



Communication practices and the struggles for housing justice

Early reflections from São Paulo and Lagos

Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Camila Cociña

Working Paper

October 2024

Urban; Communication

Keywords:
Housing, Social movements, ICT,
Nigeria, Brazil



About the authors

Alexandre Apsan Frediani, IIED, www.iied.org/people/alexandre-apsan-frediani

Camila Cociña, IIED, www.iied.org/people/camila-cocina

Corresponding author email: alexandre.frediani@iied.org

Produced by IIED's Human Settlements group

IIED's Human Settlements programme works through partnerships to create towns and cities that are sustainable, prosperous, resilient, healthy and safe, and inclusive and equitable. We do this by generating high quality evidence, shaping debates, building coalitions, and influencing policies and practices at multiple scales.

Produced in partnership

This working paper was produced as part of the action-research project 'Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos', led by PI Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Co-I Camila Cociña of IIED. It was produced in partnership with:

União dos Movimentos de Moradia (UMM), a coalition of housing movements in greater São Paulo, Brazil, which convenes grassroots housing groups, and is part of a national housing movement in Brazil; and Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI), a nongovernmental organisation in Nigeria that works directly with the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation, to empower marginalised communities to lead the changes that they would like to see in their own communities.

This project is also being implemented in collaboration with the Laboratório Justiça Territorial of the Federal University of ABC, Brazil, and the Centre for Petroleum, Energy Economics and Law at University of Ibadan, in Nigeria.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the teams in Lagos and São Paulo, especially Evaniza Rodrigues, Benedito Barbosa, Francisco Comarú, Talita Gonsales, Cecilia Bacha, Andrew Maki, Temilade Sesan, Samuel Okechukwu and Bisola Akinmuyiwa. Thanks are also due to Marcos Bau Carvalho and Alejandra (Sandra) Boni for their insightful comments on a previous manuscript of this paper.

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/W005980).

Published by IIED, October 2024

Frediani, A A and Cociña, C (2024) Communication practices and the struggles for housing justice: early reflections from São Paulo and Lagos. IIED, London.

www.iied.org/22587IIED

ISBN: 978-1-83759-110-7

International Institute for Environment and Development

44 Southampton Buildings, London WC2A 1AP, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399

www.iied.org

 @iied

 www.facebook.com/theIIED

Download more publications at www.iied.org/publications



IIED publications may be shared and republished in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

Public License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Under the terms of this licence, anyone can copy, distribute and display the material, providing that they credit the original source and don't use it for commercial purposes or make derivatives. Different licences may apply to some illustrative elements, in which instance the licence will be displayed alongside. IIED is happy to discuss any aspect of further usage. Get more information via www.iied.org/about-publications

IIED is a charity registered in England, Charity No.800066 and in Scotland, OSCR Reg No.SC039864 and a company limited by guarantee registered in England No.2188452.

This paper discusses the role that communication and media practices play for housing social movements, exploring the intersections between unjust communication landscapes and the struggles for housing justice. It is part of a wider research project, ‘Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos’. These reflections draw on the experiences of housing social movements of these two cities to explore the ways in which communication practices expand grassroots capabilities to advance housing justice.

Contents

Summary	4	4 Ways forward: researching and supporting housing movements’ communication capabilities	15
1 Introduction	6	Abbreviations and acronyms	17
2 Setting the scene: grassroots practices in an unjust communication landscape	7	Related reading	17
3 Communication justice and housing justice	11	References	18
3.1 Communication landscape and the production of housing	12		
3.2 Communication landscape and the framing of housing narratives	13		
3.3 Communication landscape and the mobilisation of housing claims	13		

Summary

How do struggles against media-related injustices connect with housing injustices? What are the intersections between the field of collective communication practices and housing rights? This working paper, part of the action-research project 'Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos', explores the role that communication and media practices play for housing social movements. It begins by reviewing the existing debates on the relationship between grassroots communication practices and social change. Drawing on the experiences of housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos, it then draws linkages between the communication landscape and housing justice struggles by identifying the **functions** communication practices play for them and proposing three main intersections. It closes by proposing ways forward and key questions to advance a research agenda about grassroots communication practices and housing justice.

Setting the scene: grassroots practices in an unjust communication landscape

The fundamental role that communication practices and infrastructures play in shaping social justice has been a critical theme for academic debate and international frameworks and negotiations for decades. Not only is the 'right to freedom of opinion and expression' recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also by UN agencies such as its Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Development Programme (UNDP) where global communication injustices underpin their work.

In the academic literature, Paulo Freire's seminal work during the 1960s and 1970s was fundamental in shaping the literature on this topic. It is possible to identify several strands of work that have framed grassroots communications in distinctive but related ways, including notions such as:

- Communications for development and social change
- Alternative media
- Radical media
- Civic media
- Civic media literacies
- Emancipatory communication practices, and
- Relational media practices.

This section reviews each of these approaches and their contributions to the understanding of unjust communication landscapes and their political economy.

Communication justice and housing justice

Current literature on housing struggles has paid little attention to the role of communications in the advancements of housing justice. To explore this gap, the paper draws lessons from the experiences of the housing movements: União dos Movimentos de Moradia (UMM) in São Paulo; and Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI), working with the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation in Lagos. Through a series of workshops, we documented and characterised the distinctive communication trajectories and practices of UMM and JEI. Specifically, the paper identifies different **functions** that communication plays for each movement, or in other words, the different purposes of the range of communication and media practices they use. These **functions** include, for example, mobilising and emancipating movement members, building capacities, agency and voice, denouncing violations of housing rights, documenting and supporting paralegal work against forced evictions, or changing narratives about informal settlements.

