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WHATSAPP IN LATIN AMERICA

Gabriel Pereira

“It was terror and panic. We lived in chaos today.” That is how the Brazilian chef Daniella Goulart described to a journalist her experience of a WhatsApp outage in 2021.¹ Almost all her clients order food through messages in the app, and the outage meant she lost 60% of her sales that day. This is just one example of how WhatsApp has become a crucial aspect of people’s lives in Brazil, with 99% of smartphone users indicating they have the app installed.²

It’s not just Brazil: as smartphones have become ever-present in people’s lives across all Latin America, WhatsApp is extremely popular—almost synonymous with digital communication. Based on their fieldwork in Mexico City, Gómez-Cruz and Harindranath go as far as calling it a “technology of life,” thus “highlight[ing] the intricate and complex connections between the app’s pervasive (and sometimes inescapable) use and the mediations that these connections engender and sustain.”³ WhatsApp is, indeed, a multifaceted place where people do things as diverse as speaking to friends and family, booking doctor’s appointments, reporting transit infractions and ordering food.

Initially released in the US in 2009, the app is now owned and operated by Meta (*née* Facebook), a Silicon Valley corporation. Meta defines how the app is developed and operated on a global scale, including business strategy, governance model and affordances. However, it is up to people around the world to continuously appropriate the system to their day-to-day lives, domesticating it to their needs.

This chapter engages with WhatsApp in Latin America, reviewing different research conducted in this region. Not all Latin American people have entirely similar relations with the app, so my goal is to bring attention to how scholarship from the region converges upon important similarities. As such, rather than arguing for WhatsApp as a single and stable object, I aim to demonstrate how such a socio-technical system presents important particularities across different contexts and uses. I begin by presenting how the app’s affordances are used as part of people’s everyday lives, which also allows us to understand how it became so popular in Latin America. Next, I discuss how this popularity matters as the app tries to make a profit from its near-monopoly over messaging in the region. Lastly, I engage with the moments when the normalization of WhatsApp was challenged, particularly concerning electoral politics.

How Is WhatsApp Used in Latin America?

To discuss WhatsApp's use in Latin America I will focus on the app's "affordances." These are the ways a technological object "shape[s] action for socially situated subjects."⁴ This implies that the app, as it is devised by its creators, embeds a set of functionalities and expected uses that shape (but not completely define) the use people give to them. By using the concept of affordances, my goal is not to explain *what* WhatsApp's functionalities (dis)allow but *how* they enable and constrain a wide breadth of practices for Latin American people.⁵

Making Instant Messaging Easy and Affordable

The primordial function of WhatsApp, since its early days, has been as an instant messaging service. As anthropologist Juliano Spyer details in his media ethnography of Brazil, WhatsApp's emergence as a native mobile app "made it easy to navigate on smaller mobile screens and allow[ed] the user [to] easily . . . send and receive messages, and to know if and when the recipient has seen each message."⁶ The app worked well in the less expensive Android mobile devices, which were becoming popular across low-income countries—in 2024, around 84% of mobile devices in South America were Android devices, whereas in the US that number was just around 43%.⁷

In addition to working well on cheaper phones, WhatsApp in Latin America directly benefited from the rise of mobile internet. It emerged at a time when access to 3G and Wi-Fi became increasingly popular in the region. As summarized by Pereira et al., "to a large extent, the great appeal of WhatsApp among Brazilian users is connected to the fact that the services of state and private telecom providers have historically been costly and inaccessible to many low-income users."⁸ Whereas sending SMS texts and making voice calls was relatively costly, WhatsApp afforded similar functionalities for free. This move was accelerated because the app automatically added contacts from phone numbers saved on the smartphone, making the transition from previous forms of communication almost seamless.⁹

The shift from SMS to WhatsApp becomes visible, for example, in Argentina: 120 million SMS messages were sent in 2013, while just 7 million in 2020.¹⁰ Similarly, Figure 39.1 shows the steep growth of instant messaging services and voice/video apps in Brazil from 2007 to 2023. The chart also indicates a decline in the number of people sending/receiving e-mails. Data from Paraguay further defines this trend: in 2021, 97.6% of the internet-connected population says they use it for instant messaging, whereas 45.4% use it for e-mail and 83.4% for social networks.¹¹

