

## Collaborative apps and trust building: OTT and engagement of public in the production of journalistically relevant information

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### Abstract

The emergence of experiences of production and circulation of news content generated by non-journalists is a growing phenomenon, particularly in the last two decades. It causes changes in the media ecosystem, requires the discussion of ethical issues and about trust and credibility, and imposes a set of challenges to traditional journalism. In Brazil, a significant experience in this sense is *Onde Tem Tiroteio* (OTT), created in 2016 as a Facebook fanpage and later transformed into an app. Analyzed here under the methodological prism of virtual ethnography, OTT is an initiative that, from a process of collaborative production, checking of information, and close relationships between facts and those who report them, acquires journalistic relevance, on the one hand, and demands the deepening of discussions about ethics, credibility, and trust, on the other. At the same time, the profusion of projects

such as OTT alerts to the indispensability of traditional journalism to adopt a self-critical look in order to reestablish bonds of trust with society.

**Keywords:** Journalism. Non-journalists. Participation. OTT. Journalistic trust.

## Introduction

In different parts of the world, significant events have gained media prominence and reached the public's knowledge through the active participation of non-journalists in the production and dissemination of journalistic content. As an example, in a single day, the BBC received 22,000 text messages and emails with reports and information, over 300 photos, and numerous videos taken with regular cameras and smartphones, regarding the four explosions that hit a bus and three subway trains in central London on July 7, 2005. The volume and diversity of content led the broadcaster's management to consider them "more newsworthy than the professionals' material" (DOUGLAS, 2006).

Years after the London attack, significant demonstrations of civil society, such as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa and the protests against bus fare increases in Brazil, have confirmed the difficulty of delineating the boundaries between those who produce journalistic content and those who were previously seen as mere consumers of this content.

In a systematic review of the literature on journalism produced by non-journalists, Christofolletti (2014) shows that there is a range of perspectives on the growth of public participation in the production and dissemination of journalistic content. Concepts like "former audience" (GILLMOR, 2004), "people formerly known as the audience" (ROSEN, 2006), and "produsage" (BRUNS, 2008) are some of the terms that seek to reflect on the changes in the relationship between the various actors in contemporary information processes.

In Brazil, a permanent initiative pointing towards the dissolution of these boundaries is *Onde Tem Tiroteio* (OTT), a tool which, as stated on its website, uses "information that is gathered, analyzed, and disseminated in a very short amount of time"<sup>1</sup> to "remove all citizens from the routes of mass robberies, false police checkpoints, and stray bullets." Even though unintentional by its creators, the mere use of the terms "gathered," "analyzed," and "disseminated" allude to a treatment of information that is associated with the journalistic process of investigation, editing, and dissemination.

On the one hand, the "way" journalism is produced is increasingly assumed by non-journalists, especially in a context of multiple and rapid technological changes in the field of communications, enabling the instant mass circulation of information. On the other hand, one must consider that there is a need for reflections upon ethical considerations and parameters of journalistic trust and credibility.

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1 Available at: <https://www.ondetemtiroteio.com.br>. Access on: 11 dec. 2019.

Understanding the complexity of this scenario and aiming to provide insights into the topic based on a Brazilian experience, this article presents an analysis of OTT. Methodologically, drawing from the principles of virtual ethnography (HINE, 2000), preliminary observations were made on the OTTRJ fanpage throughout the year 2019<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, for a deeper study, the dynamics of postings and user participation in the application were investigated over a period of six consecutive<sup>3</sup> months, totaling 2,607 analyzed alerts, which resulted in 46,395 user reactions and a total of 3,834 comments published on the application.

## Methodological challenges

Direct observation as a research procedure inspired by virtual ethnography presents complexities, constraints, and limitations that require further scrutiny. In her critical approach to ethnography in digital environments, Mitsuishi (2007) asserts that conducting this type of research may seem simple at first, especially due to the researcher's access to empirical material. Everything is on the computer, can be accessed and recorded for later handling and analysis. This is precisely where virtual ethnography faces one of its main challenges: the researcher must guide the investigation, have clear research boundaries in mind, and then employ the most appropriate methodological tools. Otherwise, they risk getting lost in the vast array of information available on the internet.