Looking at these different functions, the paper proposes three main intersections between the communication landscape and these two movements' struggles for housing justice:

- **Communication landscape and the production of housing** related to dynamics of urban data and their implications for land and housing markets, and to the communication challenges behind collective housing initiatives.
- **Communication landscape and the framing of housing narratives** related to the contestation of discriminatory housing discourses and the challenges of revealing usually-ignored voices to dispute often-criminalising narratives.
- **Communication landscape and the mobilisation of housing claims** related to how the media landscape constrains (or enables) the emergence and dissemination of grassroots voices to advocate for particular demands.

Ways forward: researching and supporting housing movements' communication capabilities

The paper concludes by proposing a series of questions that might inform research and action work on this topic:

- What are the existing communication practices of housing social movements?
- What are the functions that those communication practices aim to achieve?
- Who are the audiences that movements need to target to achieve such functions?
- What enabling or disabling factors are conditioning those media practices to reach audiences and achieve these functions?

These questions aim to help us better understand the communication trajectories of social housing movements. Unpacking these trajectories highlights the importance of supporting grassroots communications capabilities and calls for making the media landscapes fairer for their housing priorities.

1

Introduction

In the context of the current and longstanding global housing crisis, grassroots groups and their support networks have played a fundamental role in advocating for housing justice. They expose and resist violations of the right to adequate housing, generate data and knowledge about housing conditions and discrimination, participate in and advocate for policy-making processes, and lead innovative and collective processes of housing production. Underpinning all these activities are the capabilities of grassroots groups to communicate in an effective and meaningful way. Grassroots groups advancing housing rights use communication practices and engage with wider communication actors on an everyday basis. They use a diverse portfolio of communication devices to mobilise and inform their members and the broader public, use information systems to manage and disseminate data, engage with journalists to get housing injustices covered by mainstream and alternative media outlets, and use social media and other communication mechanisms to advocate for specific policy reforms or expose human rights violations. The communications capabilities of grassroots groups play a key role in the advancement of housing justice.

This working paper discusses the role that communication and media practices play for housing social movements. Its reflections are part of a wider research project, 'Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos', which explores the ways in which communication practices expand grassroots capabilities to advance housing justice. The project is addressing this issue through an action-research methodology implemented in partnership with housing social movements in São Paulo (União dos

Movimentos de Moradia, UMM) and Lagos (Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI), and the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation).¹ This involves the implementation and documentation of media workshops for grassroots groups, and a series of exchange and learning experiences between both teams. In this paper, we hope to define more clearly the conceptual landscape and analytical framing that drive this research.

While there is a wealth of literature exploring the relationship between grassroots communication practices and social change, there has been very little emphasis on its use and application in struggles related to housing. Meanwhile, in the debates about grassroots struggles for housing justice, there has been a general lack of recognition of the role communication and media practices play in bringing about change. In this paper we aim to define this gap in knowledge and practice with more precision, while also proposing a series of entry points that will help us address it.

The paper starts by reviewing the existing literature and debates about the relationship between grassroots communication practices and social change. It goes on to focus more specifically on drawing linkages between the communication landscape and housing justice struggles. It does so by identifying the *functions* of communication for housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos. Drawing from the experiences of UMM and JEI, we propose three intersections between communications and the struggles for housing justice. Based on these reflections, we discuss ways forward and key questions to advance a research agenda about grassroots communication practices in relation to housing justice.

¹ The team also includes two academic institutions supporting the local research: Laboratório Justiça Territorial, Federal University of ABC (Brazil), and the Centre for Petroleum, Energy Economics and Law, University of Ibadan (Nigeria).

2

Setting the scene: grassroots practices in an unjust communication landscape

Academic debates have increasingly recognised the fundamental role that communication practices, infrastructures and their wider political economy play in shaping social justice. An important point of departure for this debate has been the recognition of the right to communication as one of the fundamental pillars of the international human rights framework. As Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, everyone has a 'right to freedom of opinion and expression'.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been a key global actor striving to respect, protect and fulfil the right to communication. The MacBride Report (MacBride 1980) marked a milestone by exposing global communication injustices and shedding light on unequal information flows between richer countries (global North, referred to at the time as First World) and poorer countries (global South, referred to as Third World).

At the time, the report was particularly concerned with the growing monopoly of a few transnational communication corporations and their control over the content and infrastructures of communications. It called for the democratisation of communication through: 'national policies, South-to-South communication and informal channels, and a code of ethics for the mass media' (Rodríguez, 2001:7). The report promoted the establishment of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which became an important element for the broader movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, contesting the legacy of imperialism and calling for an equitable global economic and political system.

Several analyses have pointed out that not only were the recommendations from the MacBride Report never taken on board, but its diagnosis of global communication injustices has deepened in several ways. We have witnessed the growing privatisation of communication infrastructure and industries.

Rather than enhancing the scope of national frameworks and processes to regulate the communication landscape, we have seen policies creating a more supportive environment for the operations of transnational communication corporations. On top of that, the emergence of the internet and digital media has sparked a whole new set of communication injustices and complexities. We have seen the rise and domination of a few global corporations, concentrating power within media and communication platforms like Google, News Corp and Facebook (Meta).

These structures have developed a variety of ways to capture and commodify mass data on personal preferences and characteristics. The power of mass data collection among a few communication corporations generates not only new forms of making profit through personal surveillance, but it also enhances their power to police, monitor and manipulate citizens' behaviour and choices. The combination of this concentrated, globalised and unregulated communication landscape and the rise of artificial intelligence has been identified as a key global threat to human security where the:

“abuse of power and political domination can result from the concentration of the control of information and data by technological providers and governments, curtailing liberties, widening inequalities and spreading misinformation that fuels polarization” (UNDP 2022).

