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“LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY?”

Toward an Understanding of the Re-appropriation of Social Media for Emancipatory Uses among Alternative Media Projects in El Salvador

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“LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY?”

**Toward an Understanding of the Re-appropriation of Social Media for
Emancipatory Uses among Alternative Media Projects in El Salvador**

by

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Dedication

For Ginger, who keeps me going.

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“LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY?”

Toward an Understanding of the Re-appropriation of Social Media for Emancipatory Uses among Alternative Media Projects in El Salvador

Summer Dawn Harlow, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Thomas J. Johnson

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This dissertation explores whether and how alternative media in El Salvador incorporated information communication technologies (ICTs) for social change, and whether incorporating said technologies changed citizen participation not only in the media process itself, but also in a broader discursive sphere as well as civic and political life. Within the context of a digitally divided region, this project employed ethnographic methods—including in-depth interviews, participant-observation, and a content analysis—to interrogate the perceived potential value of ICTs in alternative media for contesting power, contributing to social change, and opening spaces for citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology.

This research is merely a beginning stage in learning how digital communication tools influence alternative media practices, and what that means for participation, mobilization and empowerment. This study contributes to burgeoning literature focused on communication for social change and technologies by adding an international focus, and by furthering our understanding of under what circumstances alternative media can

(or cannot) employ new technologies in liberating ways, especially in a region where use of and access to these technologies is far from universal. Ultimately this dissertation advances existing literature with two main contributions: extending our understanding of the digital divide to include inequalities of social media and whether it is used in liberating or frivolous ways, and including technology use—whether liberating or not—as a fundamental approach to the study of alternative media.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Recent protest activity around the world—whether the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street movement, *Los Indignados* in Spain, or student protesters in Chile—is notable for the way in which social media play a fundamental role in organizing, perhaps even fueling, protests (Anduiza et al., 2013; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Howard & Parks, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Much recent political action throughout the Latin American region also has been characterized by the widespread use of new communication technologies, particularly online social media (Valenzuela et al., 2012). The role of social media in activism merits attention from a communication perspective—especially from an alternative communication perspective in light of mainstream media’s marginalization of protesters (McLeod & Hertog, 1999)—because of the way the online communication processes themselves have become the forms of organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and even the sites where collective action occurs (Lievrouw, 2011). While most of the paradigms in previous social movement scholarship tend to provide scant attention to the role of the media in social change, the networked society (Castells, 1996) in which we now live demands a deeper understanding of new technologies used in activism, especially considering that this wave of technology-centric collective action seems to have created “a media world that places the mass media at the margins, and elevates purveyors of social technology from NGOs to Flickr to prominent roles” (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011, p. 205). In other words, when it comes to protests and other types of collective action, online social media, rather than mainstream media, seem to be the go-to source for information (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011).

In some sense it is difficult to imagine a media ecology in which the mass, mainstream media becomes marginalized, and the importance of media produced by NGOs, protesters, and other ordinary users upgraded. Traditionally, mainstream media “privilege dominant, mainstream positions” (Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990, p. 33) and ignore ordinary citizen voices, especially when those voices are seen to oppose hegemonic power structures (Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001; Atton, 2002). In fact, the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999) dictates that mainstream media will delegitimize protests and undermine activist causes by privileging official sources over grass roots ones, and by demonizing or belittling protesters and protests by emphasizing violence and the spectacle of it all. Melucci (1996, p. 180) noted that as “mere consumers of information, people are excluded from the logic that organizes this flow of information, they are there to only receive it and have no access to the power that shapes reality through the controlled ebb and flow of information.” To fight this legacy of marginalization and attempt to claim the power of information control, protesters, dissidents, and other voices typically relegated to the sidelines of mainstream media began creating their own media: alternative media (Gitlin, 1980; Kessler, 1984; Downing, 2001). A dissident media marketplace emerged in response to mainstream media’s marginalization of alternative views (Kessler, 1984).

Before Facebook, Twitter, or even the much-studied online alternative news site IndyMedia (Atton, 2003; Downing, 2002; Kidd, 2003), social movements and activists controlled their own information and image, circumventing mainstream media by publishing bulletins and alternative newspapers or magazines, handing out fliers, engaging in graffiti, or taking over the airwaves via both clandestine and community radio and television stations (Armstrong, 1981; Downing, 2001; Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003). But self-publishing and sidestepping the mainstream media has a catch:

limited reach, limited resources, and thus (potentially) limited sustainability and impact (Nassanga, 2013; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010; Atton, 2002), not to mention the proverbial problem of preaching to the choir (Benson, 2003).

With the advent of activists' meaningful use of the web to spread information during the Seattle protests of 1999, alternative media began to find a way out of the echo chamber. The past 15 years witnessed the flourishing use of digital technologies for alternative media and activism, as these groups initiated use of email, social media, blogs, podcasts, video-sharing platforms and a host of other tools to create campaigns, online petitions, virtual sit-ins, and interactive communities, and prompt myriad other online and offline actions (Castells, 2001; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Online alternative media gave "movements and activists the power of mass communication" (Postmes and Brunsting, 2002, p. 294) as the Internet and information communication technologies (ICTs) came to be seen as essential to creating alternative media for social change (Kenix, 2009; Raghavan, 2009). With this in mind, this dissertation explored how alternative media in El Salvador incorporated digital communication technologies for social change, and whether incorporating said technologies changed citizen participation in the media process itself, as well as in a broader discursive space and civic and political life. Within the context of a digitally divided region, this project employed ethnographic methods—including in-depth interviews, participant-observation, and a content analysis—to interrogate the perceived potential value of ICTs in alternative media for contesting power, contributing to social change, and opening spaces for citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology. Theories related to alternative media (i.e., Downing, 2001; Rodríguez, 2001), "liberation technology" (Diamond, 2010), and participation (Carpentier, 2011) help illuminate this analysis of alternative media's use of technologies for liberating ends, such as empowering marginalized groups, defending human rights,

improving governance, promoting economic and human development, and strengthening democracy. This dissertation aimed to move beyond technological determinism, recognizing that using technology does not automatically lead to social change: technologies can be used for oppression as much as for liberation (i.e. social justice and human development). Likewise, the so-called digital divide presents limits, but those limits should not be thought of as deterministically insurmountable. Therefore, the quest of this dissertation was to explore under what circumstances the alternative media projects in El Salvador managed to use technology in liberating ways, what challenges they faced, and what potential benefits and disadvantages they perceived in incorporating technologies.

Internet optimists tout the equalizing and democratizing potential of new technologies for opening the public sphere to alternative and marginalized voices (Aouragh, 2008; Kellner, 2000; Shirky, 2008; Castells, 2009). Giving weight to this perspective, Groshek (2009) in a cross-national study of 152 countries found that a greater diffusion of the Internet predicted increased democracy: increased Internet diffusion was significantly and positively linked to countries becoming more democratic, and the already more democratic countries diffused the Internet more. However, Best and Wade (2009) found in a similar cross-national study of 188 countries that any positive effects of the Internet on democracy were reduced in countries that were less developed and non-democratic. Macintosh (2004) delineated three levels of participation potentially created via electronic democracies: electronic enabling (using ICTs to make information more accessible, understandable, and useful); electronic engaging (deliberative discussion on public policies with wider audiences); and electronic empowerment (using ICTs to support participation and to facilitate bottom-up communication).

Other scholars, however, are more pessimistic, questioning whether cold, impersonal technologies and the lack of face-to-face interaction can lead to the kinds of close personal ties and commitment needed for any kind of sustained collective action (Diani, 2000). Unequal access to technologies, uneven rates of technological literacy, and even the Internet's framework as a "global capitalist project" (Atton, 2004, p. 10) all limit the democratic, emancipatory potential of digital tools. The supremacy of the Internet in today's Digital Era means those with no or limited access automatically are marginalized in economic, social, civic, and political realms of society (Castells, 2001). Mattelart (2002, p. 607) referred to "techno-apartheid" because of the disparity in Internet costs between countries with high and low densities of Internet users. In Latin America, the Internet's democratizing potential depends on pre-existing degrees of democratic development, with the Internet able to make the most impact in places where democracy is "defective," "horizontal checks on power are fragile," "freedom of the press is informally curtailed," and "financial donors have excessive influence over public policy" (Corrales, 2004, p. 31). In other words, the Internet can have the most democratizing effects in places where democracy is lacking. Thus, "Internet connectivity ought to be considered as a cause, as well as an outcome, of democratization" (Corrales, 2004, p. 33) as ICTs can lower the barriers to participation and empowerment, fomenting what Bimber (1998) referred to as "accelerated pluralism."

Clearly, then, better understanding the role of digital technologies in alternative media and activism is critical because ICTs are more than just tools; they are the force that "distributes information power, knowledge generation, and networking capacity in all realms of activity" (Castells, 2001, p. 269). At the same time however, ICTs also are linked to increased government and corporate surveillance and repression (Morozov, 2011; Cascio, 2009; Van Dijck, 2009), as well as consumerism and capitalist

consumption (Askanius & Gustafsson, 2010). As Breuer and Welp (2014) noted, ICTs might in fact increase the digital divide between the information haves and have-nots, and so because ICTs are “deeply embedded within social structures,” the successful use of ICTs for social change depends on “sensitivity to local, cultural, and social contexts” (p. 6). This dissertation, then, explored how Salvadoran alternative media and activists use digital tools for emancipatory, or liberating, ends without falling prey to the “dark side” of the Internet (Morozov, 2011), and in spite of the digital divide(s).

Enzensberger (1976) proposed an emancipatory use of media that is denoted by interactivity between audiences and producers, collective production, collective mobilization, and a concern with everyday life and people’s basic needs. He saw electronic media (radio and television at the time) as superior to print for their ability to turn consumers into producers and allow for communication, rather than just distribution of information. McQuail (1987) built upon Enzensberger’s conceptualization with the “democratic-participant” normative model that involves the use of media “for interaction and communication in small-scale settings of community, interest group and subculture,” favoring “horizontal patterns of interaction” where “participation and interaction are key concepts” (McQuail, 1994, p. 132). Similar to these ideas is Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of dialogic communication in which citizen participation in multi-directional, horizontal communication can lead to self awareness and, ultimately, social change. Diamond (2010) referred to the capacity of digital communication tools for bringing about social change as “liberation technology.” Brecht’s (1983) radio theory highlights how radio has been used in various unintended ways, much like Facebook and YouTube have been socially re-applied for oppositional, alternative uses, different than the uses for which they were created (Brodock et al., 2009). What Brecht and Diamond’s theories do not necessarily make clear, however, is the important role of the user—

whether an alternative media producer or consumer—in re-appropriating these tools for liberating uses. Liberating technologies cannot be separated from the user and the choice to utilize them in emancipatory ways (Enzensberger, 1976) within historically, culturally, economically and politically contingent settings. This dissertation, then, sheds light on any emancipatory or participatory values embedded in new technologies and the Web 2.0 by analyzing how alternative media are—or are not—using digital tools for positive social change.

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION AIMS

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at four alternative media projects in El Salvador in 2012 and 2013, this dissertation examined the potentially liberating role of ICTs in alternative media for social change, and whether/how different media practices prompt different forms of participation in the media, in technology, in a national discursive sphere, and in civic and political life itself. In El Salvador, a socially, culturally and economically stratified country, the alternative media projects under study aim for social change that encompasses social and political inclusion of marginalized groups, beginning with citizen participation. It is not enough to simply speak of the potential participatory opportunities afforded by new technologies, but rather it is necessary to question participation by whom, in what, and to what end. Thus, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of how and why alternative media producers and consumers use digital technologies, and whether and how these technologies can be used in liberating ways, prompting social change. Additionally this dissertation offers a perspective from a non-developed country, particularly important considering that little research to date has taken note of the ways ICTs are used in Latin America (Pick, et al.,

2007) or how traditionally marginalized groups use digital communication tools (Cartier et al., 2005).

This dissertation employed a theoretical framework that pulls from alternative media theories from the United States and Latin America (i.e. Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001), theories of media participation (i.e. Carpentier, 2011), Enzensberger's (1976) concept of emancipatory media, Freire's (1970) pedagogy on dialogic communication as fundamental to liberation, and the concept of liberation technology (Diamond, 2010). Ultimately it is argued that a panoptic, global understanding of alternative media must take into account liberating uses of technology: are alternative media projects' use of new digital tools enabling participation *in* technology and participation *through* technology to achieve the Freirian archetype of dialogic communication, or even Enzensberger's (1976) ideal of participatory, emancipatory media? Are new technologies, online social media in particular, liberating for democracy and society as a whole, or just for individual users? And how liberating can these technologies actually be in light of uneven computer access and literacy?

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION METHODS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To explore these questions related to using technology for social change, this dissertation focused on a) how alternative media projects in El Salvador incorporated digital technologies, and the resultant impact on citizen access to and participation in the media process and a broader discursive space; b) the challenges of the digital divide; and c) the value to alternative media for using ICTs, particularly social media, in liberating ways. The goal was to contribute to the larger objective of understanding alternative media's role in enabling citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology when access to, and understanding of, that technology is limited by the digital divide.

Two sets of research questions informed this dissertation. First are those questions answered using a qualitative analysis of 12 months of ethnographic data collected via participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews at four alternative media sites in El Salvador. Two traditional¹ alternative media projects were compared and contrasted with two online alternative media projects. The second set of research questions was analyzed quantitatively via a content analysis of the four sites' Facebook pages and posts.

The ethnographic observations and interviews explored the following set of research questions:

- RQ1: What are the perceived changes, if any, to the Salvadoran alternative media projects' identities and news processes because of ICTs, particularly social media?
- RQ2: What are the perceived changes, if any, in the meaning of citizen participation in alternative media because of ICTs, particularly social media?
- RQ3: What key obstacles do the alternative media projects face in incorporating digital technologies, and how do those obstacles influence the usefulness and relevancy that the study participants assign to these tools?
- RQ4: Under what circumstances have (or have not) these alternative media projects managed to successfully use digital technologies in liberating ways?

¹ This dissertation uses the term "traditional" to identify so-called "legacy" or analog media outlets, such as

- RQ5: What are the perceived values, drawbacks, and challenges of using ICTs, particularly social media, for social change?

RESEARCH SITES

The preceding questions were addressed using ethnographic case studies of four alternative media projects in El Salvador. These sites were chosen because all four of them self-identify as “alternative” and value citizen participation. Further, two of the sites represent traditional media, while two represent “new” media, allowing for comparisons and contrasts to be drawn in how they utilize digital technologies, and social media in particular:

1) *Diario CoLatino*. More than 100 years old, *Diario CoLatino* is El Salvador’s largest and oldest alternative newspaper, run by a cooperative (thus the “co” in *CoLatino*) comprised of 20 newspaper employees. According to the newspaper’s website, its mission is to provide “alternative, independent journalism” by criticizing those in power and opening a space for community organizations, insurgent forces and protesters (Diario CoLatino, 2011). During El Salvador’s civil war (1980-1992), the newspaper suffered various physical and verbal attacks, including a fire that nearly destroyed its printing presses: international cooperation provided funding to restore the presses. Following the war, during the 20-year reign of a right-wing government led by the Nationalist Republic Alliance party (ARENA), the government and the National Private Business Association (ANEP) both boycotted advertising in *Diario CoLatino*, resulting in limited resources but a loyal following. In a content analysis of mainstream newspapers in El Salvador, *CoLatino* was named as the country’s “only news daily that is markedly autonomous from government and elite control” (Kowalchuk, 2009). A March 2009 column in *CoLatino* claimed that even after a century in print, the newspaper still offers something

not found in any other printed media: a critical space (Alvarenga, 2009). For *CoLatino*, social change is about creating a space for the “people” to express themselves, and contributing “to the deepening of democracy and the construction of a just, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development model” (Vilches, 2012).

2) **Radio Victoria.** Radio Victoria is a community radio station based in the department of Cabañas, on the border between El Salvador and Honduras. Founded in 1993, in the aftermath of a bloody civil war that left 75,000 dead and at least another 8,000 disappeared, the station mostly serves the *municipio*, or county, of Victoria, yet thanks to a new tower in the neighboring county of Ilobasco, the radio now reaches throughout most of Cabañas. Although currently located in the county seat, also named Victoria, the station has its roots in the small community of Santa Marta, which was repopulated at the end of the war as refugees returned home to El Salvador from Honduras. All but a couple of the station’s founders, workers and volunteers are from Santa Marta, many of whom—including the coordinating committee that oversees operations—grew up in Honduras. The station’s name comes not from the city where it is located, but rather is a reference to the phrase “*¡Hasta la victoria siempre!*” (Until victory, always!) made popular by Latin American revolutionary hero Che Guevara. A part of the Association of Participatory Radios and Programs in El Salvador (ARPAS in Spanish), Radio Victoria’s mission is to give voice to the people and to generate opinion via its programming and spaces for citizen participation. Sheets of paper tacked to the walls in the station’s studio and newsroom remind workers of the radio’s conception of social change: an emphasis on environmental rights, gender equity, human rights, education, citizen participation, and identity and culture.

3) **Voces.** *Voces*, which means “voices” in Spanish, is an online alternative news site founded in 2010 in the capital city of San Salvador. Although originally slated to be a

printed newspaper and online radio station, publication of the printed version ended in 2011 for lack of funds, and the online radio has yet to materialize. Its motto is “of the people, for the people.” Wanting to be more than just an alternative to the mainstream, as it explains on its website, the newspaper aims to achieve social change by bringing visibility to the most marginalized sectors of society, offering analysis of and solutions to societal problems (i.e. educational inequality, poverty, and violence, among others), creating a space for citizen participation, and helping strengthen democracy. *Voces* also helps lead a Salvadoran movement for media democratization. According to its website, *Voces* is a non-profit organization that receives funding from various foundations, both Salvadoran and foreign; the two principal funders are the Salvadoran Communication for Development Foundation (COMUNICÁNDONOS in Spanish) and Foundation for Studies for the Application of the Law (FESPAD in Spanish).

4) ***Política Stereo***. Born out of citizens’ frustrations with a lack of political debate during the 2009 presidential elections, and its popularity consolidated during a short-lived protest movement that began the summer of 2011, *Política Stereo* (Politics [in] Stereo), a citizen journalism site, started as a website for news, information, and discussion, with the goal of generating debate around the national public agenda. *Política Stereo El Salvador* was based on the model of a citizen debate website started in 2008 in Chile called *Política Stereo Chile*. Chile’s site, however, was short-lived. The Salvadoran *Política Stereo* interviewees took pride in the fact that their site—the spin-off site—had outlasted the original. Their idea was to use digital tools—in particular the various social media platforms—to encourage civic and political participation, especially among El Salvador’s youth. It quickly became obvious that most of the interaction and activity occurred via social media, rather than the website, so *Política Stereo* shifted its attention to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, letting the website fall into disuse. A Salvadoran

non-profit organization created by a Salvadoran ex-pat living in the United States, Política Stereo is run mostly by a “creative committee:” a handful of youths living in San Salvador and working from their homes. Its Facebook page refers to itself as a “community of thinkers” promoting citizen debate and aimed at eventually becoming a citizen movement.

In addition to the ethnographic case studies of these four alternative media projects, a content analysis comparing and contrasting each project’s Facebook page helps construct a more holistic assessment of how these alternative media sites evolved with the introduction of new communication technologies, and how this digital transition affected citizen participation, mobilization, and empowerment, offering an alternative space for contesting power. The content analysis aimed not only to understand how alternative media used Facebook to encourage interaction with users and engage them in conversation, but also whether alternative media used Facebook to encourage participation and mobilization. Ultimately the content analysis of Facebook pages and posts illuminates the liberating potential of new technologies for contributing to participation both *in* technology and *through* technology. Specifically, the second set of research questions, associated with the content analysis, explored:

- RQ1: What is the relationship between the extent to which the four alternative media projects are taking advantage of Facebook’s social potential (i.e. the number of photos, videos, events and notes, and embedding of Twitter or other social media platforms), and the number of page fans and the number of fans “talking about” the page?
- RQ2: How did interactivity (i.e. liking, commenting, sharing, and responding) vary among posts published to the four Salvadoran alternative media projects’ Facebook pages?

- RQ3: What is the relationship between interactivity and the posting of multimedia elements (i.e. links, photos, videos)?
- RQ4: What is the relationship between interactivity and whether the post included accompanying text (i.e. headline, pulled quote, commentary/analysis, or greeting)?
- RQ5: Were the Facebook posts used to motivate citizens to act or to mobilize?

STUDY PURPOSE SUMMARY

In sum, the objective of this dissertation was to interrogate the usefulness and emancipatory potential of digital communication technologies in alternative media for contesting power, contributing to social change, and opening spaces for citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology. This research is merely a beginning stage in learning how digital communication tools influence alternative media practices, and what that means for participation, empowerment, and social change. More and more research shows that technologies change activism and alternative communication (Earl et al., 2010; Lievrouw, 2011). This dissertation contributes to that burgeoning literature by adding an international focus within a digitally divided context, and by furthering our understanding of how alternative media can employ new technologies in liberating ways, especially in a region where use of and access to these technologies is far from universal. After all, as Poell (2012, p. 13) noted, social media platforms are “not simply neutral communication tools,” but rather “should be understood as complex assemblages, which are deeply entangled in on- and offline techno-cultural and political economic configurations.” Ultimately this dissertation advances existing literature with two main contributions: extending our understanding of the digital divide to include inequalities of

social media use, and including technology use—whether liberating or not—as a fundamental approach to the study of alternative media. The resulting implications for alternative media and social change, especially in light of the digital divide, are discussed further in Chapter 11.

DISSERTATION OUTLINE

This dissertation is comprised of 11 chapters. Chapter Two sets the scene by situating the four media projects under study within the contextual specificities of El Salvador. Chapter Three offers a review of the relevant literature and theoretical approaches necessary for understanding the role of technology in alternative media. Chapter Four explains the qualitative and quantitative methods used to conduct this research and analyze the data. Chapters Five through Eight present the case studies of each of the four Salvadoran media sites studied. Chapter Nine builds on the four previous chapters with a content analysis of the Facebook pages and posts of each of the media projects examined. Chapter 10 compares and contrasts the four study sites. Lastly, Chapter 11 offers a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and limitations of this project, and thoughts on how future research can advance the ideas raised in this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Background

“These homilies try to be this people’s voice. They try to be the voice of those who have no voice. And so, without a doubt, they displease those who have too much voice. This poor voice will find echo in those who love the truth and who truly love our dear people.”

— Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, 29 July 1979

SETTING THE SCENE

El Salvador, about the size of Massachusetts, is the smallest yet most densely populated country in Central America, with roughly 6 million people. An estimated 35 percent of the population lives in poverty, and nearly 16 percent of those aged 15 and older are illiterate (World Bank, n.d.). By comparison, World Bank (n.d.) figures for Latin America as a whole show 10.4 percent of the region’s population living in poverty, and a 91.5 percent literacy rate. According to the United Nations Development Program’s most recent Human Development Index (HDI) report for El Salvador, life expectancy, average years of schooling, and GNI per capita all increased steadily between 1980 and 2012. The average life expectancy at birth in El Salvador for 2012 was 74 years, and the average for years of schooling was 7.5. El Salvador’s overall HDI ranking increased an average of 1.2 percent every year since 1980, to a score of .68, or medium human development, in 2012.

Despite increases in overall human development, inequalities persist: the richest 10 percent capture 37 percent of income (the top 20 percent took 53 percent of the income) while the bottom 10 percent’s share of income is a mere 1 percent and the

poorest 20 percent just 3.7 percent (World Bank, n.d.). Such inequalities in income are mirrored in access to technology (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: ICTs, press freedom, wealth and human development in Latin America, 2012

Country	Mobile density*	Internet use**	Press freedom***	GDP per capita****	HDI*****
Argentina	151.91	55.80	Partly free (52)	11,573	Very High (.811)
Bolivia	90.44	34.19	Partly free (48)	2,576	Medium (.675)
Brazil	125.00	49.85	Partly free (46)	11,340	High (.730)
Chile	138.17	61.42	Partly free (31)	15,452	Very High (.819)
Colombia	102.85	48.98	Partly free (53)	7,748	High (.719)
Costa Rica	111.92	47.50	Free (18)	9,386	High (.773)
Cuba	14.92	25.64	Not free (92)	6,0512	High (.780)
Dominican Republic	86.94	45.00	Partly free (40)	5,746	Medium (.702)
Ecuador	106.23	35.13	Not free (61)	5,425	High (.724)
El Salvador	137.34	25.50	Partly free (41)	3,790	Medium (.680)
Guatemala	137.82	16.00	Partly free (59)	3,331	Medium (.581)
Honduras	92.87	18.20	Not free (62)	2,323	Medium (.632)
Mexico	83.35	38.42	Not free (61)	9,749	High (.775)
Nicaragua	86.13	13.50	Partly free (51)	1,754	Medium (.599)
Panama	178.03	45.20	Partly free (48)	9,534	High (.780)
Paraguay	101.59	27.08	Not free (61)	3,813	Medium (.669)
Peru	98.00	38.20	Partly free (43)	6,796	High (.741)
Uruguay	147.13	55.11	Free (26)	14,703	High (.792)
Venezuela	101.88	44.05	Not free (76)	12,729	High (.748)

² Most recent data from 2011, not 2012

* *Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants, International Telecommunication Union of the United Nations (ITU) 2012.* <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

** *Percentage of individuals using the Internet, ITU 2012.* <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

*** *Freedom House Ranking 2013 (for events that occurred in 2012), press freedom ranked on a scale, where 0-30 is free, 31-60 is partly free, and 61-100 is not free.* <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press>

**** *GDP per capita US \$, World Bank 2012.* <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

***** *United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, 2012, scale of 0-1, 1 being the highest level of development.* <https://data.undp.org/dataset/Table-1-Human-Development-Index-and-its-components/wxub-qc5k>

Roughly 39 percent of Salvadoran households use radio, 85.3 percent have televisions, 25.7 percent have fixed-line telephones, 88 percent have mobile phones, 19.6 percent of households have computers, and 11.8 percent have home Internet access (ITU, 2012). When considering the Americas in general, 58.5 percent of households have computers and 56 percent have Internet access at home (ITU, 2012).

Examining how Latin Americans use the Internet, social media dominates, with users spending 30 percent of their time online on social networking sites (Breuer & Welp, 2014). Latin Americans aged 15-34 account for the bulk of social media traffic, or 60.1 percent (Breuer & Welp, 2014). Facebook is the number one social media site in Latin America, reaching about 33 percent of the region's population, or 181.7 million users, about 47 million of whom are in Mexico and Central America (Internet World Stats, 2012). El Salvador's estimated 1.5 million Internet users represent about 25 percent of the country's population (Internet World Stats, 2012). In El Salvador, Facebook is the second-most visited website (with about 1.5 million users), after google.com.sv (Alexa, 2014). YouTube is the third-most popular site, Blogspot eighth, and Twitter ninth (Alexa, 2014).

Freedom House (2014) considers El Salvador to be a "free" country, giving it a 2 for political rights and a 3 for civil rights, where 1 is most free and 7 least free. Central American neighbors Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua all are classified as "partly

free.” Although El Salvador, an electoral democracy, is rated as “free,” most Salvadorans in a nationwide survey (62.9 percent) said they were dissatisfied with democracy, and on a scale of 1-10, 1 being not democratic and 10 totally democratic, they gave El Salvador’s democracy an average rating of 6.3 (Latinobarómetro, 2011). The top three qualities surveyed respondents said hurt El Salvador’s democracy were corruption (29 percent), lack of citizen participation (28 percent), and lack of social justice (27 percent).

Concern over lack of social justice in part stems from El Salvador’s ongoing suffering from the legacy of a brutal civil war, which lasted from 1980-1992. Fueled by economic and political tensions that brewed for years, the war between El Salvador’s military-led, U.S.-backed government and a coalition of leftist guerrilla groups known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) left an estimated 75,000 people dead. Thousands more were disappeared or forced to flee as refugees (Almeida, 2008). During the war the Salvadoran government—which for years repressed leftist political groups, presumed Communists, and anyone advocating for social reforms or economic equality, including alternative media outlets—carried out a “strategy of mass murder” (Stanley, 1996, p. 225) with military death squads targeting not just guerrillas, but any civilians—sometimes entire villages—thought to support the guerrillas. “The objective of death squad terror seemed not only the elimination of opponents or suspected opponents but also, through torture and the gruesome disfiguration of bodies, the terrorization of the population” (Arnson, 2002, p. 86).

After the signing of peace accords in 1992, the FMLN demobilized and converted into a political party that in 2009 gained the presidency with the election of former journalist Mauricio Funes, the country’s first leftist president. In a heated and contested run-off election in March 2014, former FMLN guerrilla Salvador Sánchez Cerén beat right-wing candidate and former San Salvador mayor Norman Quijano by roughly 6,500

votes to win the presidency. While some Salvadorans, such as many of those at Radio Victoria and *Diario CoLatino*, view Sánchez Cerén's win as a step toward achieving the equality that the FMLN fought for during the war, the conservative mainstream media portray the continued leftist rule as damaging for political stability and the economy, and warn that El Salvador could become another Venezuela, erupting into violent protests (CLALS, 2014).

In addition to political polarization, dissatisfaction with democracy, and rampant inequality, El Salvador also contends with widespread insecurity. In a nationwide survey, roughly 63 percent of Salvadorans said they were not guaranteed protection against crime (Latinobarómetro, 2011). Despite the peace accords that ended the war, the terror and violence continues, often at the hand of criminal gangs and drug traffickers. According to media reports, the Salvadoran national police recorded more than 4,300 murders in 2011, making it the bloodiest year since the war ended, and giving El Salvador the unfortunate distinction of having one of the world's highest murder rates (McDermott, 2012). The murder rate since has dropped, in part because of an uneasy truce between rival gangs MS-13 and 18th Street (Lohmuller, 2014), but according to a 2013 report from the U.S. State Department, El Salvador still has the second-highest per-capita murder rate in the world, averaging 69 homicides per 100,000 people in 2012.

EL SALVADOR'S MEDIA

Within this context of social inequality, violence and unrest, the Salvadoran press evolved into a conservative, elitist media system common to most of Latin America. The Reporters Without Borders 2014 World Press Freedom Index ranks El Salvador as 38th of 180 countries, deeming its press freedom situation as "satisfactory." In contrast, neighbors Guatemala and Honduras are in "difficult situations" and Nicaragua has

“noticeable problems.” The press situation in Costa Rica is characterized as “good.” Freedom House, which also rates countries’ press freedom levels, listed El Salvador as “partly free” in 2013, in part because of media concentration and a lack of official recognition of community radio (about 20 community radio stations share one broadcasting frequency because of their financial inability to compete against corporate media in auctions to purchase their own frequency). Of the Central American nations, Costa Rica was the only country Freedom House rated as having a “free” press; Honduras was “not free,” and the rest were “partly free.”

El Salvador’s constitution guarantees protections for press freedom, and in 2011 the government decriminalized libel, slander, and defamation. In May of 2012, a public information access law went into effect, although as of the end of 2013 its use was not widespread. The 1997 Telecommunications Law continues to repress community broadcast media by refusing to officially recognize them and by making it all but impossible for them to obtain operating licenses.³

A national survey from 2012 showed that 62 percent of El Salvador’s population said they consumed news every day (IUDOP, 2012). Most Salvadorans (88.1 percent) got their news from television, about 5.5 percent said they listened to the radio, 3.9 percent said they read the newspaper, and 2.5 percent went online for news and information (IUDOP, 2012). Television’s overwhelming dominance raises questions about media plurality and the diversity of voices to which audiences are exposed considering that roughly 40 percent of the country’s 23 national TV channels are controlled by just two companies: Telecorporación Salvadoreña (TCS) and Megavisión (Pérez & Carballo, 2013). The Eserski family owns TCS, whose channels 2, 4, and 6 attract the greatest

³ This information comes from Freedom House’s 2014 report on press freedom in El Salvador; the author of this dissertation writes the Freedom House reports for El Salvador and Guatemala.

viewership in the country. The Eserskis also control more than a dozen radio stations as well as the country's most powerful advertising agencies (Valencia, 2005). The Eserski family has ties to the banking industry, while the family that owns Megavisión is closely aligned with the telecommunications and tourism industries (Pérez & Carballo, 2013). Of the country's five newspapers, four belong to just two families (Valencia, 2005). The Dutriz family, which owns the daily newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* and the sports newspaper *El Gráfico*, has commercial ties with the coffee business (historically coffee is one of the country's largest exports) and a chain of grocery stores, Súper Selectos, which is one of the newspaper's biggest advertisers (Pérez & Carballo, 2013). The Altamirano family, connected to various businesses, including real estate and telephone books, owns the daily *Diario De Hoy* and the popular tabloid *Más!*. Interestingly, in a 2012 national survey, media in general ranked as the country's fifth-most trustworthy institution (out of 15), below the Catholic church and evangelical churches, but higher than the federal government, the human rights ombudsman office, and the Supreme Court (IUDOP, 2012). However, rather than a ringing endorsement of the media—media may have been in fifth place but only 27 percent of the population said it trusted the media—the results indicate an overall dissatisfaction with institutions in El Salvador.

Historically, the region's media show a mix of state- or market-centered systems, although most Latin American media from the beginning were private enterprises catering to the elites (even authoritarian and military regimes), with a purpose less journalistic than commercial- and market-oriented (Cañizález & Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Rockwell & Janus, 2003; Waisbord, 2000). Any attempts at media regulation tended to reflect elites' desire to maintain political control (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Lugo-Ocando, 2008). Government interference became widespread, whether through outright censorship, the imposition of licenses and fees, or, more recently, the allocation—or

denial—of state advertising, and restriction of access to government sources. Today, while official government censorship in the region is rare, “Latin American media are hardly free from threats and pressures from political actors of all stripes, including government officials. Indeed, the last decade has witnessed a serious erosion of press freedom throughout the region” (Hughes & Lawson, 2005, p. 10).

The commercial growth of Latin America’s broadcasting systems took off in the 1970s, when much of the region was under the thumb of right-wing military dictatorships that supported free-market principles (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). In fact, mutually beneficial relationships between the authoritarian states and the media industry resulted in the growth of strong broadcast monopolies, such as in Mexico and Brazil (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Hughes & Lawson, 2005). As Fox (1997, p. 3) noted, “commercial autonomy often came in exchange for the media’s political docility,” even support for military regimes, and that “docility” allowed most media companies to outlive the dictatorships. These “collusive relations” between media owners and the political elites that developed during the dictatorships continue today, prompting the market concentration that took off in the 1990s (Hughes & Lawson, 2005).

After beginning the transition to democracy in the 1980s, most Latin American countries in the 1990s were characterized, in terms of media, by the rise of multimedia mega-corporations (media concentration with both international and local ownership), the decline of family-owned media (although more so in broadcast than print media outlets), increased local television production, and increased regional trade, all of which were made possible by neoliberal reforms, growth of the free market, and a decrease in the role of the state (Fox & Waisbord, 2002, Viely et al., 2008). Still, liberalization and privatization have not yet democratized the media, but rather politicians and media owners maintain the “quid pro quo dynamics of personal favors and clientelism” (Fox &

Waisbord, 2002, p. 10). In other words, politicians and other elites, such as business owners, share in an asymmetric clientelistic relationship with the media whereby the *patron* (the elites) bestows favors on the *client* (the media) in exchange for support. Rockwell and Janus (2002) argued that the media in Central America further the interests of the elite, helping maintain elite control rather than opening a space for alternative voices. Neo-conservative oligopolies of Central America bent on commodification of the media ensured that “homogeneity rules over diversity in content and cultural forms” (Sandoval-Garcia, 2008, p. 100). The consolidated, conservative media outlets share the same interests and thus cover the same types of stories, resulting in a lack of media pluralism, both in terms of ownership and content. The same has been documented in South American countries like Bolivia and Paraguay, where the political media have been replaced by a commercial, tabloidized product whose owners are tightly linked with political and economic elites, and where the media protect their own interests, rather than those of society (Aldana-Amabile, 2008; Torrico Villanueva, 2008). As Hughes and Lawson (2005, p. 14) noted, such symbiotic relations created a media system in which:

private media companies rarely rock the boat politically. Internally, these family-run enterprises rarely allow a separation between ownership and editorial control...It remains common practice for media owners to sack journalists who offend them, their political supporters, key advertisers, or friendly business interests. (Hughes & Lawson, 2005, p. 14)

As a result, media lack a diversity of viewpoints. For example, Mexican media owner Angel Gonzalez controls much of Central American television, pushing Mexican programming that is “geared toward the elite and middle class of Mexico City rather than a Central American audience” (Rockwell & Janus, 2002). Similarly, Herman and McChesney (1997) saw the power of Globo in Brazil as “part of a global system that will press consumerist and neoliberal ideology, unremittingly and with vast resources” (p.

166). The same occurred in Chile, where concentration of ownership and a media driven by market forces and a dependence on advertising led to a lack of pluralism and the “destruction of the dynamic alternative press” as the media “impose on the public agenda themes that do not necessarily correspond to the real concerns of society, but to the interests of the dominant elite” (Gonzalez-Rodriguez, 2008, pp. 62, 71). As one El Salvadoran journalist put it:

Our media have been aligned with official power, with political cronies, with economic interests, and with ideologies, in an almost feudal style of journalism. But it is time to get rid of our fear of offending the almighty advertiser. The advertiser should see that his interests are best served in the medium that sells the most copies, not the one with the most biased news. That is the law of the market. (Rockwell & Janus, 2003, pp. 8-9)

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

Unknown assassins, widely believed to be part of a death squad led by former Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, assassinated El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero while he celebrated mass in a hospital chapel in the capital of San Salvador on March 24, 1980⁴. Known as “the voice of the voiceless,” Romero generally is considered a martyr and saint among Latin America's poor, with his tomb in the heart of San Salvador a destination for pilgrims and tourists alike.⁵ In the late 1970s and 80s, as escalating inequality and state repression erupted into the bloody 12- year civil war that pitted leftist insurgents against right-wing authoritarian government forces (Almeida,

⁴ No one has been prosecuted for Romero's assassination, although a U.S. human rights organization filed a civil suit against Roberto D'Aubuisson's chief of security, Álvaro Rafael Saravia, who also was a former captain in the Salvadoran Air Force. In 2004 a U.S. court found Saravia liable and ordered him to pay \$10 million for conspiring to kill Romero, but Saravia went into hiding before the trial. In an exclusive interview with El Salvador's online investigative newspaper *El Faro* in 2010, Saravia confessed his own participation in the crime, as well as named D'Aubuisson, who died of cancer in 1992, as the mastermind. Several others who he said participated, including the sniper, are either dead or disappeared (Dada, 2010).

⁵ In April 2013, the Catholic Church announced that the process to beatify and eventually canonize Romero was moving forward (Wooden, 2013).

2008), Romero used his pastoral letters and weekly homilies broadcast on a Catholic church radio station to advocate for the poor, the oppressed, social justice, and *campesinos'* right to organize (Sobrino, 1985). He gave a “voice to the voiceless,” as his words “had the power of truth in a country where the media is controlled by the government and given to falsifying reality in favor of the wealthy and powerful” (Wright, 1994). Recognizing that “information is manipulated by various authorities and groups” (Romero, 1985, p. 123), Romero publicly chastised those in the mainstream media, saying, “It is a shame to not be able to trust the news in the papers, the television or the radio because it has already been bought and tampered with; it is not the truth” (2 April 1978). Because the media could not be trusted, Romero wrote that the church, and thus he, had a responsibility to be the “voice of the voiceless” and “a defender of the rights of the poor, a promoter of every just aspiration for liberation, a guide, an empowerer, a humanizer of every legitimate struggle to achieve a more just society” (Romero, 1985, p. 138). In the weeks leading up to his killing, he called on the military and its death squads to “stop the repression” of “our tormented people whose cries rise up to heaven,” and he pleaded with the United States to cut off aid to the Salvadoran military.

Romero’s death did not quiet the growing cries for justice. To the contrary, after his assassination the country’s first clandestine radio stations emerged as part of the insurgency’s strategy, with the stations fighting “to establish an alternative hegemony that would replace the system of beliefs and values that kept the Salvadoran rulers in power” (Darling, 2008, p. 84). The birth of revolutionary radio stations like Radio Venceremos and Radio Farabundo Martí took up where Romero left off, ensuring Romero’s views would not be silenced by introducing new voices and discussions into the public sphere and providing communities of listeners the information and opinions otherwise censored in mainstream media (Darling, 2008; Pérez & Carballo, 2013).

These revolutionary media helped pave the way for current alternative media in El Salvador (Pérez, 2013). Romero's photo hangs on many a newsroom wall and the journalists and activists at these alternative media projects have taken on Romero's mission to be a "voice for the voiceless." This is especially crucial in a country like El Salvador, where the mainstream, commercial media comprise an oligopoly closely linked to groups of political and economic power (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013). Media concentration, combined with media companies' ties to elites, resulted in a media discourse that mostly ignores the most vulnerable and marginalized sectors of society (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013). For example, a content analysis of El Salvador's three leading mainstream newspapers shows little attention paid to women's rights, gay rights, or the promotion of a culture of peace (Lara López, 2013). Likewise, an analysis of television programming demonstrates little recognition for indigenous populations beyond their entertainment value (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013).

While traditional communication spaces are mostly closed to alternative voices and viewpoints, the advent of the Internet provides a slight opening for those voices normally excluded from mainstream media (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013). The entrance of online news sites "has begun to break a little bit the monologue of ideas" of mainstream media (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013, p. 39). Couldry and Curran (2003) and Herman and McChesney (1997) pointed to the potential of the Internet (despite limited access) for expressing alternative views and offering noncommercial media options. Little recent empirical research, however, sheds light on the state of alternative media, particularly online alternative media, throughout Latin America. One exception is a content analysis that compared the way mainstream newspapers and digital news sites in El Salvador covered gender and the women's and LGBT movements (Lara López, 2013). The study found that "alternative" online news sites made gender part of their agendas,

and included movement participants' perspectives in an effort to educate the public about their causes and go beyond simply reporting on breaking news (Lara López, 2013). The result, according to Lara López (2013), is that digital alternative media serve as a counterweight to mainstream media, offering different voices and perspectives and aiming not only to inform their readers, but also to help generate new and different opinions (Lara López, 2013). In a similar study comparing traditional media and online alternative media, Flores Argueta and Beltrán de Cantarely (2013) found that digital alternative outlets are more likely than mainstream newspapers to cover stories promoting a culture of peace, such as topics related to historic memory and war victims. The authors argued that the digital news sites helped strengthen democracy by emphasizing a culture of peace. While little access to the Internet or other new technologies means any real changes to the current media system will not happen overnight, the exponential development of information and communication technologies in El Salvador implies that now is the time for alternative media to take advantage of changes in communication and use them for social change (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013).

El Salvador's long history of oppression and violence, coupled with its elite-controlled media system, provided the conditions allowing for strong alternative media to develop as a way for marginalized groups to bypass the often-(self)censored mainstream media (Agosta, 2007; Rodriguez, 2001). Excluded from the mainstream media, grassroots groups and other marginalized citizens created alternative and citizens' media as a way to counterbalance the hegemonic power of media conglomerates (Reyes Matta, 1986; Rodriguez, 2001). Martín Barbero (2000) noted the way in which ordinary citizens, excluded from the mega-media corporations, find ways to express themselves by constructing new "forms of communication that are recreating cultural identities" (p. 125). From Roque Dalton, the poet laureate of the Salvadoran revolution, and the war-era

underground guerrilla station *Radio Venceremos* (“We will overcome” radio), to the opposition newspaper *Diario CoLatino* and myriad community radio stations throughout the country, alternative media are firmly embedded within El Salvador’s history and culture. This alternative media movement takes a subjective position of engagement as citizens contribute collectively to an egalitarian, non-hierarchical structure of grassroots journalism. Such media not only speak directly to and about local communities and grassroots groups marginalized by the mainstream media, but they also offer people the opportunity to speak on their own behalf, thus defining their communities and identities for themselves. In an unequal country like El Salvador, then, alternative media serve as vital outlets for self-expression, social inclusion, and advocacy for social justice and democracy—all four projects in this study strive to achieve these ideals.

