

# **The methodological benefits of social media: “Studying up” in Brazil in the Facebook age**

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While conducting research on the organizational cultures of elite nonprofit organizations in Rio de Janeiro, the author encountered many access issues identified in the current literature: in particular, difficulty in encountering research subjects due to the transitional nature of educational nonprofits and the role of secretaries and administrators as gatekeepers. This article explores two previously undeveloped methodological innovations utilized by the author to overcome these difficulties with regard to access: namely, the use of social media as a participant recruitment tool and the use of an organization's online marketing presence as an alternative data source.

Keywords: elites; social media; participant recruitment; access issues

It was a pleasant afternoon in Rio de Janeiro's luxurious South Zone, and I was waiting outside one of Rio's most exclusive and expensive shopping malls to meet a contact for an interview. His name was Leandro, and he had studied and worked in education reform organizations in the United States for a number of years before coming to work as a consultant in Rio. We had a number of U.S. friends and acquaintances in common, and when I had reached out to him via Facebook he had agreed to meet me for lunch for an interview for my research on the role of the nonprofit sector in education reform in Rio de Janeiro.

When we met I shook his hand and thanked him for his time, especially given the number of projects he was working on at the time. He smiled appreciatively and said it was no problem but quickly had to excuse himself to make a work-related call. When he was finished, we began walking to the food court, and he made the following aside:

People never answer their phones. I don't know how long you have been here, but have you gotten used to like, the

lack of communication here yet? Phones don't work, internet goes out. You know how hard it is to get ahold of people around here? Everybody's got a phone and uses their phone, but nobody answers it. It's the least reliable way to get ahold of people. Facebook, now, that's number one! It's incredible!

He then went on to tell me a story regarding a consulting job he had recently finished in which he was responsible for locating educational nonprofits and reaching out to them to assist in a new internationally-funded education program. When he had originally reached out to organizations via the email addresses listed on their websites, he got a 15% response rate; however, when he sent out the same message via Facebook and Twitter, over 70% of organizations responded. He ended the story with a smile, saying, “That, friend, was my first lesson in doing this kind of work in Brazil.”

Leandro's experience echoed my own, particularly with regards to my efforts to network with potential research contacts within the elite circles of Rio society that dominated the educational nonprofit sector. I was in the midst of an ethnography exploring the ideals of “good” educational practice held by individuals in the elite philanthropic and nonprofit circles of Rio de Janeiro, a group that (due to the public-private initiatives of Rio’s most recent mayoral administration) had come to hold an immense amount of influence on curriculum and policy in Rio de Janeiro’s public school system, the largest public municipal school system in Latin America. Nonprofit organizations and foundations like those I studied and those with which Leandro worked have increasingly been recognized as institutions through which social elites exercise power (BondGraham, 2011; Dolan, 2010). Several studies have begun to

display the interconnected nature of the business and nonprofit sectors in the US (Marquis, Davis & Glynn, 2013), particularly in education (Scott, 2008). However, the public role of elite-led nonprofits in the global south remains as yet undocumented. This article represents a necessary first step into this area of inquiry, as through it I will analyze the access and methodological issues and innovations I utilized while conducting research on the influence of three elite-led educational nonprofits on public education in Rio de Janeiro.

As has been documented by other researchers' efforts (Desmond, 2004; Dexter, 2006; England, 2002; Hirsch, 1995; Kezar, 2003; Parry, 1998) at "studying up" (Nader, 1969), I encountered a number of access issues while conducting this study: not only were most of my prospective contacts busy business professionals that employed assistants and secretaries as gatekeepers, but all three of the "start-up" nonprofits I had targeted in my research had already disbanded and were no longer running during the period of data collection. As is often the case with business start-ups, these three organizations had been founded by elite management professionals, then grown large enough to offer specific programs that were well-received by the public sector before disbanding, with their employees moving on to other career opportunities. In this article, I will document some of these access issues and the particular contextual factors that exacerbated them, utilizing an international comparative approach to compare these access issues among elite Brazilian nonprofits to those documented in the literature on similar organizations in the Anglophone global north.

