precarious living conditions for Venezuelans in Brazilian shelters and Syrian refugees in Turkish and Jordanian camps shaped the collective sharing of mobile phones among the community as a form of social support, highlighting their agency and resilience in diverse sites of forced displacement.

Cogo et al. (2015, p. 179) suggest that the desire, motivations, and ways in which migrants understand and aspire to technological advantages and appropriations should be a starting point for the development of initiatives and policies of digital inclusion. In this regard, Van Deursen and Van Djik (2014) note that internet advancement reflects many of the socioeconomic aspects and cultural relations shaping the world, including those related to inequalities. Although social inequalities have always existed, the authors highlight that the expansion of the internet has deepened the social gap, turning itself into an active reproducer as well as a potential catalyzer of these inequalities. The consequences of this gap can be seen in the greater access that better-off social groups have to information resources. This gap can increase even more if we consider different social, political, economic, and health sectors where there is a growing supply of online information and services which presuppose the existence of equality in access and distribution of digital resources in society.

From the perspective of democratizing the internet as an aspect of the human right to communication, it is worth noting that the digital divide has deepened in the world because of the Covid-19 pandemic, also highlighting inequalities within social groups such as between men and women, riskier and poorer sectors, residents of rural and urban areas and among migrants and nationals. The inequalities in the access and use of technologies can be observed in the creation and publication of content, participation, and presence of Latin American social sectors in the networks, as well as in the development of skills for using the internet and digital devices. A Covid-19 special report released in July 2021 by the Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean indicates that more than 66.2 million homes in 14 countries in the region do not have an Internet connection. In the specific case of Venezuela, results of the Global Internet Speed Index, published in February 2020, placed the country as the one with the lowest internet speed among Latin American nations (Vasquez & Laya, 2020).

The importance and originality of this study are that it explores in greater detail the impact of digital inequality on the lives of Venezuelan refugees in Northwestern Brazil and how the Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the condition of digital deprivation for these populations, affecting their communication rights. By examining how Venezuelan refugees cope with limited (or lack of) connectivity throughout the pandemic period, this study aims to contribute new insights into refugees' experiences with ICTs in the context of their migratory trajectories.

3. Methodology

This study used semi-structured and unstructured interviews with twelve Venezuelan refugees living in the city of Boa Vista, conducted by the first author of this article, between May and July 2020. The researcher has been actively working on a range of initiatives aiming at improving refugees' access to ICTs, which helped them engage with the community, explain their role as researcher, invite them to participate in interviews, and provide details of the research study to them.

The selection of participants considered differences based on gender, age, educational levels, marital status, and socioeconomic situation. Rather than aiming for a representative sample, this study considered the diversity and multiplicity of views and experiences from participants' perspectives. In total, seven women and five men were recruited to take part in the study, aged between 19 and 54 years, and living in Brazil between two months and three years. At the time of the research, eight participants were unemployed, and four participants reported being self-employed as day laborers (two men and two women). The interviews took place in the context of Covid-19, in which partial restrictions were imposed by the local government in terms of face-to-face encounters. For this reason, and also taking into account that six participants (Marcos, Ana, Luci, Merlina, Bruno, and Diana) had a smartphone, their interviews were conducted online through WhatsApp. These participants were recruited initially through the researcher's established networks with the Venezuelan community from previous studies. A message was sent via WhatsApp asking if they would like to take part in the research. Those who accepted the invitation were offered phone credits to participate in the interview call. The other six interviews with Venezuelan refugees (Angelina, Dolores, Benjamin, Leonansky, Glivory, and Eduardo), who did not own digital devices, were carried out during an initiative organized by the university as part of its social impact activities, together with Pastoral dos Migrantes (Pastoral for Migrants) and the IOM, to offer digital devices with connectivity and assistance in the registration process for the emergency benefit from the Brazilian Government.

Participants in the face-to-face interviews were recruited on a voluntary basis. When they sought the social service to register themselves for the government's emergency support, at the end of the process, they were asked if they would like to participate in the study. All participants were properly informed about the study goals and scope and that the information they shared with the researcher would be used for academic purposes. During the interviews, participants were asked about the opportunities and challenges of digital access, communication with family members, and obtaining information about services and rights. The first researcher is fluent in Spanish, making it possible to establish direct communication with participants without the intervention of a moderator in the interview process. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were either recorded or annotated after obtaining participants' written and/or oral consent. The names mentioned in the article are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the participants. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Review Board of the Federal University of Roraima.

