

Communicative Solidarity: Networked Resistance to Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism in Urban Spaces

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Abstract

Today, in many parts of the world, local urban communities are forced to self-organise in response to the neoliberal restructuring of the state with its emphasis on privatisation, deregulation, and austerity that has hollowed out welfare provisions, leading to urban fragmentation. This article tells two stories of seemingly disconnected places, which, upon closer scrutiny, bear similarities regarding the ways in which neoliberalism and conflicts unfold in urban space: Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, and humanitarian activism across various regions in Russia. It discusses the communicative processes through which collectivities are formed and strengthened in situations of constant instability. The discussion systematises analytical insights and empirical findings from on-site visits and interviews. Our analysis demonstrates that these groups enact solidarity as a communicative practice strengthened by place-based relations. In these contexts, collective action that at a macro level has a political meaning gains a practical and affective significance for individuals engaged in it.

Keywords

Brazil; communicative ecologies; communicative solidarity; humanitarian activism; marginalization; Russia; shadow care infrastructure; urban activism

1. Introduction

Faced with contemporary crises, such as pandemics, wars, and natural catastrophes, local urban communities are increasingly forced to self-organise. The neoliberal restructuring of the state, with its emphasis on

privatisation, deregulation, and austerity, has hollowed out welfare provisions and the state's capacity to provide safety nets for citizens in times of need. Furthermore, the dissociation between living and work, as well as rapid commercialisation and the diminishing of public and communal spaces, has conditioned the fragmentation of urban communities. The increasing precarisation of work that reduces the security of contemporary life has led, for many, to precarious existences lacking the stability to plan their lives. In this way, urban life also becomes affected by the "cancellation of future" identified by Fisher (2020) as a state of political and creative inaction in which many resort to nostalgia, allowing reactionary politics to proliferate.

These processes happen in a context of what Santos (2021) called "space schizophrenia," a condition in which spaces are singular and global at the same time thanks to transport and information technologies. Meanwhile, citizens' rights are connected to the material space where people live—food, healthcare, sanitation, transport—but are managed by global corporations that do not have these rights as end goals, being "anti-citizen" in nature. As Stephen Graham argues, infrastructural systems such as water, sewage, electricity, and communications are often hidden underground and taken for granted in Western cities until disruption makes them visible (Graham, 2014, pp. 468–469). For Graham, such moments expose the "banal and ordinary" as contested sites of dynamism and action (Graham, 2014, p. 469). We take a reverse-engineering approach: Rather than treating disruption as an exception, we understand it as a persistent ontological condition that must be collectively mitigated. As reliance on seemingly invisible infrastructures—whether buried underground or etherealised in the myth of the digital cloud—intensifies, it becomes important to examine the sociotechnical dynamics through which disruptions are resisted and overcome.

Against this backdrop, we explore how urban communities (re)engage in future-oriented political imaginaries through communicative practices of solidarity in the present tense of complex crises. Kemmer and Simone (2021) refer to acts of "minor" future-making to define seemingly insignificant practices that enable processes of collective subversion of urban trajectories. We argue that solidarity enacted through communicative practices unveils the collective character of seemingly minor future-making individual acts.

The settings for our interrogation are Russian and Brazilian cities, places where state institutions fail to perform their fundamental role of safeguarding welfare and granting citizen rights, while corporations make access to infrastructures that would allow citizens to fulfil their basic rights difficult. These seemingly disconnected cases bear similarities regarding the ways in which neoliberal contradictions and contemporary conflicts unfold in urban spaces. In both cases, citizens are left to navigate crises and precarity on their own, often resorting to informal solidarity networks that emerge through communicative processes, creating shadow infrastructures of care that operate informally or in parallel to state infrastructures (Power et al., 2022). Dwellers in Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro and humanitarian activists in Russia engage in communicative solidarity under conditions of stable instability, thereby ensuring the future existence of communities.

Rather than treating solidarity as a moral disposition alone, we approach it as a communicative practice as enacted through the circulation of information, the coordination of care, the maintenance of trust, and the creation of mediated spaces of belonging and action. Bringing together these two cases allows us to show how communicative solidarity emerges in different but comparable urban environments marked by repression, marginalisation, and infrastructural inequality. In both cases, communication becomes central to sustaining collective action, even though the forms of visibility, risk, and territorial embeddedness differ.

In the following section, we contextualise each case, outlining the conditions that connect them as examples of contemporary communicative solidarity in urban environments. We then present the conceptual framework and methodological approach guiding our analysis, before turning to the empirical discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Case Contexts: Communicative Solidarity Under Constrained Conditions

Although Russia and Brazil differ significantly in terms of political regimes and urban governance, the two cases become comparable when approached through the question of how collective actors sustain solidarity under constrained conditions in future-oriented practices. In both urban contexts, communities operate in environments where institutional infrastructures are unreliable, hostile, or simply insufficient. Humanitarian activists in Russia navigate authoritarian repression and wartime censorship, while community communicators in Rocinha operate in a territorially marginalised urban space shaped by violence, infrastructural neglect, and contested state presence. Despite these differences, actors in both settings develop communicative practices that allow them to coordinate and maintain collective ties and sustain forms of engagement within the community. The cases, therefore, offer an opportunity to examine how communicative solidarity emerges as a future-oriented practice across different urban contexts marked by instability and uneven access to infrastructures.

2.1. Russian Case

Russia possesses a highly developed digital infrastructure, with widespread internet access and mobile communication (Levada Center, 2025). At the same time, state regulation of the digital sphere has increased significantly, especially since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Several social networking platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram, have been banned or blocked during the last four years, while other communication platforms and digital services, such as transport and delivery apps, face restrictions and periodic disruptions (E. Kalinina & Ingvarsson, 2026; Marrow, 2023; “Russia plans to try,” 2023). New legislation criminalising criticism of the military and the war has led to severe punishments, creating a climate of pervasive surveillance and risk for open public communication (Freedom House, 2024; E. Kalinina & Ingvarsson, 2026).

