BLACK BLOC RISING: SOCIAL NETWORKS IN BRAZIL[1]

SUMMARY

Brazil was convulsed by massive digitally-enabled protests between June and August 2013. While largely peaceful, a militant anarchist group emerged during this period – the Black Bloc – which seized the public imagination. Although preoccupying media and policy makers, comparatively little is known about what Black Bloc is, where it comes from, or how it operates. This latest publication from the Open Empowerment Initiative considers the presence of Black Bloc in cyberspace. It focuses specifically on Facebook, the dominant social media platform used by more than 80 percent of Brazilian internet users. The report comes at a critical moment since the Black Bloc are continuing to play a major role in ongoing demonstrations in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. The assessment finds that Black Bloc is a new phenomenon in Brazil, appearing just two weeks into the protests. It is highly geographically concentrated, particularly in specific areas of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, which may be generating demonstration effects elsewhere. There also appears to be a relationship between police-related violence and the explosion of Black Bloc activity.
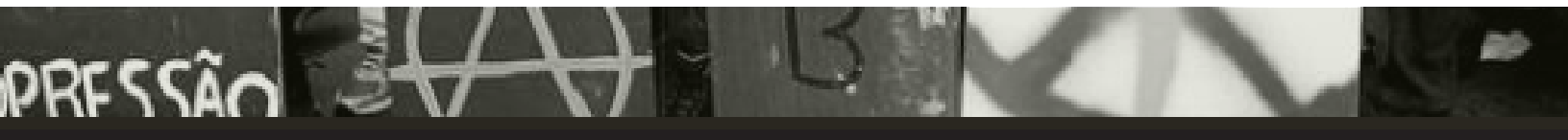
INTRODUCTION

The mass demonstrations that spread across Brazil from June to August 2013 confirm a new era of digitally enhanced protest. What began as small-scale protests against public transport fees triggered a national movement which is likely to rumble on into 2014 and beyond. Specifically, when military police were filmed using excessive force against protesters in June 2013, over a million people from more than 350 cities in Brazil took to the digital and tarmac streets to express all manner of grievances. Their voices were diverse and included left-wing and right-wing organizations as well as hacker outfits

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such as Anonymous and the more obscure anti-globalization outfit, Black Bloc. As the rallies grew in scope and scale, more extremist conservative voices also emerged, calling for, among other things, stiffer penalties for young people involved in crime, impeachment of leftist politicians, and lower taxes.[2]

Episodic and increasingly violent protests have continued into October 2013 in major cities such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. A regular staple of the national media headlines is young men dressed in black and filmed clashing directly with police. And since Brazilians are among the most enthusiastic users of social media in the world, it is unsurprising that these same photos also feature prominently on Facebook,

Twitter and other platforms. Although the punditry on Black Bloc is growing, there seems to be very little in the way of serious evidence-based commentary. There is comparatively limited understanding of what Black Bloc is, where it comes from, or how it operates.[3] Nor is there any serious empirical treatment of the complex relationships between police violence and Black Bloc, online or off.

This study considers the characteristics of Black Bloc in the cyber-domain, particularly whether or not there is a relationship between Black Bloc-related social media activity and its street activity. Analysis draws on what might be described as "medium data" (as opposed to big data) from Facebook as well as incident data from news reporting to determine whether: (a) social media and street violence spawn or reinforce each other; and (b) reported incidents of police violence elicit reactions on social media. This Black Bloc case study is part of a larger research project that seeks to understand how populations use technology to empower themselves and bring about progressive change in Latin America.[4] Social media is a critically important element in this process of empowerment and change—it is a venue for organization, discussion, encouragement and occasionally denigration and propaganda.

DESCRIBING BLACK BLOC

The Black Bloc defies simple categorization. Many members of Black Bloc claim that it is not a group or organization at all, but rather a set of ideological beliefs, protest tactics and demonstration aesthetics. Black Bloc affiliates typically seek to express their version of an anarchist political ideology through the destruction of public and private property. In particular, Black Bloc activities target property they see as embodying the state and corporate power – government office buildings, police stations, media outlets and some retail establishments associated with big global brands. The destruction of this property, they argue, is a symbolic rejection of state and corporate power. As one Black Bloc video argues, "Their actions are designed to cause material damage to oppressive institutions, but much more importantly, they are intended as theatre."[5]