The interviews were transcribed and subsequently subjected to manual coding following the principles of thematic analysis (Boeije, 2009). As a starting point for the analysis of participants' interviews, we relied upon Freire's framework of communication rights as well as empirical understandings of refugees' agency in negotiations of technology use and access in various sites of forced displacement. These insights provided general guidelines and references for interpreting the empirical materials while facilitating engagement with nuances in meaning. Finally, the researchers' engagement in the study of digital media and forced migrations with a specific focus on the agency of refugees as well as on the development of digital projects with and by displaced populations was also considered when analyzing issues of digital and social inequalities in unequal and diverse contexts such as the case of Brazil.

4. Results

In this study, digital inequalities that affect Venezuelans' everyday lives in Brazil are outlined in three themed categories: (a) reduction of digital communication interactions and affective networks; (b) barriers to accessing information, services, and migratory rights; and (c) increased exposure to fake news, hate speech, and dangerous information online. In the following sections, we elaborate on each of these themes.

4.1. Reduction of Digital Communication Interactions and Affective Networks

The first scenario of digital inequality experienced by Venezuelan refugees relates to the decreased use of ICTs in their migratory trajectories in Brazil. The participants stated that they had less access to digital devices such as smartphones and desktop computers, interfering in their communication with their affective networks consisting of family and friends who live in Venezuela. Previous research has established that maintaining transnational family relationships can help refugees deal with the difficulties of life in their new place while regaining a sense of safety and hope (Leurs, 2014; Twigt, 2018). During the pandemic, migration services were constrained and, on some occasions, suspended (Martuscelli, 2021), including access to communication services provided by the public university's technology center and the Red Cross in Boa Vista. For Eduardo, a 44-year-old self-employed respondent who used to work as a mason in Venezuela, the closure of phone service centers resulted in the disruption of communication with his mother in Venezuela. Before the pandemic started, he said he could spend at least a few minutes talking to her using the phone of these centers. As he said: "The last time I spoke to my mother was before the pandemic when the phone services were still working….It's been two months since I heard from her."

Despite increased connectivity limitations, participants devised workarounds to tactically overcome communication constraints with family members (Leung, 2018), engaging in "mobile networked creativity" (de Souza e Silva & Xiong-Gum, 2020). The "creative" uses of mobile phones helped them alleviate their concerns about their families' health situation in the face of Venezuela's precarious responses to the pandemic. In the case of Glivory, a 33-year-old woman living with her son in one of Boa Vista's spontaneous settlements, she commented that the humanitarian actors never offered communication services where she lived, so she used to access the tablets at the university when this service was still available. With the pandemic, Glivory mentioned that she looked for other ways to stay in touch with her family in Venezuela: "Now that people where I live own a phone, they lend it to me and I can quickly talk to my family members to check on their health and if they are protecting themselves from the virus."

At the same time, Venezuelan refugees also link their limitations in terms of family communication to the deterioration of connectivity and energy services in Venezuela (Vasquez & Laya, 2020). The precarious communication infrastructures of public services, according to participants, generate digital inequalities that limit the possibilities of transnational modes of living for refugees, especially regarding transnational family relationships. For example, Bruno, a 31-year-old man, self-employed, who wants to raise money to move to another Brazilian state, shared that it is very difficult to find a state in Venezuela where you have continuous and reliable access to electricity and internet unless you are from a very wealthy family. He still remembers the power outage that hit Venezuela in 2019, when some cities were left without electricity for more than five days, which, according to him, was triggered by the lack of government investment in the energy sector. Glivory added:

> The internet got a lot worse in Venezuela; the signal is very bad, and it is more difficult to communicate. When I manage to borrow a phone to call my family through WhatsApp, the internet is very weak there and it is not possible to talk.