Chapter 3: Theory and Literature Review

In light of the existing domination over information, of the ease with which it is managed by and communicated to the network of power, it is not difficult to imagine the difficulties faced by those operating at the extremities of the circuit. How limited is the power of those, for example, working in the soybean fields of Brazil, who can hardly imagine that the possibilities of their production are known with long notice at the Chicago stock exchange.

— Freire, 1997

Ever since the Zapatistas—dubbed the world’s “first informational guerrilla movement” (Castells, 2004, p. 75)—in Chiapas, Mexico, used the Internet to mobilize international support and stave off an attack by the national Army in 1994, and the global justice activists in Seattle in 1999 created IndyMedia as a way to offer news about the World Trade Organization protests suppressed by the mainstream media, new digital technologies have been changing—some would even say revolutionizing—the activist’s “repertoire of contention” (Tilly, 1978). These rapid changes challenge our understandings of the functions and purposes of alternative media in this new digital era. Scholars highlight the way digital media amplify traditional “analog” activism, allowing activists to easily, cheaply and immediately spread information around the globe, collapsing boundaries of time and space (Ayres, 1999; Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005; Ribeiro, 1998; Vegh, 2003). Others go so far as to contend that new media can actually create new forms of activism, such as through hacking and other online-only acts of resistance (Cardoso & Pereira Neto, 2004; Rolfe, 2005; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009). Optimists herald the Internet as an alternative, democratic space that allows activists to bypass the gatekeepers of mainstream media and create, control and disseminate their own message, reaching beyond their historical geographic or ideological boundaries (Bennett, 2004; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; van de Donk et. al, 2004). As Postmes and

Brunsting (2002) noted, one of the greatest strengths of the Internet gives “movements and activists the power of mass communication” (p. 294).

Still, considering the digital divide, both between and within countries, it is worthwhile to maintain some amount of skepticism about the democratic potential of the Internet. On the other hand, in light of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and other recent social media driven social movements, it seems naïve to contend, as do some, that digital technologies are too impersonal to create the levels of trust needed to sustain collective action (Diani, 2000; Polat, 2005), or that the Internet in fact weakens activism (Morozov, 2009). Rather the reality seems to lie somewhere in between, because the digital evolution of alternative media is evident, whether in terms of the communication tools activists use (Costanza-Chock, 2003), or the way in which activists communicate, sending messages within, across, and outside their organizations (Bennett, 2004; van de Donk et. al, 2004). How this ultimately affects social change remains to be seen, but clearly the traditional “analog” approaches to alternative media must be updated for a new digital reality.

In light of this ongoing digital evolution, it is worth considering to what extent existing theories related to alternative media apply to new digital technologies. It also is important to note that this is an evolution, and not a revolution, as incorporating new media theories does not necessarily mean overthrowing the entire paradigm. Rather, more probable is an evolutionary process in which analog approaches simultaneously adapt to and resist digital approaches, resulting in a new, hybrid (Martín Barbero, 1993) way of examining online alternative media and social change. To help shed light on how alternative media and activism are affected by evolving technologies, and the challenges they face because of the digital divide, this chapter reviews the existing literature and theories related to: a) alternative media in general; b) alternative media in Latin America;

c) alternative media in the digital era; d) activism in the digital era; e) the digital divide; f) the digital divide in Latin America; g) the concept of liberation technology (Diamond, 2010); and lastly h) participation.

DEFINING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Since the 1970s, when the UNESCO MacBride Commission, recognizing inequitable North-South flows of news and information, called for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) prioritizing horizontal, grassroots and radical media as a way to counter the hegemonic, top-down, Westernized media conglomerates, scholars increasingly have focused on research in alternative communication. The interactivity of Web 2.0 and a turn toward a participatory media culture (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze et al., 2007) at the turn of the century also seemingly prompted a renewed interest in alternative media and academic explorations of how new digital technologies change our understanding of alternative media.

Despite more than three decades of research, scholars still have not settled on a definition, let alone a preferred term, for alternative media. Under the umbrella heading of “alternative,” scholars alternately and often interchangeably refer to terms such as radical media (Downing, 2001), citizens’ media (Rodríguez, 2001), community media, grassroots media, participatory media, activist media, or counter-information. These terms share a common goal to move past a binary understanding of alternative media as simply an alternative to mainstream. This dissertation does not claim that a lack of a fixed definition is a bad thing—after all, the diversity of media (everything from art to print to the Internet) that can offer a broad range of alterity means that, in today’s rapidly evolving mediascape, any strict standards about what is “alternative” could potentially hamper studies, excluding potential forms of alternative communication—some of which

may not yet be invented. Nor is it necessarily productive to have such a broad, all-encompassing definition that seeks to satisfy every purpose. Without a single definition, then, scholars typically approach alternative media by examining the production process and the content produced, often reducing alternative communication to binary conceptualizations: alternative media versus mainstream media, grassroots versus top-down, non-commercial versus commercial.

Perhaps one of the broadest, most inclusive definitions of “alternative media” comes from Atton (2002), who argued that almost anything can be considered alternative, depending on the context. His definition privileges an alternative, anti-capitalist, participatory production process over content. As such, alternative media do not necessarily have to be radical, emancipatory or pushing for social change—repressive, reactionary, or conservative media can be considered “alternative” from Atton’s perspective. Like Atton, Gumucio Dagron (2004) also identified participation as the foundation for alternative media. According to Gumucio Dagron (2004), “the alternative spirit remains as long as the participatory component is not minimized and excluded” (p. 48).

In today’s Web 2.0 era of digital participation and interactivity, however, when any media consumer theoretically also can be a producer, such an emphasis on the production process means that under Atton and Gumucio Dagron’s definition, almost anything serves as alternative. As Díaz Bordenave (1994) noted, we must be careful to avoid “participationitis” (excessive participation at every level so that chaos results and nothing is accomplished) and banalization of participation in which anything is deemed participation. Instead, the term “participation” should be limited to “joint efforts of people for achieving a common important objective previously defined by them” (Díaz Bordenave, 1994, p. 46). This focus on the participatory process, however, leaves unclear

the relationship with power, raising the question of whether, in this participatory digital culture, blogging or tweeting about one's daily, mundane activities truly is empowering (and not just narcissistic), and if so, to what end? Somewhat addressing this concern, Atton (2002) suggested that there are different degrees and dimensions of radicality. For example, if a product were produced "radically" in terms of its organizing structure, but only professional journalists produced the content, it should not necessarily be discounted as not alternative. Thus, he argued, "the absence of radicality in any dimension may not limit a medium's revolutionary potential" (Atton, 2002, p. 29).

While Atton's definition appears most inclusive, leading alternative media scholar Downing (2001) provides one of the most limiting ones. Noting that "alternative" is an ambiguous term since "everything, at some point, is alternative to something else" (Downing et al., 2001, p. ix), Downing suggested that "radical" be added as a qualifier to "alternative media." Further, Downing believes terms like "community" and "grassroots" media are inadequate, merely excluding mainstream media rather than explaining exactly what they include. For Downing, radical alternative media are oppositional and interdependent with social justice movements. They are non-mainstream, typically small, under-funded, and counter-hegemonic, offering counter-information as a way to push for large-scale, long-term social change. Unlike Atton (2002), then, Downing covered content, context and production with his definition. Downing's Gramscian-inspired emphasis on counter-hegemonic resistance explicitly links radical alternative media to power and oppression, as "radical alternative media serve as developmental power agents" (2001, p. 44). The liberating or emancipatory potential of radical alternative media is not confined to traditional media forms, however, as Downing argued for the inclusion of music, art, and theater as alternative media. If graffiti under Downing's definition can be radical, then it follows that online social media, if the content message

were radical, could also be deemed “alternative.” Including content, and not just process, as a qualifier for “alternative” seems all the more relevant in a digital era to avoid the “banalization” and purposeless clutter of online participation.

Rodríguez (2001) builds on Downing’s (2001) conception of radical alternative media, proffering the notion of “citizens’ media,” wherein the production and consumption of media change or validate the individual’s concept of the “self.” In “citizens’ media,” everyday citizens participate in the mediascape, contesting hegemonic power structures through the very process of intervention in the media. Thus, participating in citizens’ media can be considered a pre-political act of resistance, empowering participants to exercise their citizenship. Rodríguez’s conception of “citizens’ media” attempts to move beyond a binary analysis of alternative media, which she believes serves to marginalize alternative media and position them as somehow lesser than mainstream media. For Rodríguez, alternative is not just about being in opposition to the mainstream. Rather, it’s about “becoming one’s own storyteller” (2001, p. 3) in order to recoup one’s voice and re-construct one’s own self-image and social context in order to disrupt the traditional, hegemonic identities imposed by outside powers. In other words, her idea is rooted in Freire’s (1970) concept of conscientization, or “the transformation of passive, voiceless, dominated communities into active shapers of their own destiny” (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 180). While Downing saw alternative media as contributing to long-term, large-scale social change, Rodríguez views individual change and empowerment as a prerequisite for larger social change. Effects, then, are at the individual level, and not necessarily at the societal level. One of the weaknesses of Rodríguez’s conceptualization, however, is that it assumes emancipatory effects automatically result from citizens participating in the media production process, and that engaging in alternative media always disrupts power. This raises the question of whether

the media actually are a necessary component of empowerment, or whether it is simply about self-expression. While much of Rodríguez's work on citizens' media centers on community radio, her concept easily can be extended to online community media, such as blogs or a Facebook group, so long as the goal is participation and empowerment. This again leads to the question: In today's digital culture when theoretically anyone can keep a blog or a v-log that perhaps no one will ever read or see, is online self-expression empowering in and of itself? Thus, it is important to consider the online medium and how it is being used. Digital media could be offering a new form of self-expression with the potential for individual and social change because the Internet, unlike any other medium, offers the possibility for videos, a blog post—even a restaurant review—to go “viral” and spread like fire around the world, raising awareness about anything from a new dance craze to human rights abuses.

Lievrouw (2011) recognized this possibility, suggesting that new digital technologies provide inherently different tools for activism, and not just better tools. Looking specifically at alternative and activist uses of digital media, she offered a conceptualization of “alternative” that sees communication processes and social movements as intertwined, much like Downing (2001). She identified “alternative/activist new media” as those that “employ or modify communication artifacts, practices, and social arrangements of new information and communication technologies to challenge or alter dominant, expected, or accepted ways of doing society, culture, and politics” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 19). Like both Downing and Rodriguez, Lievrouw valued not just content and process, but also the end goal. She noted that interactivity is a crucial part of online alternative media, and argued that digital activist media are characterized by three main features: 1) their scope (i.e. small-scale and collaborative); 2) their stance (i.e. outside the mainstream, counter-sites, “insider”

information and “recuperated knowledge, ironic, appropriation); and 3) action and agency (i.e. interventionist). Ultimately, for Lievrouw, information communication technology represents more than just a medium or a tool for activists, but rather new media “might in fact constitute movements and action in themselves” (2011, p. 157). This clearly is a departure from previous approaches to alternative media and social movement theories, and seems to flow well from Rodríguez’s concept of citizens’ media. Rodríguez saw participation in the communication process as constituting change, and it seems logical to build upon that with the idea that new media themselves are not just the channel, but the “real, practical field of action where movements themselves are created, contested, and played out” (Lievrouw, 2011 p. 156). As such, online alternative/activist media hold the potential to be more than just a digital version of analog alternative media, and more research must be conducted into what sets digital media apart. This dissertation attempted to further explore this possibility of digital media bringing something new to the alternative media table.

Couldry and Curran (2003) offer a less-politicized version of “citizens’ media” that they contend is in fact closer to Atton’s definition of alternative media. Less concerned with whether media are “politically radical or socially empowering,” (2003, p. 7), Couldry and Curran instead focus on alternative media as “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power” (p. 7). For Couldry (2003), any liberating potential of alternative media comes from opening wide the production process, thus undermining mass media’s power by redistributing it to the public, as “media power is an emergent form of social power” (Couldry & Curran, 2003, p. 4, italics in the original). Clearly, the Internet provides that opening to the production process, meaning that new digital technologies could perhaps offer social power. However, because certain marginalized groups already face challenges in accessing new

technologies due to the digital divide, the potential exists for media power to be taken from the mainstream, but given to other elites, thus still leaving subaltern groups powerless. This dilemma is especially relevant to this dissertation, as the Internet penetration rate in El Salvador is just 25 percent, meaning that any efforts to use digital tools in counterhegemonic ways reach just a fraction of the population, and are most likely led by elites speaking on behalf of the marginalized, rather than letting the marginalized speak for themselves.

Quite different from much of the existing alternative media literature is Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) notion of alternative media as critical media. Criticizing much of the scholarship for positing an automatic link between emancipatory ends and participatory media processes, they argued that defining alternative media as "participatory" is problematic for three reasons: (1) "Small-scale participatory media often remain marginal, which brings about the danger of a fragmentation of the public sphere" (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, p. 143); (2) participation can be used to repress or accumulate profit; and (3) this creates exclusivity, excluding "many oppositional media that provide critical content, but make use of professional organization structures" (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, p. 145). Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) pushed for a dialectical understanding of the relationship between "media actors" (producers and consumers) and the "media system" (economic form, content, technologies, institutions, etc.). The result of such a dialectic, they argued, is "ideal-typical alternative media," in which the form is non-commercial, the content is critical, and producers become consumers and vice versa. Of course, they noted, under a capitalist system:

Non-commercial, participatory, and collective organization can often only be sustained at the cost of public visibility and political effectiveness... Realizing an ideal model of alternative media presupposes different societal conditions. This means that it requires that people have enough time and skills for not only

consuming, but also producing media content and that the necessary technologies for media production are freely available. (Sandoval & Fuschs, 2010, p. 146)

In a capitalist society with a digital divide, then, participation is severely limited, meaning that critical media content should be used as a minimum requirement for defining alternative media since “giving people a voice by involving them in media production does therefore not mean that their voice is also heard” (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, p. 148). Their perspective is especially relevant when considering the restraints imposed by lack of access to new technologies.

Recognizing that definitions and approaches to alternative media abound, Bailey and colleagues (2007) highlighted the diversity and contingency of alternative media, arguing that alternative media are an ongoing process, and what is alternative under one setting at one point of time might not be alternative in a different context at a different time. They relied on a multi-theoretical combination of four approaches “in order to capture the diversity and specificity of alternative media” (Bailey et al., 2007, p. 5), creating a broad, panoptic view of alternative media that avoids a “prescriptive definition that would include some and exclude others” (Bailey et al., 2007, p. 7). These four approaches include: serving the community (community access and participation in the media process), an alternative to mainstream (counter-hegemonic, horizontally organized), part of civil society (media as Servaes’ [1999] “third voice,”), and the rhizome (elusive, contingent, interconnected with the market and the state). These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but rather should be applied simultaneously in order to best capture the diversity and contingency of alternative media.

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN LATIN AMERICA

In Latin America, “alternative media” have been defined as citizens’ media, grassroots media, participatory media, indigenous media, democratic communication, and

popular communication, but “the thread that links them is the desire to foster substantially different structures and processes of communication that make possible egalitarian, interactive, and emancipatory discourse” (Atwood, 1986, p. 19). According to Shmidt (2009, p. 188), alternative is not so much a communicational end in itself, as a “new vision about power relations.” One of the paradigmatic works comes from Argentine Margarita Graziano (1980) who proposed delimiting the various terms (i.e. alternative, participatory, horizontal, etc.) and using the catch-all “alternative communication.” While Western conceptions of alternative media have focused on providing an alternative to “the transnational expansion of capitalism” (Reyes Matta, 1986, p. 196), in Latin America alternative media studies are more contextualized in discourses about uneven information—and thus power—flows stemming from the New World Information and Communication Order debates.

More than 40 years ago Latin American scholars like Beltrán (1980) and Dorfman and Mattelart (1971) began calling attention to the uneven media flows between developed countries and developing ones, and the cultural dominance of the West (particularly the United States). Schiller (1976) characterized the problem as “cultural imperialism,” or:

The processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote, the values and structures of the dominant center of the system. (p. 9)

Boyd-Barrett (1977) built on Schiller’s concept, referring to “media imperialism,” or the idea that one country’s media are subject to the media from another country without any kind of local influence or two-way flow. In other words, the information and knowledge of developed nations dominated that of client states, or less developed nations. The “Many Voices, One World” report by the MacBride Commission (UNESCO, 1980)—the

first to examine international communication patterns—found unequal information flows between First and Third world countries. According to the report, which led to recommendations for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), information flow was one-way, moving from the First World to Third World countries. Further, just a few transnational media corporations controlled most global media traffic. The report supported “freedom of journalists” and “freedom of the press,” rejected state media monopolies, and called for “wider and better balance” and a “plurality of channels and information,” aimed at eliminating the imbalanced global media. About the same time, critical communication scholars in Latin America began “asserting that liberation, not liberalism, is the foundation for their desired form of democracy” (Atwood, 1986, pp. 19-20), and research on alternative communication in Latin America flourished as scholars began studying the ways people in different settings resisted hegemonic media and power structures (McAnany, 1986).

Simpson Grinberg (1986) viewed alternative communication in Latin America as a form of “social resistance,” as “this form of communication constitutes an alternative to the dominant discourse of power at all levels” (p. 169). This line of thinking, common to much research on alternative communication in Latin America, is tied closely with the progressive Catholic movement Liberation Theology, and the pedagogy of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire and his conceptualization of dialogic communication (1970).

Freire (1970), considered the Latin American founding father of participatory communication for social change, advocated for dialogue and horizontal communication leading to self-awareness (what he termed “conscientization”), emancipation and, ultimately, social change. Dialogue is at the heart of self-realization, and through dialogue, then, individuals can transform their worlds. His “pedagogy of the oppressed,” via an adult literacy program associated with political and civic consciousness-raising

(conscientization), developed an emancipatory process that involves reflective action and “naming the world.” Participation, Freire believed, would reduce power imbalances. “His pedagogy, which posits the central category of dialogue, entails that recovering the voice of the oppressed is the fundamental condition for human emancipation” (Aronowitz, 1993, p. 18). Freire’s ideas centered on citizen participation and dialogical communication heavily influenced the educational programs taken up by local Christian liberation theology-following radio stations that eventually morphed into community radio stations and the region wide call to “give voice to the voiceless” (Shmidt, 2009). While Freire’s work was not specifically aimed at media, it nevertheless influenced how scholars think about alternative media and participatory communication:

Although Freire never really linked his analysis to the use of particular media, it is implicit in his writings that communication, in order to be effective, has to be participatory, dialogic and reciprocal. In fact, the entire enterprise of participatory communication projects, from the organization and production of community radio in Latin America, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia, through the practices of popular theatre in countries like Brazil, Chile, Jamaica, South Africa, India, and the Philippines utilize[s] Freire’s perspective. (Thomas, 1994, p. 51)

In the 1980s, as much of the region saw leftist guerrillas rising against right-wing authoritarian governments and producing their own underground media, since much of the mainstream press was either co-opted or shut down by the government, scholars further built on Freire’s work to emphasize citizen participation in alternative communication. Much like Rodríguez (2001) would do 15 years later with her notion of citizens’ media, Reyes Matta (1986) posited a concept based on Freire, in which citizens’ participatory, consciousness-raising “process of dialogue” is “fed by suitable contributions from marginal and oppositional expressions” (pp. 191, 201). In fact, since Beltrán (1980), like Freire, critiqued the dominant vertical models of information transmission, calling for horizontal communication, dialogue and participation, Latin

American communications research has been dominated by “participatory communication” (Huesca, 2003, p. 567). According to Martin-Barbero (2006), the public’s exclusion from avenues for self-expression by media conglomerates resulted in participation and “the development of new actors and forms of communication that are recreating cultural identities” (p. 125). In other words, alternative forms of communication result when people are prevented from expressing themselves, excluded from the monopolies of mainstream media.

Building on the importance of citizen participation, Latin American scholars also underscore the role of “counter-information” produced by citizens as a type of political intervention (Sel, 2009). As such, media outlets that produce counter-information are not independent, but rather associated with a particular social change project, and committed to political transformation, such as the miners’ community radio stations in Bolivia (Sel, 2009; Vinelli & Rodríguez Esperón, 2004). Opposed to the rhetoric of objectivity in mainstream media, and fed up with mainstream media’s manipulation of information, counter-information media as a result are dedicated to transparency, making explicit their political nature by criticizing dominant information and constructing their own agenda (Vinelli & Rodríguez Esperón, 2004). Along with counter-information, Kejval (2010) pointed to autonomous communication (information that has overcome political and ideological influences to allow for truly free expression and thought) and citizen communication (the need for which stems in part from the traditional lack of public media and lack of citizen representation throughout the region) as being the current dominant perspectives within alternative communication research in Latin America.

A MESTIZAJE APPROACH TO ALTERNATIVE DIGITAL MEDIA

Typically, research on alternative media in Latin America trends toward dualisms falling into three main clusters: “processes and structures,” “goals and content,” and “essence of communication” (Huesca, 1994, pp. 55-56). A critique of such dualisms resulted in what scholars varyingly refer to as “hybridization,” “syncretism,” or “mestizaje” (Huesca, 1994). For Martín Barbero (1993), the Latin American concept of mestizaje, based on the idea of racial mixing, applies to media in that popular culture, or a sub-culture, simultaneously adopts, adapts and resists the dominant culture, and thus creates something new. As he noted, “there is no imposition from above which does not imply, in some form, an incorporation of what comes from below” (Martin Barbero, 1993, p. 99). In fact Downing (2001, p. 159) argued that the “mestizaje of the popular and the oppositional, even of the hegemonic” is a “hybrid quality” characteristic of radical media. Atton (2003) likewise suggested that an alternative medium and its radicality could be interrogated “in terms of its multi-dimensional character, a perspective that privileges the overlap and intersection of dimensions” (pp. 27-28). This implies then, that alternative media are always hybrids, which, as Martín Barbero (1993), Canclini (1995) and Kraidy (2005) noted, indicates a struggle, or tension, between cultures, traditions, even countries and classes. A mestizaje approach to alternative media also helps answer Rodriguez’s (2001) concern that alternative media often are dismissed as being the “other” media. Similarly, Portales (1981) critiqued the assumption of alternative media as an “answer” to one-way, commercial, monopolistic mass media (Simpson Grinberg, 1986). Portales (1981) argued that such a notion marginalizes alternative media, rather than creating a new, hybrid, multi-directional, horizontal model of communication. This concept of mestizaje also is useful for thinking about computer-mediated communication, as online social media are hybrids in and of themselves,

because they allow for multi-directional information and communication flows, blending aspects of mainstream and alternative media. As Lievrouw (2011) noted, online alternative/activist media represent exactly this mediated, hybridized, multi-dimensional mode of communication. Further, in a region still very much reliant on 20th-century technologies like radio, the online and the offline in El Salvador blend together, requiring a *mestizaje* conceptualization of the way the digital and the analog mix to create potential new ways for alternative media to encourage participation and push for social change.