However, building upon Leandro's point from my opening vignette, the primary focus of this article will be to describe and analyze two methodological innovations I utilized to overcome these access issues: first, the utilization of social networks and social media to bypass gatekeepers. More specifically, I will detail how I utilized shared

social connections with former classmates and Latin American university colleagues to network with former nonprofit staff via Facebook and LinkedIn and solicit in-person meetings and interviews. This article will explore how this methodology depended heavily on the social privileges I held due to my own elite educational and social background, through which I could make these kinds of connections.

The second methodological innovation described here will be the utilization of alternative sources of data to compensate for a lack of opportunities for participant observation, namely blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, web radio interviews, and Youtube video clips. These three nonprofits all had a very strong internet presence before disbanding, and utilized such purposefully to build their “brand” and name recognition. Thus, all three organizations left behind a plethora of online information that documented their activities, the perspectives of their staff and the public narrative pushed by their leadership. In this article, I will explore how I used these alternative sources of historical data to complement in-person interviews, as participants’ past perspectives could be compared with present ones and institutional narratives of each nonprofit could be compared with individual employees’ opinions.

### **Target organizations**

For the purpose of this article, I will provide a brief introduction to each of the three elite-led nonprofits that I studied as a part of my research in Rio. All three are education-focused nonprofits who had been contracted by the Municipal Secretariat of Education to provide particular services in Rio's lowest performing public schools. All three are here given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. First, an organization I will call Community Outreach provided afterschool opportunities for students in low-performing, low-income public schools to visit and participate in educational and cultural events that they would otherwise not be able to access. These included visits to

museums, musical and theatrical performances, and the like. Second, an organization I will call Tutoring for Success hired high-achieving college students to provide daily intense tutoring in core subjects to low-performing students in low-income public schools. These tutoring sessions typically lasted several hours a day. Third, an organization I will call Start Right provided afterschool enrichment activities to public school students in several of Rio's poorest neighborhoods. These included lessons in art, dance, music, folklore, and sports (particularly football).

All three of these organizations were led by social entrepreneurs with extensive experience in Rio's nonprofit sector. All three of the programs in question were supported by grants from private donors and Rio's Municipal Secretariat of Education.

### **My own elite positionality**

In the larger qualitative literature on elites, a few conceptual differences arise which can problematize discussion of similarities among findings: one, an inability to reliably define the term “elite,” and two, a relative dearth of willingness on the part of researchers to engage in the kind of positionality-based reflections on one’s own “elite” status that are typical of other ethnographic work. In this section, I will operationalize my own definition of the term “elite,” and, building on the work of Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard (2012), explain how I saw myself as partially both an insider and outsider to the “elite” networks I studied in Brazil.

### ***Defining “elite”***

The term “elite” has been used in a number of different ways in the literature, referring alternately to those who have access to privileged forms of knowledge (Smith, 2006), those who work in socially desirable professions (England, 2002; McDowell, 1998), and those in positions to impact policy (Cochrane, 1998). Generally speaking, what

these various definitions hold in common in some degree of access to power, though as Woods (1998) has pointed out, often discussion of the term is not further developed beyond this superficial point.

Building upon the work of Allen (2003) and Woods (1998), I here define “elite” as one who, due to a potentially variable combination of social privileges (on the basis of social class, educational opportunity, etc.), has access to desirable and powerful social networks, through which he or she regularly has the ability to exercise power. In the particular case of my research, the social network in question was that of policymakers and influential social entrepreneurs within Rio de Janeiro, a group of individuals who had tertiary degrees from Rio’s most prestigious institutions (typically in business, management or finance) and applied a business-like management style to educational service provision, whether in Rio’s Municipal Secretariat of Education or a number of nonprofits and foundations that regularly did contract work in Rio’s public schools. The job titles of the members of this group were relatively fluid, as most had worked both in the public and private sectors and were regularly starting up new nonprofits and socially-minded educational business ventures. Due to the tight-knit nature of this group, members regularly employed one another or contracted one another’s organizations for particular projects.