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Black Bloc tactics first emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s in Western Europe, as a means to protest issues ranging from nuclear power and police brutality to the eviction of squatters.[6] While well-established in West Germany during the 1980s, groups of Black Blocs gained wider media attention during the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization meetings in the United States.[7] In spite of their purported anarchist beliefs, Black Bloc protesters around the world – from Germany to Egypt – are remarkably uniform in their ideology, behavior and appearance.[8] Dressed in black, masked and belligerent, Black Bloc protesters are often the most destructive and confrontational element within larger protests, yet their identity and affiliations are almost entirely unknown.[9]

The emergence of a Black Bloc in Brazil in 2013 substantially complicated the protest movement. As El Pais journalist Maria Martin observes, the Black Bloc is "the new unknown factor in Brazil's ever-growing

street protests."[10] In contrast to the demands of most protesters in Brazil — better transportation, education, healthcare and public security — Brazilian Black Bloc-affiliated protesters have advocated ends similar to those of their global counterparts: the collapse of capitalism and the destruction of a pro-market police state. The Brazilian Black Bloc also appears to reject the role of religious authority in Brazil. One of the largest and most disruptive Black Bloc protests occurred on 22 July 2013, coinciding with the arrival of Pope Frances in Rio de Janeiro.[11] While the Black Bloc's real-world presence is amorphous and (at least superficially) difficult to study, its social media presence in Brazil is remarkably organized. What follows is an analysis of the Brazilian Black Bloc's online presence.

RESEARCHING BLACK BLOC

This investigation focuses on Black Bloc's activities on Facebook, even though it has a presence on other online platforms. This is because of Facebook's sheer prominence in Brazil. As of September 2013, nearly 89 percent of Brazilian social media activity occurred on Facebook.[12] The research team collected social media data on public Black Bloc Facebook pages using the Facebook Graph API. All information collected is public and readily available to researchers. Facebook event pages, which have been of significant importance to the Brazil protest movement, could not be collected in a uniform manner using Facebook's Graph API and were therefore excluded from the collection. This was not a significant limitation, since the Brazilian Black Bloc did not independently organize its own events on Facebook. Moreover, all information was stripped of any personal identifiers so as to ensure privacy for social media users.[13]

Nearly 89 percent of Brazilian social media activity occurs on Facebook

Drawing on a review of social media activity, the authors identified Black Bloc Facebook pages, which led to a Brazil-wide "directory" of pages representing localities around Brazil. The next step was to collect all posts, comments, and likes on these pages from their date of inception to 14 August 2013. The social media collection therefore consists of: (i) data from 42 public Facebook pages claiming to represent the Black Bloc movement in various districts in Brazil; and (ii) data from 9 general pages, including the "national" Black Bloc page and non-Black Bloc affiliate pages, including anarchist collective pages. In total, 74,087 Facebook posts were collected, 160,106 Facebook comments, and 1,452,427 Facebook likes. The team collected, organized and analyzed these data-points using data visualization and network analysis techniques and software.

TRACKING BLACK BLOC OVER SPACE AND TIME

The social media analysis allowed for a more sophisticated assessment of the distribution of Black Bloc Brazil over space and time. There is a misconception in popular media that Black Bloc is "everywhere" when in fact they are highly concentrated. The authors assessed the frequency and content of comments

