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## Border Devices, Digital Technologies, and Sovereignty: A Reading of *Operação Acolhida* as Part of a Disinformation Ecosystem

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## Abstract

Brazil receives Venezuelan migrants through *Operação Acolhida* (OPA) — meaning Welcome Operation — a program that provides documentation, medical screening, and shelter to them. This article analyzes OPA based on three premises: 1) its structuration as a border device that inserts "bare life" into another bios: the media or virtual bios (Sodré, 2021); 2) the relation between national sovereignty and the use of digital technologies to control and datify migrants and; 3) its legitimization as a "model policy" based on practices of disinformation and consensus-building. The analysis, built on ethnographic fieldwork and documents obtained via the Brazilian Law of Access to Information (LAI), shows how the reiteration of partial statements and the mobilization of fear, combined with a reduction in governmental action through the Brazilian Armed Forces and NGOs, have accentuated the precariousness of migrants' lives.

### Keywords

Operação Acolhida; Border; Disinformation; Surveillance; Sovereignty.

## Introduction

This article is the result of the research project "Frontiers of Mobility in Contemporary Brazil: Communication and Migrant Experience in the Securitization of Reception and Social Integration within the Scope of *Operação Acolhida*", funded by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), within the scope of the Universal Notice, Call CNPq/MCTI/FNDCT No 18/2021, in partnership with the Federal Universities of Pernambuco (UFPE) and Roraima (UFRR), in Brazil.

The research project involved two rounds of fieldwork, the first in the state of Roraima, in September 2022, and the second in the Brazilian capital Brasília, in December 2023. In Roraima, we were in the state's capital Boa Vista and Pacaraima, a town near to the Venezuelan border, where we visited *Operação Acolhida*'s shelters and Venezuelan migrants' occupations on collective land.

In Brasília, we interviewed active managers and actors involved in the formulation of this operation. Participants included representatives from the ministries of Defense, Justice, Human Rights and Citizenship, Native Peoples, Development and Social Assistance, Family, and Fight Against Hunger, along with local officials from the United Nations (UN), IOM, and UNHCR. The objective was to understand the guidelines that defined and currently govern a migrant reception model previously unseen in Brazil, but with characteristics similar to refugee camps conceived in Europe and implemented in countries as diverse as Jordan and Kenya<sup>1</sup>.

According to a release from the Ministry of Defense, "*Operação Acolhida* — meaning Welcome Operation — began in February 2018 as a result of the disorderly and unpredictable influx of migrants from the crisis in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, which caused a state of emergency in the state of Roraima"<sup>2</sup>. According to the official text, OPA is "executed with coordination and synergy between the military component" (called the Humanitarian Logistics Task Force - FT Log Hum), and roughly "*120 civilian agencies and institutions*" (emphasis added), which include "Governmental Agencies at the federal, state and municipal levels; International Organizations (IOs); Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and civil society". The official release also highlights the success of this civic-military cooperation, whose actions, described as harmonious, "have brought dignity and hope to thousands of Venezuelans, which has earned national and international recognition in the context of Humanitarian Aid Operations" (Brazil, 2022).

In this context, the joint research by the Federal Universities of Pernambuco (UFPE) and Roraima (UFRR) worked with an extended concept of border, discussed the rapprochement between military management and humanitarian economics and, above all, listened to groups of migrants and refugees about their experiences with OPA. Our analysis of *Operação Acolhida* arises from intertwining of two sets of findings: 1) the ambiguity between control and migrant reception, and between the defense of rights and repression; and 2) the partnership among digital technologies, securitization, the financial economy, and the humanitarian economy. Furthermore, this research makes a theoretical contribution by employing Sodr  s (2014) concept of *bios* virtual (media bios) to problematize the operation's structure.

This paper analyzes the configuration of *Operação Acolhida*, drawing on interview transcripts, ethnographic fieldwork, and documents obtained via the Brazilian Law of Access to Information (LAI). Our analysis is structured around three core premises:

First, we examine OPA's structuration as a border device that separates "bare life" to be inserted into another bios: the media or virtual bios (Sodr  , 2021, p. 113);

Second, we investigate its use of digital technologies to control, select, and datify migrants, exploring the implications of this process for national sovereignty;

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1 Retrieved Oct. 28, 2024 from <https://www.unhcr.org/jo/refugee-camps>; <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/da-daab-refugee-complex>.

2 Retrieved Aug. 4, 2023 from <https://www.gov.br/defesa/pt-br/assuntos/exercicios-e-operacoes/acoes-humanitarias/operacao-acolhida>.

Finally, we problematize its legitimization as a "model policy." This legitimization is based on disinformation practices (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017; Soares et al., 2021; Albuquerque, 2022) and a consensus-building strategy that includes: the reiteration of partial statements, the denial and/or minimization of problems, and the mobilization of fear. These phenomena target vulnerable migrants who are exposed to an ecosystem of false discourses circulating in both local media and social networks.