### ***Accessing the elite as both insider and outsider***

As Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard (2012) have pointed out, often researchers who do work among elites do not take note of the way in which their own elite positionalities as academic researchers and (in some cases) beneficiaries of privileged upbringings affect their research process. More specifically, Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard’s (2012) work represents an important entrée into a new level of reflection on one’s

positionality in research among elites, as both have at length discussed the ways in which aspects of their identities which cast them as both “insiders” and “outsiders” have affected their ability to gain access to and maintain working research relationships with elite populations. In this section I will build upon this growing literature by describing the ways in which my own history and background positioned me as both insider and outsider to this particular elite circle of Brazilian policymakers and social entrepreneurs.

To a degree, I could be considered an insider to this group in that my own personal history had several elements in common with theirs. As a hereditary academic with a parent who was also a Brazilianist, I had lived in Brazil as a small child, and during that time I had lived a very privileged lifestyle similar to most of those in this elite policy network: that is, I had lived in a wealthy, predominantly White Brazilian neighborhood close to Brazil’s most prestigious research university, my family had a regular membership at a local *clube* (an exclusive social club with intramural facilities, similar to a country club in the United States), and through my parents we spent most of our free time socializing with the highest levels of Brazilian society. I had attended some of the most prestigious research universities in the United States (as had many of the members of this policy network). This allowed me to understand more quickly and easily certain parts of my participants’ lived experience, and see the influence of those experiences on how my participants saw the world in which they lived and worked, than would have been possible for another North American researcher without this background.

However, despite having spent time in Brazil previously and being fluent in Portuguese, I was nonetheless an outsider by virtue of being a North American with a very non-Brazilian name. As I will discuss in greater detail later, this created some

access difficulties, as upon first contact many members of this network were hesitant to respond to my inquiries or talk with me due to my obvious “outsider” status.

What was perhaps the most interested (and unanticipated) role of my positionality in my research was my ability to, once having first made contact, relate to the members of this policy network as researchers. In ways that have not before been explored in the relevant literature, and which I will discuss more fully later on, my status as a Ph.D. student working on his dissertation created a form of camaraderie with many members of this network, who were also doing graduate work in the social sciences part-time at local universities and, understanding the difficulties inherent in doing research in the social sciences with human subjects, saw in my study an opportunity to “give back” and help out a fellow researcher. As I will also explore in greater detail later, my position as a Ph.D. student at a competitive and well-known graduate program in the USA also granted me a certain “expert” status, which led participants to ask my advice about graduate programs, potential dissertation projects and so forth. This particular positionality of a “researcher among researchers,” and the “expert” status according therewith, remains relatively unexplored in the current literature.

### **Access issues**

First, by means of introduction before discussing the methodological innovations I created during this study, I will briefly document some of the access issues I encountered upon arrival in Rio that made those innovations necessary. As noted above, I had limited contact with the three organizations previously mentioned; I had contact with a number of former classmates and colleagues who knew people within these organizations through their extended network, but beyond exchanging emails and



receiving confirmation that my visit and research would be welcomed, I did not yet know anyone within these organizations personally. As similarly experienced by Hirsch (1995), I was initially largely dependent on my own previously established relationships as sources of potential contacts, through colleagues who might be able to facilitate introductions to such contacts.

Upon arrival in Brazil, I reached out again via email to those same organizational contacts, but many of them had already left their respective organizations for other professional opportunities. Also, several of these organizations had already begun to wind down their activities and terminate operations after their Rio city grants had ended, as they lacked any other prospects for sustainable funding. As has been noted in the business (Holmes & Schmitz, 1996) and nonprofit (Twombly, 2003) literature in both the United States (Holmes & Schmitz, 1995) and Brazil (Meschi & Riccio, 2008), this type of organizational turnover is relatively common in both business and nonprofit “start-ups” which establish themselves based on temporary funding and new or experimental products (in this case, particular educational services and curricula).