In this methodological path, Mitsuishi (2007) draws on the thoughts of the American academic Annette Markham to highlight the interpretive effort required of the researcher in this type of work. She thus intends to clarify that “when reading an email or exchanging instant messages, we are constantly interpreting the words, punctuation, time gaps, pauses, ellipses, emoticons,” which already demonstrates, to some extent, the difficulty of the task.

Furthermore, the levels of engagement in the studied digital spaces can also lead to ethical questions. The OTT constitutes a highly sensitive content object, which is why we chose not to identify the researchers and not to contact users during the analysis period, a technique known as lurking (AMARAL, 2010; BRAGA, 2006). The decision to remain silent (HINE, 2005) was carefully considered, discussed, and is justified by the characteristics of the OTT, since revealing our presence and intentions could alter the behavior of the participants (SANDERS, 2005).

Although the use of the application is contingent upon prior registration, the system developed by the OTT does not even request users' ages, nor does it prevent them from creating various types of identifiers (IDs). This explains the presence of not only proper names but also emails, numbers, symbols, and even nicknames among the participants. To some extent, this multiplicity of IDs obscures the participants' presence in the application. The existence of

<sup>2</sup> More precisely, until August 1st of that year, when the interruption of alerts to users was announced.

<sup>3</sup> Between June 10 and December 15 of 2020.

certain textual expressions in the comments, often aggressive and supportive of criminal groups, for example, indicate the participation of a highly diverse range of individuals, including both police officers and members of criminal organizations.

For all these reasons, our choice of “non-participant” observation is also related to the application’s own functionality and access. The OTT is available for free downloads. Participants not only agree to the storage of comments but also the prohibition of “anonymity,” which proved problematic due to the potential creation of various ID types. Therefore, we also chose not to disclose user identifiers.

## **Potentials and limits of participation culture in journalism**

Before delving into the subject at hand, the OTT tool, it is worth reflecting on the academic literature related to new communication dynamics, especially considering the new forms of sociability that have emerged due to the central role of the internet and digital information and communication technologies in political, economic, social, and cultural relationships.

When analyzing the technological context characterizing the network society, Castells (2007) argues that the development of interactive communication networks has allowed for the decentralization of communication mechanisms, inducing the rise to processes of mass self-communication in which political and social agents can more decisively intervene in communication spaces through horizontal networks. This new role of the audience synthesizes the emergence of new power relations capable of resisting and challenging institutionalized power relations, including journalism, as informational exchanges no longer occur unidirectionally from one to many but have become multimodal, from many to many, whether synchronously or asynchronously.

Throughout the world, the autonomy referred to by Castells, not only in the dissemination of files and data but also in reformatting and production of content, has led to a wide range of tools, from weblogs, vlogs, pages to news-oriented websites, managed and fed with citizen participation. These initiatives are typically associated with citizen journalism models or open-source journalism (TARGINO, 2009) or participatory journalism, defined by Bowman and Willis (2003, p.9) as “the act of a citizen or a group of citizens playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating information” with the intention of “providing independent, reliable, accurate, varied, and relevant information that democracy requires.”

In this manner, participatory journalism overturns the logic of “filter first, then publish,” common in traditional journalism, with the logic of “publish first, then filter,” creating another communication system in which the participants themselves filter information as it is disseminated through the addition of new texts and comments (BOWMAN & WILLIS, 2003).

Moretzsohn (2014) takes a dissenting stance on this dynamic by emphasizing that, instead of everyone becoming reporters, as advocated by participatory journalism, we must consider

that technological facilities make “everyone” potential sources because the multiplicity of actors and information distribution tools demands even greater rigor from professional journalists in selecting information.

Even in places where internet penetration remains relatively low, such as in India, the growth of collaborative practices in online news production is notable. Paul Subin’s research (2018) conducted with 134 participants from nine participatory journalism sites reveals a high level of education among the respondents. Part of them reported having a doctoral degree (7.46%), and nearly all stated they had a Master’s degree (43.28%) or a Bachelor’s or an undergraduate degree (45.52%). Their primary motivation for participation is to provide relevant information, especially on topics that receive little coverage in the traditional media.