## Presentation of *Operação Acolhida*

According to *Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela* (R4V), in May 2024, there were 7.7 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees scattered around the world, 6.6 million of them living in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>3</sup>. Between January 2017 and April 2024, Brazil registered more than 1 million entries of Venezuelans, and approximately half of these migrants remain in the country<sup>4</sup>.

From February 2018, the Brazilian federal government has been dealing with the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population through *Operação Acolhida* (OPA), created in the state of Roraima and later replied throughout Brazil as a part of a relocation strategy<sup>5</sup>. The action has been carried out by the Brazilian Army, the local offices of United Nations (UN), UNHCR and IOM, and around 120 civilian institutions, including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Governmental Agencies responsible for the reception of Venezuelans at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

*Operação Acolhida's* scope ranges from reception, documentation, medical screening, and shelter of migrants to relocation of individuals and families "to various municipalities in search of new life opportunities and socio-economic inclusion"<sup>6</sup>. According to estimations, 140,000 Venezuelans have passed through this program and the same number have been allocated in 1,061 municipalities across the five Brazilian regions<sup>7</sup>.

In the border town of Pacaraima and the Roraima State's capital Boa Vista, OPA also maintains several facilities, such as shelters, transit lodgings, and relocation and screening posts (called Ptrig), where migrants are registered, referred to health and social assistance services, have their migratory status regularized, and receive crucial identification documents such as ID (RNM), tax ID (CPF) and work permits, among others.

It is important to note that the militarization of OPA has been criticized for contributing to the criminalization and dehumanization of migrants<sup>8</sup>, framing them as a problem to be managed by militarized forces. Yet, at the same time, the action has become known as a humanitarian "model policy" or even a "case study in success"<sup>9</sup>, garnering praise from the media and UN agencies, including the UNHCR High

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3 Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024 from <https://www.r4v.info/en/document/r4v-latin-america-and-caribbean-venezuelan-refugees-and-migrants-region-may-2024>.

4 Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024 from [https://brazil.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11496/files/documents/2024-06/informe\\_migracao-venezuelana\\_jan17-abr24.pdf](https://brazil.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11496/files/documents/2024-06/informe_migracao-venezuelana_jan17-abr24.pdf).

5 It is the voluntary relocation of migrants to the other states of Brazil through modalities such as leaving shelters in Roraima to facilities in one of the destination cities; family reunification; social reunion; and relocation with flagged job vacancy.

6 Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024 from <https://www.gov.br/mds/pt-br/acoes-e-programas/operacao-acolhida>.

7 Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024 from [https://brazil.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11496/files/documents/2024-10/informe\\_deslocamentosassistidosdevenezuelanos\\_set24.pdf](https://brazil.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11496/files/documents/2024-10/informe_deslocamentosassistidosdevenezuelanos_set24.pdf).

8 Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024 from <https://www.intercept.com.br/2021/07/23/deportacao-trabalho-escravo-governo-exercito-migrantes-desastre-humanitario/>.

9 This expression was used by Niusarete Margarida de Lima, Coordinator of Reception Services of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MDS), in a lecture available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2MNWtm-0OM&t=11785s>. Accessed on October 30, 2024.

Commissioner<sup>10</sup>.

Throughout its implementation, Operation Welcome has provided significant assistance in terms of the volume of migrants served. These figures legitimize the ideal of promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration<sup>11</sup>, while have helped to consolidate Brazil's international image as a hospitable and supportive nation.

Still, the rhetoric of welcoming and protecting the rights of migrants adopted by the official discourse, along with the dissemination of statistics<sup>12</sup> as proof of effectiveness — in short, the positive version propagated by the governmental agencies — says little about the experience of their target public, from a qualitative point of view. Listening to migrants helps to reveal the promising nature of the responses provided<sup>13</sup>. It demonstrates how both shelters and relocation have been instruments that promote the degradation of people's lives by exposing them to situations of semi-confinement, restricted autonomy, impoverishment, and labor exploitation (Vasconcelos, 2021; Ceja, 2024).

However, the constant silencing of criticism and complaints (Vasconcelos, 2021) has even resulted in calls to replicate the model. The researchers witnessed these calls on at least two separate occasions: the first, during an interview at the Ministry of Defense (on December 7, 2023), and the second, during an event at the Observatory of International Migration, OBMigra (on December 8, 2023). At these events, federal government agents suggested that OPA could be considered as a "public policy case" for other vulnerable populations, like the large and concentrated encampments of crack cocaine users in São Paulo — the so-called Cracolândia, or Crackland — for example. This mention refers to the relocation of migrants for jobs linked to agribusiness. In this case, OPA would be an intermediary (Guimarães, 2008; Chaves, 2021, Pereira et al., 2022).