This state of affairs made qualitative data collection rather difficult, as I had very little opportunity to conduct participant observations within these organizations; after all, those that had not already closed down were preparing to do so or were engaging in emergency strategic planning sessions to plan their potential futures. Locating potential contacts for interviews was also difficult when most staff members had moved on to other opportunities and the nonprofits for which they worked often had no forwarding addresses or contact information for them. For those contacts I was able to locate, their new positions were often (as has been well-documented in the previous literature on research among elite populations [Cochrane, 1998; England, 2002; Parsons et al., 1993;

Rasmussen, 1981; Sabot, 1999]) protected by gatekeepers such as secretaries and administrative assistants (Siritarungsri, Grant & Francis, 2013) who often did not forward on the messages I left with them. Being familiar with the relevant literature on research among elites, these difficulties were not unexpected—after all, according to Hertz and Imber (1995), this use of gatekeepers and other access barriers intended to keep out the “non-elite” is a large part of what establishes a group as elite. However, it was precisely due to these access issues that I was pushed to turn to the unorthodox social media-based recruitment measures I describe hereafter.

These access difficulties in research among elites are also hardly limited to Brazil—organizational turnover (Twombly, 2003) and protection by gatekeepers (Siritarungsri, Grant & Francis, 2013) have been issues in elite research ever since Nader (1969) first suggested we begin “studying up.” However, taking an international comparative approach, previous studies on elites in Brazil have shown that some of these circumstances can be exacerbated in a Brazilian context. Jeffrey Hoelle (2012), Timothy Power (2010) and Aspasia de Camargo (1981), for instance, found in their work on the Brazilian ruling class that the elite network reproduced in governing circles (both locally [Hoelle, 2012] and nationally [Power, 2010]) is extremely more tight-knit and exclusive, perhaps even more than is common among elites in North America and Western Europe. Given such circumstances, innovation is even more necessary when considering means of conducting rigorous qualitative research among Brazilian elites.

### **Overcoming access issues through social media**

I will here explain how I utilized social media to slowly make inroads into this exclusive network of, in this case, Brazilian public policy elites in Rio. A researcher's social network and personal positionality (Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard, 2012; Milner, 2007) can play a prominent role in facilitating access to elite social settings. In

my case, through my experiences working with various North American business-oriented education reform initiatives, studying in world-renowned graduate programs in the United States and participating in and networking through several educational research associations with global memberships, I had built a sizable social network of friends and colleagues doing educational research and leading educational programs throughout Latin America, including Brazil. Reaching out to these colleagues provided me with my initial contacts with Community Outreach, Tutoring for Success and Start Right. These initial contacts were unfortunately rather unfruitful, for reasons I have already discussed—namely, the transitional nature of the three nonprofits in question and my lack of forwarding addresses or other means of contact with staff that had already moved on.

However, I soon realized (through experiences like this article's opening vignette with Leandro) that despite the fact that I had no organizational or business email addresses or phone numbers by which to reach the former staff of these three organizations, the same former classmates and colleagues I knew who had introduced me via email to these individuals might also be in contact with them via social media, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. I was already connected to the former classmates and colleagues in question via these two sites, so as I knew the first and last names of my original contacts with these three organizations, I searched for these individuals on Facebook and LinkedIn and, due to these sites' algorithms which suggest connecting with individuals with mutual "friends," quickly encountered their profiles due to their connections with my colleagues and classmates. Having found my prospective contacts' profile pages on Facebook and LinkedIn, I then asked my previous classmates and colleagues if they would be willing to send an introductory message to those contacts on their social media pages, thus effectively introducing us socially in a way we had

previously been introduced professionally. As was the experience of Leandro in the opening vignette, I got a very positive response to these efforts at outreach, and was able to re-enter in contact with all of the prospective interview subjects whose contact information I had lost when they had left their previous employers. I was then able to set up times to meet and conduct interviews with these contacts normally.

While social media was very helpful in re-establishing contact with those whom I had been unable to find through their former employers, it was even more helpful as a participant selection tool for finding new contacts and prospective interview subjects. That is, as I became connected to these initial contacts through social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, I then was able to see their lists of contacts and identify a number of other individuals I knew had also worked at the three organizations I was studying. I began to reach out to these “friends of friends” myself, writing a short introductory message telling them who I was, that I had encountered their profile through a mutual friend, and that I was interested in speaking with them about their experience with their previous organization. While many individuals to whom I reached out in this manner did not respond, a substantive number did, who I then met in person and interviewed.