posted on various local Black Bloc pages to generate a sense of which ones were the most active and when. The review indicates that Rio de Janeiro's page (BlackBlocRJ) was the most active by far, essentially drowning out other smaller local pages. BlackBlocRJ was also the first and only local Black Bloc page during the most active period of wider protest on 18 June 2013. Excluding BlackBlocRJ shows that none of the other local Black Bloc pages had any activity on Facebook before 22 June. What was BlackBlocRJ's role in the protests prior to 22 June? Did it spur the creation of local pages? Or did something else spur their creation? The answers to these questions could help to explain the leadership and decision-making process of the Brazilian Black Bloc online.
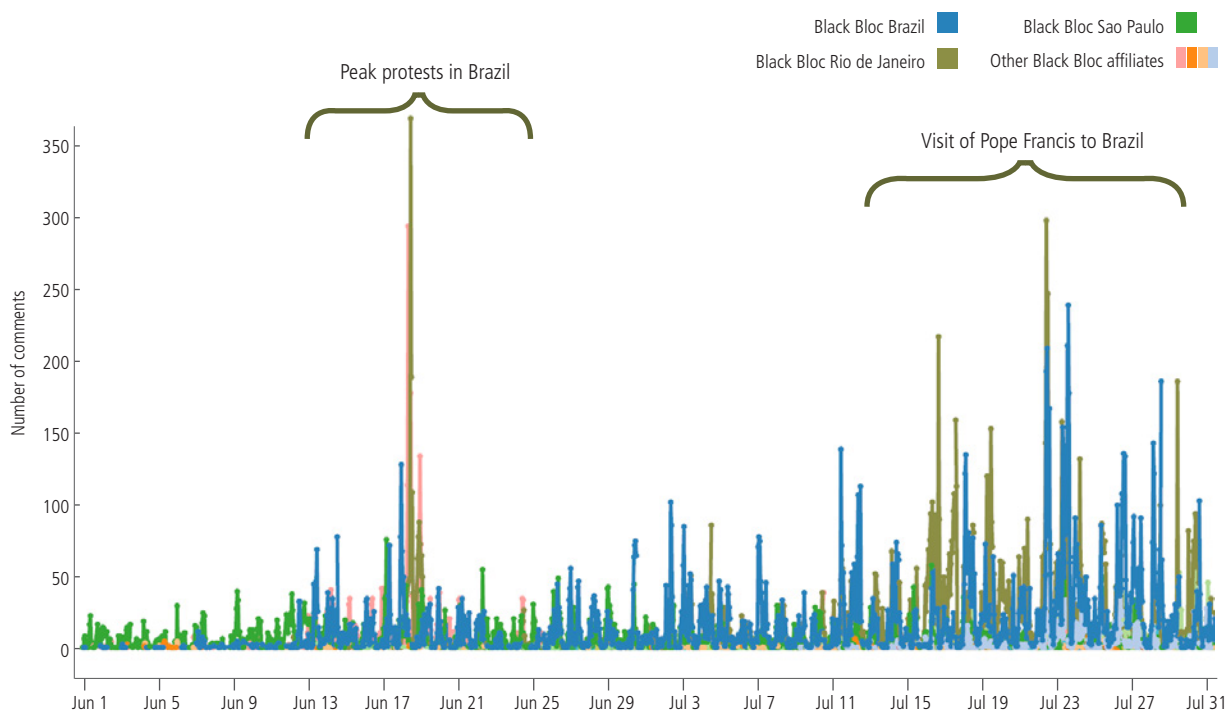
Rio de Janeiro´s Black Bloc page was the most active by far

Brazil´s Black Bloc online presence is comparatively new and spurred by events unfolding on the ground. In fact, it appears that Brazil´s Black Bloc – including all the key chapters (national, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and others) – only emerged during the first week of protest in June 2013. Although Black Bloc Brazil (BlackBlocBR)[14] and some older anarchist and activist groups existed before the protests, there is no recorded online presence of Black Bloc affiliates before June 13.[15] Moreover, Black Bloc gathered momentum during the initial week and peaked on 20 June and again on 22 July (Figure 1) although offline activities became progressively more geographically isolated. The earlier Black Bloc activities appear connected to protests, while the latter coincided with the arrival of the new Pope to Brazil. Not only was there a significant level of street activity in cities like Rio de Janeiro on 22 and 23 July, there was serious violence the following day.

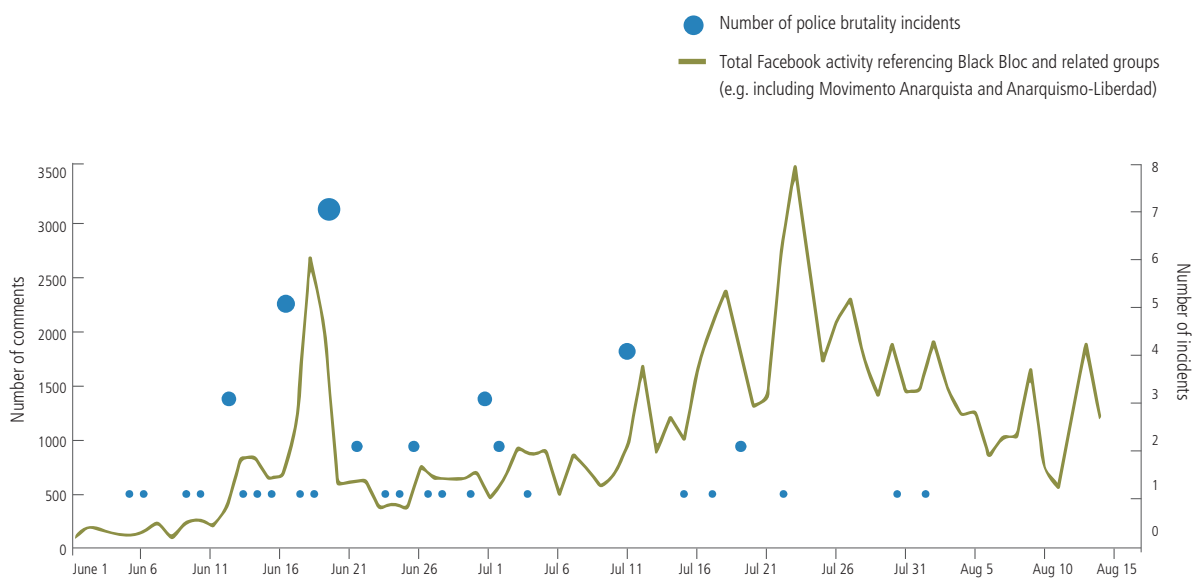Figure 1. Black Bloc in Brazil: June – August 2013