Considering this ambiguity, we sought to understand the experiences of reception from the perspective of the actors involved — migrants, humanitarian workers, and authorities — in parallel to the success stories. In this sense, an in-depth qualitative approach was necessary.

## Methodological Procedures

This work is grounded in ethnographic techniques, following the approach of Knowles (2017), who argues that interviews with migrants should be conducted close to their daily routines and must consider their enduring connections to personal ties left behind in their places of origin. From this perspective, framing the personal circumstances that lead to migration allows us to reveal micro-connections and reinsert them into a broader social context to better understand the migration process.

In September 2022, we conducted fieldwork in Roraima focused on the experiences of migrants who had passed through OPA's facilities, both in the border town of Pacaraima and in the capital Boa Vista. The investigation comprised observations and interviews conducted both in OPA's facilities — including Indigenous and non-Indigenous shelters, screening posts (called Ptrig), and transit lodgings — and on collective land managed by migrants on the outskirts of Boa Vista, such as in the communities of Terra

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10 Retrieved April 29, 2024 from <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2019/08/1683841#:~:text=Grandi%20destacou%20a%20Opera%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20Acolhida,pol%C3%ADtica%20dentro%20da%20pr%C3%B3pria%20Venezuela%E2%80%9D>.

11 These are the principles ruling the Global Compact for Migration approved in 2016 at the UN General Assembly. Available at: <https://brazil.iom.int/pt-br/pacto-global-para-uma-migracao-segura-ordenada-e-regular>. Accessed on October 30, 2024.

12 As an example, see <https://brazil.iom.int/pt-br/news/operacao-acolhida-atinge-marca-de-100-mil-pessoas-refugiadas-e-migrantes-venezuelanas-interiorizadas>

13 As a result of the first phase of fieldwork conducted in September 2022, the researchers generated a partial report that was hand-delivered to the then Minister of Human Rights of Brazil, Sérgio Almeida. This same report was a source for a series of reports produced by Agência Pública, which can be accessed at the following link: <https://apublica.org/especial/segredos-da-operacao-acolhida/>

Prometida, João de Barros, and Cantá. Following a semi-structured, in-depth model, we documented more than 20 testimonies, including *off-the-record* accounts by humanitarian workers from the various organizations involved. The interviews were transcribed, and a partial report was drawn up.

The same methodology underpinned the second phase of fieldwork conducted in Brasília in December 2023. We chose the Brazilian capital as *locus* due to its centrality in articulating and discussing the direction of humanitarian management. In Brasília, the second phase of fieldwork focused on interviews with active managers and actors involved in formulating OPA. Participants included representatives from the ministries of Defense, Justice, Human Rights and Citizenship, Native Peoples, Development and Social Assistance, Family, and Fight Against Hunger, along with officials from IOM and UNHCR. The objective was to understand — from an institutional and governmental point of view — the guidelines that defined the implementation of a migrant reception model previously unseen in Brazil.

We were also interested in hearing evaluations and perspectives on the continuity of OPA, given the change of government in Brazil in 2023, and presenting to the responsible agencies a partial report containing complaints of human rights violations heard under confidentiality during the first phase of fieldwork in Roraima. It is worth noting that these complaints — present in the testimonies of migrants and humanitarian workers — involved cases of physical, moral, and sexual violence against women, children, Indigenous people, and LGBTQIAP+ population; criminal gangs' activity inside the shelters; and unsanitary housing and food conditions. The testimonies of the humanitarian workers, in particular, reveal lack of training in case of emergencies, violence routines in the shelters, low salaries, excessive workload, racism and mental illness.

In this way, we combine multiple methods to unveil the circuit of institutional relationships and partnerships that took place in the planning and execution of *Operação Acolhida*. For this purpose, we analyzed documents received via the Brazilian Law of Access to Information (LAI)<sup>14</sup> and interviews with migrants and agents of the organizations involved and cross-checked this information with the cumulative experiences of our research works. The methods used in this research are aimed at problematizing realities and revealing truths about the border infrastructure between Brazil and Venezuela — an infrastructure that takes shape through *Operação Acolhida* and extends beyond the territorial limits of this border.

## *Operação Acolhida* as Border Device and the Concept of Media Bios

Muniz Sodré (2014) describes media *bios* as a kind of virtual key applied "to the real historical existence of the individual" (p. 117). In Sodré's view, the emergence of this new bios, superimposed on the traditional ways of elaborating the common, is equivalent to a true anthropological reconfiguration, given the changes it has caused in the field of human relationships, subjectivities, and sensitivities. In short, Sodré argues that the advance of information and communication technologies brought about by the globalizing process would imply a reorganization of "social life codified by the market and technology, and therefore the organization of the *bios*" (p. 133). This perspective is valuable in recognizing that the relationship between communication, information, and finance is, nowadays, an indissoluble nexus that sustains new patterns of value accumulation and extraction.