Still, as Kraidy (2005) pointed out, *mestizaje*, hybridity, even mediation, can be about incorporating traditions into the hegemonic fold, used as a coercive tool to promote the interests of the dominant put into power because of globalization: “As a discourse that recognizes, even celebrates cultural difference, *mestizaje* in effect is a tool for bleaching all but the most benign practices that gave pre-Hispanic natives their identities” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 67). Much like racial *mestizaje* was about whitening the indigenous populations, cultural *mestizaje*, or hybridity, from this view can be seen as a way of appropriating the traditional culture in an attempt to make the local seem less “other,” neutralizing any differences. Addressing this negative potential, Pieterse (1995) posited a hybridity continuum that stretches from assimilationist hybridity that “mimics the hegemony” (p. 56) to a “destabilizing hybridity that blurs the canon, reverses the current, subverts the center” (p. 57). Similarly, Straubhaar (2007) suggested hybridity is composed of multiple layers of culture and identity, resulting in either resistance (i.e. superficially masking the indigenous/traditional so that it appears different) or mixture. A hybrid approach to digital alternative media in El Salvador, then, must recognize that digital technologies, particularly social media, are Western, capitalist tools that may require adapting and resistance in order to be used in counterhegemonic ways.

Ultimately, alternative communication research in Latin America, like that in the United States, is confronted with a lack of consensus about what “alternative” means. Still, there are common threads throughout the research: alternative media aim for social and political change, resist hegemony, and they must be analyzed and understood within their own particular economic, political cultural, and social contexts (Kejval, 2010). As Vinelli and Rodríguez Esperón (2004) argued, alternative communication is a practice, and thus cannot be understood a priori to experience. Similar to Bailey et al. (2007), Vinelli and Rodríguez Esperón (2004) consider alternative media to be an ongoing process, not a state of being, thus making a stable definition not only impossible, but also undesirable.

Taking into account all the above, then, an examination of the evolution of alternative media vis-à-vis digital technologies requires a definition of “alternative media” as a multi-dimensional, overlapping term that takes into account not just content, process, and product, but also the digital tools themselves. While, as Rodríguez (2001) and others pointed out, “alternative” is more than just “non-mainstream” and should be defined more by what it is than what it is not, there is no denying that alternative media are, indeed, an alternative to mainstream media, and identifying them as such allows for a useful distinction (Rauch, 2007). Thus it seems most useful to recognize the diversity and contingency of alternative media by combining various scholars’ definitions to come up with a hybridized model of alternative media in Latin America that accounts for dialogue (over monologue), horizontal communication, participation, and local control, all aimed at individual empowerment, collective action and social change. Further, it also is important to include how digital tools are being adapted and adopted to benefit a local context, and whether those tools are being used in counterhegemonic ways. While Atton’s (2002) broad definition is useful as an umbrella designation that can include

everything from blogs and Twitter to Facebook and YouTube, his definition is undermined by that very inclusiveness. As noted earlier, a focus on participation as “alternative” becomes meaningless in a Web 2.0 era that is nothing but participatory. As such, we must go beyond Atton and take into account online media’s mobilizing and emancipatory potential, and not just stop at whether it is participatory. Thus, Rodriguez’s concept of citizens’ media, with its emphasis on process/participation and power relations, empowerment and both individual and social change, is useful in our digital participatory media culture. But as pointed out earlier, this concept does not explicitly state the role of the media, requiring Rodriguez’s definition to be adapted to include Lievrouw’s (2011) notion of new media as activism/social change in and of themselves.

In an economically stratified and digitally divided region like Latin America (El Salvador in particular), however, participation and new technologies alone are not enough to automatically prompt social change, especially when those with the ability to participate and access digital media often are the ones striving to maintain the hegemonic status quo. Thus, Sandoval and Fuch’s (2010) suggestion for considering alternative media as critical media, then, must be incorporated. Further, the different realities—culturally, developmentally, economically, socially, and politically—of El Salvador, as opposed to the United States or other countries where most communications research originates, must be considered because, as Pineda de Alcazar (2010) noted, while media in the developed world “operate as a deepening and maintenance of a society of well-being, and increased consumption,” media of the developing world:

must help to construct a more just and balanced society which guarantees a more equitable distribution of wealth and aid, here in the developing world, for the basic satisfaction of the primary needs of populations, and, more ambitiously, relating structural needs to cultural and social domains, for example reducing the exclusion of groups and minorities” (p. 285).

Not only, then, can analog theories and approaches to alternative media not be automatically applied to online alternative media, but so too can Western theories, and even the technologies themselves, not be applied to Latin America without some adapting in order to create a hybridized, *mestizaje*, approach that works.

Therefore, concurring with Bailey and colleagues' (2007) recognition of the diversity and contingency of alternative media, this dissertation employed a multiple-pronged approach to understand alternative media in El Salvador. Rather than characterizing the Salvadoran media under study as simply alternative by process or alternative by content, or according to a mainstream-alternative binary, this dissertation approached the definition of "alternative" by considering the media site's objectives (Is it a political project? Does it offer counter-hegemonic content? Does it have a commitment to the community? Does it favor multi-directional communication or merely diffusion of information?); organization (Is it organized horizontally or hierarchically? Where does funding come from? Who is involved in the production process? Does it self identify as "alternative?"); audience (Who is the producer? Who is the receiver? Does it offer real or symbolic participation? Does the audience use the information to inform themselves or to transform themselves?); and use of technology (Are digital tools creating new opportunities for participation? Are these tools being used in liberating, emancipatory ways? Are audiences taking advantage of these tools' liberating potential?). While up until now the liberating use of technology has not necessarily been a fundamental approach to the study and understanding of alternative media, this dissertation contends that in the current digital media ecosystem, failing to take into account how—and not just whether—alternative media projects employ new technologies constrains our ability to fully understand alternative media's changing role and growing importance in the Digital Era.

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN A DIGITAL ERA

Despite very real concerns over lack of access and a potentially increasing gap between the information-rich and the information-poor (Bonfadelli, 2002; le Grignou & Patou, 2004), scholars often herald the Internet for its promise of democratic, horizontal communication (Curran, 2003). For producers and consumers of alternative media—those voices and views traditionally excluded from mainstream media (Kessler, 1984)—the Internet seemingly represents an alternative space where information and counter-information can easily and cheaply circulate, uninhibited by the gatekeepers—and journalistic norms of objectivity—of the traditional press (Bennett, 2004). For example, Harlow and Johnson’s (2011) study of the media portrayal of protesters during the Egyptian uprising found that online “alternative” media opened new possibilities for covering demonstrations. Twitter and the online citizen journalism site Global Voices, unlike the mainstream *The New York Times*, broke free of the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984) by legitimizing protesters and serving as commentators, even actors, in the unfolding events. What’s more, users appreciate the personal experiences and opinions offered via online alternative sources, such as blogs, that the mainstream media ignore or do not provide (Johnson & Kaye, 2006, 2009). Lievrouw (2011, p. 215) suggested that new media activists might be “redefining what counts as ‘mainstream’ in a post-mass media age.” While it is optimistic to believe that online alternative media—whether IndyMedia or a social movement’s Facebook page—will soon be considered mainstream, there is no denying that the Internet expands the reach of activists and alternative media producers beyond the “converted,” potentially widening the counter public spheres within which activists communicate.

Revisiting Habermas’ (1989 [1962]) original romanticized concept of a public sphere, Fraser (1990) posited that fringe or marginalized groups excluded from the male-

and elite-dominated universal public sphere create their own multiple, subaltern counterpublic spheres in which they can articulate their identities and debate ideas. “Participatory parity,” Fraser argued, required a “multiplicity of publics” (1992, p. 127). Habermas, who contended that public discourse was essential for a democratic society, then went on to integrate Fraser’s critique into his concept, re-defining the public sphere as “a highly complex network that branches out into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, local and subcultural arenas” (Habermas, 1997, pp. 373–374). Such subaltern spheres become essential in media battles over hegemony, as multiple public spheres and their discursive communities go hand in hand with media pluralism (Fraser, 1990). Numerous scholars link alternative media with the creation of multiple, counterhegemonic discursive spheres that allow normally marginalized voices to express themselves and participate in citizenship (Atton, 2009; Bailey et al., 2008; Couldry, 2006; Dahlgren, 2006; Harcup, 2011; Rodríguez, 2011). Acknowledging alternative media’s role in constructing public spheres is important considering the way previous studies showed that the contestation occurring via alternative media has the capacity to influence what appears in mainstream media, which then has the capacity to influence public policy (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006).

There is no doubt that, at least technologically speaking, the Internet extends the public sphere(s), opening new spaces for public discourse (Beers, 2006). The participatory and DIY cultures of the Internet serve as a rich breeding ground for multiple counterpublic spheres. The (theoretical) ability of anyone, or any community, with at least minimal connectivity to promote dissident or normally marginalized perspectives via information communication technologies (ICTs) seemingly turns the Internet into a public zone for free speech where ordinary voices are privileged over the bourgeoisie of Habermas’ (1989 [1962]) original concept. Kellner (2000, p. 280) argued that the “rise of

the Internet expands the realm for democratic participation and debate and creates new public spaces for political intervention.” ICTs in this new convergent media environment allow for political participation stemming from cultural participation, along with empowerment and collective negotiating power that ultimately could help transform democratic life (Jenkins, 2009). For example, social movements can use the Internet to take control of their message and image, and then can disseminate it to non-activists and potential activists around the world, regardless of whether those individuals seek such information. This delivery holds the potential to convert the traditionally antagonistic views toward protesters, fed by the “protest paradigm” of the mainstream media, into understanding and perhaps even active support. Such a possibility became evident in the way Egyptian protesters used social media to spread their alternative view, which was largely omitted from international mainstream press. Spreading digitally around the world via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and garnering international support from other Internet users, mainstream media eventually picked up the protesters’ message, demonstrating how, in a digital era, “alternative” is much more easily transformed into mainstream (Lievrouw, 2011; Peretti, 2001). As Benkler (2006) noted, “The emergence of a substantial nonmarket alternative path for cultural conversation increases the degrees of freedom available to individuals and groups to engage in cultural production and exchange” (p. 293), which creates a space for contradictory opinions and allows users the freedom to construct their own cultural symbols.

Castells (2001, 2009) likewise takes a very optimistic stance toward the emancipatory power of the Internet. According to Castells (2007, 2009), online social networks, blogs, peer-to-peer sharing, and other interactive aspects of the Internet created a new communication system: “mass self-communication,” characterized by “the capacity of sending messages from many to many, in real time or chosen time, and with

the possibility of using point-to-point communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting, depending on the purpose and characteristics of the intended communication practice” (Castells, 2009, p. 55). While Castells makes an attempt to dial back the technological determinism by acknowledging that the medium “does not determine the content and effect of its messages” (2009, pp. 70-71), he nevertheless contends that mass self-communication—which he views as both a communication realm and medium—“has the potential to make possible unlimited diversity and autonomous production of most of the communication flows that construct meaning in the public mind” (2009, p. 71). Even as Castells sees a new form of communication resulting from the Internet, Lievrouw (2011) similarly sees new media as blurring the distinctions between mass and interpersonal communication—what she referred to as “mediation.” Lievrouw turned to Martín-Barbero’s (1993) concept of mediation to help explain “communication as action” (2011, p. 230). For Lievrouw, mediation is comprised of reconfiguration (modifying and adapting technology to meet one’s needs) and remediation (borrowing, adapting, or remixing existing content or structures to create something new), so that “media artifacts, practices, and arrangements become both the means and the ends of communication” (2011, p. 231). Nowhere does this concept seem more appropriate than in today’s online DIY media culture of remixing.

In today’s Digital Era and interactive world of Web 2.0, the Internet and other digital communication technologies offer the possibility of further rupture of the top-down, one-way flow of communication from the developed/elites to the less-developed/non-elites. Whether mobile phones, YouTube, blogs or social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, new digital tools theoretically open up an alternative public sphere, allowing for horizontal communication that overcomes geographic and temporal boundaries (Castells, 2001; Kellner, 2000). The opening of such global, horizontal

communication channels because of increasing mobile phone and Internet use also opens the possibility of global resistance and activism, as evidenced by the Arab Spring—a domino effect as protests spread from Tunisia to Egypt and beyond—and the Occupy Movement, that moved from Wall Street to the rest of the United States and eventually to other countries.⁶

Ideally, the Internet, whether social media, blogs, or simply the ability for any activist group or alternative media outlet to self-publish, is a space that easily allows for contraflows and flows of alternative media that break up the hegemony and homogeneity of globalized international communication. Although continued commitments to liberalization, deregulation and privatization mean Internet companies are merging with phone, television and other media groups to create multi-platform conglomerates, the potential for horizontal, more democratic digital communication still exists. From the Zapatistas in Mexico in 1994 and the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, to the Arab Spring and global Occupy movement of 2011, the Internet has proven to be critical to transnational communication, information, organization, and mobilization (Cardoso & Pereira Neto, 2004; Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005; Rolfe, 2005). Beyond offering a means of resistance, the Internet also opens a space for ordinary individuals who tend to get overlooked in globalization discourses. For example, digital communication tools allow anyone—in theory, although of course, not in practice considering the digital divide—to act as a journalist, providing a viewpoint alternative to those of transnational corporations and mainstream media (Bennett, 2004; Curran, 2003; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Considering media agendas most often are set by the “center” states and the “core” elites, alternative and citizens’ media—especially in periphery states—are crucial for offering

⁶ This dissertation does not imply that the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement necessarily resulted in social justice. Rather, what is important is the way ICTs were used in these movements to encourage participation and strive for the possibility of social change.

non-commercialized, non-privatized, non-hegemonic, or non-Westernized perspectives (Downing, 2001; Rodríguez, 2001). And, in some cases, the Internet even has allowed alternative media to set the mainstream media's agenda, as topics that gain enough attention online get covered by the mainstream media (Bennett, 2004; Peretti, 2001).

ACTIVISM IN A DIGITAL ERA

Even as alternative media—typically the media of social movements, dissidents, and activists—changes with the evolution of new technologies, so, too, does activism. The world seemed to sit up and take notice of the potential role of digital tools in activism during the “Arab Spring,” a wave of protests that spread throughout the Arab world in 2011, moving from the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Jordan, Oman, and elsewhere. Despite varying degrees of Internet access in each of these countries, observers and participants alike credited social media like Facebook and Twitter as instrumental in the various uprisings (Iskander, 2011; Lim, 2012). Just as Guatemala, Colombia, India, Spain, Turkey, and even the United States have experienced similar bouts of social media-related collective action, what happened in Egypt appears to be a case of a mostly unplanned movement forming online and then moving offline—something for which most research and theories do not account. This is not to be technologically deterministic and say that social media=democracy, but rather to suggest a need to move beyond traditional approaches and further explore the role of the Internet, particularly online social media, in activism and alternative media, as information communication technologies (ICTs) change how activists communicate, and that affects how a movement is mobilized.

Social networking sites (SNS), a type of online social media, allow users to create semi-private or public profiles and navigate other users' profiles, thus building a social

network with other users with whom they share some commonality (boyd & Ellison, 2007). With more than 700 million daily active users—about 80 percent from outside of the United States and Canada—Facebook is the largest social network site (Facebook, 2013). While not originally created with activism in mind, SNS now are the most common gateway into activism, according to a 2009 survey by DigiActive (Brodock et al., 2009). Recent research shows social networking sites encourage sociability online and offline (Ellison et al., 2011), and are positively related to increased civic participation (Park et al., 2009; Pasek et al., 2009). For example, Zhang and colleagues (2010) found a positive relationship between SNS use and civic participation during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Similarly, Lim (2012) found protesters used Facebook to create online and offline networks that facilitated mobilization in Egypt during the Arab Spring. In Latin America, where roughly 182 million persons use Facebook (Internet World Stats, 2012), the social media platform has played a central role in numerous protest movements, such as those in Guatemala (Harlow, 2012) and Colombia (Neumayer & Raffl, 2008). Comparative studies of activists in the United States, China, and Latin America also show social networking sites to be integral to both online and offline activism (Harlow & Harp, 2012; Harp et al., 2012).

Using the Internet for activism is nothing new. Researchers often cite the way the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, used the Internet to mobilize international support in 1994 (Castells, 2004), or the way activists harnessed the Internet to stage massive protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. Much of this research, however, views the role of the Internet in activism as that of a facilitator or amplifier for traditional offline activism, augmenting the existing repertoire of tried and true activist tactics and tools by allowing for the cheap, easy and immediate dissemination of information across boundaries of time and space (Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005; Ribeiro,

1998; Vegh, 2003). Many scholars contend that the Internet is just one more tool in the “repertoire of contention” (Tilly, 1978) and that there is nothing inherently new, different or better about online activism. Along those same lines, some research argues that not only are online interactions unable to create the levels of trust required to sustain any kind of meaningful collective action (Diani, 2000; Polat, 2005), but that in fact the Internet in some instances is harmful to activism, resulting in what has been termed “clicktivism” and “slacktivism,” which is the idea of weakened participation and dedication via the Internet resulting in a less meaningful activism (Morozov, 2009; Van de Donk et al., 2004). As van de Donk and colleagues (2004) noted, “The Internet may facilitate the traditional forms of protest such as rallies, demonstrations, and collection of signatures, but it will hardly replace these forms” (p. 18).

The social media-driven protests in Egypt, Spain, Chile and elsewhere, however, suggest that these scholars are overly pessimistic, as activists used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to help create a community of protesters (Anduiza et al., 2013; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Howard & Parks, 2012; Iskander, 2011; Lim, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2012). No wonder, then, that more and more research suggests that the Internet can indeed help promote a collective identity and establish a sense of community necessary for mobilizing people not just online, but also offline (Hara 2008; Nip 2004; Wojcieszak 2009).

For example, Wojcieszak’s (2009) study of online neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist groups found collective identity was strengthened through these online groups, and the more users participated online, the more they also participated politically offline. Even the act of merely seeking information via online social networking sites was shown to be a positive predictor of participatory behaviors (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). What’s more, some studies show that online activism can foment offline activism,

forming collectives and mobilizing movements that without new technologies might not have occurred (Harlow, 2012; Juris, 2005; Rolfe, 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009). The Internet could perhaps even be creating new forms of activism (Cardoso & Pereira Neto, 2004; Rolfe, 2005). For example, a study of activists in Latin America found that SNS can help facilitate the transformation of online activism into offline activism (Harlow & Harp, 2012). While most recent research into the role of new technologies in activism tends to fall into one of three camps—the Internet has no real impact (think Malcom Gladwell’s assertion in *The New Yorker* that “the revolution will not be tweeted”); the Internet facilitates activism but without provoking any substantial or lasting impacts; and the Internet is prompting model changes—increasingly, research suggests that perhaps a sea change is occurring in the way we think about activism (Earl et al., 2010).

Thus, whether the Zapatistas 20 years ago, or the Egyptians a few years ago, activists and protesters increasingly use the Internet to organize and mobilize movements. Whether social media, blogs, emails, or even virtual sit-ins, activists use digital tools to facilitate both offline and online activism (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009). And while divided on whether, to paraphrase Gumucio Dagron (2006) the so-called technological revolution is actually a social revolution, scholars increasingly agree that digital tools change activism, and not just in terms of tools allowing for immediate, global mobilization. Real changes also are evident in terms of communication, both in how they communicate with the general public and mainstream media, and how they communicate within social movement organizations themselves (van de Donk et. al, 2004).

ACTIVISTS AND COMMUNICATION

The role of the Internet, and social media especially, in activist communication is particularly important considering the historically complicated relationship between social movements and the mainstream media. The press often marginalizes and delegitimizes protesters, and yet at the same time protesters are beholden to the media to spread information about their cause (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Kessler, 1984; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). The Internet, however, especially with the interactive and participatory capabilities of Web 2.0, allows activists to circumvent the gatekeepers of traditional media, taking control of their own messages, in terms of production, content, and dissemination (Bennett, 2004; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Digital technologies make ordinary citizens less dependent on the mainstream press, meaning that information once excluded from the media now becomes available with the click of a mouse. The immediate and global reach of the Internet also allows activists to reach a much wider audience—geographically and ideologically—than they previously could relying just on pamphlets, fliers, or movement newspapers. While scholars often bemoan the Internet's fragmented audiences and its tendency to cater to niches (Stroud, 2011), the possibility exists that social media, with users' wide social networks, could actually broaden activists' reach, allowing them to stop simply preaching to the converted (van de Donk et al., 2004). What's more, the Internet raises the opportunity for activists' online information to cross over into the mainstream media realm, thus even further extending activists' audiences (Bennett, 2004; Peretti, 2001).