Source: Authors

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BLACK BLOC AND VIOLENCE

The data also allowed for a preliminary assessment of the relationship between social media activity and violent incidents. This involved collecting incident data from national and municipal news outlets on publicized instances of police brutality during the protests from June to August 2013 (see Figure 2).[16] Although the facts on the ground are disputed, our analysis suggests that 18 June was the first instance of organized Black Bloc activity that coincided with a violent police response.[17] Not surprisingly, there was a notable spike in social media from Black Bloc that day. There was also a notable spike in violent incidents on 20 June, coinciding with what many consider the most significant day of protests during the three-month time series.[18] And yet there is comparatively little social media activity on Black Bloc pages on that day. This is intriguing, but establishing why it is absent may be difficult. In a sense, this is the Black Bloc dog that didn't bark.

It is more difficult to determine whether there is a linear relationship between reported incidents of police brutality and social media activity involving Black Bloc. Indeed, Figure 2 highlights a progressively increasing level of activity on Facebook coinciding with a relative decline in reported incidence of police violence. Direct encounters with police tended to cool down after 21 June with protests concentrated in specific cities and certain days (including a general strike on 11 July and another set of incidents on 7 September on Brazil's Independence Day). And yet it is worth stressing that Black Bloc activity on the street bloomed late, and only after the first reported instances of police violence. Black Bloc activity swelled in the following two weeks and then began detaching itself from wider protests after the peak period of protests was reached.[19]