In this context of technological rooting and articulation of everyday life, subsumed by mediatization, the media assert themselves as a fundamental component of socio-cultural practices in contemporary society. Border practices are also part of this dynamic. They function as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion whose growing sophistication stems from a technocratic governance prioritizing security via the

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<sup>14</sup> These are the meeting minutes of the Federal Emergency Assistance Committee (CFAE), a body coordinated by the Executive Office of the President to manage migration in contexts of humanitarian crisis.



control and surveillance of the moving body. Borders are increasingly entangled by images and discourses that symbolically constitute and technically instrumentalize them.

As Sara Marino (2021) elucidates, borders are now techno-militarized, in response to the significant increase in the number of people crossing them, and techno-mediated, due to the digital technologies ubiquitously employed. If, on the one hand, digital technologies are fundamental for people on the move — allowing them from keeping in touch with their place of origin to negotiating belonging in the new territory —, on the other hand, the States and transnational capitalist corporations also mobilize this technologies with little publicized objectives (Madianou, 2019).

Venezuelan migrants assisted by OPA receive a full set of Brazilian documents, which enable them to live in Brazil. In addition — and this is one of the nodal points that particularize the Brazilian migrant reception model — they can be relocated to other states of Brazil as long as they remain in one of the shelters while waiting to be assigned to a job, mainly in agribusiness, especially meatpacking plants and farms (Demétrio; Baeninger, 2023). However, while OPA's premise is impressive in its effectiveness, the testimonies gathered from migrants and humanitarian workers reveal a picture of multiple human rights violations<sup>15</sup>.

In this way, we assert that *Operação Acolhida* can be understood as a border device, in the sense of "a result of the intersection of relations of power and knowledge within the framework of what Foucault calls governmentality" (Sodré, 2021, p. 112). This device serves as a network established between discourses, institutions, organizations, laws, security, and repressive measures, which "has a concrete strategic function and is always inscribed in a power relationship" (2021, p. 112).

There are many devices at work in contemporary society. Yet, we advocate understanding OPA as one that inserts the "bare life" — precarious and governable — of Venezuelan migrants into another *bios*: the media or virtual one. This insertion seeks "to neutralize or dissolve the human community by *absolutizing itself*, that is, constituting a sphere left to itself by the logic of the devices, (...) keeping the power of the techno-industrial organization intact" (Sodré, 2021, p. 113). Corporate interests, therefore, prevail to the detriment of the dignity of subjects reduced to the role of victims and depoliticized.

We identify that the set of actions executed by OPA are located within a contextual framework that organizes all the crossings mentioned before in order to contain and organize population contingents. At the same time, this framework establishes a "field form" (Figure 1) — as first described by Michel Agier and reworked by Achille Mbembe — as a response to the Venezuelan presence in the state of Roraima. We make this assertion as OPA materializes the fundamental premises related to control, securitization and selectivity that characterize the experience of contemporary mobility. The mediation exerted by these phenomena would be unfeasible if they did not also rely on a broad system of technologies for controlling and datifying people who cross borders. As Agier (2006) points out, these structures are not new; they take on particular attributes of the places where they develop, but they constitute "a set of spaces, now growing, to keep refugees, 'clandestines' and undesirables waiting, in state of survival and without rights" (p. 198).

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15 We made partnership with Agência Pública on the basis of a partial report made after the first phase of fieldwork, in 2023. Available at: <https://apublica.org/especial/segredos-da-operacao-acolhida/>. Accessed: 28 Oct. 2024.

Figure 1 - Rondon II Shelter, at the time with an estimated population of 2,000 inhabitants



Source: Produced by the authors

In line with Agier, Achille Mbembe first states that, in the wake of the decolonization movements, war "has become the sacrament of our time since the end of the 20th century" (Mbembe, 2020, p. 12). In this context, it is essential to "transform borders into primitive forms of distancing" from enemies, intruders, and manufactured foreigners, which ultimately leads to the fractioning of citizenship. "Borders are no longer places that cross, but lines that separate. In these more or less miniaturized and militarized spaces, everything is supposed to be immobilized" (Mbembe, 2020, p. 14). Visible (walls, fences, and ditches) and invisible barriers (representations and discourses, such as software and sensors) (Marino, 2021) are erected to legitimize the division between a sovereign 'us' and the undesirable 'others', cut off from common life. From these milestones, multiple forms of humanitarian aid have proliferated around the world, varying according to local particularities and needs.