Sharing Multimedia Content

Beyond text messages, WhatsApp allows users to easily send and receive multimedia content. From very early on, WhatsApp integrated as a key affordance the possibility of sharing videos and photos, even with low bandwidth—a key issue in emergent countries. An ethnography of social media use in Northern Chile by Nell Haynes gives us a clear example of what this means in Latin America. She explains how WhatsApp became an ideal mode of socialization for families with a member in the mining industry.¹³ Through the app, Jorge, a miner, can "stay in contact with his wife Vicky, daughter Gabriela and his grandson Samuel." When he arrives from the mine to his dormitory, away from his hometown,

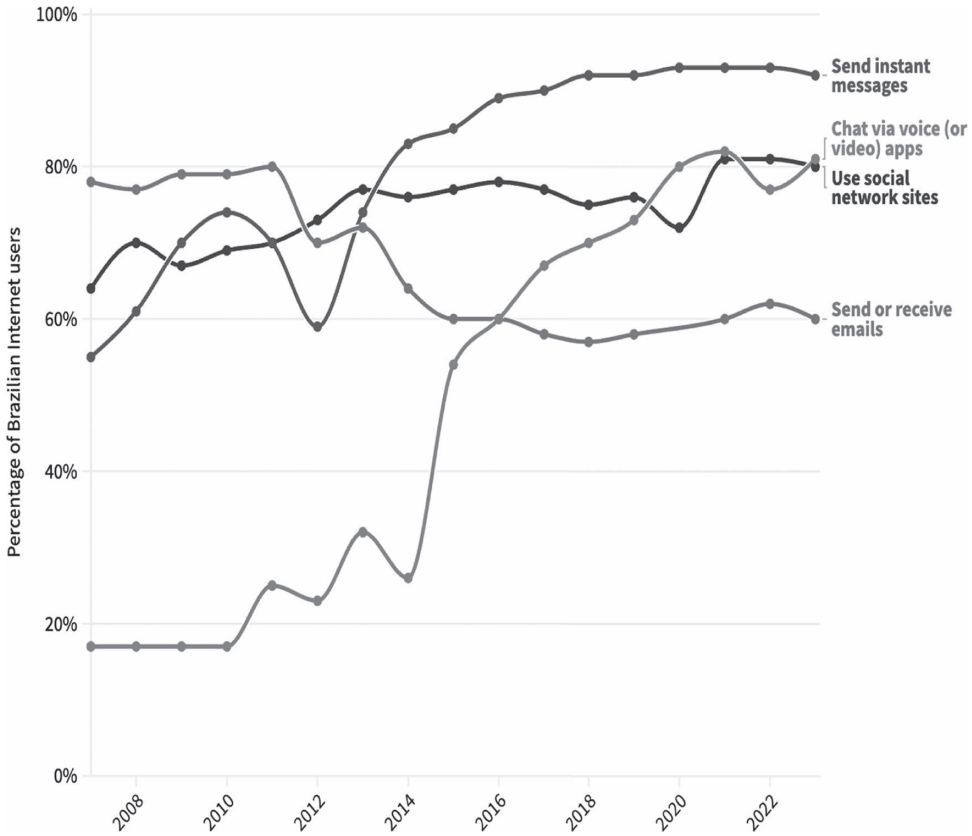


Figure 39.1 How do Brazilian internet users communicate? Growth in the Use of Digital Communication in Brazil, 2006–2023.¹²

Jorge “passes the night sending messages to his family . . . and receiving replies from his wife and daughter, often with pictures of Samuel.” As can be seen through this example, the inexpensive integration of multimedia communication within WhatsApp enabled new forms of digital sociality and intimacy.