Focusing on a local context, Jenkins and Graves (2019) analyzed three similar projects in Europe to understand the main benefits and obstacles of participatory journalism. Among the benefits, they indicate the maximization of technological and human resources, which enable deeper investigations with more consistent data analysis, broader coverage, source diversification, and the sharing of knowledge and experiences. On the other hand, journalists’ distrust of external agents’ involvement and joint decision-making can lead to conflicts. Accepting to report experimentally and finding sustainable financing models have also proven to be significant challenges.

Contemporary studies must also take into consideration the structuring and control exerted by technological conglomerates over the flow and distribution of content voluntarily produced by citizens. These entities gather an inexhaustible amount of data, which is commercialized and monetized in exchange for connection management services and mediation between users and providers (FÍGARO & MARQUES, 2020).

These configurations challenge the understanding of entirely free and horizontal participation of individuals in the production and distribution of information. They must be taken into consideration by researchers in order to avoid naive and utopian analyses of participatory processes, including those with noble motivations and concerns for the common good (SUBIN, 2018). Hence, the importance of empirical research, as advocated by Quandt (2018), which can provide concrete references regarding citizen participation in communication phenomena and processes.

## **OTT: participation, collaborative verification, and trust building**

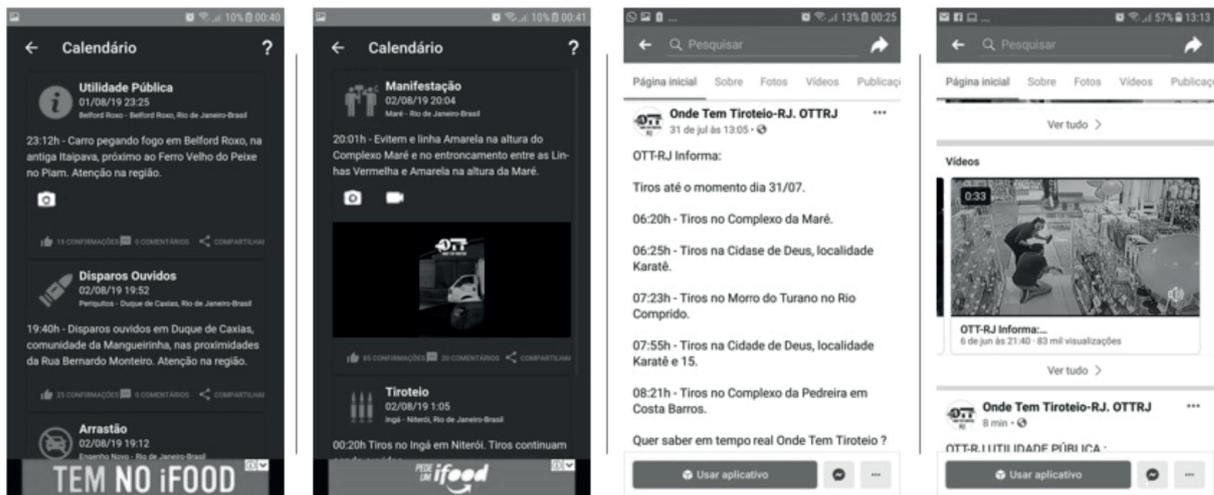
OTT is an initiative that originated on Facebook through a fanpage<sup>4</sup> created by four non-journalist friends in 2016. It is based on the concept of “public security 4.0,”<sup>5</sup> which assumes citizen-to-citizen (C2C) safety, in a collaborative and instantaneous manner. In 2019, the

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/OTTRJ>. Access on: 11 dec. 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.ondetemtroteio.com.br/>. Access on: 11 dec. 2019.

fanpage was partially deactivated, and the initiative was transformed into an app, allowing users to report events they have witnessed to help others avoid confrontations, robberies, and stray bullets, among other crimes (Figure 1). The information is compiled in the tool, and the OTT administrators claim to operate independently, meaning they are not obligated to verify the accuracy of the occurrences with official sources. Instead, they opt for collaborative layperson verification, in which citizens themselves are responsible for confirming, denying, correcting, and supplementing the published information.