This represents an interesting methodological innovation heretofore little discussed in the literature. While a number of studies have discussed the use of advertisements on Facebook as a means of recruiting survey participants (Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2007; Ramo & Prochaska, 2012), this article represents a much needed first attempt at describing the potential use of Facebook as a recruitment tool for face-to-face qualitative interviews.

Previous studies among elites (Pierce, 1995; Routledge, 2002; Spencer, 1982) have described having to utilize varying levels of deception to gain access to elite

circles such as this Brazilian nonprofit policymaking network. Given that understanding elite thinking and social organization is a necessary precursor to understanding how power is exercised in unequal societies, such deception can be necessary, and as Spencer (1982) has argued, ethically defensible. In the present study, I found such tactics to be unnecessary in my work thanks to the benefits of social media and my own positionality. That is, as I reached out to such “friends of friends” there was no need to misrepresent myself or my research in order to be seen as “one of the group”—by virtue of already being virtually connected to my initial contacts, these subsequent contacts could see that we had connections in common, and as several contacts said to me when we finally met in person, “I knew if you had met and talked with so-and-so, you must be okay.” Having indeed met and talked with all individuals before adding them as Facebook or LinkedIn “friends,” this trend of adding research contacts as did not seem to be a means of deception (as I really had met and gotten to know these individuals), but rather a virtual way to visualize and represent to others the (albeit slow) organic growth of my research network.

### ***Growing my network***

After meeting these initial contacts and getting to know them personally, I was able to use social media sites like Facebook to expand my research network through the friends of those contacts. Using Facebook and LinkedIn, I would ask these contacts to message their friends introducing me. Others would simply indicate people they knew who had worked for the same organization and suggest I mention their name when reaching out.

I also became Facebook “friends” with each of these individuals after meeting them. By so doing, I was slowly entering into the relatively small, elite social circle of educational nonprofits in Rio. Facebook, after all, is primarily used for personal socializing rather than business use (Lin & Lu, 2011). By meeting and then becoming

Facebook “friends” with more and more members of this elite circle, I became more and more a part of that circle, as other individuals could see on Facebook that we shared a number of “mutual friends” within the same network, and those same friends were typically writing notes of introduction for me, effectively “vouching” for my character. This increased as I met and interviewed more and more people, with whom I subsequently became friends on Facebook and LinkedIn. This created a growing number of “mutual friends” with Rio's education elite, which led more and more individuals to respond positively when I was introduced to them by their colleagues via Facebook message, as I appeared to them to be part of this elite social circle by “knowing” the same people on Facebook.

In several cases, people I had been e-introduced to via mutual friends on Facebook but who had not responded wrote me months later, after I had already gained several more “mutual friends.” One interviewee in particular said that he had been wary of contacting me at first since he did not know me personally, and only peripherally knew the mutual contact who had e-introduced us—however, when I sent him a follow-up message months later and he saw we had 10 “mutual friends,” he thought I must be somewhat trustworthy as he knew and more fully trusted the opinion of those new shared acquaintances.

This growing list of “mutual friends” with Rio education practitioners and policymakers led to over 60 interviews with former administrators and employees of Community Outreach, Tutoring for Success and Start Right. While previous research has shown that perceived friendship results in more research contacts than cold calling (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004) or working through gatekeepers (Harvey, 2010), this study shows how social media sites like Facebook can exponentially multiply the number of “friendships” one can make that can then lead to productive interviews.

What differentiates this Facebook-based recruitment method from what is commonly called the “snowball” technique is that I was not merely using Facebook to meet new contacts through existing ones: rather, the process was inherently being facilitated because the “mutual friend” feature of Facebook granted upon me an assumption of elite status that granted me possible access to contacts I might not have met otherwise. Due to this feature, Facebook is an extremely convenient way to immediately display elite membership, as having mutual friends that are “in” an exclusive, elite network leads to the assumption that the researcher also is within that network. I did not consider this deception because I never misrepresented myself as more of an “insider” than I truly was—but that mutual friendship nonetheless often got me “in the door” by giving potential contacts a reason to listen to my research pitch and request for an interview, a pitch they might have rejected out of hand had that mutual friendship not existed.