In this context, the current symbolic and discursive work enabled by mediatization plays a decisive role in the naturalization of a type of entrepreneurial subjectivity anchored in the concept of "human capital". According to Foucault (2010), human capital is made up of innate and acquired elements, which become relevant as they constitute rare resources for a given purpose. Thus, "human capital can be, firstly, improved and, secondly, conserved and used for as long as possible" to form a "machine competence" (2010, p. 290). Dardot and Laval (2016) underscore that neoliberalism "extends the logic of the market far beyond the strict boundaries of the market, in particular by producing an 'accounting' subjectivity through the creation of systematic competition between individuals" (2016, p. 30).

In this line of thought, for Sodr , the concept of human capital also legitimizes the need for a "qualifying organization" organized around the idea of training. According to the author, "it is no longer a question of knowing (in the humanistic sense of the word) but of becoming *competent* (knowing how to operate): the virtual or media bios is the ecosystem of this new form of collective consciousness" (p. 121). This ecosystem employs communicative work to structure NGO-humanitarianism relations around migrants, propagating narratives of entrepreneurship and the common good (Author et al., 2019) under a humanitarian guise. This process reframes the individualization and degradation of working conditions as opportunities for autonomy. An illustration of this is the statement that legitimizes migrant relocation



for agricultural work<sup>16</sup>.

## Digital Migration, Border Technologies, and Relegated Sovereignty

The so-called *Digital Migration Studies* (Loers, 2023; Marino, 2021; Madianou, 2019), developed by critical researchers of border infrastructures (especially in Europe), have become a fundamental reference point for understanding the use of technologies in mobility and migration processes. They are also key to critical migration and border studies that observe the paradox between the reception, control, and selection of migrants.

For Koen Loers (2023), the study of the relationship between digital technologies and migration should not take place in isolation. On the contrary, "bringing together critical concepts of migration, mobility and digital studies could establish new bridges between the fields, as well as stimulate reflection on the dominant assumptions within the fields" (Loers, 2023). It is precisely by using the concept of media bios (Sodré, 2014) to problematize *Operação Acolhida* that we see the main potentials in this approach.

In the context of transnational migration and border devices, the digitalization of migrant connectivity and migration management has enabled the production of a variety of "migration traceability" data (Madianou, 2019). The resulting large-scale datasets become assets for companies, who seek to capitalize on them, and tools for government agencies, who harness them to oversee and project migration patterns (Madianou, 2019).

In *Operação Acolhida*, the emblem of the process of collecting and storing sensitive data for governance purposes is the screening post (called Ptrig). According to one of the sources who participated in the implementation of OPA during Michel Temer's presidency (2016-2018)<sup>17</sup>, Brazil had appointed an international delegation to design a contingency plan for the Venezuelan migratory influx in Roraima. Upon arriving in Jordan, this delegation came across "a large facility" where the residents of the refugee camps were registered on a data platform called *Progress*, managed by UNHCR, in order to access supplies "such as food, medicine, diapers" and assorted services.

Although the delegation considered that the format of a refugee camp would not be appropriate in Brazil, the concentration of digitalized services in one place seemed adequate to speed up migratory regularization processes and the issuing of other documents. After its creation, Ptrig also became the distribution center of Venezuelans to shelters and relocation, enabling to trace "whether they had been transferred or not, and were."

Digital migrants are, for example, increasingly processed as databases for asylum or visa verification purposes<sup>18</sup>. Digitalization, datification and connectivity co-constitute the migrant's being and existence (Cogo & Camargo, 2025). It is necessary to problematize the possible consequences of this statement in terms of exercise of sovereignty, when the State are no longer formulator of public policies, but just one of the entities participating in a management dominated by digital technology companies linked to the international humanitarian economy.

For Floridi (2020), sovereignty is a form of control, and it is important to reflect on who can exercise it, over what, and for what purposes. At the same time, any consideration of national sovereignty in the digital sphere involves the need for the State to regulate the flow of its citizens' information within its borders and raises questions about the boundaries between autonomy and international cooperation.

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16 On the housing and working conditions of relocated migrants, see <https://apublica.org/2024/09/dou-rados-ms-venezuelanos-em-risco-de-expulsao/>, accessed on May 12, 2025.

17 Anonymous interview in Brasília. December 2023.

18 For details of OPA's datification platforms, see the article Cogo, D. & Camargo, J. (2025) Migration and the Implications of Digitalization on the Brazil-Venezuela Border. *International Migration*, 63, e70015. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70015>

The State's digital sovereignty is an attribute of very recent recognition, describing aspects of the authority, right and ability of State to control its data, information, and digital content. These aspects imply control over the digital environment where the population or social life is inserted, including personal and non-personal data, infrastructures for the operation of digital networks and platforms, programs and other intangible assets such as intellectual property rights, digital tokens, etc. (Polido, 2024, p. 5)

Recent studies on the matter have also used the concept of digital (or data) colonialism to think about the new forms of interaction between these actors. Following Lippold & Faustino (2022), we can define colonialism as the installation of military infrastructures for political, economic, and social domination. Seen through this lens, it represents the current stage of development of the capitalist mode of production, which is now based on the use of technology.