**Figure 1** – Comparative excerpt of posts on the app and on the fanpage



Source: authors' collection (2019)

In the new format, urban violence alerts are classified into at least 10 categories: Shootout; Shots heard; Mass robbery; Wrong-way traffic; Police operation; Police chase; Public service; Flooding; Demonstration; and Fire. There is a greater emphasis on the specificity of the reports, which are accompanied by different symbols. For example, shootouts are symbolized by three rifle cartridges, while shots heard are represented by a single bullet. Furthermore, two icons indicate the presence of photos or videos in certain reports (Figure 2). At the end of each post, users can leave their likes, make comments, and also share the alerts on their personal digital social networks. The app is free and has 5 million downloads.

**Figure 2** – Iconic categorization of alerts in the application

Source: authors' collection (2019)

The collaborative layperson verification system of OTT operates in two distinct ways. In Rio de Janeiro, the city of origin of the application, the confirmation of alerts is done through the cross-referencing of information provided by participants in WhatsApp groups in areas of armed conflict<sup>6</sup>. These individuals are deemed trustworthy as they pass on accurate information to OTT. In the rest of Brazil, the reports received from users are immediately published in the application. A predefined time limit has been established for confirmation by other individuals, but this period is not disclosed by the administrators to prevent the person responsible for posting an alert from confirming it. Thus, if an alert is published and receives a second confirmation within a certain time frame, it remains active. Otherwise, the alert is removed from the application. In this regard, OTT's dynamics bring the initiative closer to the actions of participatory journalism.

Verification of photos and videos is carried out in a similar manner. If there are suspicions that the image was recorded in a different place and/or time than indicated by the user, the administrators conduct an initial screening through online search engines to determine if the scenes have been used on other websites, television news, or even on other digital social networks. If this is not sufficient for confirming the date and location of the recording, they again turn to their contact networks and WhatsApp groups.

<sup>6</sup> OTT administrators participate in more than 600 groups formed by people living in areas of armed conflict, which they call "trust groups". In-depth in-person interview given to the author on August 5, 2019.

It's interesting to note that within systems of collaborative information production like OTT, the fact that the information does not originate from traditional journalism is not a problem for the general set of participating individuals, as long as it is truthful and verifiable. This concept is crucial to understand how trust is built among the tool's users and the credibility of the app, as we will delve into further in the results of this study.

## Results and Analysis

The OTT page on Facebook followed the model of other news profiles existing on the platform, typically directed towards residents of peripheral neighborhoods with the aim of informing about the routine of violence in those areas. In Rio de Janeiro, the so-called "News" pages (*Jacarepaguá News*, *Praça Seca News*, *Guadalupe News*, etc.) adhere to the logic of instant production, live content, and thus, they seek to affirm their membership to journalism by their names as they present themselves, and primarily by providing a public service to residents, "indicating places where assaults, shootings, mass robberies, among other events are taking place, with actual images of the incidents" (GRUPILLO, 2018, p. 81). One of the main characteristics of these profiles is the geographical proximity of their followers.

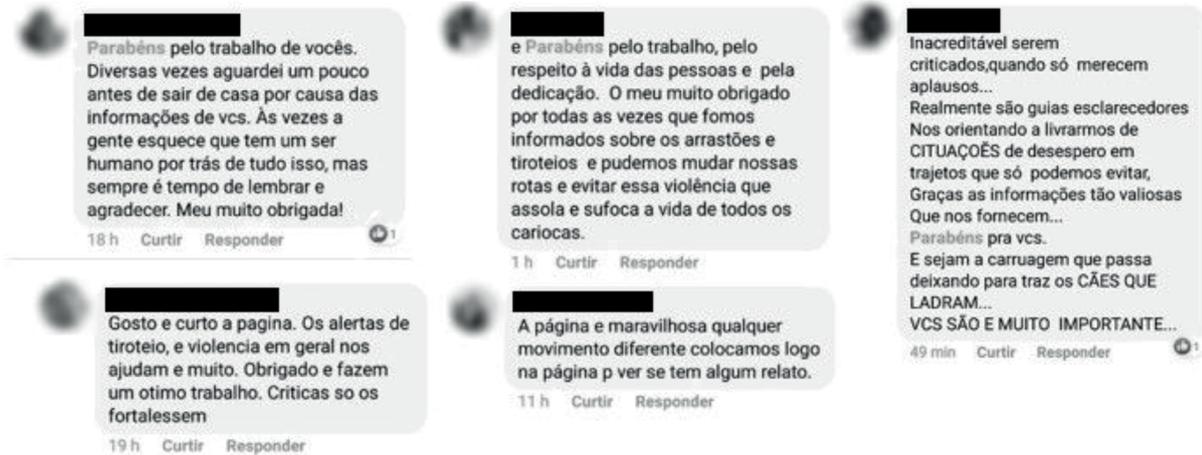
The author suggests that the proliferation of these profiles is associated with at least two factors: 1) the technological availability brought about by the popularization of smartphones and the capacity it provides users to document violent behavior; and 2) the restriction of traditional journalistic coverage in conflict-ridden regions, which started in 2002, the year of the murder of journalist Tim Lopes (Rede Globo) during a report in the Complexo do Alemão, Rio de Janeiro.