Figure 2. Tracking instances of police brutality and Facebook use

● Number of police brutality incidents

── Total Facebook activity referencing Black Bloc and related groups
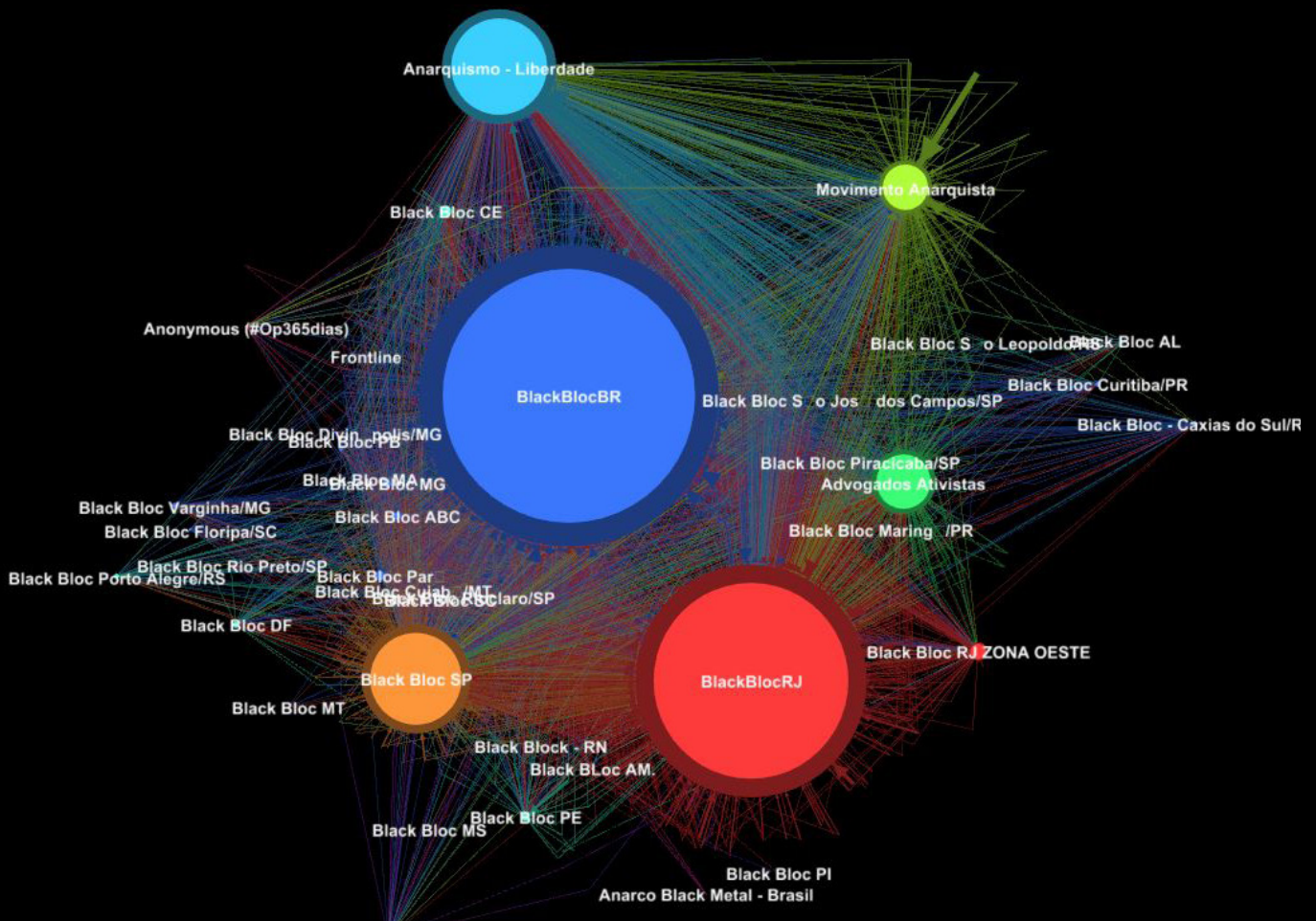(e.g. including Movimento Anarquista and Anarquismo-Liberdad)

Source: Authors

EXAMINING THE BLACK BLOC NETWORK

A closer inspection of the data shows that the Black Bloc social network has a high number of loosely connected users who generate a large amount of "one-off" content. In fact, 90 percent of Black Bloc network users only interacted with the Black Bloc Facebook pages once during the sample period. These "one-off" communications account for 81.9 percent of network communications. This is not consistent with standard network models, which are governed by the so-called "Pareto Principle" or 80/20 rule. The Pareto Principle states that 80 percent of output is generated by no more than 20 percent of the population. In this case, the opposite appears to be true — some 82 percent of network communications were generated by almost 90 percent of users, rather than just the top 20 percent.