With the worsening of public services of internet and electricity during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants also reported that it became very difficult to send money to Venezuela, and in some cases, they were prevented from having access to bank transfer websites. "We can no longer transfer money in 'real value' using the bank system so that our relatives can receive this money in 'bolivares'; we do this through other people who provide this kind of service," said Benjamin, a 33-year-old man, graduated in Computer Science but currently unemployed. Acknowledging the agency of refugees in developing tactical uses of ICTs in response to increased digital inequality due to the pandemic outbreak provides the opportunity to critically assess the role of unreliable and fragile digital infrastructures in deepening the digital divide for refugee populations (Mezzadra, 2015), and hindering their rights as communication citizens (Cogo, 1999; Freire, 1983).

4.2. Barriers to Accessing Information, Services, and Rights During the Pandemic

In the city of Boa Vista, the reduction of communication channels and closure of refugee support centers during the pandemic created obstacles to obtaining reliable and quality information about rights and basic services, such as education, health, work, and shelter for refugees. Increasingly more central to the humanitarian response, the digitization of activities related to the management of migrants' daily lives gained momentum during the pandemic. This advancement, however, did not account for both inequalities of digital access and the different levels of digital literacy and participation among target audiences of emergency actions, that is, people in situations of social vulnerability (Cogo, 1999; Tufte, 2013). For Madianou (2019), digital innovation in migration contexts can strengthen power asymmetries between refugees and humanitarian agencies, generating inequality and dependency in a structure that dates back to colonial power. At the outset of the pandemic, a significant amount of training, education, and entrepreneurship courses began to be offered online to Venezuelan refugees, generating a feeling of exclusion among those who did not have access to ICTs. This was particularly the case of Leonansky, a 23-year-old man who came to Brazil in search of a job to be able to send resources to her mother in Venezuela. Leonansky said he was unable to attend a training course offered by a humanitarian agency, whereas Glivory shared her young son's feeling of sadness for not being able to follow the school's remote teaching due to the lack of a smartphone:

> I have seen an administration course for refugees offered by the Jesuit Service, but I don't have a smartphone or a computer. I think a lot of people were interested in the course but, because of these inconveniences, they won't do it either. Some have a telephone but no internet, others have internet but no good phone. It gets boring, I was really willing, but I don't have the conditions. (Leonansky)

> I go to school to get the material for my son to study and sometimes I ask someone at the shelter to borrow their mobile phone so that he can follow his classes. He doesn't have the teacher's WhatsApp to answer questions, and I can't help because my Portuguese is not good. It's much harder for him, he's sad about it. (Glivory)

Aside from digital exclusion, asymmetry and dependency also appear as key issues deriving from the digitalization of migration processes and that have become more visible during the pandemic (Madianou, 2019). Here, asymmetry and dependency are related to the challenges brought by top-down communication channels that are aimed at facilitating the work of humanitarian and Brazilian government agencies, instead of reducing (digital) barriers for refugees to access information about their rights and basic services. This finding further corroborates the ideas of Leung (2018), who states that the absence of official citizenship rights among refugees is filled with a condition of precarity when accessing information and digital technologies. Some participants reported having difficulty filling out public digital forms, both due to the lack of access to ICTs and the fact that these documents are only available in Portuguese. Others highlighted the challenges they faced when asking questions using one-way communication apps offered by UN agencies. For instance, Luci, a 54-year-old woman living in one of Boa Vista's refugee shelters, unemployed, commented that she was once part of a WhatsApp group of the Help Platform (UNHCR) and decided to leave the group because no one except for the administrator could write messages in the group. As she said:

> The group did not look good because we need to know a lot of things and want to ask them, especially now in this pandemic….I also left the group because I don't have much phone data and I need to choose what I download.

Another participant expressed the anguish of not being able to denounce human rights violations behind closed doors of public institutions. The comment below illustrates this:

> The company offered us a job and did not deliver what it offered in the relocation process. We never signed a document and now they have told us

> that, because of the pandemic, we will only work until the end of May; all the whistle-blower bodies are only working online. They [Operation Welcome] brought us to Boca do Acre [Northern state of Brazil]. I need a contact from UNHCR, IOM, or the military. I would like them to hear my family's story, many Venezuelans can still be deceived. (Marcos, 37 years old, man, migrated to Brazil with his two teenage children and his pregnant wife; unemployed)