Koen Leurs (2023, p. 26), writing about infrastructures, points out how the meaning of this concept has shifted from engineering, planning, and politics to being studied in humanities and social science disciplines through the lens of technology. For sociologist Michael Kwet, "today, Eduardo Galeano's 'open veins' of the Global South are the 'digital veins' crossing the oceans, connecting a technology ecosystem owned and controlled by a handful of corporations based mainly in the United States" (2021).

Beyond the problems surrounding the monopolization of data and services in the digital field, what we observe is the very presence of the United States in providing aid to the Venezuelan population in Brazil, whose effective access to rights increasingly depends on technological solutions. Evidence of this is the announcement the US government made in January 2025, after Donald Trump took office, that it would suspend funding for international humanitarian aid actions for 90 days.

This measure affected both the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations as a whole, including the UN Migration Agency (IOM). Consequently, it also impacted the programs in Brazil depending on direct and indirect resources from these agencies, such as *Operação Acolhida*<sup>19</sup>. During the first phase of fieldwork in Roraima, the US presence was visible in the logos of USAID and the State Department's Office of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), which is the US flag itself, abundantly printed on institutional posters.

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19 Retrieved May 12, 2025 from <https://migramundo.com/suspensao-de-verba-dos-eua-a-agencia-da-onu-para-migracoes-gera-tensao-e-incerteza-no-brasil-e-no-exterior/>,

Figure 2 - PRM logo on an institutional poster found in the João de Barro Community



Source: Produced by the authors

One example of PRM funding implemented by Cáritas Brasileira and displayed in the collective lands we visited was the "Orinoco Project: Waters that Cross Borders". The project consisted of installing toilets, drinking fountains, and washing facilities, as well as a basic sanitation system in the outlying areas where they lived (Figure 3). The migrants also reported receiving prepaid food cards funded by USAID, as well as other non-personalized cards that aroused suspicion about the possibility of diversion of aid funds. If, on the one hand, they were positive about the aid provided by the NGOs, "*as it has helped us*"<sup>20</sup>, on the other hand, they were critical of the way the projects worked. The Orinoco project was one of the first to be affected by the cut in US funding<sup>21</sup>.

20 Group interview on the João de Barros land, Roraima, September 2022.

21 Retrieved May 12, 2025 from <https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2025/01/28/migrantes-venezuelanos-ficam-sem-banheiros-e-ate-agua-potavel-apos-corte-de-verbas-de-trump-unica-coisa-que-ti-nhamos.ghtml>,

Figure 3 - Wash-type installations



Source: Produced by the authors

The *ayudas*, as the Venezuelans call them, range from emergency benefits such as food baskets and personal hygiene kits to priority care in private medical centers and entrepreneurship workshops. In general, these are not spontaneous demands presented by communities, but projects previously formatted by NGOs that collect information to prove their viability to funding agencies. Besides complaints about the incompatibility between some of these actions and their real needs — even in the sense of offering them more permanent solutions — the migrants were uncomfortable with the number of similar registrations they had to fill out, entering personal data such as name, surname, age, Brazilian tax number (CPF) and signature, in the hope of receiving some aid.

The transcribed excerpts from fieldwork interviews allow us to deepen the debate on the relation between data colonialism and surveillance capitalism. According to Zuboff (2019, p. 22), surveillance capitalism appropriates "human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data". The author emphasizes the behavior of *Big Tech* when she points out that, under this new regime, the precise moment in which our needs are met is also the one "in which our lives are plundered in search of behavioral data, and all for the profit of others" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 73).

However — and considering the previous discussion on sovereignty — to think about the intersection between migration policies in Brazil and the ideas of surveillance, control, the State, and the countries that own technologies implies, necessarily, to reflect on the asymmetries and hierarchies established in this process. As one of our interlocutors shared with us: "I just keep asking myself, what does the funder get out of funding all this social work? Seriously, how come I never see how many different institutions are distributing the same card?"<sup>22</sup>

## Legitimization of the OPA Through Disinformation: Between Silences, Omissions and Half-Truths

So far, we have discussed how *Operação Acolhida* can be understood as a border device that reproduces — and, at the same time, reconfigures — a model of global governance of migration (Mezzadra,

<sup>22</sup> Group interview in Terra Prometida, Roraima, September 2022.

2012) based on data, control techniques, humanitarian "expertise" and inter-agency cooperation. OPA is a management model that relies on digital not only to extract and store data used to monitor and control people's movements, but also to circulate information through official channels, including institutional websites and social media profiles (Madianou, 2013).