Media organizations, especially television broadcasters, began to prohibit reporters from entering certain areas of the city. In the following years, these security protocols would be further intensified with the deaths of cameramen Gelson Domingos (TV Bandeirantes) and Santiago Andrade (TV Bandeirantes) in 2011 and 2014, respectively. These three media professionals died while covering news in different conflict areas.

Nunes (2017) shows how the development of the internet and the reduction of journalistic coverage in certain urban areas were decisive for the emergence of neighborhood pages. In total, 156 profiles were counted and analyzed, with the majority created by the residents themselves. This means that a significant part of the official neighborhoods in the city (160) has a "News" page. The author notes that most of these pages were initially created to produce general content for residents related to public services, social actions, parties, regional events, and even reports of improper use of public space. However, these profiles shifted to covering violence with an emphasis on their place of origin and its surroundings. Nunes includes OTT within this phenomenon.

During the transition period of alerts from the fanpage to the app, OTT users sought to reiterate its role, utility, and importance. They pointed out how OTT influences decisions about the time to leave home or the route to take. This was evident in comments such as “*Several times I waited a bit before leaving home because of your information*”; “*The alerts about shootings and violence in general help us a lot*”; or “*I thank you for all the times we were informed about robberies and shootings and could change our routes*” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3** – Followers highlight the utility of OTT alerts in daily life



Source: OTT Facebook page

Overall, the reach of pages like OTT indicates the existence of a significant number of people who recognize them as “reliable sources” of information, even though they may not be considered journalistic by professional journalists. The credibility the app shares among users is evident in the comments presented (Figure 4), in statements such as: “*In the midst of the era of Fake News, OTT is a serious communication channel that we can trust*”; “*You are a serious communication channel that we can always trust*”; “*I have a lot of trust in the information on this page and can only thank all of you for your availability to verify if the information is true*”; “*I always go to the page to check where it is safe*”; “*I trust your information because I know they are not posts from months or years ago*”; “*I want to know if there’s been any issue in location x or y, I quickly turn to OTT*”; “*I trust the page 100%*” and “*How many times do we turn to the page to check what’s happening, where it’s happening, such credibility.*”

Figure 4 – Trust in OTT



Source: OTT Facebook page

In addition to the trust they place in the tool, some followers emphasize their frequent use of information and videos published by OTT in television reports as a point to reinforce its credibility. In this way, followers believe that because the alerts are verified and published first on the platform they draw the interest of TV stations and other media outlets, supplying them with content (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – References to the usage of OTT material in the news

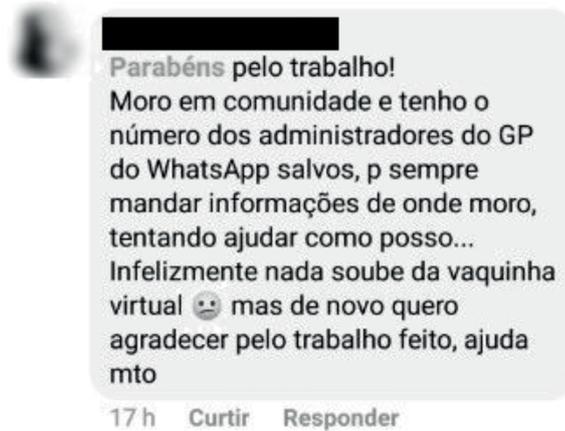


Source: OTT Facebook page

Among the comments, we can read: “*even the most popular media outlets also use your videos and alerts*”; “*Many pages benefit from your page... even TV programs*”; “*Just to emphasize that I’ve seen your reports in news broadcasts several times*”; and also, “*You have credibility because even TV stations use your reports in local news*”; “*I suggest that you start charging (I don’t know how...) other media outlets (TV and Radio, like Tupi, which I’ve heard giving alerts based on this material) that use the content from the page*”; “*if it weren’t good, it wouldn’t be cited as a source of information in the TV news*” and “*these days even local newspapers use your information to create reports.*”