Beyond changing the way activists reach the outside world, the Internet also changes the way activists communicate within a social movement organization. Van de Donk and colleagues (2004) suggested that:

ICTs may help to intensify communication among all parts of an organization (including the rank and file), thereby challenging to some extent the top-down flow of communication domination so far... There is ample evidence that ICTs are conducive to forging (temporary) alliances and coalitions, both vertical and horizontal, across different movements.” (Van de Donk et al., 2004, p. 19)

Just as activists employed the Internet to communicate across social movement organizations in order to create a global network in the case of the 1999 WTO protests (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004), so, too, did Egyptian protesters use SNS to communicate with protesters across the Arab world, leading to a seeming domino effect as protests erupted in country after country. More recently this is evident in the way the Occupy Movement spread from Wall Street across the United States and then on to other countries, eventually becoming a global Occupy Movement. SNS, then, afford activists a way for their message to go viral, spreading contagiously, similarly to Dawkin’s (1976) idea of a “meme.” As Fine (1995) noted, a social movement is “not only a set of beliefs, actions, and actors, but also a bundle of stories” (p. 134, emphasis in the original), and these stories, Fine noted later, “have the potential to spark activism” (2002, p. 241) because narratives have the power of persuasion that can create a sense of normative action (Polletta, 1998, 2002). In this digital era, then, SNS seem an increasingly logical way for activists to spread their own message, without interference from the mainstream media, in order to spark collective action.

Whether or not the Internet truly offers a democratic, egalitarian and democratic space—counterpublic sphere—for communication, however, is debatable, especially considering uneven access to (and interest in or usefulness for) digital technologies. For example, le Grignou and Patou (2004) found that within the ATTAC movement, the Internet in fact contributed to an increased knowledge gap between the educated elites of the movement, and ordinary, less-educated members. The proverbial digital divide also has been shown to limit the adoption of new digital tools for activism in Latin America

(Salazar, 2002; Sandoval-García, 2009). Some scholars also voiced concern about using capitalist technologies for counterhegemonic purposes, questioning whether using these online spaces amounts to “commodification of protest culture” (Askanius, 2010).

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Internet no longer can be thought of as simply a tool to facilitate or amplify the efforts of an existing social movement. As Lievrouw (2011) suggested, ICTs are not just the medium, but perhaps they have become the “field” where activism actually takes place. However, any discussion of the democratic potential of the Internet would be remiss if it did not take into account the digital divide. Research on the digital divide—which scholars define as an economic, political, and cultural divide that includes lack of know-how and lack of interest in new technologies—stems from the theory of the knowledge gap, which remains a concern, given the uneven rise and spread of the Internet. According to Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970), the knowledge gap refers to the media’s role in contributing to the difference in the distribution of knowledge between members of various social groups, such as those based on class, education, race, gender, age, and/or geographic location. In other words, knowledge and information—no differently than wealth—are unevenly distributed among the haves and the have-nots. Information tends to reach the already informed segments of the population whose established frameworks of reference allow them to build upon their existing knowledge and use the new information. While the promise of mass media lies in its ability to inform everyone, the knowledge gap theory hypothesizes that this information gap increases as media input increases: those persons with higher socio-economic status acquire information at a faster rate than those persons with a lower socio-economic status and are more prepared to build upon that information. It is important to note that this does not

mean the lower socio-economic groups are uninformed, but rather their knowledge gain is proportionally lower than that of persons in the higher socio-economic groups. As such, mass media benefit the already information-rich, making them even richer.

It is easy to see why the Internet—offering an over-abundance of information—revived fears of an increased knowledge gap. Gaps in Internet access, scholars assumed, meant gaps in knowledge. More recently, theorizing of the digital divide moved beyond a binary conceptualization based on access (Di Maggio et al., 2004; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003)—including both physical and financial barriers—as scholars now contend that lack of skills, interest, discretionary time, and motivation, as well as differential uses (i.e. recreational vs. capital enhancing), also factor into the digital divide, making it in reality an economic, political and cultural divide (Bonfadelli, 2002; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Fuchs, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005). The speed of access (i.e. dial-up, broadband, cable) and where one accesses the Internet, such as from home or from an Internet café, also indicates an important dimension of the digital divide as those who can conveniently and quickly access the Internet from the privacy of their homes have clear advantages (such as the ability to immediately search for the answer to a question or ready access to breaking news) over those who must pay by the hour at an Internet café (Hargittai, 2008). Gumucio Dagron (2006) called the digital divide a “false problem,” characterizing it as “just a flashy manifestation of other divides that have been around for decades” (p. 979). In other words, the digital divide just manifests the latest aspect of the world’s centuries-long problem of inequality.

Still, as access to the Internet increases, so do hopes that this might lead to a reduction in knowledge gaps. In reality, however, the Internet contributes to widening knowledge gaps (Bonfadelli, 2002; Fuchs, 2009; Kim, 2008). For example, previous research shows that those interested in a subject hold more knowledge about it and tend

to increase that knowledge, thus contributing to the knowledge gap. Just as this theory predicts, Polat's (2005) review of the Internet and its impact on political participation showed that the "advantaged" populations, in terms of economic and education status—people who already were more likely to participate politically—are the ones who tend to benefit the most from the Internet. Even 17 years ago, just as online technologies were taking off, Herman and McChesney (1997) predicted (mostly accurately) that "it is likely that the global media firms will be able to incorporate the Internet and related computer networks into their empires, while the egalitarian potential of the technology is minimized" (p. 107). Similarly, Amaral (2002), studying the uneven spread of technologies in Brazil, noted that the Internet "has become just another large market that is being appropriated by the same conglomerates that dominate television, radio, film, and print media" (p. 45). What's more, because the Internet caters to niche audiences and special interests, only those users highly motivated to learn something will seek new information outside of their comfort zones, or beyond those sites they visit on a regular basis (Stroud, 2011). Additionally, those people not interested or motivated can mostly avoid a topic altogether, never learning anything new about it until they make a conscious effort. Worth exploring, then, is how social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter affect knowledge gaps, as such sites' news feeds offer an opportunity for disinterested users to stumble upon information—and thus gain knowledge—that they otherwise might never have encountered. The potential thus exists for social media to help bridge knowledge gaps. On the other hand, the potential also exists for the creation of a digital sub-divide: a social media divide, both in terms of who uses social media, and how they use it. For example, previous research classifies Facebook as an elite form of social media, with unequal participation resulting from differences in users' race, ethnicity and parental education (Hargittai, 2007).

Even as Internet access increases across the globe, research demonstrates that disparities still exist along racial and ethnic lines (Robinson et al., 2003). For example, Ono and Zavodny (2008) found that between 1997 and 2003, while the digital divide in the United States in general decreased, the gap between immigrants and natives actually widened. More recent numbers show some gains in closing the digital divide in the United States. For example, while the computer and Internet use of African Americans and Latinos still trails that of Whites, the adoption of smartphones among all three groups is about equal (Lopez et al., 2013; Smith, 2014). If we truly are in an information society, where information and knowledge are the new wealth, then understanding the knowledge gap, and the impact of new communication technologies on said gap, becomes that much more important. As Gumucio Dagron (2006) noted, more knowledge alone is not enough to solve the deeper problems related to social, economic, and political structures that, as Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1970) pointed out, are at the root of the knowledge gap. Further, the ways in which technologies are used can contribute to further information gaps. For example, some scholars have criticized hegemonic uses of the Internet (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Recognizing more capitalistic than counter-hegemonic uses of the Internet, Thussu (2006) contended that “in reality, digital connectivity has become largely a medium for commerce rather than a social tool to eradicate mass illiteracy and promote health care for the world’s underprivileged” (p. 243).

Lim (2003) emphasized that any emancipatory, counter-hegemonic, alternative information found online is worthless as long as it is limited to elites with Internet access, as “information that circulates only among the members of a small ‘elite’ loses its power to mobilize people to challenge the cordons of hegemonic power. No revolution can happen without involving society on a wider scale” (p. 274). Online alternative media, then, must make the transition offline in order to create real-world impacts. In her study

of the Internet and reform in Indonesia, Lim (2003) found social movement groups with Internet access were printing information from websites, and thus spreading the online information offline. Other studies also show activists and NGOs in developing countries adapting new technologies to fit their specific needs as one way of bridging the digital divide (Friedman, 2005; Harlow, 2013; Wasserman, 2007). Lim (2003) concluded that more than cyberspace itself, most important for spreading counter-information and advocating social change were the connections between the virtual world and “the physical spaces of cities, towns, and villages” (p. 284).

Atton (2004) also was cautious about new technologies’ potential emancipatory contribution to alternative media and activism. Atton (2004) referred to an “alternative Internet,” as opposed to a dominant, or mainstream Internet. Rather than setting up a binary opposition, however, he saw the two as dialectic in their relationship, especially considering that the “alternative” Internet remains embedded within the “global capitalist project” of the dominant Internet (2004, p. 10). Thus, while resistance via alternative media sometimes occurs online, it cannot be ignored that the Internet is a problematic “force for social change” (Atton, 2004, p. 24) in light of “the obstacles to empowerment that legislation, inequalities of access, limits on media literacy and the real-world situations of disempowerment necessarily place on groups and individuals” (Atton, 2004, p. 24).

What’s more, this new digital era requires scholars to consider whether Western technologies can be applied to the benefit of marginalized groups in developing countries without reinforcing the status quo (McAnany, 1986). As Gumucio Dagron (2001) noted, “when new technologies are introduced to a different social setting, what is transferred is not only technology itself, but also the social use of it, a set of assumptions and practices that emerged from another context and other needs” (pp. 23-24). Technology alone also

is not enough to lead to social change in the developing world, as the Internet, in order to truly be successful at encouraging participation and change, must be connected to existing experiences and communication techniques, and must be linked to a plan of action (Gumucio Dagron, 2001). Therefore, any study of online alternative media, particularly in El Salvador, must be situated within the local context and reality. Recognizing that technologies are embedded in society, and that uses, rather than connectivity, offer a more nuanced view of the potential role of ICTs, helps avoid any reductionist or technologically deterministic approach to this study.

DIGITAL DIVIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

Little scholarly attention has been paid to the use of ICTs in Latin America (Pick et al., 2007). Unequal Internet access both within countries and between countries remains a problem throughout the region, as “the Internet is still a chimerical aspiration limited to the rich, indirectly subsidized by the state and exploited by corporations as a pure entertainment commodity” (Lugo-Ocando, 2008). Less than half, 42.9 percent, of the Latin American and Caribbean population has Internet access, and that number drops to a mere 9.7 percent for Central America, and 24.5 percent in El Salvador (Internet World Stats, 2012). Considering the region’s low literacy (Salvadorans on average complete 7.5 years of school, according to the UNDP’s 2013 Human Development Report) and high poverty rates (34.5 percent live in poverty according to 2012 World Bank data), it is worth questioning how valuable it is to most Latin Americans’ lived experiences to divert limited resources to pay for access to new technologies. Lugo-Ocando (2008) went so far as to say that each new government-funded computer meant less money for teachers and a “greater dependency on the manufacturing corporations and the lending institutions that finance these projects” (p. 4). What’s more, privatization

and conglomeration has meant it is not in the best interests of mega-corporations to provide universal access, and giving the control to the private sector has resulted in these “media giants” placing “governments in a straightjacket” (Lugo-Ocando, 2008, p. 5).

In general, Internet access and use throughout the region is stratified, aimed at elites, reflecting a long-term pattern of inequality and unequal capital distribution (Bonilla & Cliche, 2001). Albornoz Tinajero (2007) argued that the digital divide will not be bridged until social gaps close. She cautioned, however, that new technologies are not a panacea, and assuring access will not automatically solve problems of social inequalities. Similarly Robinson (2001, p. 470) argued that the “so-called digital divide does not have anything to do with the digital per se, but rather refers to the growing socioeconomic polarization...where today there are a few rich, connected to the Net, and a lot of poor, without connection.”

To address problems with access and connectivity, some governments and non-governmental organizations have worked to open community *telecentros*, or telecenters, offering free or low-cost Internet access. Still, evidence as to the success of these centers in terms of whether and how community members use the centers and whether they help bridge the digital divide is inconclusive (Cabrera Jorquera, 2007). Further, Internet services typically are developed for and aimed at urban elites, with the poorer, especially rural, sectors marginalized (Robinson, 2001). A 2013 report on gender equality and ICT use in the region by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) found that among those with higher educations, Internet access does not fall below 70 percent in any of the 10 countries surveyed, while for those with just a primary education, Internet use fell to as low as 0.6 percent in Honduras. Those with higher income all have higher levels of Internet use, while Internet use for the lowest-earning quintile fell to below 5 percent in Central America.

Still, to some extent all of the countries in the region are engaged in a digitalization process to incorporate new technologies, and rhetoric of being part of, or wanting to be part of, the Information Society is ubiquitous (Palacios, 2007). However, planning and funding are scarce, making infrastructure advancement slow as States have left most development up to the private sector (Palacios, 2007). Further, providing infrastructure, whether computers or Internet, is only part of the battle, as information communication technologies also must be culturally (re-)appropriated, with their uses and potential understood in a daily lived context (Arredondo et al., 2001).

In El Salvador, Internet service—email—first became publicly available in March 1995, and the first Salvadoran websites were hosted in country by early 1996 (Noyola, 2007). Wireless Internet access first became available in 2000. The Salvadoran government has made various attempts at bridging the digital divide (Noyola, 2007). In 2002 the government began an *Infocentros* project to teach Salvadorans about information communication technologies. More than 40 such centers were established throughout the country. In 2004 the Ministry of Education launched *Operación Red*, or Operation Network, to teach top high school students new technologies, with the idea being that they then would teach their classmates.⁷ Also, the *Conéctate* project's goal was to equip schools with technology tools, such as computers. Still, just 8.3 percent of individuals in El Salvador had Internet access in their homes in 2010, although rate of use, thanks mostly to Internet cafes, was higher, at 14.2 percent, according to the 2013 ECLAC report. Internet use jumped to 20.45 percent in urban areas, but dropped to a dismal 3.65 percent in rural areas. The most recent data from Internet World Stats (2012) places El Salvador's Internet penetration rate at 24.5 percent, the highest among the

⁷ Results on the success of this program could not be found.

Central America Four⁸, but again, this number is skewed because of the urban-rural gap. A quarter of the population also uses Facebook, according to 2012 Facebook data.

LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY

Despite the fact that just a quarter of the population has access to the Internet, technologies and any potential benefits they might bring cannot be dismissed, especially considering the way Internet use continues to increase throughout the region. Research demonstrates how activists and social movements throughout Latin America successfully incorporated new digital tools, such as has been done by indigenous organizations, women's rights groups, and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-sexual (GLBT) movement (Salazar, 2002; Torres Nabel, 2009). Just as Curran (2003) suggested that "the Internet does appear to offer an important new means of self and collective expression" (p. 228), Diamond (2010, p. 70) proffered the notion of "liberation technologies," or "any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom." For example, Diamond noted the way in which the Internet, smartphones, social media, and other platforms for multi-way communication empower citizens to be "not just passive recipients but journalists, commentators, videographers, entertainers, and organizers," working to challenge the status quo and expose abuses of power (Diamond, 2010, p. 71). Along these same lines, numerous scholars (Ackerly, 2003; Curran 2003) herald the coming of new technologies as opening new spaces for expression and participation. Just as technologically deterministic, however, are the pessimistic views that scoff at such claims, (ironically) dismissing them for being overly deterministic and arguing that studies have yet to prove the Internet enhances participation and democracy (Charles, 2009; Morozov, 2009, 2011).

⁸ The adjoining countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua signed a treaty allowing open movement across borders for their citizens and foreign travelers.

Determinism is not new to communications research. From theories of mass and uniform effects during the early 20th Century, to theories of propaganda and persuasion, to McLuhan's (1962) idea that the medium is the message, to the rise of the Information and Network societies, technological determinism has been integral to the study of the power of the media (McQuail, 2007). McQuail outlined three ways of thinking in the literature regarding technology and its effects on society: 1) essentialism, wherein technology has an inherent quality that necessarily produces a direct effect; 2) institutional, whereby social institutions adapt technologies to fit their needs and bring about change; and 3) societal, or interaction between society and technology as society seeks technological solutions to problems. While some degree of technological determinism cannot be dismissed out of hand (i.e. mass production leads to standardization), it also cannot be ignored that social change and the development of new digital technologies do not always coincide, and when they do, they are mutually influential (McQuail, 2007).

Disputing such criticisms of technological determinism, Diamond pointed out that technology is a tool that can be used for good or for ill—there is nothing inherently emancipatory or liberating about these technologies. Unlike the printing press, telegraph, radio, television, or other “analog” communication devices, however, digital tools have more liberating potential than ever, thanks to the Internet's “dramatic new possibilities for pluralizing flows of information and widening the scope of commentary, debate, and dissent” (Diamond, 2010, pp. 71-72). The question this dissertation attempted to answer, then, became whether, how, and why four alternative media projects in El Salvador used these tools to their full liberating capacity.

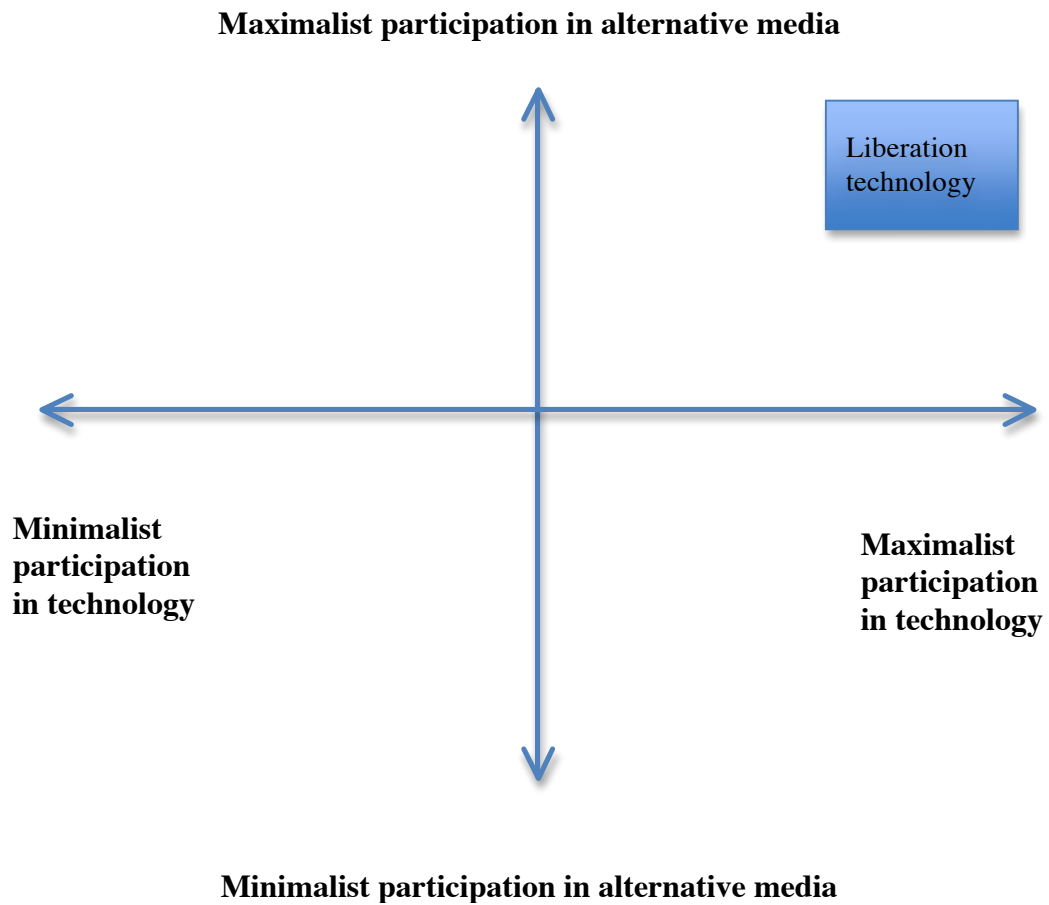
PARTICIPATION

When analyzing liberation technology and its connection to alternative media and social change, it is useful to consider Carpentier's (2011) dimensions of minimalist (unidirectional) participation vs. maximalist (multidirectional) participation. For Carpentier, the media represent a social sphere in which the possibility exists for democratic participation, communication, and representation. More participation by non-elites ultimately helps balance unequal power relations and thus should be a priority in any democracy, he argued, adding that often in a democracy, the more passive role of representation is substituted for active participation. He distinguished between participation in the media (non-professional participation in the media production and decision making process) and participation through the media (the ability to participate in public dialogue, debate and deliberation, and to represent one's self in the public spheres), noting that participation in the media ultimately facilitates participation through the media. Carpentier developed an Access, Interaction, and Participation model in which access and interaction enable participation; and power, identity, organization, technology and quality work to enable or disable participation. Although Carpentier mentions technology, he focuses mostly on broadcast media, paying little attention to the Internet, and social media in particular. Carpentier's notion of maximalist participation can be equated with the top rungs of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, which places non-participation on the bottom rung, tokenism in the middle, and citizen power on the top. Citizen power is comprised of three levels, moving up: partnership, delegated power, and citizen control.

Carpentier's (2011) thinking about minimalist and maximalist participation in the media is useful for examining the role of digital tools in alternative media and activism, as these dimensions of participation can be borrowed to apply to technology:

participation *in* technology and participation *through* technology. Using a matrix (see Figure 3.1) that brings in minimalist to maximalist participation in the media along a vertical trajectory, and minimalist to maximalist participation in technology along on a horizontal trajectory, this dissertation explored where on the matrix alternative media in El Salvador fall, and what it takes to land in the upper right quadrant (maximalist participation in media and maximalist participation in technology) and thus potentially achieve the use of liberating technologies and fulfill Enzensberger's (1976) notion of emancipatory, participatory media and Freire's (1970) model of dialogical communication. In fact, Freire's ideal of two-way flows of information from the people and to the people is surpassed, as new technologies allow for multi-way communication (media to audience, audience to media, and audience to audience). Thus, it can be argued that the key to applying Freire in today's Digital Era lies in understanding whether and how new technologies can be used in liberating ways. To what extent can new technologies be liberating, or in other words, to what extent can alternative media employ new technologies to give voice to the voiceless, allowing them to participate *in* technology and *through* technology and thus foster social change?