Under these conditions, visible forms of public protest have largely disappeared from urban spaces (Ingvarsson & Kalinina, 2024; A. Kalinina & Beyes, 2024). However, civic engagement has not vanished, but instead, many initiatives have shifted toward smaller-scale and more ad-hoc forms of organisation (Vasilevskaia & Kalinina, 2024), as well as “small deeds of resistance” (A. Kalinina & Beyes, 2024). The use of digital communication technologies for civic mobilisation in Russia did not emerge with the war. Prior to 2022, social media platforms were widely used for public campaigning and mobilisation around elections, urban issues, and protest events, shaping agendas and facilitating collective action (Chernysheva & Zaporozhets, 2025; Glazunova, 2022; Lonkila et al., 2021). Research on urban and political activists in the period 2017–2022 already documented forms of cautious and security-aware digital coordination (Chernysheva & Zaporozhets, 2025). After the full-scale invasion, however, this caution evolved into a more deliberate organisational strategy: Activists increasingly rely on selective and trusted audiences, encrypted messaging platforms, and informal communication networks to coordinate assistance and circulate information (Bederson et al., 2025). This reliance on digital communication infrastructures and informal

organisational practices, together with the emergence of locally embedded initiatives and newly formed cross-border networks, became the main characteristics of anti-war mobilisation (Meyer-Olimpieva, 2023).

At the same time, the humanitarian consequences of the war, including the movement of large numbers of Ukrainian civilians through Russian territory, have generated new forms of anti-war grassroots mobilisation (Karyakina & Zinder, 2023; Meyer-Olimpieva, 2025). Many Ukrainian citizens, who reached Russian territory through humanitarian corridors from combat zones (“Russia: ‘Filtration’ of Ukrainian civilians,” 2022) and hoped to continue onward to European countries, faced significant obstacles, including limited resources, unfamiliarity with travel logistics, and insufficient institutional support. In many regions, local social infrastructures proved unable to accommodate their needs, leaving refugees dependent on volunteer networks and civil society initiatives. In response, activists and volunteers organised informal support systems to provide information, financial assistance, and logistics. The communicative ecology mobilised by these networks comprised a mix of infrastructural elements, integrating conventional communication technologies, such as mobile phones, and transportation, including roads, vehicles, and boats, with spatial nodes of coordination that function as improvised meeting points. These socio-material infrastructures not only facilitated information flows but also enabled the logistical and affective work of solidarity under constrained conditions of war and political repression.

2.2. *Brazilian Case*

Rocinha, the largest favela in Rio de Janeiro, represents a different but analytically comparable case study in which communicative solidarity emerges under conditions of marginalisation and infrastructural inequality. Located between two of the city’s wealthiest neighbourhoods, São Conrado and Gávea, Rocinha is home to tens of thousands of residents living in a densely built informal settlement characterised by uneven access to public services, persistent territorial stigma, and recurring conflicts between organised crime and police forces.

The social conditions in Brazilian favelas have been described as a form of “militarisation of everyday life” in which police operations and territorial disputes shape the rhythms of daily life in the favelas (Martins & Farias, 2024). Residents frequently experience restricted mobility, surveillance, and precarious access to basic infrastructures such as sanitation, housing, and transportation. At the same time, favela residents have long developed collective strategies to address these inequalities and to assert their right to the city.

An important communication channel for marginalised communities has been community media initiatives. Since the late 20th century, grassroots collectives in Brazilian favelas have used radio, audiovisual projects, photography, and citizen journalism to represent local realities and to challenge dominant narratives that portray favelas primarily as spaces of violence and poverty (Custódio, 2017; Peruzzo, 2011; Suzina, 2021). Through these communicative practices, communities seek to make their experiences visible and to participate in public debates about urban inequality and social rights.

One such initiative is Fala Roça, a community communication collective established in 2013 by young residents following a media production course organised by a local NGO. Initially launched as a local newspaper, Fala Roça has since developed into a broader communication platform combining journalistic reporting as well as audiovisual and digital production. Building on traditions of popular communication in Brazil, the collective produces content addressing issues affecting favela residents, including access to

education, housing, gender equality, and public safety. These communicative practices function both as tools for community information sharing and as mechanisms for constructing counterpublic narratives about favela life (Custódio, 2017).

A key project developed by the collective is the Cultural Map of Rocinha, launched in 2015. The map documents local cultural initiatives, community organisations, meeting places, and social services within the favela. Developed through fieldwork and collaboration with local residents, the project seeks to incorporate local knowledge into the representation of the territory. In doing so, it responds to the limited representation of favelas in official or commercial digital mapping platforms, which often fail to capture the social and cultural infrastructures that structure everyday life in these areas.