Furthermore, the role of encouraging participation stands out. It appears in a comment from a follower who says she contributes to the tool by sending information about the community where she lives: “*I live in a community and I have the administrators’ WhatsApp group number saved, so I can always send information from where I live, trying to help as much as I can*” (Figure 6). Besides confirming the existence of the trusted groups mentioned in interviews for this research, the message helps us understand the collaborative verification mechanism established by OTT. Having reliable informants within conflict zones interested in providing accurate information is, in our view, the greatest value of the tool, ultimately contributing to the construction of credibility among users.

**Figure 6** – Follower highlights participation in the tool



Source: OTT Facebook page

In order to understand how users began to engage with the application, the interaction they maintain through the tool, and the credibility they place in it, we divided the most significant comments, out of the universe of 3,834 recorded comments, into six categories. However, over the six months of analysis, what caught our attention the most was the change in the proportions of posts made by administrators and users on the app.

In month 1, out of the 339 alerts issued, only eight were attributed to users. In the following months, however, we noticed a substantial increase in user participation, as shown in Table 1. In month 2, OTT was responsible for 326 alerts compared to 104 from users. In month 3, 375 alerts were issued by the app administrators, and 180 were sent by users. In month 4, we observed a significant reduction in alerts issued by OTT. There were 252 from OTT compared to 167 from users.

Finally, in the last two months of the analysis, we noticed a more pronounced trend of decreasing alerts from OTT and an increase in reports from users. In month 5, the number of user reports (212) was very close to those published by the tool's administrators (250). In month 6, we observed a reversal, with a higher quantity of user alerts (237) compared to OTT's reports (165).

**Table 1** – Comparison of number of posts

| Proporção de publicações |       |          |
|--------------------------|-------|----------|
| Período                  | OTT   | Usuários |
| Mês 1                    | 331   | 8        |
| Mês 2                    | 326   | 104      |
| Mês 3                    | 375   | 180      |
| Mês 4                    | 252   | 167      |
| Mês 5                    | 250   | 212      |
| Mês 6                    | 165   | 237      |
| Total                    | 1.669 | 908      |

Source: Data collected by the authors in OTT (2019)

During the analysis period, users were responsible for 908 publications on the app among the 2,607 alerts released, corresponding to 34.83% of the total. Even though most publications are still carried out by the tool's administrators, the data leads us to believe that users have understood how OTT works, becoming capable of maintaining its collaborative dynamics even though its creators and administrators reduce the publication of reports. Furthermore, the number of reactions observed (46,395 confirmations) indicates high participant involvement in the application, including comments.

In general, posts and comments from the users demonstrate a concern for adding information about incidents, indicating, in some cases, the exact location of clashes, the movement of police forces, the duration of shootings and even the movement of criminals. and armed drug traffickers in certain locations, as can be seen in the composition of three alerts in Figure 7.

Figure 7 – Comments collected on the app



Source: OTT app (2019)

In the first alert of the sequence (Shooting - July 22), the user comments: “*What’s the situation right now? I need to go to work*” and the subsequent responses seem quite assertive: “*No gunfire*” and “*Armored vehicle, backhoe, and many officers from the 16th battalion, but no gunfire at the moment.*” In the second alert (Shooting - July 24), some users try to inform others about the interruption in the urban train service due to the confrontation: “*Trains are waiting for the signal due to intense gunfire in Manginhos*” and “*Trains are still waiting for clearance, meaning there are no trains to GRAMACHO.*” Finally, in the third alert (Shots Heard - October 4), one of the users writes: “*If you live in Vila da Penha near Morro da Fé... there are several teenagers on the street robbing pedestrians and drivers. BE CAREFUL.*” The last participant to comment updates the information a few hours later: “*More gunshots now (9 PM).*”

In addition to streamlining the posts on OTT, many of the comments manage to bring users closer to a specific location, keeping them informed about a particular incident until its resolution. Depending on the type of alert and its severity, user engagement can even generate new reports in OTT’s timeline, thus fueling a continuous information system about risky situations (Figure 8).