The multimedia aspect of WhatsApp goes beyond images, as it also allows sharing video, audio, text, links, emojis/stickers and other attachments. Gómez-Cruz and Siles’s study of multimedia communication across WhatsApp users in Mexico City discusses how visual elements are used “for creating layers of open meaning that would be difficult to achieve through writing,” including the use of nuance and local cultural references.¹⁴ Stickers, for example, are user-created figures, which people share and collect through WhatsApp. An example of the use of this affordance can be found in the groups of microworkers studied by Moreschi et al. in Brazil.¹⁵ Although workers self-organized to give each other support related to their labour, the group’s communication was populated with humour, often using funny stickers to express anger, frustration and confusion. In one of the stickers, the cover of a book read by Kermit the Frog says, “How to punch someone through a computer screen”; in another, an angry dog is accompanied by the text “What?”¹⁶

Beyond visual material, sending voice notes is an affordance that has been crucial in Latin America. People often prefer recording voice notes because they are more intimate

or allow users to “express genuine affection.”¹⁷ Another important reason is because many do not feel comfortable with typing, often because of lacking reading/writing literacy or because the smartphone’s small keyboard is unwieldy for them (e.g. the elderly). These different multimedia capabilities allow a broader amount of people to participate in social media, as expressed by Juliano Spyer’s ethnography in Northeastern Brazil:

Not being able to read or write no longer prevents a person from participating in “small talk” with peers online; simply by sharing an image or video they can joke and show moral values in relation to themes such as politics and religion.¹⁸

Groups, Big and Small

WhatsApp allows the creation of groups with a low barrier of access. As Baulch et al. suggest, “This feature makes the app more like a social network (e.g. similar to Facebook groups) rather than just a text messaging or voice call service.”¹⁹ As a report from 2022 by Mont’Alverne et al. shows, 59% of Brazilian WhatsApp users say they use groups for speaking to family members, 51% with friends, 38% with workmates, 25% with local community, 7% with political groups and 27% with groups related to other interests.²⁰

Most groups are rather small. The ethnographer Benjamin Junge, for example, studied an extended family group in Brazil, which he defines as a “sacred space for announcing family events and accomplishments, for expressing love, and for posting an incessant flurry of well wishes.”²¹ These same groups, however, became sites of heated discussion on politics during the elections, and thus both “reflected and affected cross-generational family dynamics.”²² Beyond family life, Matassi et al. have shown in their study of the domestication of WhatsApp in Argentina that work logistics play a key role, particularly for “middle adults.”²³ In these situations, people make use of WhatsApp’s mobility and quickness, for example, to arrange shifts or speak to customers. However, as a survey of university teachers in Ecuador suggests, the continuous messaging with work colleagues that WhatsApp affords may lead to a feeling of overload and a higher degree of burnout.²⁴

Very large groups (capped at 1,024 members), though a minority, are relatively popular in Latin America. Some of such groups may be public, which means they can be accessed by anybody with a link, while others require an invitation. Their topics may be related to politics, religion or sport, for example. These functionalities make the messaging app very akin to other social media platforms, a “superapp.”²⁵ The most discussed use of these very large groups was political organizing in elections. In her study of far-right groups in Brazil’s 2018 election, the anthropologist Leticia Cesarino speaks of how these groups enabled forms of sociability comparable to other social media platforms—though one which allowed a “populist mobilization.”²⁶ A different, less investigated use are groups for buying and selling goods. Köhn and Siré conducted an ethnography of semipublic “black market” group chats in Havana (Cuba), some with hundreds of members.²⁷ As WhatsApp does not embed functionalities of rating or reporting sellers/buyers (as, for example, MercadoLibre/Ebay), they explain that users developed alternative strategies to safely trade with their largely anonymous counterparts.

The sharing of news often takes place in the intimacy of conversations with close contacts, including through groups.²⁸ A Reuters Institute report from 2021 indicates people in Latin America heavily rely on WhatsApp for reading news, with 40% of respondents indicating they used the app for accessing news in the past week—a number much higher than

in Europe (16%).²⁹ The consumption of news often happens as part of the day-to-day social relations of users, what researchers refer as “incidental news consumption.”³⁰ This may also explain the impressive finding that Brazilians are more trusting of news they receive on WhatsApp (53%) than the ones received from news media in general (46%).³¹

End-to-End Encrypted

The fact that communications on WhatsApp are end-to-end encrypted played an important role in its growth, particularly because it evokes the notion of a more private space than other social media. WhatsApp made this affordance particularly visible to users, thus presenting itself as a safer, privacy-focused platform.³² Scholars Santos and Faure have suggested the introduction of encryption was mostly for show rather than due to a real company belief in privacy, serving mostly to protect the company from future legal dilemmas around content moderation.³³