The Cultural Map operates as a crowdsourced informational resource that allows residents to register cultural activities, community initiatives, and public services. More than one hundred points of interest, including schools, community centres, cultural groups, and healthcare facilities, are documented through the platform. The project follows the principle of “nothing about us without us” (Costanza-Chock, 2020), emphasising participatory knowledge production and community involvement in the design of digital tools.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1. *Solidarity as a Future-Oriented Social Practice*

Emile Durkheim understood solidarity as a force that binds societies together, preventing social unrest and conflicts (Durkheim, 1997), distinguishing between mechanical and organic solidarity. This distinction remains useful because it claims that solidarity, being one of the building blocks of a community, arises either from a feeling of belonging or from dependence on other actors in society (Durkheim, 1997). Consequently, by undermining solidarity, the individualisation imposed by neoliberal regimes is an obstacle to community building, particularly in urban areas where individualisation and privatisation are materialised in spatial practices. Building on this tradition, we approach solidarity as a social, cultural, and political response to crisis and risk (Levy, 2018) and propose communicative solidarity as a way to attend to the communicative and mediated character of solidarity. Previous studies in urban future-making have focused on temporal imaginaries related to urban spaces (Datta, 2019). We seek instead to recast the focus to present practices that are enacted with a view to constructing common urban futures that are otherwise denied to certain communities. Communicative solidarity, therefore, describes a specific way in which collective life is sustained in hostile environments, projecting a common future away from neoliberal individualism. It captures how people use communication not simply to express solidarity, but to organise and maintain it. In the cases examined in this article, we show that communicative solidarity emerges where formal support is weak, public space is constrained, and communities must rely on hybrid communicative practices to preserve collective agency.

Much of the literature on media and solidarity has previously focused on representation and attitudes toward others in processes of media production and reception (Fenton, 2008; Nikunen, 2018). Less attention has been paid to the ways media and communication are used as practical means of enacting solidarity. Yet in highly mediatised societies, collective life is increasingly organised through communication technologies, platforms, and networks (Castells, 2013). This requires a broader understanding of solidarity, one that accounts for how

communication is embedded in everyday practices of coordination, organisation of care, as well as trust- and community building.

Here, the notion of shadow infrastructures of care is particularly useful. Power et al. (2022) use the concept to describe the informal, improvised, and often hidden arrangements through which life is sustained where welfare institutions fail or withdraw. These infrastructures include not only established services, but also ad hoc networks, local initiatives, mutual aid practices, and unofficial mechanisms of care. Such arrangements are especially visible in what DeVerteuil (2015) calls post-welfare cities, where institutional provision is incomplete, uneven, or bypassed altogether.

3.2. Communicative Ecologies and Technological Appropriation

If communicative solidarity draws attention to how communities are enacted through communication practices, it also requires that the environments in which those practices take shape be examined. Communication does not occur through isolated technologies, but through complex arrangements of infrastructures, people's communicative practices, and their everyday routines. To capture this complexity, the concept of communicative ecologies is particularly useful.

Tacchi (2015) defines communicative ecologies as community-centred systems of communication composed of multiple interacting elements, including digital platforms, analogue media, interpersonal exchanges, spatial settings, and social relationships. Rather than focusing on individual technologies, the concept foregrounds the relational and contextual character of communication. As Slater (2013) argues, communication technologies are always embedded within broader social and material arrangements that shape how they are used, interpreted, and integrated into everyday life. From this perspective, communication practices emerge from a layered ecology that includes both technological infrastructures and social relations.

This approach is particularly helpful for analysing communication practices in marginalised urban contexts, where actors navigate uneven infrastructures and contested spaces. In such environments, communication rarely depends on a single platform or medium. Instead, actors combine digital tools with face-to-face interaction, informal networks, and locally embedded practices of information exchange. Communicative ecologies, therefore, highlight the hybrid character of communication, where older and newer technologies coexist and are adapted to specific social and spatial conditions (Tacchi, 2006).

In the context of communicative ecologies, technological appropriation is a key process. It refers to the ways individuals and groups adapt technologies to their own needs, reshaping them to overcome oppression in the course of everyday use (Carroll et al., 2001). In the context of marginalised or politically constrained environments, technological appropriation often takes on an explicitly political dimension. Subaltern groups frequently adapt communication technologies in order to navigate censorship, surveillance, territorial exclusion, or infrastructural neglect. In these processes, communication tools used may be repurposed for coordination, mutual aid, knowledge sharing, or territorial representation, allowing communities to maintain collective agency despite structural constraints.

In the cases examined in this article, communicative solidarity emerges from precisely such hybrid communicative ecologies. Activists and community communicators combine digital platforms, interpersonal

networks, and locally embedded knowledge to coordinate support, represent their communities, and sustain collective action under conditions of repression, marginalisation, or infrastructural exclusion. Understanding these practices, therefore, requires attention not only to the technologies themselves but also to the communicative environments in which they are embedded.

3.3. Methodological Note

This article is based on a comparative qualitative case study of two socially engaged communities that develop networks of solidarity under constrained conditions: humanitarian activist networks in Russia and popular communication initiatives in Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro. The comparison treats these communities as analytically comparable cases because, in both contexts, actors operate in urban environments marked by instability, institutional failure, and restricted possibilities for public participation. In both cases, communication becomes a practical means of sustaining collective action, coordinating care, and preserving forms of future-oriented social and political agency.

The comparative approach allows us to identify similar dynamics of communicative solidarity and understand the implications of contextual differences. The two cases are compared across the following three dimensions: (a) the political conditions from within which the communities operate; (b) the communicative infrastructures through which collective action is organised; and (c) the forms of communicative solidarity that emerge through these practices. This design allows us to examine how communicative solidarity is enacted in distinct urban environments shaped by neoliberal regimes, repression, violence, and infrastructural inequalities.

The Russian material is part of a broader research project on urban activism in Russia after 2022, funded by the Baltic Sea Foundation. The full dataset consists of 115 semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2022 and August 2025 with activists aged 21–55 across 15 large cities (more than one million inhabitants). Interviews were collected by Ekaterina Kalinina, Elisa Marin, and Oliver Skye. Participants were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their active involvement in urban civic initiatives, including non-commercial third places, heritage preservation, urban development, community gardens, and environmental activism. Of these participants, 22 had migrated from Russia to other countries, while the rest were still active in Russia at the time of the publication. Interviews were conducted in Russian by native speakers, mostly in person and in locations chosen by participants in order to ensure safety and confidentiality.