To a lesser extent, LinkedIn was also a fruitful networking tool for finding research contacts. While it is a professional networking site rather than a primarily social one, connecting with members of this elite network of nonprofit education practitioners via introductory messages from my existing contacts on LinkedIn also made it appear more and more to other members of that professional network that I was “one of them,” even without having met me or knowing who I was. This also opened a number of doors to interviews I would not have been able to conduct through cold calling.

### ***The ethics of social media friendship***

While I did not have to resort to deception to gain entrance to this elite social network via social media, the fact of my entry into Facebook and LinkedIn “friendship” with dozens of research subjects inevitably granted me access to personal (and potentially

sensitive) data far beyond that needed for the scope of this project. As has been outlined in the previous literature on ethics in the use of online material (Ramo & Prochaska, 2012), this access to sensitive data placed me in a relative position of power over my research subjects. Also, since I personally use social media to communicate with friends and family and share updates relative to my wife and children, this new online component to the research relationship also put my research subjects in a potential position of power over me, due to their access to my own personal (and potentially sensitive) information. Since the relationships I maintained with research contacts through these social media sites were warm and cordial, and the policy focus of my research provided no cause to include any of the personal information granted through these sites, there was no cause for concern on either side—however, in other studies focused on more sensitive subject matter, I would imagine this would become a much more prominent ethical issue.

### ***Role of my positionality as the study continued***

It is important to continue to explore how, as I previously mentioned, my personal positionality as an upper-middle class, college-educated White North American man also played a part in facilitating access to the individuals I reached out to via social media. As Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) asserts, one's positionality plays a role in elite research not only at the point of entry into elite circles, but it also informs the constantly negotiated status of a researcher's relationship with their informants throughout the course of the study.

In general, those I met in Rio's elite education circles had similar backgrounds to my own: they self-identified as White, they were from the upper social classes and they had university degrees from elite institutions (often in the United States). In addition, prior to coming to Brazil I had worked with education reform organizations in the



United States which provided the same kinds of services and ideas to the public sector as nonprofits like Community Outreach, Tutoring for Success and Start Right did in Rio's public schools.

In short, I had a great deal in common with these individuals, having come from an elite background myself and having engaged in much of the same kind of work. Due to that, when I did begin to meet with these contacts in person we had a great deal to talk about, and often got along quite well. Completely independent of my work ethic, my positionality facilitated participant selection and quality data collection in a way that I could not ignore, and in a way that would be unlikely to occur with researchers who do not share this same background. While this is a methodological benefit, it is also a limitation of this study that could not uniformly be replicated, as well as a form of privilege that can and should be examined (McIntosh, 1990) and interrogated (Author, 2014).

As I mentioned earlier, one unforeseen aspect of my identity that greatly facilitated this study was my own status as a graduate-level researcher at a well-known elite university in the USA. As most of the members of this elite policy circle were in their 20s and 30s and at the relative beginning of their careers, many were attending graduate school themselves part-time at local elite universities. Due to the status afforded my own university, a number of research contacts mentioned to me when we met that one reason they were excited to meet me was to ask for my advice regarding choosing graduate schools, deciding on research projects for one's thesis or dissertation, and other miscellaneous aspects of how to start an academic career. After the end of my research, one contact with whom I'd become particularly well-acquainted asked me for a letter of recommendation for a prestigious Brazilian social science graduate program. This level of deference on the part of some research contacts most definitely impacted

the power dynamic in our interviews, as these particular contacts came to see me as somewhat of an authority on academic matters.

Other participants who were also pursuing graduate studies also opened up to me about their thoughts and feelings in our interviews, but more so because they expressed seeing me as a peer rather than a superior. These contacts, particularly those studying the social sciences at a graduate level, were quite interested in my study methodology, my research design, and my theoretical framework, among other things. Others admitted to me during our interviews that they accepted the invitation to talk because they themselves had done similar research, and knowing how hard it is to find participants, wanted to “give back.”

Generally speaking, whether these research contacts pursuing graduate studies saw me as an equal or a superior, my own status as a graduate-level researcher at an elite US institution greatly facilitated the interview process in a way that I have not seen documented heretofore in the qualitative literature on the study of elites. While Aldridge’s (1993) work has begun to explore the ways in which one’s status as an academic researcher can grant privilege when working among other academics, this status given to a “graduate researcher among graduate researchers” is one that has yet to be fully developed in the existent literature, and is a point that deserves further consideration.