In the context of vertical communication processes by international agencies and the challenges to access ICTs among refugees, it is important to highlight the commitment of small civil society organizations that, through a strategy closer to the reality of vulnerable communities, offered digital services during the pandemic. As mentioned above, initiatives like those of the Pastoral dos Migrantes in partnership with the public university offered connected devices and help with the registration of the telephone chip in the Federal government app called Emergency Assistance. The program was created by the Brazilian government in April 2020 to support workers and the unemployed during the Covid-19 crisis. Registration in the program was only possible through the website or application of a Brazilian government bank. As reported by Eduardo:

> We came here to register for emergency assistance from the Brazilian Government. But since we do not have a phone, we had to buy the chip for R$10.00 *reais* [$2.00 US dollars]; it's expensive. After registration, we will put it on a friend's cell phone to see the code and withdraw the money. If I didn't have to spend the money on food, I'd buy a phone.

Consequently, the experiences shared by participants revealed how digital responses by humanitarian actors can generate a verticalization that is inaccessible to the basic human right, defined here as the act of communicating. It is noteworthy that the right to communication—perspective postulated by Freire (1983)—relates to the understanding of communication as knowledge not only granted, transmitted, or imposed, but socially constructed and shared. This conception thus has an ethical, humanitarian, and citizen dimension that highlights the need for a fair social distribution of resources, including technological resources, necessary for the exercise of the right to communication (Cogo, 1998; Freire, 1983; Lima, 1981).

4.3. Increased Exposure to Fake News, Hate Speech, and Dangerous Information Online

The challenge of obtaining accessible and specific information on Covid-19 as a fundamental right exacerbated Venezuelans' vulnerability to fake news and rumors on social media platforms and message apps, generating misinformation and enhancing the risks of exploitation and marginalization of refugees (Camargo & Alencar, 2020). In this study, some participants said they received fake news via WhatsApp, on behalf of the UN, WHO, the World Bank, offering food stamps, in dollars, to Venezuelans. As one participant said:

> I saw this news about aid in dollars to buy food. It's very frustrating to receive this kind of news right now, because if you need help for food, even if it looks like it's a lie, you are in doubt and want it to be true. I don't understand why people like to cheat those in need. (Marcos, 37 years old, man, petroleum engineer, who moved to Boa Vista in search of a better way of life for him and his wife, after losing his job in Caracas)

Others commented that they received regular WhatsApp messages prescribing medicine and diets against the coronavirus: "I think some of these medicines are good and help protect ourselves; I, for example, heard that eating lots of sugar makes you more susceptible to be infected, so I stopped eating sugar" (Diana, a 19-year-old single woman from Zulia State, unemployed, living in Boa Vista for eight months).

In Brazil, WhatsApp is leading the rank of the most downloaded app with the highest number of users. The Reuters report on digital news consumption indicates that 83% of Brazilians use WhatsApp more than any other platform. The app is also used by 48% of Brazilians for news consumption, as well as 57% who see the platform as an important source of information. WhatsApp has been, however, a central source of dissemination of disinformation in Brazil, especially from a part of the far-right represented by President Bolsonaro in the context of the 2018 presidential elections (Soares et al., 2021). In a study on disinformation about Covid-19 in WhatsApp in Brazil, Soares et al. (2021) highlight that the pandemic has not been addressed as a public health issue but framed as a political-ideological polarized debate between "us" versus "them." Disinformation was used to strengthen a narrative in favor of the actual president Bolsonaro in a moment of crisis for the government. Besides, the authors observe that conspiracy theories, oftentimes rooted in opinions, were the most common type of disinformation spread in the messages shared on WhatsApp.

At the same time, Venezuelans reported being the target of false news and xenophobia on Facebook and WhatsApp. Their experiences involve, for example, viewing xenophobic memes on Facebook, with content opposing the right of refugees to receive emergency aid from the Brazilian government, or Facebook posts accusing Venezuelans of congesting the public healthcare system and disseminating the virus. In this regard, Martuscelli (2021, p. 12) showed that previous incidents of discrimination or the fear of being discriminated against led many refugees to avoid accessing public health services even if they got sick during the pandemic.