From this broader dataset, five interviews were selected for closer analysis for this article. These interviewees were not chosen to be statistically representative, but because they offered especially rich accounts of involvement in humanitarian relief for Ukrainian refugees and, in some cases, political prisoners. Importantly, these actors had not previously worked in humanitarian organisations; rather, they came from urban activist backgrounds and redirected their skills, contacts, and communicative practices toward relief work after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This makes the material especially relevant for the article's argument: It shows how preexisting activist capacities were reconfigured into forms of humanitarian and communicative solidarity under authoritarian wartime conditions. The interview material was transcribed, closely read, and manually coded, with particular attention to themes of communication, trust, coordination, infrastructural improvisation, and risk.

The Rocinha material was gathered during a site visit to the offices of the organisation Fala Roça in November 2023 as part of a network initiation project funded by the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT). During this fieldwork, both authors participated in two group meetings involving approximately 15 popular communicators from Favela da Rocinha and Complexo da Maré (an area in Rio de Janeiro formed by 17 favelas), and conducted conversational unstructured interviews with five communicators associated with Fala Roça. In addition, we carried out a document analysis of the Cultural Map of Rocinha, including its categories, functions, representational logic, and stated goals.

In the Rocinha case, the interviews are used less as standalone evidence and more as a way to contextualise the communicative practices surrounding the creation of the Cultural Map and related work at the *Fala Roça* newspaper. Because interlocutors live under constant pressure from both organised crime and police violence, and because the article identifies places and organisations in the favela, we chose not to reproduce individual quotations or provide identifying personal details. Instead, the interviews informed our interpretation of how popular communicators understand territorial representation, risks, and issues that surround visibility. The interviews, therefore, have an interpretive role alongside the site visit and document analysis.

Ethical considerations were central in both cases: In the Russian case, the names of cities and interlocutors are withheld because humanitarian support for Ukrainians and other anti-war civic activities have resulted in criminal prosecution. In the Brazilian case, anonymity is also necessary because community communicators operate in a setting marked by surveillance and threats from police. In both cases, we prioritise contextual analysis over personal identification in order to protect participants while still foregrounding the communicative practices through which collective action is sustained.

Analytically, the material was read comparatively through a conceptual lens centred on communicative solidarity. Rather than treating solidarity as a pre-given social bond, we examine how it is produced through communication: through the circulation of information, the coordination of care, the maintenance of trust, and the creation of mediated spaces of belonging and action. The analysis, therefore, focuses not only on what these groups do, but on how communication itself becomes a condition of collective endurance in urban contexts where futures are uncertain. Table 1 outlines the comparative analytical categories that guide our discussion.

Table 1. Contextual comparison.

	Russian case	Brazilian case
Political context	Authoritarian repression and war censorship, surveillance, shrinking civic space/institutional neglect of care function	Police violence, organised crime, infrastructural neglect
Geographical context	City-based, across borders, dependent on local social networks	City-based, dependent on local social networks
Why communication matters	To coordinate relief, maintain trusted ties, circulate information discreetly, sustain anti-war civic action	To represent the territory, circulate local knowledge, strengthen community ties, make rights claims visible

Table 1. (Cont.) Contextual comparison.

	Russian case	Brazilian case
Key communicative infrastructures (digital & physical infrastructure)	Telegram and Signal chats, phone calls, private apartments, roads, informal meeting points, Wi-Fi, mobile internet	Fala Roça newspaper, Cultural Map of Rocinha, face-to-face communication, graffiti
Main condition of instability	Criminalisation of dissent and humanitarian aid, insecure communication	Police and criminal violence, uneven urban services
Predominant mode of visibility	Low visibility, selective, private, and risk-managed communication	Strategic visibility: community-facing and outward-facing, but carefully negotiated
Relation to state institutions and corporate actors	Substitutes for absent or hostile state support, resists platform-based discrimination	Compensates for state neglect and stigma by platform-based mapping systems
Basis of trust	Interpersonal ties, word of mouth, prior involvement in civic engagement	Territorial embeddedness, local recognition, long-term presence in the community
Temporal orientation	Keeps civic and humanitarian action possible when future is uncertain	Reclaims the community's present and future visibility in a city that aims to erase favelas
Form of communicative solidarity	Networked, local & translocal	Place-based, representational, community-anchored
Similarity with mechanical and organic solidarity	Organic solidarity (distribution based on skills and weak ties)	Mechanical solidarity (locally based and built on strong ties in the community)

4. Communicative Solidarity and Contested Urban Futures

4.1. Communicative Infrastructures of Solidarity: Key Features

Communication plays a central role in enabling solidarity networks to operate under constrained conditions. In both cases under analysis, collective action relied on hybrid communicative infrastructures that combine digital platforms, interpersonal networks, and locally embedded practices in shared spaces. In the Russian case, activists coordinated humanitarian assistance primarily through digital communication channels such as Telegram chats (Meyer-Olimpieva, 2023, 2025), which allowed participants to share logistical information, coordinate transportation routes, and organise financial contributions. However, what truly sustained these initiatives were the previous personal relationships between individuals and the use of local physical infrastructure. Under conditions of digital surveillance and political repression, knowledge and information were primarily shared through word of mouth, while the physical spaces and routes made this solidarity effective in terms of the humanitarian support provided. At Rocinha, physical structures play an important role in reaffirming the existence of collectives in areas where those acting towards social aims struggle between a hostile police and the control of organised crime. The headquarters of Fala Roça became a communicative space that complemented the mediating role of the newspaper that started as a paper publication and is today a multiplatform publication (www.falaroca.com).