The bulk of the Black Bloc network appears to be composed of casual users. Most of the network has only commented on one Facebook page one time. The interactive core of the network composes only a very small sliver of overall activity. This may be an early indicator of so-called "slacktivism" and suggests that the proportion of committed and active users is very small. This finding suggests that while there may be a large number of people that temporarily associate with the Black Bloc, their participation manifests itself more as a "protest meme" than a long-term commitment to action. Moreover, a more extensive reading of (the content of) Facebook activity shows that it is more reactive to events on the ground and not necessarily driving Black Bloc protests.
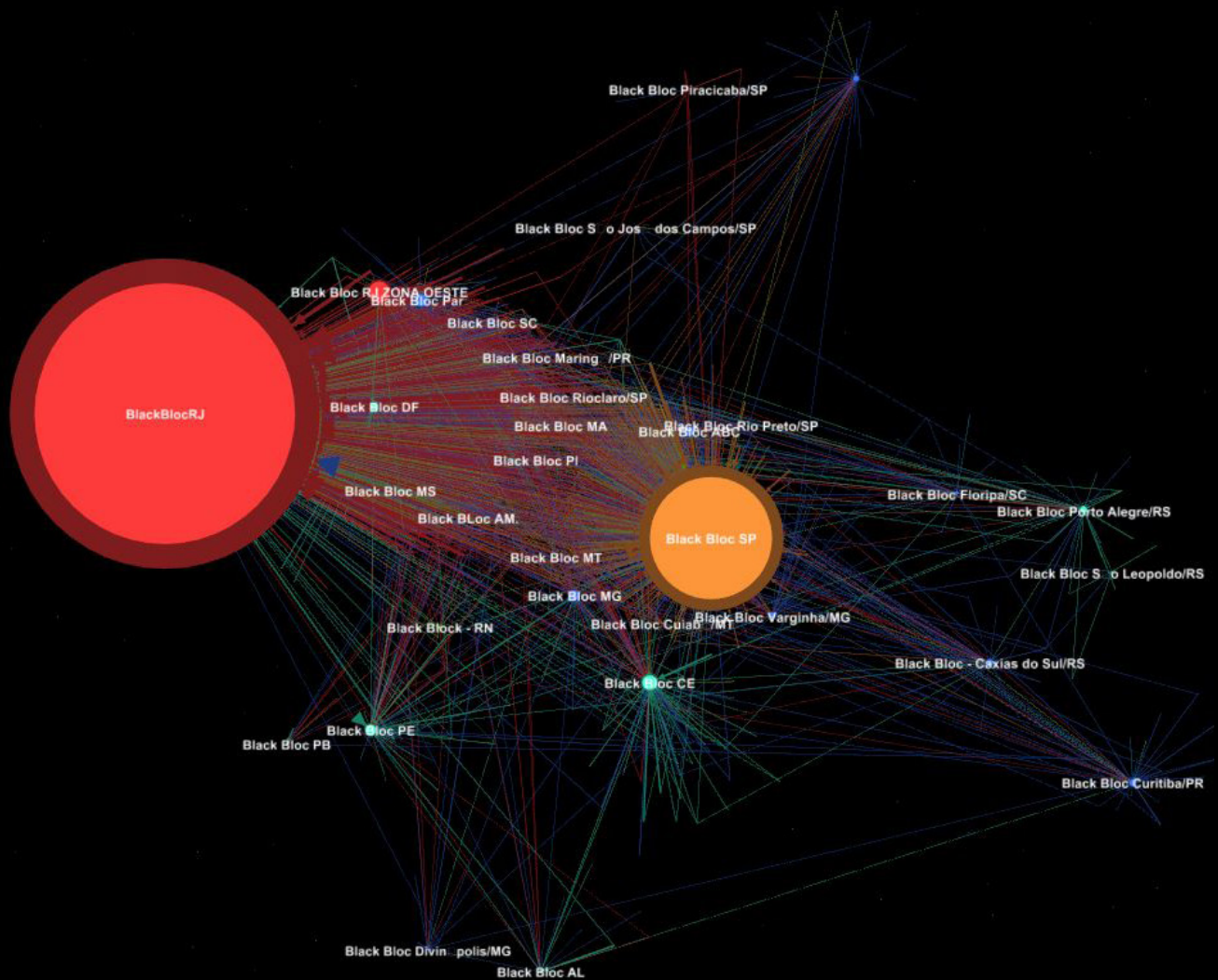
Figure 3. Examining the authority and centrality of all Black Bloc pages and other groups (1 June – 8 August 2013)

As noted above, BlackBlocBR and BlackBlocRJ are authoritative and central network hubs. In Figure 3 (above), the size of the circle reflects the number or frequency of connections in the network ("authority") while its position reflects the group's relationship to other members of the network ("centrality"). In other words, the more central the position, the more connected the entity. Thus, the national Black Bloc page, BlackBlocBR, is the most authoritative and interactive page. It sits at the veritable heart – the cross-roads – of the Black Bloc network and exhibits extensive connections to all other areas of the network. Meanwhile, the Rio de Janeiro Black Bloc page, BlackBlocRJ, is only slightly less authoritative, but substantially less central to the network, as the network shows (Figure 4). Less authoritative groups include the Sao Paulo Facebook page and other actors that do not identify themselves as Black Bloc but were identified by the authors as having affiliations.[20]

The isolation of specific pages can provide insight into network dynamics among Black Bloc affiliates (Figure 4). When excluding the national pages from the sample, it is possible to examine more localized relationships. For example, Black BlocRJ and Black BlocSP remain authoritative, but other pages also begin to exert themselves. For example, the page for Rio de Janeiro's Zona Oeste (colored red, to the right of Rio), the page for Ceará (Black Bloc CE, colored aqua blue below the Sao Paulo page), the page for

Figure 4. Examining the authority and centrality of local Black Bloc pages (1 June – 8 August 2013)

Pernambuco (Black Bloc PE, colored aqua blue in bottom left) and an archipelago of other pages that sit between and interact intensely with both the Rio and Sao Paulo pages all suggest a level of authority and centrality. Meanwhile, a number of other local pages lie at the periphery of the network, indicating their relative lack of interactivity with the network core.