It is within this context of growing communication complexities that the practice and debates about grassroots communication have been situated. Since the late 1960s, there have been several approaches to describe and strengthen the ways in which grassroots groups have used communication practices to contest processes of domination and bring about social change.

This field has generated rich diversity of concepts and approaches, which represent different communities of practice in this field.

An often-mentioned point of departure is the work of Paulo Freire through publications such as: ‘Extension or Communication’ (1969); ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ (1970); and ‘Education: The Practice of Freedom’ (1976).

*“Freire proposed communication and dialogue as a critical tool to break through the culture of silence; he thought that people would be able to overcome alienation, isolation, and silence by appropriating their own languages and using this new fluency ‘to speak the world in their own terms’. Freire’s ideal communication – known in Latin America as *comunicación popular**

[popular communication] – transforms people into subjects who acquire their own languages, use those languages to re-signify their reality, and develop ways to move those interpretations of reality in the public sphere” (Rodríguez 2020).

A fundamental characteristic of Freire’s conceptualisation of communication is his understanding of it as dialogue rather than a tool for the diffusion of information. In the context of agrarian reforms during the 1960s, Freire’s writings were contesting the idea of communication that treated farmers as pure objects and receivers of information and knowledge. His focus on communication as dialogue recognised farmers as subjects, co-constructing meaning and agency to transform conditions of oppression. For Freire, “to be dialogical is not to invade. It is not to manipulate. It is not to impose slogans. To be dialogical is to commit to the constant transformation of the reality” (Freire 1977: 43).²

With Freire’s ideas as a starting point, we identify several communities of practice and strands of work that have framed grassroots communications in distinctive but related ways.

One important stream, with direct links to Freire’s work, gravitates around the idea of **communications for development and social change**. Since the 1960s, many authors criticised development initiatives that distribute communication devices with the objective of enabling the diffusion of information and triggering behavioural change. They treated beneficiaries as passive recipients, rather than agents of change (Servaes 2008). As a response, there has been a proliferation of participatory communication methodologies that focus on how the production and dissemination of communication outputs can deepen critical thinking, disrupt a culture of silence, forge bonds of solidarity and unlock the potential for collective action. A key contribution in this field was an in-depth examination of how communications can be a catalyst for empowerment and emancipation in development work (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006).

Another important strand of work in this field has emerged through the idea of **alternative media**. This emerged, not necessarily as a response to development initiatives, but to the wider communication injustice described in the MacBride Report (1980). This work began as a response to the injustices perpetuated by the growing concentration of power in the circulation of information among a few transnational media corporations (TNMC). The movements around alternative media hoped for the democratisation of

²Translated by the authors

communications through the promotion of small-scale media outlets controlled by grassroots groups, collectives and social movements. The transformative potential of alternative media would emerge at a moment when enough small-scale and diverse media outlets would generate a tipping point within national communication systems, rebalancing power away from hegemonic corporate interests, towards decentralised and democratic communication infrastructures.

However, this dichotomy between alternative, small and liberatory media vis-à-vis mass, big and oppressive media, did not necessarily capture the complexities and diversities within the different spaces and structures of media practice. Since then, several authors have begun to conceptualise media practices in less binary ways, focusing on the subversive and emancipatory potential within different sites and agents of media production. Downing's work from the 1980s on **radical media** is often cited as a key contribution in this respect. Drawing on feminist anarchism, radical media brought to the forefront the liberatory potential of grassroots media practices to disrupt current structures of domination. Following on from this, more recent work has begun to focus more explicitly on the media **practices** of the oppressed and marginalised (Stephansen and Treré 2020), rather than the media **structures** that are created.

It is within this context that Rodríguez proposed the notion of **citizens' media**. She draws strongly on Mouffe's (1992) work on radical democracy, which approaches citizenship as something to be constructed and claimed through everyday political practices, rather than by being granted a legal status. From there, Rodríguez uses citizens' media to imply:

“first, that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible” (Rodríguez 2001:20).

Citizens' media and citizens' communication have become a burgeoning area of work, describing and influencing practices in the global North and South. In a 2009 special issue of *Development in Practice*, for example, this notion was used to identify connections between overlapping debates on mainstream development and alternative media, understanding that citizens' media “contributes to processes of social and cultural construction, redefining norms and power relations that exclude people” (Pettit et al. 2009: 443).

Another recent line of work focuses on the exploration of communication and digital technologies and practices to participate in civic life. The notion of **civic media** has been defined as “the technologies, designs, and practices that produce and reproduce the sense of being in the world with others toward common good” (Gordon and Mihailidis 2016: 2). The Center for Future Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) used this term in 2007 as a critique of the ways in which the media had negatively influenced civic engagement in the United States. The notion of civic media was mobilised to carve a space to imagine the use of communications technology that generated positive societal outcomes. Since then, the term has been used to define various and diverse forms of civic engagement, from advocacy journalism to e-government. According to Gordon and Mihailidis: “its power lies in the potential to identify civic communities that form around the production or use of media technologies” (2016:3).

A meaningful methodological and theoretical development in this literature has been the focus on **civic media literacies**. Mihailidis (2019) has shed light on the pedagogies of civic media, emphasising how civic media literacy can enhance people's capacity to act, participate in civic life and advocate for rights. Mihailidis elaborates on what he calls ‘constructs’ of media literacy initiatives that shape literacies: caring, critical consciousness, imagination, persistence and emancipation (see Table 1). The notion of media literacy has also been used in urban debates by international agencies such as UNESCO, through the development of a global framework of ‘Media and Information Literate Cities’ (UNESCO 2019).