Against this background, in this analysis, we identify and discuss the key features of these communicative structures, pointing to the shared dynamics in the two different sociopolitical and spatial contexts across three dimensions: the political conditions from within which the communities operate; the communicative infrastructures through which collective action is organised; and the forms of communicative solidarity that emerge through these practices. Each dimension is specified and discussed as follows:

1. Political conditions: visibility and risk, pre-existing infrastructures;
2. Communicative infrastructures: digital infrastructures of solidarity, spatial infrastructures of solidarity, fragile infrastructures of care and personal trust, affective community infrastructures;
3. Communicative solidarity: geographies of communicative solidarity.

In the following sections, we discuss each of these comparative dimensions.

4.2. Political Conditions

4.2.1. Visibility and Risk

In both cases, people operated in highly constrained and repressive environments, which further shaped how much visibility their initiatives could afford. While in both cases, communication involved risk, the predominant mode of visibility differed. In Russia, any support to Ukrainians can be viewed by the state as an act of treason, while even mentioning the political dimensions of such support may lead to prosecution as an anti-state protest. Under these conditions, communicative solidarity in Russia depended on low visibility: carefully managed humanitarian support that reduced exposure to surveillance by state authorities.

In Rocinha, communicative solidarity was also shaped by threats, though of a different kind. Popular communicators constantly had to navigate the risks posed by both police violence and organised crime when gathering and circulating community information. Here, visibility could not simply be avoided, since projects such as the newspaper *Fala Roça* and the Cultural Map of Rocinha depended on making the territory, its cultural life, and its infrastructures visible both within and beyond the favela. At the same time, this visibility had to be strategically negotiated. Focusing on cultural activities became a way to strengthen the community and assert its presence without directly provoking controversy.

In the two cases, solidarity was not always communicated in order to be fully visible. In Russia, invisibility was often a precondition for action, as volunteers limited publicity in order to continue providing care and logistical support. In Rocinha, by contrast, visibility was necessary but calibrated: Communicators sought to contest stigma and erasure while remaining attentive to the local risks of overexposure. The two cases, therefore, differed not in whether communication was political but in how political action had to be framed and staged in order to remain possible: Russian volunteers forfeit political capital to do groundwork, while favela communicators help dwellers despite the risk of being targeted by organised crime.

In both cases, actions were often framed as pragmatic solidarity and community-building rather than as overt political confrontation. In Russia, humanitarian help could be described in practical and moral rather than explicitly anti-war terms, even if it carried a broader political significance. In Rocinha, the emphasis on culture and community infrastructure allowed communicators to support local communities and territorial recognition without always stating these efforts in openly confrontational language.

4.2.2. Pre-Existing Infrastructures

Collective action is often portrayed as spontaneous and timeless, detached from the historical and material conditions that shape it. However, technology is always appropriated within specific social and historical contexts, and its use unfolds within particular temporal dimensions. This becomes clear in both the Russian and favela cases, where seemingly immediate and improvised forms of collective action were in fact built on earlier histories of activism.

With the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, placement centres for Ukrainian refugees opened up in many large cities, where the refugees were migrating. Many of these centres emerged spontaneously, mobilising both people who were new to volunteering and those who had previous experience of social mobilisation and activism. Our respondents, who had prior experience of civic engagement, pointed out that these humanitarian actions attracted many people of different backgrounds, including refugees: “In the chat, for example, there are 1,000 people. Even more....Well, among them are refugees, too” (AN, 2024). Many of these initiatives were informal and community-led, often functioning as a patchwork infrastructure of care emerging in the absence of a more institutionalised system.

Yet despite their seemingly spontaneous and atemporal online presence, these communicative solidarity practices were not entirely ad hoc. They were deeply rooted in earlier protest and activist cultures, especially those developed in response to repression around rallies and detentions in previous years, as well as in longer-standing forms of social mobilisation in urban space. In this sense, the digital tools used to coordinate humanitarian support were not adopted in the moment, but appropriated through already existing civic networks, repertoires, and organisational experience. As one activist put it: “Civil society had already formed in Russia. You couldn’t just make it disappear. How do you get a million people to leave the country and stop doing what they do?” (PL, 2024).

A similar dynamic can be seen in Rocinha. In the favelas, there is a long history of resistance and collective organisation that can be traced back to Brazil’s re-democratisation in the mid-1980s, after a 20-year civil-military dictatorship. This history includes the emergence of communication and audiovisual collectives, often in collaboration with universities and NGOs (see Custódio, 2017). The Cultural Map of Rocinha was created by a communication collective formed in 2012 by youth who had attended a media production course offered by an NGO in partnership with a TV station, Tv Tagarela, active in Favela da Rocinha since 1998 (<https://www.falaroca.com/mapa>). Also, popular mobilization in 2015 in response to the city’s preparations for the 2016 Olympic Games contributed to the creation of the Map. The development of this technology was therefore not an isolated initiative but part of these longer communicative ecologies and assemblages.

4.3. Communicative Infrastructures

4.3.1. Digital Infrastructures of Solidarity

If collective action is historically grounded rather than purely spontaneous, the same is true of the communicative infrastructures through which it is sustained. In both cases under analysis, solidarity depended not only on prior traditions of mobilisation but also on the practical appropriation of digital tools

by specific actors who could turn platforms into working infrastructures of care. Digital communication and project management skills proved to be very much sought after in humanitarian and community activist networks. The appearance of a person combining both skills at an early stage, when the processes were agile, often became decisive and contributed to the longevity of an initiative. As several of our interlocutors pointed out, activist digital infrastructure often emerged from the initiative of a volunteer, rather than from a conscious organisational choice. Once these persons are identified, they can become nodes and catalysts of communication in social media channels.