### **Complementing restricted access with alternative online data sources**

In the previous section, I described how using social media I was able to make significant inroads into exclusive networks of elite education practitioners and policy professionals, and conduct a respectable number of interviews (66 in total). These extended, semi-structured interviews provided participants with an opportunity to describe their worlds in their own terms, thus granting key insights into how these elite

practitioners felt and thought about the organizational environments in which they worked. However, through my training as an ethnographer I knew that interviews alone, while significant, were not sufficient to provide a well-rounded depiction of the organizational culture of these three nonprofits. Due to the temporary nature of these organizations, I was not able to complement my interviews with the kind of participant observations that could have captured a more authentic “picture” of how the sociocultural context of these organizations functioned (Spradley, 1980). In order to gain further insight into the functioning of these organizations, I needed additional data sources.

Luckily, as is common among start-up organizations looking to build their “brand,” gain funding and become sustainable (Stride & Lee, 2007), the three organizations I studied had a significant online media presence. More specifically, each of these organizations had their own Facebook page, their own Twitter feed, and a number of blogs on which participants extensively documented each organization's activities. While these organizations had since closed down or gone into strategic restructuring, these online sources provided extensive detail regarding organizational practices, operations and values. In addition, two of these three organizations had blogs on which their employees regularly posted entries in which they shared personal experiences and described their feelings and opinions regarding particular programs and curricula. The third organization had a Youtube channel in which video entries were posted documenting activities at each of their school sites.

While it was clear that these blog posts, Facebook updates and Youtube clips were placed online primarily as a marketing tool (Pope, Isely, & Asamos-Tutu, 2009) through which these organizations could provide their own perspective on their institutional culture and why they do the work they do, these media also served as rich

sources of data regarding the day-to-day operations of these three organizations. While I was not in Rio at the time of these activities so as to be able to document them in person, and it is more difficult to use secondhand accounts such as these for research when they were created with other purposes in mind, these online records were a truly valuable source of insight into the organizational culture of these settings during periods of time in which participant observations were not feasible.

One way in which these online data sources were useful was in expanding the sample of available statements by program participants on their perceptions of these various nonprofits and their programs. Due to the instability of such organizations mentioned earlier, and the temporary nature of many of the jobs in this sector, despite my use of social media as a recruitment tool there were a number of former employees and participants in these programs with whom I was unable to make contact. As a result, I was unable to conduct interviews with these subjects and gain their perspectives on their former employers or the work they were doing. However, several of these organizations did have a number of Youtube videos or blog posts in which these unreachable individuals provided some of their thoughts regarding each organization's programming. While this data was often promotional in nature (and therefore not necessarily a complete or full representation of employee opinions), it was much more information than I would have had access to otherwise regarding the opinions of these unreachable former employees. These blog posts and video testimonials allowed me to get a much broader sense of employee opinion than I would have otherwise been able to access.

However, perhaps what was most useful was how, using these various forms of media (especially blog posts and Youtube video journal entries) I was able to do two things: first, I was able to more fully explore the differences between the "public face"

of these organizations and their inner workings. As promotional materials, these clips, testimonials and blog posts inevitably went through a vetting procedure to ensure that they put forward the “best face” of the organization in question, and supported the overall mission. In my interviews, I was able to talk to many of the same employees who had participated in these online testimonials or written promotional blog posts, many of whom seemed to express more nuanced or critical perspectives in our private interviews than they had in their promotional materials. As one of the benefits of extended semi-structured interviews, I was able to use these videos and blogs as a starting off point for conversations regarding how well employees’ public statements matched their private opinions, and thus effectively get a peak of the inner workings and employee thought processes that were behind these “best face” online testimonials.