Similar to the dissemination of hate speech on social media, threats containing serious risks were directed at refugees in the context of their digital experiences during the pandemic. Exposure to virtual scams was particularly prominent in the interview data. Participants highlighted the existence of WhatsApp groups with themes of chains and financial pyramids, which in Brazil are configured as illegal practices. Another reported problem was the lack of information about the entry of Venezuelans into Brazil during the pandemic since the country closed its borders to nonnationals. This created much uncertainty, mainly because many Venezuelans had family members living in Brazil and had to look for information about alternative routes to enter the country. According to participants, there were WhatsApp groups that offered information and rates for the crossing between Santa Elena de Uairén (Venezuela) and Pacaraima (Brazil) through *las trochas* (trails), known as alternative paths, which do not have migratory control of governments, located between the border of Brazil and Venezuela:

> My husband stayed in Brazil and I came to Venezuela to leave my children with my mother because we lost our jobs to the pandemic. My financial benefit from Bolsa Família [social assistance program of the Brazilian government] is available, but my husband cannot withdraw the money. I don't know to who I have to explain my situation so that they can allow me and my kids to cross the border. I received messages via WhatsApp that offer services to go through *las trochas* on foot, but it must be at least R$600.00 [Brazilian currency]. They say it's reliable, but it's also dangerous, but we manage to cross. I need to go back to Brazil with my children. (Ana, a 26-year-old woman, mother of three children, self-employed)

5. Conclusion

This article considered Freire's perspective on communication rights to analyze the impact of digital inequalities on the everyday lived experiences of Venezuelan refugees in Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic. The current study found that Venezuelan refugees faced increased levels of digital precarity in terms of family communication, access to information about services, rights, and exposure to misinformation online. First, we highlighted how the suspension of communication services as part of humanitarian responses to the pandemic in Brazil combined with unreliable technology services in Venezuela undermined refugees' rights as communication citizens. Furthermore, the digital infrastructures put in place by government and humanitarian organizations amid Covid-19 contributed to enhancing social exclusion and marginalization of refugee populations through the adoption of technology solutions that bypassed the realities and priorities of Venezuelans living through a pandemic. Finally, it was argued that refugees' access to precarious information landscapes online not only affects their well-being and health, but also hinders safe pathways to mobility during and beyond the pandemic.

These results are in accord with recent studies indicating that top-down technology solutions can potentially enhance discrepancies and reinforce power imbalances between refugee and governance actors (Cogo et al., 2015; Madianou, 2019). In Brazil, the lack of information adapted for culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Martuscelli, 2021), as well as problems related to connectivity, usability, design, and functionalities of government websites and digital services systems can deprive refugees of accessing relevant information about their rights and services. In the case of the government financial assistance due to Covid-19, members of civil society organizations often act as translators or mediators in assisting refugees to access digital services, as many do not have a phone device and a SIM card registered in their names for obtaining this benefit. Despite the relevance of NGOs and migrant-led organizations in providing digital support to refugees during the pandemic and beyond, we still do not know much about the role of these small organizations and refugee communities in filling the gap between top-down institutionalized digital governance and technology deprivations faced by refugees. This is an important issue for future research. At the same time, this study provides some support for the conceptual premise that the development of communication spaces and practices among the forcibly displaced is increasingly shaped through the technological infrastructures available both locally and transnationally. In this regard, Venezuelans' practices of mobile phone sharing emerge as agentic forms of exercising their right to communicate and a response to migration systems that use technology as a tool of oppression and exclusion (Mezzadra, 2015). Further research should be undertaken to investigate the potential of refugees' creative and effective adoptions of technologies as acts of self-governance both at the individual and collective level, with the potential to mobilize resources beyond their personal uses and needs and that can shape the future of their own communities.

Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings offer valuable insights into refugees' media use experiences to negotiate their social, economic, and cultural conditions amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The urgency of understanding the impact of digital inequalities on refugees' migratory experiences is increasingly becoming more pressing, and yet the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects of lockdown around the world have configured dynamic trajectories for engagement with ICTs, such as increased digitization of social relations and daily lives. In a moment, post-Covid-19 crisis recovery is also envisioned around current and future potentials of digital technologies and systems. This study, therefore, reinforces the need to call attention to power relationships that mediate and emerge within opportunities for and barriers to ICT

adoption in order to move away from techno-centric approaches that do not fully engage with the sociocultural and political situatedness of refugees' digital experiences. While Covid-19 sharpened the relevance of this issue, the challenge of understanding the complexity of digital inequalities in forced migration is a problem that requires evidence-based policy directions, especially considering South–South migration contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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