Looking at media practices, Stefania Milan's (2013, 2016) work on **emancipatory communication practices** re-emphasises the importance of civic media initiatives to address media-related injustices. Milan makes the connection between struggles against injustices in the media landscape and the responses to other inequalities in society. She calls for actions that promote more democratic and emancipatory communication infrastructures, as well as empowering relations and contents. Under the wider framing of communicative justice, Milan states:

“In times of aggressive corporatization, increasing enclosure of communication spaces, and blanket surveillance, emancipatory communication practices appear to be particularly suited to offer concrete alternatives to activists and citizens alike” (2016: 12).

Table 1 Constructs of civic media literacy

CONSTRUCT	IMPLICATION TO CIVIC MEDIA LITERACY
Caring	“Media literacies that embrace caring ethics establish the need to focus on bringing communities together in receptivity, relatedness, and where we care for and care with” (Mihailidis 2019:110).
Critical consciousness	Drawing on Freire, hooks and Dewey, “civic media literacies embrace transgression, where media critique, creation, reflection, and action work to subvert power, and to reinvent the future through <i>conscientização</i> ” (Mihailidis 2019: 113).
Imagination	“Civic media literacies embrace civic imaginary to design interventions that focus on providing the creative space to explore alternative realities through cultural icons that can connect, subvert and inspire” (Mihailidis 2019: 114).
Persistence	Civic media literacies develop persistent mindsets which “approach sustained and long-term engagement with issues over time and through various platforms and modalities. They reject transactional approaches to media literacies, in favor of developing pathways that embrace complexity, respond to failure and setback, and develop gritty dispositions in young people” (Mihailidis 2019: 116).
Emancipation	Relating to the work of Milan (2013) on emancipatory communication practice, civic media literacy interventions “interrogate powerful media institutions and structures, negotiate the boundaries of opting in to digital networks, and when possible circumnavigates restrictive technologies and platforms” (Mihailidis 2019: 117)

Source: Authors, drawing from Mihailidis (2019: 110-118).

Like Milan, various authors have explored the role that the transformations in media and communication practices have played in shaping social movements. Castells (2015), whose work on grassroots and urban social movements has been extremely influential since the early 1980s, outlines the opportunities to contest power imbalances created by the “transformations in communication technologies in the digital age”. Castells focuses particularly on the rise of what he calls mass self-communication, brought about by the internet and wireless networks as platforms of digital communication, and argues that: “Mass self-communication provides the technological platform for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor, be it individual or collective, vis-à-vis the institutions of society” (2015: 7).

Della Porta (2013) builds on this point by arguing that these developments have allowed social movements to break down the boundaries between news production and news consumption. Mattoni (2013) analyses precisely these communication practices of social movements that have focused on the interactions between media technologies, media outlets and media professionals. Mattoni argues that it is possible to define these **relational media practices** according to four main categories:

- *adaptive* might involve strategic engagement with journalists of mainstream media

- *contentious* might involve subversive engagement with events and activities, gaining visibility through disruptive encounters
- *abstaining* may be deciding not to inform or ignore mainstream media about their activities; and
- *alternative* may include engagement with non-mainstream media outlets and platforms.

This type of categorisation has been helpful in understanding and analysing the range of communication and media practices by social movements, beyond the dichotomy between alternative versus mainstream media. This literature highlights the ways that media-related forms of contestation are enabling social movements to inhabit and productively occupy the spaces in between the margins and the mainstream. As argued by Ruiz (2014):

“Such ‘in the middle’ spaces are full of exciting and unexpected political possibilities. However, the price of such a productively entangled position is that everything is in a state of unstable and perpetual renegotiation. Consequently one is denied the comfort of certainty” (2014: 178).

3

Communication justice and housing justice

How do these debates on the struggles against media- and communication-related injustices connect with housing injustices? What are the intersections between the fields of collective communication practices and housing rights? Elsewhere, we have discussed what we see as the remit of a housing justice agenda, calling for policies and practices that are anti-discriminatory and radically democratic, that provide an infrastructure for more just, sustainable and caring cities, and that expand housing futures (Cociña and Frediani 2024a).

Also, as part of this action–research project, our partners have described the housing challenges in the context of Lagos (Sesan 2023) and São Paulo (Rodrigues, Barbosa and Gonsales 2024). It is not within the scope of this working paper to reproduce such debates, but rather to recognise that in the current literature around housing struggles there has been little emphasis on the role of communications in the advancement of housing justice. This is also the case within policy agendas, debates, and commitments around the right to adequate housing.

In this reflection, we start to articulate how the practices, relations and characteristics of the existing media landscape condition the struggle for fairer, inclusive and equitable housing systems. These intersections emerge from our reading of the unjust media landscape discussed in the previous section, along with an initial

mapping of communication practices developed with UMM and JEI in São Paulo and Lagos respectively, which we discuss below.

UMM is an alliance of housing movements in greater São Paulo that for more than 35 years has mobilised grassroots groups to promote collective self-managed housing, social mobilisation and advocacy work, as part of a national housing movement that coordinates initiatives from different parts of Brazil.

JEI is a nongovernmental organisation in Nigeria that has worked directly for more than a decade with the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation. It has provided support through paralegal services to stop evictions, strategic advocacy, and strengthening the Federation's media team through the 'Media4Change' initiative.