Figure 3.1: Minimalist vs. maximalist participation in media and technology



Chapter 4: Methods

OVERVIEW

This dissertation analyzed, compared, and contrasted how four alternative media projects in El Salvador incorporated new technologies into their practices, furthering our understanding of the emancipatory potential of using digital tools for participation, contesting power, and contributing to social change. Two of the projects can be considered traditional media (the newspaper *Diaio CoLatino* and the community radio station Radio Victoria), and two are so-called “new” media (the online newspaper *Voces* and the citizen news site Política Stereo). These four sites were selected for study in part because of the important similarities they share: they self-identify as “alternative;” they go after story topics typically ignored by the mainstream media; they value citizen participation; and they claim to give voice to the voiceless. Additionally, choosing two traditional projects and two online projects allowed for deeper insight into how the digital (r)evolution changes alternative media practices, and what that means for the larger phenomenon of social change and its relation to technology.

El Salvador was selected as the country of study for various reasons. First, because of this Central American country’s rich tradition of alternative, activist, and revolutionary media: *CoLatino* is more than 100 years old, and the revolutionary radio stations Radio Venceremos and Radio Farabundo Martí set the stage for future generations of alternative media projects to open a space for civil society. Further, El Salvador’s history of military dictatorships and elitist- and government-controlled media systems created the conditions for strong alternative and activist media to develop as a way for marginalized groups to bypass the often-censored mainstream media (Agosta, 2007; Rodriguez, 2001). In other words, when military governments maintained death

squads and regularly censored and bought off the mainstream press, the underground press and clandestine radios flourished, becoming one of the only sources for accurate information. Research about oppositional press in these situations—common to most of Central America and much of Latin America—can encourage future cross-country comparisons to be made. Lastly, despite suffering from a digital divide, El Salvador’s Internet penetration rate of 25 percent (Internet World Stats, 2012) is more than the average for Central America as a whole (22 percent, including Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama), and is highest among the countries that make up the Central American Four (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua), offering the possibility that El Salvador’s experiences with alternative media and technology could serve as a model for the rest of Central America. What’s more, essentially the entire population of Internet users in El Salvador also regularly uses Facebook (Internet World Stats, 2012).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Data were collected via ethnographic methods, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, over the course of 12 months I spent in El Salvador as an Inter-American Foundation Grassroots Development Fellow. A content analysis also examined the posts published on the four groups’ Facebook pages. This dissertation answered two sets of research questions. First are those questions answered using the ethnographic data collected via participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews at four alternative media sites in El Salvador:

- RQ1) What are the perceived changes, if any, to the Salvadoran alternative media projects’ identities and news processes because of ICTs, particularly social media?

- RQ2) What are the perceived changes, if any, in the meaning of citizen participation in alternative media because of ICTs, particularly social media?
- RQ3) What key obstacles do the alternative media projects face in incorporating digital technologies, and how do those obstacles influence the usefulness and relevancy that the study participants assign to these tools?
- RQ4) Under what circumstances have (or have not) these alternative media projects managed to successfully use digital technologies in liberating ways?
- RQ5) What are the perceived values, drawbacks, and challenges of using ICTs, particularly social media, for social change?

To explore these questions, a total of 97 formal and informal semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish with alternative media producers and consumers at the four different sites. Not all interviewees were asked the same questions, and the questions asked changed according to interviewees' responses and interests (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In general, interviews were conducted using a guide consisting of possible questions to be asked during formal and informal interviews (see Appendix A). In addition to demographic information related to age, education, work experience, technology use and digital training, subjects also were asked questions related to the media project's history and structure, their involvement with the project, and their perspectives on whether and how the project could be considered "alternative" and whether and how it differed from the mainstream media. Questions also probed subjects' experiences with learning to use technologies, such as by asking them to describe how and why they opened social media accounts, and how they use social media now versus when they first opened their accounts. Interviewees also were asked to talk about specific instances of success and failure in incorporating technologies, as well as any advantages or disadvantages they perceived in using said technologies. The digital divide also

factored into interviews, with subjects questioned about audiences' and their own limitations in using technologies.

The second set of research questions addressed with this dissertation was answered via a quantitative content analysis of the four sites' Facebook pages and posts:

- RQ1) What is the relationship between the extent to which the four alternative media projects are taking advantage of Facebook's social potential (i.e. the number of photos, videos, events and notes, and embedding of Twitter or other social media platforms), and the number of page fans and the number of fans "talking about" the page?
- RQ2) How did interactivity (i.e. liking, commenting, sharing, and responding) vary among posts published to the four Salvadoran alternative media projects' Facebook pages?
- RQ3) What is the relationship between interactivity and the posting of multimedia elements (i.e. links, photos, videos)?
- RQ4) What is the relationship between interactivity and whether the post included accompanying text (i.e. headline, pulled quote, commentary/analysis, or greeting)?
- RQ5) Were the Facebook posts being used to motivate citizens to act or to mobilize?

Using ethnographic methods allows for an analysis that goes beyond mere content, providing insights into the meaning and relevancy that these alternative media producers and users assign to digital technologies. Adopting a grounded theory approach, which suggests that meaning and understanding are generated via interactions in social processes (e.g. Birks & Mills, 2011; Blumer, 1986), the interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively to look for themes and patterns related to interview subjects'

perceptions of how technologies were impacting identity, production practices, participation, and social change. Ultimately the aim of a grounded theory approach is to identify key patterns to build or extend a theory, concept or model (Birks & Mills, 2011). The immersion in the texts under study (Pauly, 1991)—the reading and re-reading of the transcripts required for such a qualitative approach—helps reveal what is both explicit and implicit in the text (van Dijk, 1991), and explain any patterns or relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such an approach is a reflexive process (Charmaz, 2006) involving the analysis and re-analysis of interviews and observations in various stages of data collection and analysis, allowing for comparisons to be made within the sample, and even emerging themes to be explored in subsequent interviews (Birks & Mills, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Reflexivity means researchers must acknowledge their preconceptions and perspectives and set aside any a priori assumptions in order to fully engage with the subjects' own meanings and interpretations (Cutcliffe, 2000). A grounded theory analysis of the transcripts is important for thoroughly breaking down what was said and what was meant, providing a more in-depth and contextually specific evaluation beyond the numbers (Hall, 1977; van Dijk, 1991). However, recognizing that word counts and other numbers often can provide useful insight that might further explain the patterns revealed in discourse analysis, transcriptions also were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software program NVivo, which was used to create coding and word-use comparisons. In addition to the interviews that were analyzed qualitatively, the Facebook pages of the four alternative media projects, as well as two constructed weeks worth of comments posted to those Facebook pages, were examined with a quantitative content analysis. Employing these various methods resulted in a triangulated study, producing a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Flick, 2004).

Additionally, in recognition of the risk of ethnocentrism in studies conducted outside of the researcher's own culture, care was taken to be transparent and self-reflective (Emerson et al., 1995) throughout the course of research. Subjects' input and feedback were sought during and after the data collection process, making research collaborative and less hierarchical (Foley & Valenzuela, 2004). Doing so creates a "polyvocal" study that prioritizes subjects' own interpretations and understandings over those of the researcher (Foley, 2002), thus helping avoid any ethnocentrism or imposition of any exogenous theories that do not necessarily apply in El Salvador (Spradley, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Preventing ethnocentrism is particularly important for this dissertation considering that El Salvador's digital environment is so different than that to which I as a researcher am accustomed.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Unlike the scientific, "objective," and positivist approach to research, the qualitative, or post-positivist, humanistic tradition assumes that meaning is subjective and constructed and that the best way to learn about someone else is from her individual perspective (Potter, 1996). According to Weiss (1994), qualitative methods are called for when the research goals are to develop detailed descriptions, integrate various points of views, describe a process, offer holistic description, learn about an audience's reaction, and bridge "intersubjectivities" so that the reader feels transported to that time and place. Additionally, qualitative methods help identify variables that could be studied using quantitative methods (Weiss, 1994). Scholarship about the role of digital technologies in alternative media and activism is burgeoning, but to date much remains unknown, making qualitative approaches an ideal method for obtaining a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). While qualitative studies are valuable in and of themselves, and shouldn't

have to be considered “exploratory” or “ground breaking” (Weiss, 1994, p. 12), in the case of this dissertation a qualitative study was warranted precisely because the research is exploratory. With so much still to be learned about this phenomenon, qualitative interviews and observations provide the best way to obtain the nuanced details and holistic description to explain what this ongoing digital evolution means for alternative media, participation, and social change. Such qualitative explorations also generate new research ideas, and once more is known qualitatively about this new phenomenon, then quantitative methods could be employed in follow-up studies to further develop any possible new theories (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000).

As such, rather than seeking a random sample of interviewees generalizable to the population at large as is typical in quantitative studies (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000), this dissertation relied on a convenience, or purposive, sample. A purposive sample, also often referred to as a “judgment sample,” is based on the researcher using her own judgment and criteria to select who or what will be part of the sample (du Plooy, 1995). Such samples are selected to fulfill a certain purpose and are not representative of the entire population (du Plooy, 1995). In this case a convenience sample was justified because the goal was to obtain *relevant* evidence and thus interview subjects were chosen based specifically on characteristics they possess that were relevant to this study (i.e. they regularly participated in and were familiar with the work and mission of one of the four alternative media projects under study, rather than participating in any alternative media project). Subjects were accessed via a snowball method, which began with purposively identifying a few seemingly knowledgeable/relevant subjects at each research site (initial identifications were made based on observations and knowledge about the organizational structure of the site) and then asking those subjects to suggest the names of other

potential interviewees they believed could offer insight into this research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Potter, 1996).

Also, to ensure this study was as inclusive and representative (although not generalizable) as possible, subjects were sought using a quota method (Potter, 1996), wherein I attempted to make sure the convenience sample included subjects from all strata of demographics (including digital know-how), cultural identifications, and job positions within the organization under study. In other words, at each of the sites I was interested in observing and interviewing editors/owners, reporters, citizen journalists, volunteers/activists, and audience members, so that subjects would encompass a diverse sample (when possible) of ages, socio-economic status, digital connectedness, education, and cultural background. While limited in that results are not generalizable, and also much more time consuming than a quantitative study, such qualitative sampling techniques allowed for access to relevant subjects who could provide the most pertinent and significant insights for this study, and contribute to the holistic, thick description this dissertation offers.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Potter (1996) noted seven dominant methodologies within qualitative research: ethnography, ethnomethodology, reception studies, ecological psychology, symbolic interactionism, cultural studies, and textual analysis. This dissertation relied primarily on ethnographic research, as I immersed myself in the four different project sites, spending most weekdays and many weekends for 12 months at the four sites, observing, interviewing and participating in their production practices. Ethnography is “the work of describing a culture, aimed at understanding another way of life from the native point of view. Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people” (Spradley,

1979, p. 3). Developed by the Chicago School in the early part of the 20th Century with an emphasis on case studies (Jankowski & Wester, 1991), ethnography normally entails immersion, or long-term observations and interactions with the group being studied in order to experience and understand events similarly to how the research subjects experience and understand those same events (Emerson et al., 1995). The four main aspects of ethnographic work are that it is inductive, the data collected is open to multiple interpretations, the research itself is intense and narrowly focused, and analysis involves interpreting the meaning of human behavior and/or language (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

When communication scholars employ ethnographic methods, it tends to be for studies about newsrooms or audiences (Bird, 2010). As news itself is “a form of cultural meaning making” (Bird, 2010, p. 1), it makes sense that a qualitative approach like ethnography would be useful to help interpret the way in which news—or alternative news—is constructed and how audiences attribute meaning to it. Wahl-Jorgensen (2010) noted a “newsroom-centricity” among communication ethnographies, because researchers tend to choose the newsroom as the site for their fieldwork as they strive to better understand the routines, practices, processes and cultures of journalism. For example, Altheide (1976) dedicated three years to observing newsroom practices, and Tuchman’s (1978) classic study showed how newsroom routines help dictate what is considered “news.” More recently, Everbach’s (2006) ethnography of the Sarasota (Florida) *Herald-Tribune* examined “feminine” characteristics and the role of women managers in the newsroom.

The problem, however, is that much of these studies focus on large, elite, city-based media outlets, which “tends to erase the more diffuse work done in local news, alternative media, non-Western countries with fewer resources, and the new virtual

environment” (Bird, 2010, p. 15). This dissertation addressed each of these concerns by relying on ethnographic research of alternative media—both “legacy” traditional media and “new” digital media—conducted in a developing country (El Salvador).

While the interest in ethnographies of mainstream news has taken off just in the past 15 years (Peterson, 2010), such qualitative research traditionally has been used to study alternative media, activism and social movements (Armstrong, 1982; Downing, 2001). For example, Todd Gitlin’s (1980) oft-cited ethnography *The Whole World is Watching* is based on his years of experiences as a participant observer with Students for a Democratic Society, and interviews with the group’s activists as well as news reporters. Stein (2001) conducted ethnographic case studies of three radical media projects in her examination of the public access television movement, and Huesca (1996) ethnographically studied tin miners in Bolivia. This dissertation continues in this same research tradition, drawing on ethnographic methods, as did Downing, Stein, Huesca, and Gitlin, with immersion in four of El Salvador’s alternative media projects.

Immersion is just one of the techniques scholars identified for ethnographic investigations. Others include in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, all of which were employed as part of this research. Most often, scholars conducting qualitative research rely on participant observation as the preferred method (Jankowski & Wester, 1991). Becker and Geer (1957, p. 28) defined participant observation as a research method “in which the observer participated in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time.” Participant observation is not necessarily a single research method, however, but rather a blend of formal and informal interviews, observations, interactions, and document analysis (Jankowski & Wester, 1991). Lindlof

and Taylor (2011) identified two levels of participant observation researchers: the passive participant observer, who tries to operate as anonymously and unobtrusively as possible; and the active participant observer, who tries to interact with participants as much and as openly as possible. Gold (1958) delineated four degrees of participation: complete participants (who operate as fully recognized and functioning members of the group, and their research is covert); participant as observer (who openly acknowledges research); observer as participant (who primarily is invested in observing the group, favors interviewing, and has only casual or indirect interaction with group members); and complete observers (who observe from a distance, remain unknown, with no meaningful contact with group members). I fulfilled the participant as observer role, which Gold (1958) deemed the preferred researcher role for ethnographic work. Still, while I participated in their daily activities and in some cases was assigned supporting roles (i.e. helping with interviews at the various sites, writing a few articles at *Diario CoLatino*, and doing the international news segment for Radio Victoria), I was not what Adler and Adler (1987) would consider a “complete” member of the group, because while I participated in the same core activities as the group members, I did not go so far as to commit myself to their goals or values.

Spradley (1979) argued that observations alone are not enough, as researchers must ask about, or interrogate, what it is they are observing. Formal and informal interviews help ensure that researchers correctly interpret what they observe. Further, in-depth interviews, and the use of open-ended, probing questions, allow researchers to better understand not just what they observe, but also the attitudes, opinions, and motivations shaping subjects’ behavior. Such nuanced, explanatory information is unobtainable from a survey or other quantitative method, again justifying the choice of ethnographic methods. This research included not just formal interviews, but close

observation and informal interviews: throughout my time with the four projects I followed the journalists around, asking questions about everything I saw.

Ethnographic research entails more than interviews and observations, as document analysis also provides an important factor in achieving “thick description” and strengthening or confirming the interpretations of interviews and observations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Potter, 1996). Documents help in “establishing contexts for communication, orienting communicative action, creating emblems or expressions of ideas, distinguishing symbolic sites of value and power, and forging linkages to the past and the future” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 239). Advantages of document analysis include informational richness, ready availability, documents’ “non-reactivity” or unchanged and already fixed status, and their truth value, not necessarily in terms of accuracy, but perhaps because the information was vetted before published, or because it is an honest reflection of a person’s perspective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For Potter (1996), anything from diaries, letters, memos and notes to photographs, audiotapes, videos, movies, books or manuscripts offer potential for document examination.

Clearly, in this digital era, websites and social media postings also lend themselves to online document examination (Pauwels, 2005). In fact, Pauwels (2005) called for technological texts to be analyzed along with the producers and audiences, in order to achieve a “broader ethnographic approach” (p. 611). Thus, this study incorporated “documents”—whether printed articles, online postings, or radio broadcasts—for both content and textual analyses.

While content analysis is a standardized, quantitative method that involves counting words, sources, or news frames, textual analysis in contrast is a qualitative method that goes “beyond the manifest content of media” and “focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text. Text is understood as a complex set of

discursive strategies that is situated in a special cultural context” (Fursich, 2009, p. 240). Textual analysis requires immersion in the text under study—what Hall (1975) referred to as a “long soak”—and analysis typically employs a narrative, semiotic, rhetorical, or genre approach in order to get at the text’s latent meanings (Fursich, 2009). This dissertation employed textual analysis in so far as interviews were analyzed as a text.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

In contrast to a textual analysis, content analysis does not look for implicit meanings, but rather is limited to the manifest meaning of the actual content itself and does not take into account the content producers’ attitudes, opinions or motivations (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). The classic definition of content analysis comes from Berelson (1952): “A research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” For the content analysis in this research, three Salvadorans were hired to code the Facebook pages of the four alternative media projects under study, as well as two constructed weeks (Riffe et al., 1993) of posts and comments on the Facebook pages. The two constructed weeks, pulled from August 2012-August 2013 in order to correspond with the same timeframe during which interviews and observations were conducted, resulted in a sample comprised of 570 posts total, plus the four Facebook pages themselves. The codebook for the content analysis (see the entire codebook in Appendix B), which complements the ethnographic data, was derived from observations as well as subjects’ statements during interviews.

The Facebook pages (as opposed to the posts) were coded (at the end of the 12-month research period) for the following ratio-level variables: number of “likes”⁹ of the Facebook page; number of people “talking about” the page; and number of photos,

⁹ Both the number of page fans and the number of people “talking about” the page are numbers generated by Facebook and at the top of every Facebook fan page.

surveys, videos, events, and notes published on the page. Nominal variables included whether a Twitter account or other social media account was embedded on the page, and whether contact information was provided on the page.

When examining the Facebook posts (as opposed to the pages), coders analyzed ratio-level variables such as: number of “likes,”¹⁰ comments, and shares the post received; and number of links, photos, or videos included with the post. Nominal variables included: topic of the post; whether the original author of the post responded to any of the comments written by other users; and whether the post merely included a headline or a pulled quote, whether it was a greeting, or whether it offered any kind of analysis or commentary. A bivariate variable looked at whether the post was framed as mobilizing, or a call to action, motivating people to participate in any kind of civic or political event.

After two coding training sessions, inter-coder reliability was achieved with six variables at “substantial agreement,” where Cohen’s Kappa is between .61 and .80, and nine variables at “almost perfect agreement,” where Kappa is at or above .81 (Viera & Garrett, 2005). Agreement among variables ranged from a low of .64 Cohen’s Kappa (was there a motivational frame that encouraged people to participate or take action) to a high of 1 (number of likes, number of comments, number of shares, number of links, number of photos, number of videos, and type of motivational information provided). The mean Kappa of .87 for all variables exceeds the acceptable minimum standard (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000).

To test RQ1, concerning the relationship between the extent to which the four alternative media projects took advantage of Facebook’s social potential (i.e. number of

¹⁰ The number of “likes,” comments and shares that each comment receives are counted and recorded by Facebook.

photos, videos, events and notes, and link to Twitter), and the number of page fans and the number of fans “talking about” the page, bivariate correlations were conducted using the variables for number of page fans, number of people talking about the page, and numbers of photos, videos, events and notes posted by the page.

In answering RQ2, which questioned how interactivity (i.e. liking, commenting, sharing, and responding) varied among comments posted to the four alternative media projects’ Facebook pages, an ANOVA test was conducted using the variables for numbers of “likes,” comments, and shares as the dependent variables, and the media site as the independent variable. A Chi-square test compared whether the sites responded to users’ comments (dependent variable) with the media site (independent variable). Also, a T-test measured the relationship between the number of comments (dependent variable) and whether the site responded to user comments (independent variable).

For RQ3, examining the relationship between interactivity and the posting of multimedia elements, bivariate correlations were run comparing the interactivity variables (i.e. likes, comments, and shares) with the variables that counted the number of links, photos, and videos.

To answer RQ4, analyzing the relationship between interactivity and whether the post included accompanying text, ANOVA tests were run using the variable about what kind of text was posted with links (i.e. headline, pulled quote, commentary/analysis, or greeting) as the independent variable with the interactivity variables (number of likes, comments, and shares) as the dependent variables.

Lastly, an ANOVA test and frequencies were used to answer RQ5, which questioned whether the comments posted to the Facebook pages were used to motivate citizens to act or to mobilize. This question relied on the bivariate variable that coded whether the post was framed as a call to action, motivating people to mobilize or to

participate in any kind of civic or political event as the dependent variable, and the media site as the independent variable. Additionally, frequencies were run for the topic of the post.

TRIANGULATION

Utilizing multiple methods—in this case, semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observations, and content and textual analyses—results in a triangulated study with strengthened arguments (Flick, 2004; Potter, 1996). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), triangulation involves comparing at least two forms of evidence in order to help “bolster confidence in the objective reality of a research finding” (p. 274), thus answering concerns of those who would dismiss qualitative work as being less rigorous or valid. Rather than seeing triangulation as a way to reach a single, objective, or “true” reality, employing triangulation seeks to overcome the biases of a single method or source, and counterbalancing the weaknesses of any one method in order to create holistic or thick description (Jankowski & Wester, 1991).

Triangulation can involve methods (i.e. interviews and document analysis), sources/data (i.e. multiple reports from multiple people about the same subject), researchers (i.e. more than one researcher observing the same subjects, conducting the same interviews, or coding the same data) or theory (i.e. different approaches and disciplines), with the end goal of achieving greater descriptive and/or interpretative validity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Jankowski & Wester, 1991). Being an ethnographic study (which implies the use of multiple methods), this dissertation as a result is triangulated methodologically. Further, by conducting multiple interviews at each media site, as well as analyzing the media produced by each site, this dissertation also employed source/data triangulation. Finally, as this research is grounded in theories from

communication literature (such as alternative media and digital media theories) and sociology (such as social movement theories), this can be considered theoretical triangulation. Employing these various types of triangulation addresses any perceived weaknesses of qualitative research, thus strengthening the findings, increasing validity, and providing a more complete picture than could be obtained were just one approach or method used.