Humanitarian activists used Telegram as a basis for improvised infrastructures that maintained both the flow of resources and the social capacity of the group: “We’d run out of stuff and ask him [a local activist] what to do, and he’d say, ‘Post on social media and people will bring more.’ So we’d post, people would bring things—and somehow that worked” (PL, 2024). Favela communicators used social networking sites to share information useful for managing daily life, including police visits to the favela and practical information about local events. When networked social relations are organically articulated, platforms become resilient communication channels through which acts of solidarity can materialise in the form of donations, protection of vulnerable community members, mutual help, and support for community initiatives.

At the same time, the infrastructures of urban solidarity were also marked by ephemerality and operational security under different forms of oppression: “I don’t think any of those chats have even been preserved—we deleted everything” (PT, 2025). Similarly, favela communicators admitted not always being able to trust commercial messaging applications and having to resort to tactical measures such as disappearing messages. This points to a deliberate erasure of communicative activity, illustrating how repression reshapes the material conditions of mobilisation. The act of deleting chats is not merely tactical; it reflects how infrastructure itself becomes dangerous. “We were securing Telegra” (PT, 2025) signals the normalisation of digital security protocols such as clearing logs, using encryption, and not leaving traces—strategies common in repressive environments and among activists managing high levels of risk.

Early humanitarian efforts also developed from digital spontaneity toward more systematised practices. While the first phase often operated under what one activist called the chaotic ethos of “grab more, throw further,” many groups eventually developed systems for resource tracking, verification, and accountability. An activist who migrated for a short period to Georgia in 2022 recalled how early relief operations became more organised and professional:

They’ve [the organisers] really made progress because they managed to structure their work. We started fundraising, tracking our purchases. We adjusted what we bought: cheaper food staples, more hygiene items, which are twice as expensive. They also built a system using Notion. (PL, 2024)

In the favelas, the same spontaneity in appropriating digital technologies for mutual help could be observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, when already established communicators started similar disparate initiatives facilitated by digital media to later converge in more organised efforts.

In both cases, the connective features of mediated communication facilitated the initial articulation of solidarity, which gradually evolved into more systematic forms of coordination and resource management.

4.3.2. Spatial Infrastructures of Solidarity

Urban social mobilisation has an undeniable spatial aspect and is profoundly embedded in local, face-to-face social interactions, especially in smaller or tightly knit urban settings and neighbourhoods. Both in the favela and among humanitarian activists, there was an identifiable sense of a place-based network composed of key individuals who knew each other, forming interpersonal networks of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). This speaks against assumptions that digital tools such as Telegram or WhatsApp are the primary mode of connection; rather, they are layered on top of already existing offline relationships rooted in particular urban localities. As one activist recalled:

The apartment itself was already packed to the ceiling, and people were still bringing stuff in. It wasn't just random drop-offs; everything came through some kind of connection. It was mostly closed communications, not just an open call for people to donate whatever they had. It was very much peer-to-peer. (PT, 2005)

Similarly, favela communicators stressed the importance of securing physical places that could be used as headquarters to meet and organise aid; in other words, a place where weak ties could be materialised into solidarity acts.

These spaces, private apartments in the case of the humanitarian activists and community-operated spaces in the case of Favela communicators, became essential elements of spatial infrastructure because they functioned as sites of coordination, storage, and spontaneous meeting points. As one activist put it: "We were gathering humanitarian aid in someone's apartment. I can't remember the exact addresses now. Maybe they still exist, but no one uses them anymore" (PT, an activist, big city). He recalled: "We were meeting at her place....Olya comes in, and of course we know each other! And we're sitting there!" (PT, 2025). These scenes provide examples of spaces functioning as a node of civic organisation.

In the Russian case, spatial infrastructures also extended beyond the city itself, connecting solidarity hubs to trans-border routes. Humanitarian activism depended not only on local spaces of coordination but also on the material infrastructures that enabled people to move across wartime and post-pandemic geographies. As one activist explained, St Petersburg functioned as a transit node for people travelling onward to Finland, Sweden, and Estonia, at a time when border restrictions introduced during Covid-19 had not yet been fully lifted: "Part of them went through Petersburg, just as a transit point, because some of the folks there were migrating....At that time, people were still being allowed through the borders....We were somehow managing to get stuff through anyway" (PT, 2025). Along the way, activists involved in humanitarian relief also developed situated knowledge of how these transnational humanitarian infrastructures operated in practice. Rather than reading this only as individual resourcefulness, we suggest understanding this example as illustrative of an ability to navigate the different spatial and institutional arrangements of specific border crossings. This also shows that communicative solidarity thus depends on infrastructures that are not always stable, but need to be interpreted and navigated across multiple jurisdictions.

4.3.3. Fragile Infrastructures of Care and Interpersonal Trust

A key characteristic of the shadow infrastructures of care is their fragility, because they rely on precarious relations. What often makes these networks fragile is that they cannot be articulated through technologically mediated interactions that occur in instant messaging applications and social networking sites, but rather through co-present personal relationships and trust. This trust is deeply tied to how the community is formed, whether it is based on shared geography (territorial) or shared identity (e.g., ethnicity, values, political beliefs). In both the Russian and the Brazilian cases, trust emerges as a condition of collective action under constrained circumstances, yet it rests on different social foundations.