As part of the 'Civic media for housing rights' project, the wider teams of UMM and JEI met at a series of workshops in February and April 2023 to discuss the different ways in which their housing movements have used communication and media practices to advance housing struggles. These workshops included the development of a historical timeline in which we identified the ways in which these practices have transformed over time and have been responsive to changing contexts (Cociña and Frediani 2024b).³ We also discussed a series of common questions to

³ A description of the different communication practices of both movements can be found at www.iied.org/22521iied

characterise the distinctive communication trajectories of UMM and JEI. These included: What are the current communication practices of the movement? Who is part of them? What are the targets or audiences of such practices and their outputs? What does each movement use their specific media practices for? What role do communication practices play in their struggle for housing rights? And what are the challenges and opportunities they have faced when these practices have been mobilised?

Through this series of open questions, we aimed to explore together the different **functions** of communication for each movement. We used the term ‘function’ as a way to describe the different purposes of the range of communication and media practices utilised by each movement. We clustered the functions identified by each movement in Table 2 below.

Looking closely at these different functions, we argue that there are at least three distinctive spheres or intersections between the communication landscape and these two movements’ struggles for housing justice. These intersections are in the:

- processes of production of housing solutions
- framing of housing narratives and questions
- mobilisations of grassroots groups and their housing demands.

In what follows, we expand on each of them and their implications beyond these two organisations, as we believe that recognising these three intersections is a useful tool for housing movements more broadly.

3.1 Communication landscape and the production of housing

Housing movements are constantly mobilising to transform and influence the ways in which the **production of housing** is shaped, and often their communication practices are ultimately targeting housing production systems. Broadly speaking, the production of housing is led by a combination of actions by the state (in its different levels and sectors), the market, and the efforts of groups and individuals who are constantly seeking solutions for their housing needs and aspirations. Inevitably, the current media landscape intersects these processes in different ways, particularly manifested in two issues: in urban data and its implication for land and housing markets; and in communication challenges related to the level of organisation required for collective housing initiatives and self-management.

The management of data about property and land in cities has a direct impact on processes of housing speculation. There is growing research demonstrating how the commodification of data about cities, and its control by a few powerful digital monopolies, is exacerbating inequalities. This process is deepening the uneven landscape of who has access to information about urban dynamics, compromising accountability and transparency of urban governance (Shaw and Graham 2017). Further research is needed in this area. It is crucial to understand better the connections between current trends associated with the production, management of and access to urban data, on the one hand, and the dynamics of housing markets on the other.

Table 2 Functions of communication of two social movements

UMM, SÃO PAULO	JEI, LAGOS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to mobilise and emancipate movement members and non-organised people ▪ to self-educate and strengthen capacities of movement members ▪ to disseminate and give visibility to the actions of the movement, both within its membership, and with allies and wider society ▪ to denounce violations of housing rights ▪ to propose alternative and collective housing solutions and policies ▪ to implement self-managed housing initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to organise, building solidarity and strength in communities, communicating horizontally ▪ to build capacities, agency and voice ▪ to educate and empower community members ▪ to document and support paralegal work against forced evictions ▪ to stop evictions and human rights violations ▪ to advocate and create awareness about slums across wider society ▪ to change narratives about informal settlements and showcase local voices ▪ to call for action and policy change

Source: Authors, in collaboration with UMM and JEI.

Processes such as housing and land financialisation and commodification (Rolnik 2019), and the unquestionable role of housing markets in capital circulation and accumulation (Aalbers and Christophers 2014), make these challenges even greater.

Beyond the use and production of data, there is a second way in which the media landscape intersects housing production. When social movements, collectives or other forms of organised civil society and allies self-manage the production of housing projects, the communication landscape has a direct impact. Mapping the communication practices of housing movements in Lagos and São Paulo demonstrated how they are used to mobilise and organise members of housing projects, design and implement housing strategies, and to call for action both inside and outside the movement. These practices use a range of tools such as WhatsApp groups, pamphlets, in-person meetings, Facebook groups.

Unfair access and control of communication tools can directly influence grassroots capacity to implement these activities, affecting their capacity to self-organise and be empowered to act and make informed decisions. Affordability and accessibility of mobile data is a big issue here. Likewise, the communication landscape can affect the movements' ability to access, produce and share reliable information and resources in the process of housing production. Movements in São Paulo, for example, reported the increasing challenge of creating trusted information channels for their members in the context of the proliferation of 'fake news' and the overwhelming amount of competing information. The cohesion of collective processes of housing production depends on robust networks based on trust, and the platforms and channels offered by the media landscape play a crucial role in facilitating or hindering such processes.

3.2 Communication landscape and the framing of housing narratives

Changing narratives about the ways in which housing is framed and produced is one of the primary goals of housing social movements. By disseminating alternative housing framings, revealing usually-ignored voices, and highlighting systemic injustices, housing movements are constantly challenging official narratives and proposing other approaches and solutions. In these efforts, the communication landscape has an important role in **framing housing narratives and questions**. The way in which dominant media outlets portray housing discourses has direct implications for grassroots claims for housing justice.

Dominant media actors have often played an active role in disseminating discriminatory housing narratives. This translates, more notably, into systematically depicting informal settlement dwellers as 'illegal invaders of land', or using similar discriminatory labels. Media tends to criminalise housing social movements and informal housing initiatives, and to portray areas in which there is housing deprivation as the source of other urban and social problems. When portraying housing problems in a more empathic way, the media tends to treat housing deprivation as an individual, isolated problem, rather than a symptom of broader systemic issues. Likewise, social movements and leaders are often portrayed as opportunistic and/or exploitative.

These tensions take a particularly heavy toll when events that call for media attention take place. Dramatic examples of this have been deadly fires in occupied vacant buildings in central São Paulo and Johannesburg, in 2018 and 2023 respectively. In the case of the São Paulo fire, which left 150 families homeless, the media coverage tended to criticise community leaders and social movements, reinforcing ideas such as 'invasion' over 'occupation' (Victor, Chiachiri and Gonsales 2019). In the case of Johannesburg, media played an important role in the official shift of blame for the tragedy onto those NGOs that had helped people to find shelter in the building (SERI 2023).