**Figure 8** – Comments collected on the app

Source: OTT app (2019)

At 5:09 PM, one user posts: *“My dad just drove by Bulhões Macial and called me in a panic, saying there’s a lot of gunfire in Cidade Alta, I could clearly hear it.”* Then, at 5:40 PM, another participant alerts: *“Train has been stopped for over 30 minutes Saracuruna Line Stopped at Penha Circular... Reason is gunfire in Parada de Lucas and surrounding areas.”* Later, at 5:49 PM, a third user reports the normalization of traffic on Avenida Brasil, a road that crosses the entire region: *“Lanes have been reopened on BRASIL.”*

The observation of these comments indicates the existence of a collaborative awareness among the participants and the dissemination of the app’s usage in certain well-known conflict-prone environments. In a way, this suggests that OTT has been able to play its initially proposed role in promoting agile communication, made in a participatory and collaborative manner, from citizen to citizen. However, this communication seems to be anchored in a fundamental value for the app’s credibility: eyewitness testimony. Many of the comments report situations witnessed by the participants themselves or events they learned about through family members, friends, or acquaintances.

Some of the alerts highlighted in the previous figures already indicate the presence of this characteristic; however, in the sequence of four posts in Figure 9, the testimonial value of the comments can be seen more clearly. *“I am inside bus 383, we got caught in the crossfire, a horrible feeling”*; *“I work at Lagoa Hospital, had to take cover away from the windows. A lot of*

gunfire, at least two different calibers. It happened on Borges de Medeiros.” But also: “I saw 2 ambulances and 1 firetruck. Maybe there are injured people. May God protect the victims of this violence” and “The criminals had rifles and were right in the middle of the Caja street.”

In the group of four posts in Figure 10, user testimonies appear in comments like: “I’m on the BRASIL and it’s closed in both directions”; or “On the uphill part of the mountain, armed with a pistol, I was one of the mugged, they wanted to steal money, cell phones, and a watch.” And also: “A friend of a cousin of mine is still trapped inside because a store was robbed, and the police blocked the exit for everyone”; “Robbery attempt. The victim, a woman, tried to escape, got shot in the arm, and has already been taken to the hospital.”

In a way, the spelling and punctuation errors in the original messages in Portuguese show the tension experienced by people as they share their experiences of violence through posts and comments on the app.

Figure 9 – Comments collected on the app



Source: OTT app (2019)

**Figure 10** – Comments collected on the app



Source: OTT app (2019)

## Considerations

The analysis of “Onde Tem Tiroteio,” particularly the central role of users in generating content that circulates on the app, positions it as an expression of communication initiatives with journalistic relevance produced by non-journalists, which are part of the contemporary media ecosystem, where the boundaries between content producers and receivers are narrowing by the day.

Both academic literature and the observation of specific cases, as proposed in this article, particularly regarding OTT, indicate that these experiences result from a series

of factors, including the withdrawal of traditional journalism from specific areas and territories marked by social conflicts. There is a desire for the public to reposition themselves regarding information, taking on an active role as credible sources. The testimonial value of the reports and the geographic proximity of information producers to the reported events are also key aspects.

In addition to these factors, it is important to emphasize that the concern for following the different stages of collaborative production, verification, fact-checking, and the possibility of refutation, which are structural elements in journalism, contribute to the relationship of credibility and trust between users and OTT.

In this sense, OTT and similar actions are understood neither as opposers nor substitutes for traditional journalism, but as important and complementary agents within the current media landscape.

On one hand, this scenario reinforces the need for discussions about ethical issues and the parameters of journalistic trust and credibility. On the other hand, it requires traditional journalism to engage in self-reflection, understanding the institutional decisions made in recent years that have weakened its privileged and formerly nearly exclusive role as a mediator between events and the general population.

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The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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