Emiliano Treré’s fieldwork in Mexico City and Spain engaged with how WhatsApp is used by activists, a key group to value such encryption.³⁴ In discussing the Mexican #YoSoy132 movement, for example, he shows how the “crucial communicative affordances” of the app, “in conjunction with the omnipresent smartphone,” made WhatsApp into a “potent organizational device.” As Treré recounts, “when the repressive strategies of the government impelled activists to erase protest-related pictures, posts and sometimes their whole public profiles from Facebook and YouTube, WhatsApp groups witnessed instead an intensification of exchanges.” The encryption of the app, together with the organization around closed-off groups, made it into a sheltered backstage space, one where activists felt protected.

New and Emergent Functionalities

Since its inception, WhatsApp has been implementing new affordances at a quick pace. Some added functionalities have been small, such as allowing users to “react” to messages with emojis, accessing the app through the browser or editing sent messages up to 15 minutes after they were sent. Others have been more significant: in 2015, WhatsApp added the affordance of voice calls, and a year later video calls were introduced. Since 2017, the app also allows users to post “Status,” a feature like Snapchat and Instagram/Facebook Stories. These new functionalities further consolidated the app as a one-stop-shop for interpersonal communication, while also making it further resemble a social media platform.

In late 2022, a “Communities” feature was introduced, nesting smaller groups within larger ones. Notably, the feature was launched in Brazil only in January 2023 due to requests from the Superior Electoral Court, which argued this new feature could be used problematically in the ongoing elections. This new affordance aims to increase the resemblance between WhatsApp and other social media such as Facebook, though it also introduces new challenges to content moderation. Some tweaks have been made before to deal with the abuse of the app’s functionalities: for example, after the viral spread of misinformation was attributed to the app’s forwarding function, a marker has been added indicating when a message has been “Forwarded many times.” However, the political communication scholars Munger et al. found in an experiment with people in Mexico and Colombia that people did not find such warnings made messages less credible.³⁵

The commercial imperative of the app has also led to changes in its operation, with WhatsApp offering since 2018 a business version for companies—streamlining communication with customers and adding exclusive functionalities, such as the automation of customer service through bots. WhatsApp is also developing WhatsApp Pay, a form of payment based on Facebook Pay that was initially experimented with in a few countries (including Brazil).³⁶ In the future, the goal seems to add an e-commerce function to the app—as it is being tested in India.³⁷ With a Latin American population that is already very reliant on the app, these affordances could lead to a problematic monopoly, as discussed next.

How Does WhatsApp's Popularity Matter?

This non-exhaustive analysis of WhatsApp affordances makes clear why in countries like Argentina, WhatsApp is a “highly versatile, all-encompassing space of encounter, meaning making, and coordination where entrance barriers are low and exit costs are high.”³⁸ The app is not just a popular service but something difficult to live without, an infrastructure people are reliant on. As Pereira et al. argue, “In the Brazilian public imaginary and in everyday life, WhatsApp is thought of and experienced as a national infrastructure, even if it is owned and controlled by Facebook, a largely unregulated global media conglomerate.”³⁹ In effect, WhatsApp's popularity has meant people in Latin America are dependent on a service that is not directly accountable to them, while also profiting from their data in potentially questionable ways.

The concept of “data colonialism”⁴⁰ may be useful to explain how WhatsApp's near-monopoly of Latin America may become particularly problematic. This concept expresses how data extractivism underpins contemporary digital capitalism, a process that continues historical colonialism through different inequalities and forms of exploitation. Take WhatsApp: it is a free application, which does not sell advertising but “has intangible assets with a high prospect of future cash generation and subjective pricing.”⁴¹ The goal, as with many other Silicon Valley endeavours, is “scaling up” and taking control of the market to then experiment with different forms of monetization through data extraction. This is becoming reality now, for example, with WhatsApp Pay, an experiment initially conducted in Brazil, Kenya and India. These countries, all in the Global South, are used “as laboratories for implementing big tech monopoly policies” because they are large markets but also due to Meta's capacity to lobby around data protection laws. The WhatsApp Pay experiment sought to monetize WhatsApp not by selling a product but through the extraction of personal financial data—a valuable asset for advertising.