Housing movements utilise collective media practices to challenge such discriminatory framings, through continuous efforts to generate grounded content for legal action, denounce housing violations, disseminate alternative stories that highlight the efforts of social movements, and mobilise actors around locally-produced data. However, the dynamics that explain the dominant narratives they are trying to challenge are multiple and complex. At times these are led by the value systems of communication professionals, or by dynamics associated with the media industry. But often they are also the result of local elites using their control and influence over media and communication outlets to promote certain narratives. This means that any call for advancing the claims of those experiencing housing injustices needs a way to democratise existing communication landscapes.

3.3 Communication landscape and the mobilisation of housing claims

In this context of mis- and mal-recognition of housing struggles, housing social movements have embedded a range of collective communication practices for **mobilising and audiencing housing demands**.

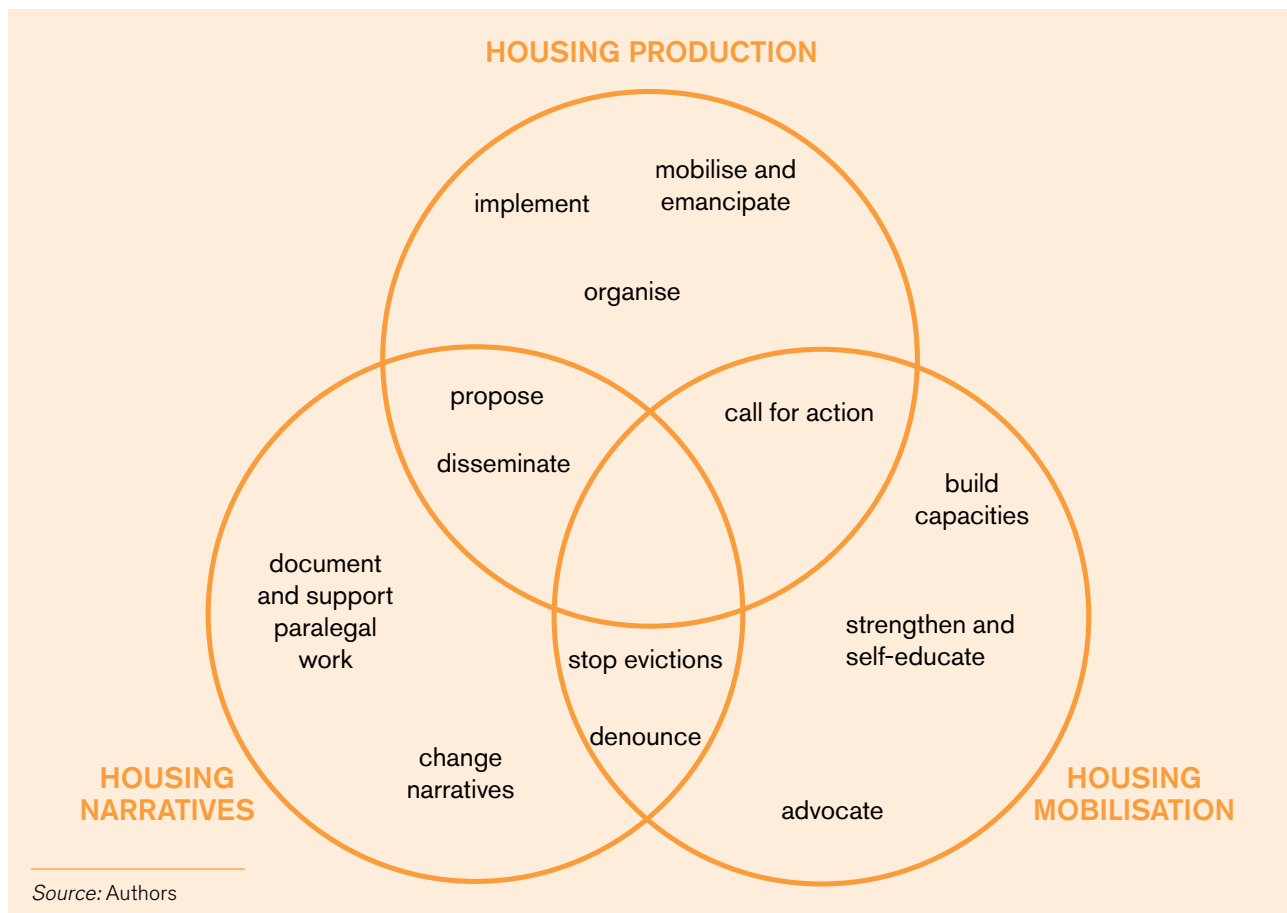
These efforts are inevitably shaped by the existing unequal media landscape, which constrains or allows the emergence and dissemination of grassroots voices to advance housing justice. From pamphlets to digital cards, from newspapers to short videos, from letters to social media campaigns, from footage used in court to data collection used in publications, housing social movements have historically used a diverse portfolio of communication practices to create awareness for their demands — sometimes in the margins of the dominant media landscape.

These efforts have at least two dimensions. One has to do with strengthening the mobilisation capacity inside the movements, utilising media practices to self-educate and call for internal coordination, empowering and mobilisation. This also has implications in shifting the agents of media production, strengthening the capacities of those experiencing housing deprivation to create media content and tell their stories using their own voice. The second dimension relates to the use of media practices to target specific actors and advocate for demands which might relate to the promotion of policy and planning reform, or to the opposition and resistance to legal measures, eviction threats or housing rights violations.