REFLECTIONS AND INSIGHTS

As this report shows, a "medium data" assessment of social media data allows for a more fine-grained and higher resolution understanding of the temporal and spatial dynamics of Black Bloc. Groups claiming some affiliation to Black Bloc are less than a few months old and widely spread across Brazil. Most activity, however, is concentrated (online and off) in Rio de Janeiro. The study has also generated some useful insights on the relative authority and centrality of specific players, and thus their potential legitimacy and influence in the wider network. Such information has potentially important implications for thinking about influencing, negotiating, or otherwise engaging with Black Bloc.

It is worth underlining that Black Bloc is, by design, a decentralized and multifaceted entity. When it comes to their engagement with social media platforms, sympathizers to Black Bloc methods appear to have wide-ranging motivations. Put another way, the use of social media (such as Facebook) is not merely limited to organizing and extending protest. A review of the content of Black Bloc sites and interaction suggests that it is used at a minimum to: (i) gather information on protests (and share among friends); (ii) report facts on the ground (telling people which streets to avoid or advising people about safe spaces); (iii) share videos, photos and testimonies on specific events; (iv) denounce police brutality and censorship (including the infiltration of protests by police ("P2") and removal of content by Facebook); (v) teach tactics to counteract military police troops; and of course (vi) incentivize participation in protests and mobilize new ones.

The vast majority of Black Bloc participants in Brazil's social media are casual and even one-time users

It is also worth noting that administrators of Black Bloc Facebook pages, or curators, play an important role in shaping the "culture" of the group for its followers. For example, they provide history on the movement, ideas about standards of behavior, and some explanation of tactics. Also, curators seek to clarify the purpose of their activities, defend the Black Bloc and its members from denunciations, and report the facts on the ground as they see them. Moreover, curators play a role in catalyzing protests, reviewing past actions, and providing guidance on future initiatives.[21] This suggests that for some Black Bloc groups, notably in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, there may be growing formalization. This fact has not been lost on the military police who have detained Black Bloc administrators in Rio de Janeiro on charges of inciting violence, with some opting to leave Rio de Janeiro for fear of arrest.[22] It nevertheless remains the case that the vast majority of those who participate with Black Bloc in social media platforms are casual and even one-time users. What is more, there may be other important social platforms that are informing protest.

Important aspects of the Black Bloc phenomenon in Brazil merit further investigation. While this study has presented a summative analysis of Black Bloc's Facebook social network, the analysis could be deepened by fusing network dynamics with geographical and temporal data to study the evolution of Black Bloc's social network over time and across Brazil. How did Black Bloc respond—on a network level—to particular incidents of police violence? How much of what they do is constituted by political vandalism as opposed to protecting protestors, as many Black Bloc affiliates claim? How resilient is the Black Bloc's social network to disruption and dissent?

Social network analysis could also be used to examine wider domestic and international connections between the Brazilian Black Bloc community and other counterparts. In particular, it might be possible to start understanding the extent to which Black Bloc is "maturing out" and garnering wider sympathy among the public. Likewise, connections and relations between Black Bloc and the global Anonymous movement are potentially significant—the groups have been known to work together internationally, although the authors' assessment suggests divergences in the approach and aggressiveness pursued by each group in Brazil. These and other questions will be the subject of future reports by the Igarapé Institute and The SecDev Foundation.

ENDNOTES

[1] This report was prepared with research support provided by SecDev Analytics and The Igarapé Institute. The work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada

[2] See, for example, http://isnblog.ethz.ch/social-media/brazils-wired-protests.

[3] One of the first articles on the Black Bloc to appear in traditional media was released by Exame magazine on 21 June 2013 (http://exame.abril.com.br/brasil/politica/noticias/black-blocks-os-grupos-que-usam-a-violencia-para-protestar). The Black Bloc Rio de Janeiro Facebook page reacted negatively to the article, claiming that no Black Bloc members had been involved in the protests when it was written. (https://www.facebook.com/BlackBlocRJ/posts/535505103164324#). Only in mid-to-late July did more meaningful coverage begin to circulate: on 11 July by Folha (http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2013/07/1309858-entenda-o-que-e-o-ativismo-black-bloc-presente-nas-manifestacoes.shtml) and in late-July by Carta Capital (http://www.cartacapital.com.br/sociedade/o-black-bloc-e-a-resposta-a-violencia-policial-1690.html and http://www.cartacapital.com.br/sociedade/201cblack-blocs-sao-minoria-mas-simbolo-importante-da-resistencia201d-6046.html). With the exception of a piece in the Spanish outlet El Pais in September, (http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/09/02/inenglish/1378144335_726742.html), international coverage of the Brazilian Black Bloc has been almost non-existent.