WhatsApp Pay also serves as “another step towards increasing the data monopoly that Facebook has over Brazil and India”⁴²—as well as other countries in Latin America. WhatsApp, much like its parent company Facebook/Meta, aims at monopolizing access to the internet, transforming its platform into the internet itself. This is not entirely new, as “zero-rating” deals—where mobile internet plans do not count WhatsApp/Facebook data use towards a plan's limits—were a key factor in making WhatsApp so popular in Latin America. As described by media scholar David Nemer in his ethnography of different favelas in Brazil, zero rating was crucial among these communities to get users hooked into WhatsApp and Facebook.⁴³ WhatsApp Pay is a clear example of how the profit motive behind the app continues historical relations of colonialism (e.g. through the experimentation in Global South subjects), further entrenching WhatsApp as a monopoly while extracting valuable personal data for advertising.

How Is WhatsApp Challenged in Latin America?

So far, I have described WhatsApp as an ever-present element of people's lives in Latin America, one which is so normalized that it is seldom questioned. The discussion of "data colonialism" may further give the impression that WhatsApp is an all-powerful institution, one that people in the region passively accept. This is not true: there have been several moments when people's relationship with WhatsApp was challenged. I now turn to different ways this has happened, particularly considering recent electoral campaigns.

Whereas Facebook became associated with issues such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, elections in Latin America have been marked by scandals around WhatsApp. In Brazil, WhatsApp played a key role in the 2018 presidential race, particularly for fake news and bulk messaging. Scholars Evangelista & Bruno have argued that "the campaign of Jair Bolsonaro used the app to deliver messages (and disinformation) to exacerbate political feelings present in the political debate of the legacy media."⁴⁴ In his study of the far-right WhatsApp groups, the media scholar David Nemer suggested that "Bolsonaro's campaign relied on mis- and disinformation that was systematically created and spread by a human infrastructure that orchestrated a guided campaign."⁴⁵ That is, an organized network of groups was created, with content being produced by "influencers" and spread to loyal fans ("Bolso-army"), where it spread to average people's day-to-day groups. In the context of Colombia's 2018 presidential election, Chenou et al. similarly found that WhatsApp "groups during political campaigns [were important] in creating echo chambers, where a limited number of convinced followers receive positive information, potentially viral content, and even elements of language about the candidate."⁴⁶

Beyond this form of group mobilization, the journalist Patrícia Campos Mello uncovered a scheme in the 2018 election in Brazil where businesspeople were paying for mass messages to be sent out to people and groups through WhatsApp. These automated messages often included attacks on candidates or other forms of misinformation.⁴⁷ Appeals were made for WhatsApp to act, including by electoral courts, academics and activists. However, WhatsApp denied any abuse was happening. It was only in 2019 that the company would recognize there was indeed widespread abuse of its services during the elections.⁴⁸

Issues related to electoral politics led to WhatsApp's perception as a seamless infrastructure to be challenged. The Brazilian press, for example, described WhatsApp as "a space without regulation ('no man's land'), positioning it at the epicentre of the country's intensifying political polarization and pointing out the emergent frustration citizen-users felt in relation to the app and its operations."⁴⁹ Although WhatsApp positions itself as a neutral platform, abstaining from responsibility for content moderation, it has assumed a more proactive tone since these scandals. For example, WhatsApp partnered with both the Brazilian and Peruvian electoral courts, with projects and actions to curb abuse in the 2022 elections, including the use of chatbots. There have also been other forms of indirect lobbying. The "Communities" feature, which was slated to be released right before the election, was postponed after officials raised fears of misuse in Brazilian elections.⁵⁰ All in all, these responses raise questions about the role of a platform that controls so much political and information exchange but that is difficult for Latin American countries to regulate.