Because trust relies on personal and social bonds rather than institutional or technical structures, the solidarity networks are vulnerable to collapse if those relationships are disrupted. In less institutionalised collectives that lack bureaucratic accountability, resource circulation depends almost entirely on interpersonal credibility. Once suspicion arises, the network fractures, as one activist confirms:

There was this guy, Pasha [name altered by the authors to secure anonymity], very well known in Georgia. Donations went to his bank card because he had a Georgian account. Eventually, we realised he wasn't giving us any money. But a slow conflict began, and eventually we kind of left him behind. We redirected donations to another card. (PL, 2024)

This example illustrates the fragility of informal care infrastructures in which logistical and financial coordination rests on trusted individuals rather than formal systems of accountability. Such precarious horizontality is common in grassroots initiatives (cf. Juris, 2008), where rejection of hierarchy and institutionalised bureaucratic systems often results in the absence of accountability structures and suffers from communicative breakages or even disengagement of volunteers (Bronnikova et al., 2025).

The case of Favela da Rocinha further illustrates how trust and social capital underpin solidarity initiatives, though in a different way. Popular communicators pointed out that the fact that they are known and trusted among the community makes people more likely to contribute information to the Cultural Map of Rocinha. This shows that the effectiveness of initiatives such as the Cultural Map depends on the local presence of the popular communicators and the shared histories they have with the dwellers of the favela.

Social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram supported this trust-based coordination, but they did not replace it. In the case of Russia, Instagram was used as a peer-to-peer fundraising tool, reflecting a functional but fragile infrastructure of solidarity: "People just sent me money via Instagram, no reporting, and it was fine" (LN, 2024). Here again, the infrastructure worked because the platform was embedded in personal networks and informal communication. Yet this also meant that the initiative depended on continued goodwill, volunteer energy, and public attention, all of which could quickly diminish. When these conditions changed, both material and financial donations stopped, and the humanitarian initiative the activist talked about ceased to exist in 2025.

The comparison between the two cases shows that shadow infrastructures of care are fragile not simply because they are informal, but because they are anchored in different forms of socially produced trust. In the Russian case, trust circulated through interpersonal networks that enabled rapid coordination under repressive

conditions, but that could also collapse when credibility was lost. In Rocinha, trust was less mobile and more territorially grounded, relying on long-standing recognition within the community. In both cases, however, trust functioned as a substitute for formal guarantees, making communicative solidarity possible while also exposing it to instability.

4.3.4. Affective Community Infrastructures

Spaces are not only functional and instrumental, but also symbolic anchors for the community that can offer safety and support to local grassroots initiatives in urban areas characterised by commercial exploitation. Because social mobilisation is broader than its digital interface, material and emotional infrastructures are key to communicative solidarity.

In repressive conditions, we witness a relational mode of organising in which trust and social mobilisation are not based on open calls but built through interpersonal networks of strong and weak ties, where solidarity is enacted as practice (Paiva, 2007). This speaks against assumptions that technologies such as social media platforms or instant messaging applications are the primary mode of connection; rather, they are enmeshed in already existing territorial relationships. In the case of the Cultural Map of Rocinha, the digital interface is combined with interpersonal relations and contact. Even though there is a simple form for including new cultural initiatives, anyone can also contact the team responsible for the map to add new entries.

In Russian humanitarian solidarity networks, social media platforms are essential tools for connection and coordination. All interlocutors emphasised the critical role of Telegram bots and channels in organising their work. However, what sustained these initiatives were personal relationships between individuals. Under conditions of digital surveillance and political repression, knowledge and information were primarily shared through word of mouth. Friends and acquaintances already involved in care networks passed on details in private conversations rather than using public social media to advertise their efforts. Our own observations confirm that high-profile social media influencers contributed little to the visibility or promotion of these initiatives, either inside Russia or abroad. Instead, it was the quiet, persistent work of ordinary people, driven by interpersonal trust and informal connections, that kept these solidarity networks alive.

For both Russian and Rocinha activists, ordinary local places have affective and social importance, as they provide a safety for the exercise of activities. In the case of favelas, collective assembly and participation in cultural life are denied to favela dwellers because they exist at the urban margins. The Cultural Map of Rocinha provides a digital interface that renders these affective spaces visible as part of Rocinha's cultural infrastructure. The map includes places categorised as community centre, social centre, meeting point, and religious site that construct an image of the favela to the outside society as a socially supportive place beyond the stigma of violence and organised crime. Moreover, the digital interface allows the local communities to navigate the varied material infrastructures of culture and social care that contribute to strengthening the connective tissue of life and resistance at the favela.

In the Russian case, the emotional toll of war and organised crime is managed, in part, through smaller task- and project-based actions, which allow individuals to channel their anxiety into purposeful action. Practical tasks and projects such as distributing food for refugees or registering local cultural activities in a digital tool gave activists in Russia and Brazil a sense of purpose in their work. Here, affect is central. In such cases, activism

and community mobilisation practices evoke affective attitudes in combination with their more long-term and abstract political role.

The scale of logistical, affective, and communicative labour involved in sustaining these networks that survive on a fragile combination of personal engagement and practical knowledge cannot be ignored: “There were just so many ongoing communications, always something happening. I still have all of it in the chat—it was a ton of work” (PT, 2025). Similarly, popular communicators at Rocinha speak about constantly having to negotiate the conditions of their work with both the police and organised crime, whilst dealing with a host of personal issues.

4.4. Communicative Solidarity

4.4.1. Geographies of Communicative Solidarity

Marginalised communities often experience space schizophrenia in practice (Santos, 2021), particularly in conditions of intense but unequal digitalisation of urban life. In these situations, communicative solidarity is exercised in a communicative ecology that needs to attend to local and translocal/global aspects of their activities. In the case of Russian-speaking activists, they needed to learn how to navigate borders and create new connections with both activists and those in need of help. Popular communicators at Rocinha, in turn, needed to reclaim the representation of their territories to respond to the erasure operated by transnational technology corporations in the United States.