Second, I was able to document past perspectives of staff from all three of these organizations on the work they were doing and the theories of change that drove that work. These were particularly useful for noting changes in perspective among staff over time, as I was able to compare statements made by my participants during periods of time in which their organizations were still functioning to the thoughts and perspectives they shared in my in-person interviews several years later. For example, one of my contacts had written a blog post several years previous to my study on her perceptions of the role of nonprofits and civil society in the provision of public education. The blog post was very positive and idealistic, asserting how the author believed effective, lasting change in society could come from the nonprofit sector. However, when I interviewed this same contact several years later, her participation as an employee of that organization over a number of years had led her to change her opinion drastically, to the point that she no longer saw civil society as an effective influence on social change. This dynamic contrast of opinions, triggered in large part by this contact’s experience as

an employee of this nonprofit, provides a much more rich perspective of what the working environment of this nonprofit was like than what would have been provided by the interview on its own.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

During my fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro, I encountered a number of the same access issues that are common in research done among elites in other countries: particularly organizational turnover (Twombly, 2003) and the difficulty of trying to bypass gatekeepers (Siritarungsri, Grant & Francis, 2013). These issues were exacerbated by the particularly tight-knit and exclusive nature of elite social networks in Brazil (De Camargo, 1981; Hoelle, 2012; Power, 2010).

I have here identified two methodological innovations that I utilized during fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro in order to overcome these issues: first, using social media as a means for participant recruitment. While a growing literature has already noted how social media can be a qualitative data source (see Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011), the use of social media for participant recruitment among elites has heretofore gone undocumented and untheorized. This article represents an initial examination of this potentially quite useful methodological tool.

Second, I have here defended the use of an organization's online efforts at branding as an additional source of primary data. Given that the possibility for qualitative inquiry among elites can be limited, particularly for ethnographers interested in holistic portrayals of particular cultural contexts, the heavy online marketing presence of educational nonprofits provides a rich potential data source. As educational nonprofits continue to compete for limited funds to support their endeavors, the online marketing presence of such organizations (in the form of blogs, Twitter feeds, Facebook accounts, podcasts and so forth) will likely continue to grow. This allows those

conducting qualitative research among elites engaged in nonprofit social enterprises to expand the reach of their research significantly.

As in all social inquiry, I encountered a number of questions during this study that deserve much more investigation than was possible in the present article. For example, the “start-up” nature of these nonprofit organizations, given their ostensible social justice mission serving low-income public school populations, is itself ethically questionable, as they present short-term solutions to entrenched, long-term problems. Also, the elite nature of the organizers and executives of such organizations, given the low-income, marginalized populations that attend Rio’s public schools, are also problematic, as one can easily imagine that it is difficult for such elites to fully understand the social world in which they are working. Both of these ethical questions are much more fully addressed in other manuscripts that are currently being prepared for publication in other venues.

Another fruitful area of potential future inquiry lies in the Facebook lives of the students served by these nonprofit organizations. While their thoughts and opinions lied somewhat beyond the scope of the current study, in the current age Facebook use is nearly as ubiquitous among Brazilian youth as it is among North American youth, and their social media reactions to the programming put forward by these elite institutions is a fascinating potential point of departure for future research.

Also, as noted throughout the article, the two innovations I have put forward here are not without their limitations. While social media sites like Facebook can be potentially useful for participant recruitment in hard-to-reach populations, there are also inevitable and potentially complicated ethical questions that must be addressed when considering its use in research. For instance, accepting a Facebook friend request does not carry the same connotations as accepting an invitation to participate in a research

study—as such, participants recruited through Facebook must still be given the same opportunity to provide informed consent as other potential research populations. Also, Facebook friendship provides a researcher access to much more private information than one necessarily needs for any given research project—and again, before any of this information, or any statements made by an individual on Facebook, can be suitably used for research purposes, informed consent must be obtained. The facility that Facebook and similar sites provides for social connection is no excuse for sloppy ethics.

As outlined here, I tried to be as explicit and transparent through my participant recruitment selection process as possible, so as to avoid such issues. Indeed, due in part to the mutually beneficial and gratifying research relationships I had with these participants, I am still Facebook friends with the majority of them to this day. In this sense, one of the benefits of Facebook friendship is that it is much easier to share the results of research with those with whom one has worked, and receive their (relatively) immediate feedback. To end on a relatively personal note, I look forward to sharing this article on Facebook once it is published, and seeing the response from my extended Brazilian nonprofit network of Facebook friends.



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