On a different scale, the users of WhatsApp hold a distributed power over it, as users may choose to quit the service. The scholar João Carlos Magalhães identified that, after the 2018 election in Brazil, some Facebook users "may not delete their social media accounts but stop acting politically on this platform as a way of explicitly avoiding an algorithmic

visibility game that is felt as demeaning their political dignity.”⁵¹ A similar process seems to have taken place with WhatsApp, as people left groups due to family and friend disputes regarding the elections.⁵² Relatedly, there was much resistance to WhatsApp changing privacy policies to allow sharing metadata with Facebook in 2021. Many users switched to other messaging apps such as Telegram or Signal to indicate their dissatisfaction.⁵³ Furthermore, government regulators in the Argentinian government acted to suspend the change to WhatsApp’s policies while their impacts would be investigated.⁵⁴

In addition to electoral issues, WhatsApp has posed difficulties for researchers, as communication is encrypted, and the company does not share any data or metadata for research. This has led to a relative gap in scholarship being produced on the app’s use across the world, thus reducing the accountability and transparency of its operations. However, researchers have explored alternative ways to access and analyse data without the platform’s support, with much success. An important project in this realm is WhatsApp Monitor, created by researchers from the University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), which developed tools to scrape data from public WhatsApp groups.⁵⁵ This work has led to much knowledge production, enabling key contributions to the public debate on the app’s role in society.

Although these challenges to WhatsApp’s seamless operation have emerged, there is nothing that resembles a concerted effort to resist WhatsApp’s dominance in the region, or even to propose alternative local platforms with different logics. However, other imported platforms such as Telegram and Signal have been growing in Latin America. Notably, Telegram and Signal do not operate with the goal of financial profit, thus placing privacy and security as core goals. Moreover, these platforms come with different possibilities and challenges, including much larger groups and less strict moderation—a reason why far-right groups may have migrated to them.⁵⁶ The fact that they are even less regulated or controllable poses crucial risks, as became clear in January 8, 2023, when far-right militants invaded the capital Brasília after mobilizing via Telegram⁵⁷ and, to a lesser extent, Twitter and WhatsApp.⁵⁸

The Path Forward

In August 2024, Venezuela’s President Nicolás Maduro deleted WhatsApp from his phone on live television, while requesting a “voluntary, progressive and radical withdraw[al]” from the widely used app—and for people to use Telegram and WeChat instead.⁵⁹ This came in the wake of protests against his self-declared win in the presidential election, many of which were organized through WhatsApp. This debacle over the control of WhatsApp shows its continued and growing relevance in social and political life across Latin America.

WhatsApp is, as this chapter has shown, a widely present infrastructure for communication in people’s daily lives in Latin America, with multifaceted uses. The wide range of affordances, such as multimedia messaging, allows for a simple yet powerful communication system that has been fully integrated in people’s life and work. To complicate matters, the group functionality makes the messaging app akin to a social network platform. However, the fact that the app has a near-monopoly in the region, while being an imported technology, leads to important questions—including how its profit motives may lead to forms of monetization through data extraction and who gets to control it. Although increasingly normalized, there are challenges to WhatsApp’s seamless operation in Latin America, particularly due to electoral scandals, user dissatisfaction to privacy erosion or different forms of governmental regulation or meddling—as seen in Venezuela. Its outsized role in the

wider digital ecosystem in Latin America, nonetheless, remains largely unchallenged and, as new functionalities are added, may grow further.

For the oversized role it plays in Latin America, WhatsApp remains relatively understudied. Most of the work so far has concerned the use of WhatsApp in electoral politics, so there remains much to be unpacked about its empirical everyday use across different communities, such as activists⁶⁰ and elderly people.⁶¹ Despite the leading role it plays in the region, there is still little work that engages with the new affordances it continually introduces, such as Communities and Pay. How are these functions being integrated into people's lives, and how are people appropriating in ways that are particular to Latin American culture? For example, the use of WhatsApp Business has also not been the subject of extensive research, despite the large amount of business that depends on it in the region—as mentioned through the case of the Brazilian chef Daniella Goulart in the introduction.

Future scholarship should also play a crucial role in further identifying and critiquing the political economy of WhatsApp, including how its monetization relies on data extraction, as well as the risks that its centralized role may play for political life. There is ample space for using comparative methodologies to track and identify the approaches to governance of the app across the region, including the emerging arrangements being made in different countries to tackle mis-/disinformation—such as the Superior Electoral Court decisions in Brazil. Finally, as WhatsApp continues to expand its control over digital communication in Latin America, researchers must creatively grapple with what forms of policy and regulation, as well as resistance and antagonism, are possible—and desired—for the years to come.

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