[4] See www.openempowerment.org.

[5] This video, with Portuguese sub-titles, was posted to the main Black Bloc page in Brazil at https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=1385650314984980.

[6] See http://www.infoshop.org/amp/bgp/BlackBlockPapers2.pdf for a review of the Black Bloc in history.

[7] See http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/05/01/seattle-may-day-protest-turns-into-black-bloc-gone-wild/.

[8] See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-21228852 and http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/201322103219816676.html.

[9] It is important to note that the Brazilian Black Bloc is not solely engaged in property damage and violent confrontation. Recent reports indicate that they have also assisted the wider protest movement by acting as a protective barrier between the police and peaceful protesters. See, for instance: http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/coordenadora-do-sepe-diz-que-adeptos-da-tatica-black-bloc-ajudaram-professores-10258008#ixzz2gyk15CI7.

[10] See http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/09/02/inenglish/1378144335_726742.html.

[11] See http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/16789/1/brazils-black-bloc-vs-the-pope.

[12] Other platforms are all but absent in Brazil. Twitter, for example, constitutes less than 3 percent of social media activity. See http://gs.statcounter.com/#social_media-BR-monthly-201209-201309.

[13] None of the reports or analytical products produced by SecDev or Igarapé includes personally identifiable information of Facebook users. Where such information is available, it has been withheld.

This withholding does not meaningfully affect the research project's findings, which are principally concerned with the dynamics of the Black Bloc at the local and national level, rather than the individual level.

[14] For example, Brazil's Black Bloc appears to have been created in February 2012.

[15] It appears that with the exception of the Rio chapter, most local Black Bloc entities emerged after the height of the protests. It could be that these kinds of Black Bloc pages were intended more to promote discussion, debate and encouragement than as means to organize actual events.

[16] The authors identified 49 violent clashes between police and protesters in June and July of 2013: 11 in Rio de Janeiro, 9 in São Paulo, 18 in other state capitals, and 11 in peripheral areas or medium-size urban centers. These represent the largest and most publicized incidents, although there were many other small incidents that did not receive attention in the news media (the sample represents approximately 10 percent of all protest activities, whether violent or peaceful). Carefully targeted web searches using key terms (including *confronto, policiais, manifestantes, Black Bloc, vândalos, choque, enfrentamento*) and date ranges were also undertaken.

[17] In fact, on 21 June the BlackBlocRJ page responded to an article released by a traditional media outlet contending that in the preceding weeks there had been no Black Bloc action in the protests. See http://exame.abril.com.br/brasil/politica/noticias/black-blocks-os-grupos-que-usam-a-violencia-para-protestar.

[18] It is possible to determine when and where key terms were used on local Black Bloc pages. A preliminary analysis indicates that "protesto" peaked during the 18 June protests (as might be expected), but that the other terms, which are more indicative of violence, peaked on 23 July, the day that a molotov cocktail was used against police and video of the incident circulated online. This could partially account for the spike in activity.

19 Anecdotal evidence from some Black Bloc members suggests that they believe they are "protecting" protesters from police brutality

20 These include, inter alia, Anarquismo Liberdade, Movimento Anarquista and Advogados Ativistas.

21 It is worth noting that curators of Facebook pages are increasingly being surveilled by Brazilian police. Specifically, the civil police's *delegacia de repressao a crimes de informatica* (DRCI) raided members of Black Bloc on 4 September. They arrested six persons, including Daniel Guimaraes Ferreira who was a Facebook page administrator. Operations took place in Sao Goncalo, Marica, Niteroi and Rio de Janeiro. Those arrested are accused of being linked to some 20 people involved in vandalism. See http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/tres-black-blocs-presos-na-semana-passada-sao-liberados-de-presidio-9949260. More recently, the police detained three adolescents on 25 September who were accused of hacking into police databases and divulging more than 50,000 records. See http://oglobo.globo.com/rio/tres-menores-sao-responsaveis-por-vazamento-de-dados-de-50-mil-pms-10141919.

22 See http://www.demotix.com/photo/2659010/protest-liberation-black-bloc and http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-daily/rio-black-bloc-members-arrested/.