In view of this, it is worth highlighting how Brazilian government agencies and, especially, UN, IOM and UNHCR offices have legitimized OPA as an effective solution to the "migration problem"<sup>23</sup> by publishing numerous reports, news bulletins, and periodicals. If, on the one hand, the publication of these materials can produce an effect of transparency, on the other hand, it is necessary to problematize the objectives behind such disclosures in the sense of "constructing a well-curated narrative (...) which, while making some issues visible, silences others" (Ceja, 2024, p. 222).

In short, only the information that supports the image of *Operação Acolhida* as a 'model policy' is published. We believe this is the way to build consensus both in the eyes of Roraima's society — by meeting its incessant demand for more control, monitoring, and reinforcement of borders<sup>24</sup>— and to draw the attention of private funders, being accountable to them and attracting untapped resources. As illustrated in CFAE Minutes No. 13, the suggestion to resume "the international dissemination of OPA to recall the absolute success of a mission with European Union participation" reflects this correlation of forces.

In this sense, a broader narrative dispute is evident between the multiple economic interests and power relations permeating Operation Acolhida. Agents within OPA can go so far as to employ institutionalized disinformation in favor of "imposing order at any cost" (Albuquerque, 2022, p. 141). By disinformation we mean the "circulation of distorted, manipulated or entirely false information that is produced with the aim of misleading" (Soares et al., 2021, p. 76). Beyond the degree of veracity of the content, what ultimately characterizes disinformation is the intent to cause harm (Wardle; Derakshan, 2017), thereby manipulating public opinion and distorting reality. However, the line between information and disinformation can be thin, as the mismatch between migrant and official statements reveals.

Raquel Recuero (2022) uses the concept of a "disinformation ecosystem" to explain that the process involving disinformation is much more complex than simply replicating dubious information. The author raises the importance of certain actors within this system. These actors are often people with social credibility and authority— in this case, members of Brazilian State institutions and partner organizations. Therefore, official speeches gain notoriety and veracity because they respond directly to actions that arise from socially established places. "As we have explained, disinformation is a type of discourse that disputes visibility and legitimacy" (Recuero, 2021, p. 6). Yet, this dispute does not consider the contrasts between practices and discourses.

The disclosed information is often just a snippet released for propaganda. Moreover, the centrality of statistics is key to building this successful narrative aligned with the logic of neoliberal governmentality and its "neutral standards of calculation and risk management" (Mezzadra, 2012, p. 87). Underneath the appearance of neutrality and precision, data and statistics imply a way of representing and ordering reality crossed by an administrative rationality that turns migrant into numbers, desumanizing them. As various humanitarian workers told us, the practice of tampering figures<sup>25</sup> could even be common. So, given the

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23 The monitoring, collection, and analysis of social media posts by OPA and partner organizations has been conducted through Scientific Initiation research projects (a Brazilian undergraduate research fellowship program) since August 2024.

24 For example, the request to intensify migration controls in Roraima was the subject of a petition in December 2023. Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024 from <https://www.folhabv.com.br/cotidiano/abaixo-assinado-pede-intensificacao-de-controle-da-migracao-venezuelana-em-roraima/>.

25 One of the reported manipulation mechanisms was to inflate statistics by counting diverse types of assistance given to one beneficiary at the same time as separate, distinct services. For example, if a mother were to receive both guidance with documents and a food basket, she would be counted twice.



need to hit "goals that demonstrate results and justify maintaining the operation" (Vasconcelos, 2021, p. 259), impressive figures should be observed with caution.

We use this evidence to argue that one of the pillars supporting *Operação Acolhida* is the dissemination of half-truths, as well as discursive absences and omissions. Thus, we understand that the imposition of the project as the only solution to the "migratory crisis" takes place, simultaneously, by the exaltation of its achievements and by the attempts to deny what deviates from the official version. This becomes evident when problems encountered are pointed out as "individual cases" or "isolated incidents"<sup>26</sup>, and therefore minimized.

During the second phase of fieldwork in Brasília, there were two especially enlightening interviews regarding this *modus operandi*: the first was at the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MDS), and the second at the UNHCR office. In both, we shared complaints made by humanitarian workers in Roraima. When we asked interviewees if they knew that systematic rapes and criminal gang activity were taking place in the shelters — which are supervised by military personnel and UNHCR agents — their reactions ranged from astonishment to dismissive phrases. Examples included: "it's not that there can't be one situation or another"<sup>27</sup> and "of course incidents happen, right?"<sup>28</sup>.

Far from being limited to the moments of conflict in the research work, attempts to discredit evidence that contradicts the consensus shaped by *Operação Acolhida* also appeared subtly in the minutes of the Federal Emergency Assistance Committee (CFAE) meetings. As an example, we can cite CFAE Minute no. 17, where cases of work analogous to slavery in companies involved in the relocation of migrants (via flagged job vacancies) denounced by the media are described as "alleged".