ETHNOCENTRISM

As noted earlier, positivists assume there is a single, objective “truth.” As Rubin and Rubin (2005) pointed out, however, no research is completely objective or bias-free, so the aim of research then becomes to learn about “contingent truths,” which presupposes that a researcher’s own experiences and perspectives impact the research. For example, according to standpoint theory, knowing and knowledge depend on one’s perspective, and researchers’ points of view cannot be separated from the research itself (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Further, as Emerson and colleagues (1995) noted, “reactive effects” occur because the researchers themselves impact the subjects under study, as just the fact of being there will affect what or who is being researched. Reactive effects are especially relevant in the case of this dissertation, as at least one of the alternative media projects changed its practices after the interviews conducted with editors and reporters revealed shortcomings in terms of adoption of technology. For example, *Diario CoLatino*, after the research was completed, invested in smartphones for many of its reporters and photographers, requiring them to post to Facebook and tweet while out in the field. In fact, *CoLatino*’s adoption of smartphones signals interviewees’ ability to engage in self-critique and take advantage of tools that more digitally “developed”

societies consider important. Reactive effects do not distort or contaminate the research. Rather, they lend credence to the notion that data cannot be objective or “true.”

Because there is no “true” data, then, the aim of qualitative research is getting subjects to “disclose their subjective standpoints” (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 179), which requires researchers to take care that their own subjectivities inform, but do not distort, their interpretations. One such distortion particularly relevant to this dissertation is that of ethnocentrism. Berry and Kalin (1995) suggested that ethnocentrism is the demonstration of “a lack of acceptance of cultural diversity, a general intolerance for outgroups and relative preference for one’s ingroup over most outgroups” (p. 303). Ethnocentrism inhibits any kind of intercultural communication competence (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997), which requires both intercultural sensitivity and intercultural awareness (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

Emerson et al. (1995) warned against ethnocentrism and the imposition of exogenous meanings on one’s research subjects. Descriptions of what researchers observe while in the field must “appreciate local meanings and concerns,” avoiding the temptation to place familiar—yet inapplicable—categories, criteria, standards or meanings on the subjects under study (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 109). When writing field notes, researchers must “learn to recognize and limit reliance upon preconceptions about members’ lives and activities. They must become responsive to what others are concerned about, in their own terms” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 12). Researchers do this by preserving “indigenous meanings”—using the actual words subjects used to describe and explain phenomena, rather than immediately interpreting what they think those words mean (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 12). Thus, all interviews for this research were conducted in Spanish, and all analyses of the transcripts were done in Spanish, using the interviewees’ own native words during the coding and interpretation process. Translation

into English occurred as a final step when the results were written. The English translations remain faithful to “indigenous meanings” by letting interviewees define what they meant by terms such as “accompany” or “participation,” instead of just directly translating the words themselves.

Also crucial to avoiding ethnocentrism is “reflexivity,” or the recognition that a researcher’s “account does not mirror reality, but rather creates or constitutes as real whatever it describes” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 213). Foley and Valenzuela (2004) suggested that “the road to greater objectivity goes through the ethnographer’s critical reflections on her subjectivity and intersubjective relationships” (p. 218). For Foley (2002), reflexivity is about being critically self-aware, understanding that there is no real distinction between the “self” and “other” as the self is a “multiple, constructed self that is always becoming and never quite fixed, and the ethnographic productions of such a self and the ‘cultural other’ are always historically and culturally contingent” (p. 473). According to Marcus’ (1994) typology, reflexivity can be confessional (such as in auto-ethnographies where the researcher and her personal experiences are located as central to the story), theoretical (where theory is grounded in the everyday practices and culture of the specific subjects under study), or epistemological/intertextual (more than just comparing different texts throughout history, it is about critically analyzing the discipline, the theoretical developments within that discipline, and the discipline’s influence on researchers’ interpretations). Foley (2002) added to that “deconstructive reflexivity,” which involves tearing down the supposedly objective constructs of the “cultural other” in order to deconstruct notions of power, hierarchy, and racial and class privileges. It is worth bearing in mind that ethnographic studies “can be used to oppress people or set them free” (Spradley, 1979, p. 13), making the call for reflexivity in qualitative research that much more urgent.

French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) called on researchers to be more transparent about how they create knowledge, and about the role of the academic discipline in influencing the researchers who are producing the “facts” or knowledge. Part of such transparency can mean opening up research to the subjects, seeking their input and feedback to create a collaborative study (Foley, 2002; Potter, 1996). Such a collaborative process allows researchers to fix any misinterpretations or misrepresentations from the point of view of the subjects, making the ethnography less hierarchical (Foley & Valenzuela, 2004). The end result is a more “polyvocal” study that elevates the interpretations of the subjects, and their understanding of meanings (Foley, 2002). Throughout the research stage, then, ongoing interpretations were relayed back to the interviewees, allowing them to provide feedback and participate as more than just interviewees in the research process.

Applying reflexivity and transparency to research also involves an awareness of and openness about the researcher’s own personal experiences that shape, to some extent, the research process and product. My educational background in journalism and Latin American studies, as well as my professional experiences as a reporter and blogger in the United States and Central America, influenced my decision to study news media in El Salvador. Further, when I was freelancing as an Inter American Press Association Scholar, my first-hand observations of and reporting about social media-driven protests in Guatemala in 2009 piqued my curiosity about the possibility of using social media for social change in other Central American countries. The contacts I made while working as the blog editor for the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas enabled me to more easily insinuate myself into the daily practices of the four alternative media sites studied herein. Additionally, my fluency in subjects’ native language of Spanish, as well as my previous experiences living and working in Latin America and my understanding of the

United States' interventionist policies in the region, helped me to gain acceptance as a researcher who was there to learn from them, work with them, and not just take from them.

As a professional-journalist-turned-scholar conducting research for this dissertation, I had the luxury of sharing many of the same understandings of and ways of speaking about journalism as my research subjects. Despite being from different countries and cultures, our shared journalism background provided me the advantage of being able to draw on common ideas and language during the formal and informal interviews with subjects, thus helping overcome any subjects' distrust of a scholar studying them and facilitating their acceptance of me. What's more, the commonalities between journalism and ethnography—such as the pitfalls of the assumption of objectivity (Agar, 1995; Bird, 1987) and the goal to help change, rather than merely describe, the world (Denzin, 2003)—contributed to a better, mutual understanding of my role as researcher and those of the interviewees as subjects and participants.

I do not claim that my observations are objective: my standpoint as a journalist and scholar with experiences in the United States and Latin America molds my perspective. I spent long days with the interviewees, interacting with them five, sometimes seven, days a week for 12 months, talking about alternative media, the state of journalism, technology, the future, and life in general. In some instances we became friends, which presents a challenge common to much ethnographic research (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), as the researcher attempts to engage closely with subjects and their daily lives while still maintaining ethical and professional distance during the data collection process. My ethnographic research required an awareness of these blurred roles and boundaries: familiarity was necessary in order to obtain valuable insights about the subjects' lives, but when participants asked me for my opinion, or asked me to take a

stance with them, I remained neutral. I used their questions as an opportunity to share with them my interpretations or tell them what other subjects said, soliciting their feedback and using their reactions to shape my ongoing research. Unlike journalists, who take an etic, or outsider's, perspective, ethnographers conduct research from an emic, or insider's, position. Research is collaborative, and thus requires a relationship between the researcher and subject: these relationships with fellow journalists and activists—colleagues, even—formed the basis of my research in El Salvador.

Such reflexivity helps lessen ethnocentrism. To avoid ethnocentrism in this dissertation, data analysis was approached from a grounded theory perspective, with interpretations constructed based on the cultural descriptions of the research subjects, privileging their own emic understandings instead of trying to impose exogenous theories constructed in different contexts for different settings (Spradley, 1979; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I did not consider myself an “expert” or somehow superior simply because I was a U.S. scholar and they were not: I was there to learn from them and tell their stories as truthfully as possible. Further, when in the field, I was conscious of native, or indigenous, language that the subjects used to explain and give meaning to phenomena, and this native language then was employed not just in my notes, but also in the interview questions, data analysis, and final interpretations (Emerson et al., 1995; Spradley, 1979).

Interestingly, while media scholars examine ethnocentrism in the news, avoidance of ethnocentrism in research itself is not discussed in much of the journalism literature. Perhaps because journalists are inculcated with the importance—and achievability—of “objectivity,” scholars within the field are seemingly less willing to call attention to the dangers of ethnocentric research, as that would involve denying the possibility of objective, value-free research.

Even though journalism scholars pay scant attention to ethnocentrism, general communications and area studies scholars recognize the need to de-Westernize research, which involves more than just studying non-Western countries and cultures (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). As Mohanty (1984) noted, de-Westernizing research also means abandoning “assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality” (p. 335) and situating Western theories and scholarship within a global economic, political, and cultural power hierarchy so that the hegemonic, taken-for-granted Western theories and assumptions do not become the “yardstick” by which all “others” are measured. In other words, researchers cannot look at themselves as the standard and research subjects as the “other,” for to do so “colonizes and appropriates the pluralities” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 351) of the differences under study. Revisiting her original 1984 essay on de-Westernizing feminist research, Mohanty in 2003 summed up her original argument by saying that the point is to avoid any “falsely universalizing” approaches, whether theoretical or methodological.

Takahashi (2007) also called attention to the problem of universalization, noting that research and theories produced in the West are not automatically etic (culturally neutral), an ideal model, or applicable to all regions of the world. He called for “Western emic concepts” to be contextualized, and for any measures or theories to be cross-culturally examined to determine to what extent they fit within different social and cultural realities. Rather than constructing a model for the West and another for “the rest,” however, Takahashi argued for the creation of an integrated model that takes into account not just research produced in the West and applied in other contexts, but also research from outside the West and its impact and relevancy in other parts of the globe. Answering Takahashi’s call, this dissertation included alternative media research from the United States and Europe, as well as Latin America. Incorporating Latin American

communications scholars and theories (i.e. Beltrán, 1980; Freire, 1970; Martín-Barbero; 2006; Reyes Matta, 1986; Sel, 2009; Vinelli & Rodríguez Esperón, 2004) with those from more developed countries lays the foundation for a better, more contextualized understanding of the role of alternative media and technology in El Salvador.

As Couldry (2007) stipulated, internationalizing media research means not just de-Westernizing existing concepts, but “generating an entirely new discourse whose reference points are, from the outset, global” (p. 249). Thus, this research makes an effort not to impose etic Western ideals or concepts on its subjects or ignore cultural distinctions that create meaning. Instead, local and cultural uniqueness and context were recognized and valued, as the goal was not just “to test the applicability of universalist hypotheses,” but rather to produce knowledge “by proceeding from local specificities upwards to comparative generalizations rather than downwards deductively from a priori assumptions” (Mody et. al, 2007, p. 316; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Although the content of ethnographic research such as this evolves during the act of writing (Stake, 2000), as the narrative guides interpretation, ultimately this dissertation compared and contrasted the four Salvadoran alternative media projects to provide a framework for examining and understanding the potential liberating use of technologies in alternative media. While a descriptive approach is valuable, this dissertation, although exploratory, goes beyond mere description to focus on any patterns that emerge that could help explain whether, when, how, and why alternative media were successful in incorporating liberation technology. Specifically, this dissertation focused on a) how alternative media projects in El Salvador incorporated digital technologies, and the resultant impact on citizen access to and participation in the media process; b) the challenges of the digital divide; and c) the value to alternative media for using ICTs, particularly social media, in liberating ways.

Chapter 5: *Diario CoLatino*

In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.

— George Orwell

Chipped paint peels from the dull peach-colored cement walls, which are plastered over with a half-dozen posters of the assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero—known in El Salvador as Monseñor Romero—and another dozen or so posters, stickers and fliers promoting various social causes: press freedom, clean water, anti-mining, efforts to end child-trafficking, justice for those disappeared during the civil war. The walls and desks, also decorated with stickers, contribute to the sense that the small, windowless, rectangular newsroom for the alternative newspaper *Diario CoLatino* feels lived-in, albeit also a bit worn out. There are only 11 desktop computers—a mix of old, new, and rebuilt Macs and PCs—for roughly twice as many reporters and photographers who sit at shared desks on maroon and teal-colored plastic indoor/outdoor chairs. A couple of the computers are too slow for reporters to be able to use them to access Facebook or even a non-HTML-only version of Gmail, and one of the computers is too old to even be able to go online at all. One nearly constantly ringing communal telephone sits on a metal desk at the front end of the room, and a communal cell phone with beads dangling from it—a cell phone that more often than not is in need of *saldo*, or minutes, to be able to place a call—is kept in a desk drawer for reporters' use. Equipment is limited because advertising is limited: the National Private Business Association for decades has boycotted advertising in *CoLatino* because the conservative business group's interests do not necessarily align with those of the leftist newspaper.

It is shortly after noon, and most of the journalists are ready to leave for lunch, winding down after meeting their 11 a.m. deadline—*CoLatino* is the country's only afternoon newspaper. An occasional *beep* or squawking sound signals a journalist's attempt to communicate with a colleague via the newspaper's walky-talky system: three years prior the newspaper decided to invest in the radios rather than more expensive cell phones. The door to the newsroom opens and lets in a blast of warm, humid air that clashes with the frigid temperature of the heavily air-conditioned room. Reporters shout to close the door because the loud rumble of the ancient presses roaring to life is nearly deafening. The presses, located just outside the newsroom door, occupy much of the space of the converted house that is home to *CoLatino*. They are more than simply old—the machinery had to be restored after it burned during a 1991 attack on the newspaper by rightist forces during the civil war.

CoLatino workers take pride in the way the newspaper has weathered more than 100 years in print, and they wear the physical and verbal attacks against the newspaper as a badge of honor, proof that it is a newspaper "in resistance." Driving home that mission, one long-time *Diario CoLatino* journalist pointed to a sheet of computer paper taped to the wall quoting Nobel Prize winning author and former reporter Gabriel García Márquez: "*Debemos ser conscientes de que los periodistas tenemos el poder y las armas para cambiar algo todos los días,*" or "we should be conscious that as journalists we have the power and the weapons to change something every day." *CoLatino*, the journalist said, tries to embody those words.

It is within this context of *CoLatino's* struggle to be a voice for resistance and change with limited resources and outdated technology that this chapter analyzed interviews with and observations of 28 *CoLatino* editors, reporters, photographers, and

readers. The analysis was guided by the five research questions outlined in Chapter 1¹¹. The interviews reveal various themes, such as a pride in being “alternative,” and a disconnect between the stated desire to encourage participation in and through the media, and a practice of only diffusing information and offering access to and representation in the media. In other words, interviewees espoused the importance of participation, but in reality only represented the voices of the people in the newspaper instead of allowing the people to speak for themselves. A tension between the importance journalists afforded to the role of ICTs and their inability to fully understand or use them also is brought to light with discussions of the challenges of the digital divide and the emergence of a fundamental theme regarding frivolous vs. liberating uses of digital tools. Many interviewees did not see Salvadorans as able to take advantage of technology’s liberating potential because they believed, for example, that users were too enamored of perusing their friends’ photos on Facebook or watching silly, even demeaning, videos on YouTube to be able to recognize the possibility of counter, emancipatory uses for ICTs in El Salvador. Additionally, the incorporation of more citizen participation via new technologies also exposed a concern among interviewees regarding their perceived ability to maintain their roles and professional identities as journalists. They saw themselves more as speaking on behalf of the people, rather than letting the people speak for

¹¹ RQ1) What are the perceived changes, if any, to the Salvadoran alternative media projects’ identities and news processes because of ICTs, particularly social media?

RQ2) What are the perceived changes, if any, in the meaning of citizen participation in alternative media because of ICTs, particularly social media?

RQ3) What key obstacles do the alternative media projects face in incorporating digital technologies, and how do those obstacles influence the usefulness and relevancy that the study participants assign to these tools?

RQ4) Under what circumstances have (or have not) these alternative media projects managed to successfully use digital technologies in liberating ways?

RQ5) What are the perceived values, drawbacks, and challenges of using ICTs, particularly social media, for social change?

themselves, and they worried they might lose control of that mediator role if they relied too much on the participatory features of social media.

An examination of the top 100 most frequent words that appeared during interviews¹² showed that the *CoLatino* interviewees most often spoke of “people,” “truth,” “informing,” “work,” and “alternative.” Subjects’ word choices are telling, demonstrating the importance they assigned to their alternative work as journalists who truthfully inform the people. The emphasis on “informing,” rather than “participation” also adds to the idea, developed below, that for these journalists, representation took precedence over participation. Words related to “organizing,” “campaigns,” or “movements” occurred much less frequently, appearing in the bottom half of the top 100 words, suggesting these subjects perceived of *CoLatino* more as an informer than a mobilizer. Words like “technology,” “digital,” “Internet,” “social networks,” and “Facebook” fell around the middle of the list, indicating perhaps that things technological were of interest, yet not a priority. Their middle-of-the-road position also perhaps speaks to a lack of full recognition of the potential of these tools, and a lack of understanding of how to fully utilize them, that is explored further below.

This chapter addresses each of these themes that emerged during analysis, and concludes by showing how these themes relate back to the five guiding research questions of this dissertation, ultimately furthering our understanding of the potential for liberating uses of technology in alternative media for contesting power, contributing to social change, and opening spaces for maximalist citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology.

¹² Word frequencies were conducted using NVivo. Word frequencies were generated after designating certain “stop words” that were omitted from the count, such as articles, helping verbs, transition words, and filler words (i.e. “you see?”).

A DIFFERENT KIND OF NEWSPAPER

With a circulation of 20,000, *CoLatino* is the country's largest alternative newspaper, and the journalists take pride in the newspaper's "alternative" status. Ana¹³, a 33-year-old reporter, described *CoLatino* as "an alternative newspaper, an objective newspaper, with truthfulness, that says things as they are." Norma, 32, also a reporter, gave the example of a presidential campaign event she covered that tens of thousands of people attended, even though the next day the two leading newspapers ran brief stories implying that no one had attended. Attributing the misleading story to the newspapers' rightist editorial lines, Norma said the differing campaign coverage between the mainstream newspapers and *CoLatino* is when she truly realized how important it was for El Salvador to have an alternative source of information. Bruno, a 39-year-old photographer, said that when he goes out on assignment, people on the street come up to him and say, "'Oh, you're from the newspaper that tells the truth.' That makes you feel good." In fact, on numerous occasions during the fieldwork period for this dissertation the *CoLatino* journalists repeatedly were thanked, their hands grasped tightly in appreciation, by community members who said the newspaper was the only one that cared about them.

While *CoLatino* journalists, just like mainstream media, cover the president, Congress and the Supreme Court, they do so from a different perspective, using different sources, and that in part is what makes the newspaper alternative, they said. Blanca, a 24-year-old reporter, explained: "We have to give voice to those that have no voice, that is, the people. Other media say 'the official said this thing,' but we take what the official said and contrast it with reality, which can be very different." *CoLatino* journalists also

¹³ Journalists' names were changed to protect their identity. The newspaper's director granted permission to use his real name.

pointed out that the newspaper is different because it covers topics ignored by the mainstream press. For example, a certain medicine made in El Salvador had been pulled off the shelves in the United States, but the Salvadoran mainstream press disregarded the story, said Francisco, the newspaper's director, because the company was a big advertiser, and because the company had ties to prominent politicians. Coverage decisions at *CoLatino* by contrast, he said, were made "independently of advertising decisions. We're going to publish the things we believe are of national interest." Interestingly, however, journalists did not seem to recognize contradictions in their statements about truth and independence on one hand, and their allegiance to the left on the other. With the 2009 election of El Salvador's first leftist president, *CoLatino* journalists suddenly found themselves no longer in opposition to the government. Journalists admitted that critical coverage of the government had declined since the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) came into power, but this did not necessarily create any dissonance with their understanding of the newspaper as "alternative" and "independent." Rather, they reconciled any tension by arguing that not criticizing the government was in fact alternative to the mainstream, which constantly criticized the government. Further, they said, the left stands for democracy and development, and they saw nothing inherently partisan about supporting whatever was in the best interest of the country and its progress.

The difference between *CoLatino* and other media was made obvious when noting which stories *CoLatino* reporters were sent to cover. More often than not, when covering protests or other events sponsored by civil society, the *CoLatino* reporters found themselves the only newspaper journalists—often the only journalists—present. For example, at one particular anti-mining protest as well as a demonstration demanding minimum wage for domestic workers, the only journalists to attend besides those from

CoLatino were from local community radio stations. At other events, such as unions protesting firings, television crews arrived on the scene, but typically just to show how traffic hampered the protesters, rather than to give voice to those protesting. As Fernando, the 35-year-old web master, put it, *CoLatino* “identifies with the needs of the people.”

PARTICIPATION VS. REPRESENTATION

More than simply covering stories that the mainstream will not, *CoLatino* journalists said they wanted to provide a voice for the voiceless, and, as Blanca said, “give more space to the people who do not have space.” Carmen, a 43-year-old reporter, noted that El Salvador’s history of repression and war created a culture of silence, which is why it was so important for *CoLatino* to open a space so “the people can come here and exercise their right to be citizens.” During interviews journalists talked a lot about participation, and the access that community members have to the newspaper. For example, Ana noted that *CoLatino* has an open-door policy for the “communities, the people that need it most, the people who for a long time have been the most excluded...These people are the ones who have trusted most in the newspaper.” Likewise, Francisco said the public knows where to turn with problems that need to be brought to light. “Who do you think they look for? They don’t go to *La Prensa Gráfica*¹⁴, they don’t go to *Diario de Hoy*, they don’t go to *Mundo*. They come here.” Bruno noted: “The people come to us to tell us their stories...And we go to the place and talk with the people, and then transmit it.” Carmen referred to it as “listening to their problems and then bringing visibility to their problems.”

¹⁴ *Prensa Gráfica* and *Diario de Hoy* are the leading mainstream dailies in El Salvador.