The growth of digital communication infrastructure and technologies, accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has meant that the use of digital technologies and platforms has become a critical component in how housing social movements mobilise and communicate their demands and struggles. Campaigns such as ‘Zero Eviction’ (*Despejo Zero*) led by housing movements in Brazil during the pandemic, or the #CoronaDiaries digital campaign developed by JEI and the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation, are examples of resourcefulness in the digital space during the lockdowns and other COVID-19 restrictions.

Importantly, however, the research in Lagos and São Paulo has demonstrated the importance of combining online with offline activities for capacity-building efforts and, more specifically, the vital role of protests, demonstrations and political linkages for making demands visible. The reliance on digital spaces has also brought political challenges and new risks, related, for instance, to surveillance risk, exposure of social movements leaders and data ownership. There is still very little documentation and reflection on how this digital growth has impacted on their capabilities to organise, share information and advance their housing agendas.

Figure 1 Intersection of housing movements’ struggles and collective communication functions



4

Ways forward: researching and supporting housing movements' communication capabilities

To conclude, considering the different issues that these two cases have highlighted, we propose a series of questions that might inform research and effective actions on this topic, aiming to facilitate collective processes of documentation and reflection about the role of communication practices to advance housing rights. These are organised around four issues that, so far, have proved to be useful entry points for investigating collective aspirations and motivations for using communication practices in the context of contesting violations of housing rights and advancing housing justice.

The first question relates to identifying and documenting the diverse communication practices of movements, to create an inventory of practices to better understand the different processes of production and mediation.

Second, a key question relates to what we have referred to in this paper as the 'functions' of communication practices.⁴ These refer to the set of communication aspirations and the roles that communication plays in the advancement of housing justice for these movements.

⁴For a more in-depth reflection about the notion of 'Functions' and 'functionings', see Frediani's (2021) application of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach in cities.

Third, while identifying the practices and their functions, it has been important to raise questions around the intended audiences. Researching who these are for housing social movements' communication practices, and to what extent they are being reached has been key to informing and learning from their communication activities.

Finally, a key set of questions focuses on examining the factors and conditions that shape the communication practices of housing social movements. These factors might be supportive, but they can also create obstacles. In this sense, this 'enabling environment' includes characteristics of the communication, housing and wider social–political landscapes within which housing social movements are operating. We believe it is crucial to identify relevant policy, regulations, formal and informal norms, and power relations that have shaped these landscapes. The focus on enabling environments means looking at processes and factors that have created positive incentives, as well as highlighting the bottlenecks, the norms and regulations that have created challenges, and asymmetries of power.

The questions for understanding these communication functions, practices, audiences and enabling environments are summarised below. Together, they aim to provide entry points to better grasp the communication capabilities of housing social movements, and explore the role that they are playing to advance housing justice.

- **What are the existing communication practices of housing social movements?** For example: producing videos, using WhatsApp groups, creating pamphlets, cards in Instagram, meeting journalists, in-person workshops, street protests, online campaigns.

- **What are the functions that those communication practices aim to achieve?**

For example: empowering, disseminating projects, changing narratives, influencing policies, resisting evictions.

- **Who are the audiences that movements need to target to achieve such functions?**

For example, movement members, policymakers, wider society, authorities, judges, allies.

- **What enabling or disabling factors are conditioning those media practices to reach audiences and achieve functions?**

For example, lack of resources, contacts in media outlets, political cycles, technical challenges, lack of capacities, access to technology.

As a final observation, the focus on enabling and disabling factors calls for special attention to the ways in which the dynamics of wider communication landscapes, like those we have described in this paper, affect movements' capabilities. As discussed previously, communication practices are key for the activities of housing social movements and understanding the wider dynamics that constrain or strengthen them is a fundamental task.

Understanding the communication trajectories of housing social movements highlights the need for supporting such grassroots capabilities and for making policy and media landscapes fairer for their housing priorities. It also calls for expanding the scope of housing justice debates, calling for more research, funding and policies that explore the multiple factors that are conditioning housing movements' communication capabilities.

Abbreviations

JEI	Justice & Empowerment Initiatives
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NWICO	New World Information and Communication Order
TNMC	Transnational media corporations
UMM	União dos Movimentos de Moradia
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Related reading

Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos. Project page. www.iied.org/civic-media-for-housing-rights-lessons-struggles-against-evictions-sao-paulo-lagos

Cociña, C and Frediani, A A (2024) Media trajectories: a brief introduction to the communication practices of housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos. Case study. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22521iied

Cociña, C and Frediani, A A (2024) Towards housing justice. Four propositions to transform policy and practice. Issue paper. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22321iied

Cociña, C and Frediani, A A (2024) São Paulo: How social movements are advancing housing rights while decarbonising the city. Article. IIED, London. www.iied.org/sao-paulo-how-social-movements-are-advancing-housing-rights-while-decarbonising-city

Cociña, C and Frediani, A A (2024) Defining housing justice: an audiovisual exchange of struggle and action. Insight. IIED, London. www.iied.org/defining-housing-justice-audiovisual-exchange-struggle-action

Sesan, T (2023) Defending housing rights in Lagos. A historical perspective on state-citizen contestations and emerging opportunities for housing policy reform. Working paper. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22206iied