The humanitarian networks supporting the passage of Ukrainians through Russia to third countries were transnational and global on one hand, and hyper-local on the other. For this reason, the activists had to navigate complex transits across both post-Covid and wartime geographies. The activists working with humanitarian relief usually know the transnational corridors used for humanitarian supply chains very well, and they also demonstrate practical knowledge of how different national border systems work. In general, we observed that activist geographies, though localised and dependent on the right people being in the right localities, also spilled over borders and resulted in exile activism, i.e., civic mobilisation of people who themselves had to migrate to other countries against their will. Many Russian civic actors, journalists, and various professionals forced to leave their country continued or engaged in activism abroad: “Tbilisi saw a real explosion of these kinds of initiatives. Tons of people who knew and loved civil society work moved there and started doing a lot. Ours was one of three humanitarian aid points” (PL, 2024).

In this sense, Bronnikova et al. (2025) wrote that after 2022 Russian exile activists built a digital solidarity network with social media channels and donations made by members of Russian diaspora communities not only from Georgia, but all over the world. Even though the connections with local activists in the host country (in this case, Georgia) and with international organisations were made, they did not play a decisive role in the development of such humanitarian exile initiatives, which cannot be said about the diasporic connections, which ensured financial support. At the same time, these efforts unfolded in an environment of growing technological constraint. Western sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine led many platforms, including payment systems (Master Card, PayPal), communication apps (Zoom), and fundraising apps (Parteon), to restrict access for users in Russia. This severely hindered activists’ ability to transfer money, manage online infrastructure, and communicate securely. Many found themselves excluded from the very digital tools designed to support transnational civil society. As a result, activists were often forced to

revert to basic, analogue forms of coordination, such as cash transactions and phone calls from “dumb” phones rather than smartphones.

In a similar way, popular communicators in Rocinha created a digital map based on local knowledge of the territory, as opposed to a fully digitalised, automated process operated by Google. The United States-based tech corporation retains control over the geolocation data of Rocinha, including satellite images, telecommunication data, and official maps, which are used to comply with Google’s profit-making interests. To respond to the control of this corporate action, communities have to act collectively and engage in mutual help, through acts of communicative solidarity (helping with entering data in the map), supporting local cultural activities.

In both cases, the experience of space schizophrenia prompts a response from the communities that have to engage in conscious technological appropriation, engaging with local and territorial communicative ecologies and assemblages. When doing so, these communities also exercise communicative solidarity by constructing a sense of collective through mutual help articulated in communication.

5. Concluding Remarks: Present Tense and Imperfect Futures

The capacity to imagine and project futures depends on conditions in the present. When these conditions, including spatial, social, and political infrastructures, become unstable and unfavourable, future-making becomes difficult. In contexts marked by infrastructural inequality and political repression, such as the two cases we have presented, the future becomes unevenly accessible. Future-making requires infrastructures that stabilise expectations and enable coordinated action. When welfare systems, public services, and civic institutions are weakened or hostile, individuals and communities lose the institutional foundations that normally sustain long-term planning. In such contexts, communication becomes a collective infrastructure of future-making, rendering otherwise invisible infrastructures highly visible (Graham, 2014). Through communicative practices, communities with divergent trajectories maintain networks of care, share knowledge, and coordinate action, sustaining social continuity where institutional futures are uncertain or foreclosed. Collective knowledge and coordinated action around urban infrastructures thus function as a social buffer against the harmful social and environmental effects of infrastructural disruption. In such contexts, communication becomes a collective infrastructure of future-making. These communicative practices are specifically oriented toward solidarity acts, in the form of communicative solidarity. Communicative solidarity operates not only as a response to present crises but also as a practice of future-making. By sustaining networks of trust, information, and cooperation, communicative practices help communities maintain the conditions necessary for continuity while also minimising inequalities.

Even where institutional futures appear blocked, these communicative infrastructures allow actors to preserve the possibility of acting together. In both case studies, communicative solidarity is mobilised not only to survive present tensions but also to preserve the possibility of collective futures. In one case, futures are constrained by authoritarian repression; in the other, by urban marginalisation, violence, and inequality. Communicative solidarity, therefore, becomes part of future-making: It helps communities sustain agency where official institutions foreclose viable futures.

Our analysis of two different communities facing related conflicts intensified in neoliberal urban environments shows that these groups enact solidarity as a communicative practice strengthened by place-based relations. In these contexts, collective action that has political meaning at the macro level also gains practical and affective significance for the individuals engaged in it. The spatial dimension in both cases reveals the varied collective entanglements that can emerge beneath the surface of neoliberal, individualised, and commercialised urban spaces. In both cases, communities engender particular communicative practices (Slater, 2013) in which the places where they live play an important role. Although they make extensive use of digital communication technologies, these do not determine their actions. Our interlocutors are conscious of the limitations of digital communication technologies, particularly in terms of vulnerability to surveillance and accessibility challenges specific to vulnerable communities.

We use the term communicative solidarity to describe forms of collective cohesion produced and sustained through communication practices: the sharing of information, coordination with the help of media technologies, and trust-building among actors who share common urban spaces. Unlike mechanical solidarity, which rests on shared beliefs and similarity in small, traditional communities, or organic solidarity, which rests on the interdependence of specialised and diverse roles in industrial societies, communicative solidarity operates differently. It foregrounds the practical and relational work through which collectivities are enacted under conditions of institutional breakdown or repression in highly mediatised and atomised urban societies. Communicative solidarity does not replace classical forms of solidarity, but draws attention to a different analytical dimension: the ways collectivities are enacted through the circulation of information, mediated coordination, and the practical maintenance of social ties under conditions of uncertainty concretely related to spatial aspects of urban life, such as safety, transportation, citizen participation, and cultural and leisure activities. In this sense, solidarity is not only a moral disposition or a social structure; it is also a form of communicative action oriented toward the construction of collective futures.

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