In this sense, by discrediting facts and reiterating partial statements — such as the claim that relocation promotes "new life opportunities and socio-economic inclusion" the State produces a success narrative that ultimately silences the migrants themselves. As our interlocutors pointed out, "there are people who aren't well off, there are others who don't have a job, nothing."<sup>29</sup> This situation is especially difficult for relocated migrants, who cannot afford to return to the border, at least in the short term, to be closer to relatives who stayed in Venezuela.

During the visit to the collective lands managed by Venezuelans in Boa Vista, it became clear how migrants — due to their fragile socio-economic condition and lack of knowledge about laws, rights and other aspects of Brazilian society — have been exposed to inaccurate and false information that negatively influences their decision-making. These deliberately fabricated narratives (Wardle; Derakshan, 2017) are designed to harm migrants by misinforming them and manipulating their expectations and emotions.

An example of this was the eviction of the Ka'Ubanoko occupation<sup>30</sup>. This action, conducted by military agents under an OPA order, employed coercive measures to expedite the process and persuade families to enter shelters. As one of the leaders interviewed recalls, "they worked on people psychologically. What for? To scare them (...) So they'd say, 'when prison comes, when the machines come, what are you going to do?'" (Group interview at Terra Prometida. September 2022; emphasis added).

Linked to this, the legacy of Jair Bolsonaro's government in terms of the political-ideological instrumentalization of the crisis in Venezuela was evident on the eve of the 2022 presidential elections — which Venezuelans living in Brazil watched with attention, tension, and uncertainty. Despite all the criticism

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26 Retrieved from <https://apublica.org/2024/07/migrantes-e-trabalhadores-relatam-violencia-crime-e-medo-na-operacao-acolhida-em-roraima/>

27 MDS interview, December 2023.

28 Interview at the UNHCR office in Brasília, December 2023.

29 Group interview in Terra Prometida, Roraima, September 2022.

30 The demobilization of the spontaneous occupation was the starting point of a process that led to the purchase of the collective plots where the migrants we spoke to are currently living.

leveled against the militarization of migration management, our interviewees expressed broad support to Bolsonaro, reproducing the catchphrase "if Lula wins, Brazil will become Venezuela" as a justification. This situation reveals how migrants have been the focus of extreme right-wing groups that use lies and alarmist rhetoric not only to captivate voters mobilized by racist, xenophobic, and nationalist discourses (Cogo & Alencar, 2022) but also to maintain the support of vulnerable groups, such as Venezuelans themselves.

On the other hand — even with the change to the progressive government of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva in 2023 — we have observed the strengthening of *Operação Acolhida*, not only because of the growing number of assisted and relocated migrants but also based on the analyses made by State agents. In this way, this article demonstrates the relevance of the concept of mediatization: migrants are equally immersed in the media *bios* (Sodré, 2014), characterized by the junctions between the market, financialization and the retraction of public policies. This ecosystem elevates information to a new scale, merging a public sphere inflamed by lies (from both official networks and the *fake news* underworld) with the binding experience of ordinary contemporary life.

## Final Considerations

What we have pointed out in this work is the dissolution of an idea of sovereignty that summarizes the State's actions — based on militarization and the issuing of documents — in a series of actions that make it possible to subject certain lives. In this sense, sovereignty increasingly consists of "the power to manufacture a whole series of people who, by definition, live on the edge of life, or on the outer edge of life, people for whom living is a constant reckoning with death" (Mbembe, 2020, p. 68).

In the Brazilian context, external actors have dictated migration policies, implementing models that systematically produce precarious conditions for migrant and refugee lives. The 'national' cedes its space to partner organizations and reproduces experiences tested elsewhere, highlighting the lack of a truly national policy. This scenario reveals how State control practices, supported by international organizations, operate: they function as an institutionalized infrastructure that redesigns the presence of Global North countries within Global South policies.

As part of the same geopolitical interference, we highlight the role of digital technologies in the conception of control over migrant bodies and the cataloging of data related to their mobility processes. Digital technologies transform borders into techno-militarized and techno-mediated spaces (Marino, 2021), reorganizing the political-institutional space of the commons based on what Sodré (2014) calls the *media bios*. It ultimately reconfigures the lives of migrants through hegemonic models of global capital and market, in which the humanitarian industry is fully inserted.

Reflecting the immersion in this *bios*, the databases and monitoring and tracking tools used to regulate traffic on the Brazil-Venezuela border are also part of fake news about or targeting Venezuelan migrants. Together, datification and the disinformation ecosystem (Recuero, 2022) — promoted even by agents related to *Operação Acolhida* — legitimize the control and exclusion of vulnerable migrants.

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