References

- Aalbers, M and Christophers, B (2014) Centring Housing in Political Economy. *Housing, Theory and Society* 31(4), 373–394. doi:10.1080/14036096.2014.947082.
- Castells, C (2015) *Networks of outrage and hope: social movements in the internet age*. Second edition. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Cociña, C and Frediani, A A (2024a) Towards housing justice. Four propositions to transform policy and practice. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22321iied
- Cociña, C and Frediani, A A (2024b). Media trajectories: a brief introduction to the communication practices of housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22521iied
- della Porta, D (2013) Bridging research on democracy, social movements and communication. In Cammaerts, B, Mattoni, A and McCurdy, P (eds). *Mediation and Protest Movements*. Intellect, Bristol.
- Downing, J D H (2001) *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. Sage, London.
- Frediani, A A (2021) *Cities for Human Development. A Capability Approach to City-Making*. Practical Action Publishing, Rugby (UK).
- Freire, P (1969) *Extensão ou comunicação?* (7th Edition). Paz e Terra, Rio de Janeiro.
- Freire, P (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum, New York.
- Freire, P (1976) *Education: the practice of freedom*. Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, London.
- Gordon, E and Mihailidis, P (2016) The Big Picture. In: Gordon, E and Mihailidis, P (eds) *Civic Media: Technology, Design and Practice* 1–26 MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Gumucio-Dagron, A and Tufte, T (2006) *Communication for Social Change. Anthology: Historical and Contemporary Readings*. Communication for Social Change Consortium Inc, New Jersey.
- MacBride, S (ed) (1980) *Many voices, one world: towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order*. International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. UNESCO, London.
- Mattoni, A (2013) Repertoires of communication in social movement processes. In: Cammaerts, B, Mattoni, A and McCurdy, P (eds.) 2 (39–56) *Mediation and Protest Movements*. Intellect, Bristol.
- Mihailidis, P (2019) *Civic Media Literacies: Re-imagining human connection in an age of digital abundance*. Routledge, London.
- Milan, S (2013) *Social Movements and their technologies: wiring social change*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Milan, S (2016) *Liberated Technology: Inside Emancipatory Communication Activism*. In: Gordon, E. and Mihailidis, P (eds) *Civic Media: Technology, Design and Practice* (4) 107–124. MIT Press Cambridge, MA.
- Mouffe, C (ed) (1992) *Dimensions of radical democracy: pluralism, citizenship, community*. Verso, London.
- Pettit, J, Salazar, J F and Dagron, A G (2009) Citizens' media and communication. *Development in Practice* 19(4-5), 443-452. doi:10.1080/09614520902866462.
- Rodrigues, E, Barbosa, BR, Gonsales, TA (2024) *Emergência habitacional em São Paulo: Uma análise da crise de moradia sob a perspectiva da produção autogestionária e da luta contra despejos e remoções forçadas*. IIED, London.
- Rodríguez, C (2001) *Fissures in the Mediascape: an International Study of Citizens' Media*. Cresskill, Hampton Press archive.org/details/fissuresinmedias0000rodr
- Rodríguez, C (2020) Part I: Introduction. In: Stephansen H C and Treré, E (eds). *Citizen Media and Practice: Currents, Connections, Challenges* 37–41. Routledge, Abingdon. www.tinyurl.com/mun9nncv
- Rolnik, R (2019) *Urban Warfare: Housing under the Empire of Finance*. Verso, London.
- Ruiz, P (2014) *Articulating Dissent: Protest and the public sphere*. Pluto Press, London.
- Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) (31 August 2023) *City of Johannesburg's wake up call: fire at Usindiso Shelter for Women and Children*. Press statement.
- Servaes, J (2008) Introduction. In: Servaes, J (ed) *Communication for Development and Social Change* 14–30. Sage, London.

Sesan, T (2023) Defending housing rights in Lagos. A historical perspective on state-citizen contestations and emerging opportunities for housing policy reform. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22206iied

Shaw, J and Graham, M (2017) An informational right to the city? Code, Content, Control and the Urbanization of Information. *Antipode* 49(4) 907–927. [fonlinelibrary. doi:10.1111/anti.12312](https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12312).

Stephansen, H C and Treré, E (2020) Practice what you preach? Currents, connections, and challenges in theorizing citizen media and practice. In: Stephansen, H C and Treré, E (eds) *Citizen Media and Practice: Currents, Connections, Challenges (1)*1–34. Routledge, Abingdon.

UNESCO (2019) Global Framework for Media and Information Literacy Cities (MIL Cities). www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/05/global_

[framework_for_mil_cities.pdf www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy/mil-cities](http://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy/mil-cities)

UNDP (2022) New threats to human security in the Anthropocene: Demanding greater solidarity. *Special Report of the Human Development Report Office* 22–23. hs.hdr.undp.org/pdf/srhs2022.pdf

Victor, C, Chiachiri, R, and Gonsales, T (2019) Nós na perspectiva deles – a tragédia do Paissandu e a representação midiática dos movimentos de moradia em São Paulo. *Logos*, 26(1) www.e-publicacoes.uerj.br/logos/article/view/36182

This paper discusses the role that communication and media practices play for housing social movements, exploring the intersections between unjust communication landscapes and the struggles for housing justice. It is part of a wider research project, 'Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos'. These reflections draw on the experiences of housing social movements of these two cities to explore the ways in which communication practices expand grassroots capabilities to advance housing justice.

IIED is a policy and action research organisation. We promote sustainable development to improve livelihoods and protect the environments on which these livelihoods are built. We specialise in linking local priorities to global challenges. IIED is based in London and works in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and the Pacific, with some of the world's most vulnerable people. We work with them to strengthen their voice in the decision-making arenas that affect them — from village councils to international conventions.



International Institute for Environment and Development
Third Floor, 235 High Holborn, London WC1V 7DN, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

This work was supported by the the Arts and Humanities
Research Council (grant number AH/W005980)



Knowledge
Products