Indeed, community members regularly approached *CoLatino* with story ideas or problems they wanted to be addressed in print. As one lawyer who worked with an anti-mining coalition put it:

CoLatino opens a space for us, for civil society, and then hopefully we can get the conversation going from there. It's not necessarily that *CoLatino* journalists are more interested in environmental themes than mainstream journalists, but the mainstream media are controlled by economic interests, so with mining such a polemic topic here, *CoLatino* is the only newspaper that is going to write about it.

Similarly, a woman who headed a human rights organization dedicated to seeking justice for the disappeared¹⁵ and reuniting families separated during the civil war said that *CoLatino* was the only media outlet that always covered whatever the organization did. "The other media never give us space, or if they do it is to accuse us or detract from what we are doing," she said. "But *CoLatino* works to bring visibility to social problems. They give us a profile, and participate in what we do."

In general, not a day goes by that someone from the community does not call or drop by the newspaper to talk about a community problem and ask for a story to be written, and journalists typically followed up on most story tips. For example, one man in his fifties who for 20 years had been selling *CoLatino* on the streets of the city of Ahuachapán made the two-hour-long trek to San Salvador to complain that street vendors had been kicked off the streets and market vendors prevented from entering the market because the mayor wanted to "clean up" the city. The newspaper vendor brought the problem to *CoLatino's* attention, he said, because he never even considered going elsewhere. *CoLatino*, he said, was:

the only newspaper that fights for the people. I'm a social activist, and a vendor, and I always participate in marches, and demonstrations. I knew that if I wanted

¹⁵ An estimated 8,000 Salvadorans were victims of forced disappearances during the civil war.

to get our cause publicity, (*CoLatino*) would publish it. It is the newspaper of the people... We need to organize the people, and this article will help.

Most of the *CoLatino* journalists interviewed referred to this kind of access to the newspaper to as “participation.” And that access, they said, is evidence of their “*compromiso social*,” or social commitment that most claimed to have. They were “journalists with a conscience,” they said. For example, Ana said that *CoLatino* always attended to the needs of the people: “If there is a community that needs something, we have always tried to always give them a space.”

The point behind covering marginalized sectors of society and offering these voices a space for expression was so that the information could be used to spark change, Blanca said. If the people read a story but do not act, she said, then what is the point? Journalists should be writing stories not just because it is their job, but because they should want to “waken people’s consciousness so they act.” As Rosario, a 52-year-old reporter, explained, “empowerment is linked to speaking for one’s self, and alternative media is the tool” that enables it. Similarly, Gonzalo, a 55-year-old editor, said *CoLatino* “forms public opinion” and helps “orient” people to decisions they should make or actions they should take.

Still, in all their discussions related to participation and empowerment, the newspaper played the primary role, taking on a seeming preeminence over the citizens themselves. These *CoLatino* journalists’ definitions of participation and empowerment were more about access or representation, as interviews revealed. They saw themselves as speaking on behalf of the voiceless, rather than allowing the voiceless to speak for themselves. The journalists quoted the people, and were open to citizen input on story ideas, but the media process itself was not participatory. As Bruno phrased it, *CoLatino* journalists “want to make known what the people cannot transmit... We defend the people

that do not have a voice. We try to support them and help them...help the people who don't have a way to defend themselves or make themselves heard." Likewise, José, a 23-year-old photographer, said that at *CoLatino*, the people believe

they are heard and someone is interested in the problem that is happening. They can make their voice heard, and perhaps they are never going to find an official and say, "look, this and this happened," but by bringing it to the newspaper, that official can come to know about the problem that is happening.

Opening a space for the people allows them "to see in the newspaper a medium that responds to their needs and interests," José said. In other words, as these quotes indicate, *CoLatino* served as a mediator, speaking up for the people rather than letting them say it themselves.

When space was opened directly to the public, it was in the form of ad space sold, or in some cases given, to civil society organizations, but not to individuals. Such ads, Gonzalo noted, were how the newspaper survived. The objective of the space is "total pluralism for all sectors," he said, but interviewees pointed out that there was no concern of businesses or politicians with different views than *CoLatino* wanting to advertise, because they would not want to give any money to support the newspaper. For example, 20 years ago the right-leaning National Private Business Association instituted a still-ongoing advertising boycott against the newspaper, subjects noted. And despite *CoLatino's* support of the FMLN, the government still gave most of its advertising dollars to mainstream media. The journalists said this is because the government assumes the people reading *CoLatino* already are supporters, and because the government wants to reach as many eyeballs as possible, which means advertising with TV and the largest circulation newspapers, rather than small *CoLatino*.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

The journalists' interpretation of participation as closer to representation is tied to their identities as professional journalists. Pilar, a 48-year-old journalist, explained that while the public was more than welcome to come to the newspaper with concerns, it was the journalist's job as a professional to dig deeper and write about it. For example, when a man showed up in the newsroom to complain about cell phone towers being built next to an elementary school, the newspaper sent a reporter to report on any health risks the children might be suffering. The journalists implied that covering a story themselves, instead of just letting a community member write about it, gave added importance and credibility to the issue. Pilar explained that by getting to know in-depth the communities and their problems, the newspaper's journalists fulfilled their commitment to readers, and that, she said, is what it meant to be a journalist. As Ana succinctly stated, "My job is to inform, and through information, help people."

It is interesting to note the way in which the journalists spoke about their relationship to their profession, and their relationship with the newspaper. For example, they repeatedly lumped themselves in with professional journalists by saying "we." However, when referring to practices at the newspaper, they mostly referred to "*CoLatino*" or the newspaper, suggesting that they identified as journalists, but many of them did not necessarily identify as *CoLatino* journalists. This is telling in that for many of these journalists, *CoLatino* was a job, more than a calling. In fact, despite the newspaper's leftist stance, many of the journalists planned to vote for the right-wing candidate in the upcoming presidential elections. They primarily wanted to be journalists, and while they were proud to work for an alternative newspaper, many said that if given the opportunity to make more money at a mainstream media outlet, they would leave *CoLatino*. They believed in the newspaper's mission to provide a voice for the

voiceless—they were, after all, “committed journalists”—but that did not necessarily make them supporters of the ruling, leftist FMLN, and nor did it mean that they prioritized that mission above a more general one of doing journalism. What’s more, they spoke of *CoLatino*’s identity as alternative, and not their own. They were journalists working at an alternative newspaper, not alternative journalists.

As such, they were careful to distinguish their roles as journalists from that of activists, which was especially important to them professionally since they understood that alternative media are the media of activists. For the most part, journalists perceived their commitment to helping people as an advocacy role, writing about what was happening rather than taking part in any actions themselves. Rather than being part of a social movement per se, Blanca said, the newspaper aligned with social movements, bringing them visibility, but still doing journalism more than activism. Instead of carrying signs during the marches they covered, they carried audio recorders, notebooks and cameras. The laminated *CoLatino* badges hanging around their necks identified them as journalists. As José said, *CoLatino* did not take part in activism, but rather supported it by providing space for activists’ voices and covering their stories. The newspaper influenced readers to take action by informing them of facts and events, rather than directly calling for action. For these journalists, activism meant actively participating in political action, while what *CoLatino* did was more social action, informing about what the activists did, which then could shape opinion as to how readers perceived of those activists.

However, a few subjects—in particular those who had sided with the FMLN guerrillas during the civil war or whose parents had—said that by committing to a cause, and contributing to social movements, they in fact did acts of activism, and did not simply influence the public. Francisco went so far as to call what the newspaper did “propaganda,” and he did not mean this in a pejorative way. Rather, he said, the

newspaper had a mission to support the left, support development, support social movements, and support democracy: “We complement propaganda with journalism, and vice versa... Lenin outlined three functions the media should have: organize, educate, and orient. This is propaganda. Thus, this is what we believe the newspaper should do.”

Either way, though, these interviewees clung to their professional identity as journalists first and foremost. “We’re professionals,” Carmen said. “We collect information and present it to the public so they can form an idea about what is happening.” These journalists did not see contradictions between standards of professionalism and a social commitment. In part because they worked at an alternative newspaper, and in part because of the history of the country’s media with aligning with political and business interests, they did not adhere to the U.S. definition of journalists as unbiased or objective. Objectivity to them was more about transparency and admitting they were on the side of the people: objective from whose standpoint? Objectivity was not about including two sides of the story if one of those sides was wrong, they said, especially when “objectivity” in fact just represents the dominant power’s point of view. Professionalism, then, was less about objectivity per se and more about truthfully representing the people and giving them the information they needed to make informed decisions that could lead to the betterment of the country.

Of course, the newspaper’s provision for representation instead of actual participation was about more than just professional identity. It also stemmed in part from the fact that *CoLatino* fundamentally is a political project to support leftist, progressive causes. Allowing too much participation, then, potentially could disrupt that political mission. As Francisco said, the newspaper had to be careful about who was quoted or which unions or civil society organizations were given coverage, because it was easy for anti-leftist views to creep in. The newspaper must have spaces for debate that further

tolerance and democracy, he said, but it will not open spaces for those that do not—those views already have plenty of space in mainstream media, the journalists noted.

This limited participation—more akin to access or representation—on the print side was mimicked in the virtual realm. “New technologies can generate positive debate to a certain point, but we’re not doing that at all. We limit ourselves to putting out the print version putting it online, and that’s it,” Ana said. For example, *CoLatino*’s website did not allow readers to make comments on any stories, or upload their own videos or photos. While most reporters mistakenly assumed this was because the platform or server would not allow it, in fact reader comments and other user interactivity were prohibited because the newspaper’s editors did not want to allow them. “I’m scared of irresponsibility,” Fernando said. “We left it open once, and people said all kinds of barbarities. And I do not agree with that.” Also, despite the capacity to publish blogs on the newspaper’s website, again the higher-ups decided against offering citizens direct access to the production process without at least having someone dedicated fulltime to supervise what was posted, and they did not have the resources to hire anyone to do so. Further, interviewees noted, the newspaper had other, more pressing priorities than making online space for citizens or adding interactive multimedia elements. For example, Gonzalo said that the newspaper first must worry about making sure the website does not crash, or that the online PDF edition functions correctly. “First we have to resolve all of this, and then comes the possibility of audio, video, comments, and everything else,” he said. *CoLatino*’s hesitancy to open wide the gates to citizen participation is not unusual, as online interactive and participatory elements are rare at newspapers throughout Latin America (Bachmann & Harlow, 2012). Still, in light of the fact that interviewees repeatedly stated the newspaper sought citizen participation, more inclusion of opportunities for online participation seems in line with *CoLatino*’s professed mission.

SOCIAL MEDIA: INFORMING, NOT COMMUNICATING

This same pattern of participation in name only was repeated when it came to *CoLatino's* social media accounts which, when updated, tended just to be a link to a story or diffusion of information, without any real analysis or a call for citizen commentary or participation¹⁶. Further, the updates, if they came, tended to correspond with when the website was updated, which happened when the newspaper went to print. Journalists espoused the participatory potential of social media, but admitted they did not take advantage of it. José, for example, said Facebook could totally change the way journalists interact with the public:

With social networks, it is like you are there in front of the other person. The other person can write you and you can realize first-hand what the other person thinks, what he feels, the needs he has or the problems that are happening. It is not like they have to come here and leave a letter or talk on the phone. They just write it there and the newspaper can find out about it. It is faster, and shortens distances... You can interact with the people. There can be reciprocity... The people publish something on their account and then we take it to do a story.

Once again, then, the newspaper placed itself in a mediating role, despite the acknowledgment of the interaction and citizen self-publishing that Facebook offers.

Looking at the newspaper's Facebook page was no different than viewing *CoLatino's* website or the printed version of the newspaper itself. *CoLatino's* Facebook use was uni-directional, diffusing information to the public, rather than multi-directional, creating conversations between *CoLatino* and its readers, and among readers. During the fall of 2012, as interviews with *CoLatino* journalists were conducted for this dissertation, the newspaper's Facebook and Twitter accounts remained mostly inactive (this since has changed). No one updated the Facebook account, reporters said, because no one knew what the password was. The story went that the journalist who had created the account

¹⁶ For more on this, see the content analysis in Chapter 9.

had left a couple of years prior, and either no one had contacted him to find out the log-in information, or he could not remember the log-in information. “I do not know what is really happening with our pages...No one knows who manages them,” Linda, a 35-year-old reporter, said. Raquel, a 39-year-old photographer, said she “supposed” the newspaper had a Facebook page, but she never really looked at it.

Much of the bewilderment surrounding the Facebook account can be attributed to a lack of resources. No employee was dedicated fulltime to updating the social media accounts. The newspaper’s web master—the editors assumed he was responsible for the accounts, but he said he was not—was not part of the actual news production process, and because he was not on the streets reporting or writing up the stories, he was disconnected from a context that encouraged the posting of news and information updates via social media. Plus, he said, no journalist ever expressed to him a desire to update stories on social media as they were reported. Seeing that the newspaper’s website was essentially only updated whenever that day’s print edition was published, it is not surprising that social media updates were not at the forefront of journalists’ minds.

The journalists assigned value to social media for communicating with the public in an informative capacity, but they were unsure how to get started. “We are being left behind...but we do not know how to adapt,” Linda said. Also, few had undergone any kind of digital training that would allow them to post photos, videos or audio online. As Rosario put it, “we’re *meques*” (nosey): if they wanted to learn something, they had to experiment with it until they figured it out, or abandoned it. Pilar explained that the lack of digital training prevented them from recognizing, and thus using, digital tools’ full potential: “We do not have access to a lot of technology, but we do not even know what is out there.” Thus, that lack of digital training affected what tools they adopted. If they had heard about it and everyone was using it, they would give it a try. If not as many

people were using it, they might not even bother, or would eventually give up, as many did after opening Twitter accounts. Lack of digital training also had an impact on how they used the tools they adopted. Without someone teaching them the best practices of Facebook, for example, their Facebook use—personally or professionally—was limited to what they could learn via experimentation or observation of how their friends used their own accounts. For example, since no one they knew used Twitter regularly, they had no one to explain to them how to use Twitter in terms of what to post or when to post. This helps explain why they did not understand what benefits Twitter might offer that Facebook did not, and thus why they continued to use Facebook and not Twitter.

EVOLVING USES OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

Only half of the journalists used Twitter, and of those who had opened Twitter accounts, most had let them fall into disuse. “I do not know how to use Twitter,” Pilar said. “It does not interest me. I do not know why not, but it has not called my attention. Maybe because I have a lot of things to do and I think Twitter will take up all my time.” Pilar’s fear of Twitter’s time consumption was common to many of the journalists. Ana likewise said she did not use Twitter because one social media account was enough: “It would be too much of a bad habit.” Carmen said she did not understand the point of Twitter or how to use it. “I just found out what a hashtag is,” she said, adding that she often did not understand the emoticons on social media, either. Norma, who perceived of Facebook more as a social experience and Twitter as more useful for news, said she rarely tweeted anything, using Twitter just to monitor what was going on. Similarly, Mateo, a 27-year-old reporter, said he used Twitter to post information and news, while Facebook was more personal. Blanca mixed the personal and professional on her Twitter feed, but she said she did not like Twitter’s limitations: “I just feel like man, Twitter, 140

characters? One hundred forty characters is not enough space for me.” Rosario complained that Twitter focused on the banal. Plus, she said, she was not that “egotistical” to think people needed to read posts about what she did all day long.

While all journalists interviewed had Facebook accounts, few were in the habit of posting their stories to their personal Facebook pages, and none posted to *CoLatino's* page. “The majority of journalists use Facebook, but they do not see the newspaper’s Facebook page as a tool for them to publish the news,” Fernando explained. Most subjects primarily used Facebook to chat with friends and family or to look at photos. “They are called *social* networks; it is a matter of friends, the social,” Raquel said, explaining why she never posted work-related stories or photos on her page. “We communicate and talk about other things that have nothing to do with journalism,” she said. Ana noted that she started to learn how great Facebook could be for keeping track of what her sources did on the beats she covered: “It is a good work tool,” she said, adding, though, that she could not deny often using it just to play games or chat. Like so many of her colleagues, though, if she posted a news story—which was rare—it was never her own. Why not? And again, like her fellow journalists, she simply answered, “I don’t know. I have never thought about it.” Norma expanded somewhat on her own “I don’t know,” saying that because she saw Facebook as belonging to the personal realm, she did not want to mix that with news or work, as she worried that because she had Facebook friends from polarized ideological stances, posting news might lead to a debate, which she did want to encourage on her own “personal space.”

A couple of journalists had created two accounts: one personal, one professional. The idea being, they said, to prevent political comments on their personal pages, or to keep sources from learning personal information about them. In reality, though, their professional accounts were rarely updated and used more for contacting sources than

diffusing information. Still, using their personal Facebook accounts to monitor their beats was a step forward. For example, every morning Norma started the day by logging onto Facebook and Twitter to see what the legislature was up to. Linda also checked Facebook throughout the day for any press releases coming out of the presidential office. And while most press releases arrived via fax or email, more and more the journalists learned of events via Facebook. In one case, the newspaper was not invited to a union protest that Norma found out about on Facebook, and thus the newspaper was able to cover the event at the last minute. Similarly, university groups and student movements relied almost entirely on social media to get out the word, so Blanca often ran to the national university at the last minute to cover an event she had just seen advertised on Facebook.

Thus, although their Facebook use seemed to evolve, as they increasingly used the platform for contacting sources and following information posted on pages associated with the beats they covered, mostly they used Facebook for non-newspaper related activities. This is not to say that in their personal lives they only utilized Facebook to chat with friends or for frivolous purposes. For example, during the fall of 2012 *CoLatino* journalists used Facebook to mount a fund-raising campaign for a fellow journalist, Santiago, who needed to go to Cuba to have a tumor removed from his face. Once the social media campaign started to attract attention, *CoLatino* published stories related to Santiago's cause, and eventually the mainstream media picked up the story, as well. "We proved that social networks work, because the majority of events that we held had a good echo. Everything was promoted via Facebook, and it was successful," Norma said. Linda said the Santiago campaign showed her that Facebook was useful not just for communicating, but also for "moving the masses" and "convoking people...Maybe in El Salvador is has not been exploited on a grand scale yet, but it already is starting."

A LACK OF DIGITAL-FIRST VISION

When it came to thinking about ways the journalists could apply the same social media techniques used for Santiago's cause to various of *CoLatino's* campaigns (such as an anti-gun and anti-violence campaign, or a campaign to free five Cubans held as prisoners because the United States accused them of terrorism), the journalists interviewed struggled to make the connection. "I think maybe because we do not all have phones with cameras or Internet that our thinking is a little behind when it comes to what all we can do with technology," Raquel said. This also can be attributed to a lack of vision both on the part of the editors as well as the reporters and photographers themselves. "I have never heard anyone comment about wanting to do more multimedia things, about using video, using the Internet. I do not think there is a lot of interest," Bruno said. Raquel noted that they are only trained—and paid—to write, or take photos, and any additional multimedia responsibilities would just take up too much time. Rather than take the initiative to give their audio to the web master (the journalists all recorded their interviews with digital audio devices), or ask the photographer with them to record a video instead of just take photos (all the cameras were digital with video capabilities), most journalists just shrugged and blamed the newspaper's director. As one journalist said, "He does not give a lot of priority to digitalization at the moment. Maybe it is because he is married to the newspaper, that is, print."

Gonzalo and Francisco both freely admitted that the journalists were correct, and that providing the latest in technological advances was not at the top of *CoLatino's* priorities, especially when, as Gonzalo said, he believed Facebook and Twitter were more for entertaining than providing serious information. The members of the cooperative overseeing *CoLatino's* operations—only two were journalists, the rest in production or on the business side—decided how to spend any extra revenue at the end of the year, and

typically they opted to put the money toward employee loans or bonuses. “If a computer is working, we are not in a place where we could just throw it out to buy another... We do not need to be updating equipment all the time. What is most important to us? To be able to pay the salaries of all the workers,” Gonzalo said. Journalists, most without smartphones of their own, were concerned with writing and publishing their stories when they returned to the newsroom, and not focused on publishing updates on social media. Of course, they said, if they had access to smartphones, they would be more likely to use Facebook and Twitter on the job. “We could tell the people, ‘we are here for you,’ minute-by-minute, informing them of what is happening,” Raquel said. Editors, though, questioned whether the journalists would make good use of smartphones, assuming that they would use them just to make phone calls or send text messages, rather than post story updates to social media.¹⁷

Despite espousing a desire to integrate social media into their daily practices, just as journalists were dubious of allowing readers to comment on their stories on the website, they were apprehensive of what “too much” citizen participation via social media would do to the newspaper’s credibility and their own journalistic identities. Raquel worried that, rather than creating a dialogue, users would turn to Facebook to complain: “‘You are doing a bad job’ and ‘we do not agree with what you are doing.’” Many also shook their heads at the thought that social media and a smartphone could make anyone a journalist. Tomás, a 20-something part-time reporter, pointed out that *CoLatino* was a brand that readers trust, so if just anyone posted an opinion on Facebook, that could damage the newspaper’s credibility. Likewise, reporters noted the way inaccurate information spread like wildfire on social media, especially when reporters

¹⁷ Since the fieldwork ended, many of *CoLatino*’s journalists and photographers were provided with company smartphones and told to post to Facebook and Twitter while reporting.

posted unverified rumors just to have a scoop, and they said they did not want to be a part of that because it was not how “real” journalists should behave. Interestingly, Norma noted that too much of a focus on social media and interaction distracted from their jobs as journalists, perhaps even preventing them from fully informing their public. For example, if they worried about updating social media, they might miss deadline. Or creating and uploading videos to YouTube might detract from time that could be spent tracking down a story. Perhaps because of their lack of digital training, then, they did not necessarily see the multiple ways social media and interaction could in fact make their jobs easier and perhaps even make their work better.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND BLACKBERRIES

Still, in general, journalists perceived digital tools as important for their work—even if they did not fully recognize to what extent—and their desire to use ICTs and mobile technologies was only slightly mitigated by recognition that access to technology was limited in El Salvador. This lack of concern about the digital divide is somewhat surprising considering that about 75 percent of the population does not have Internet access or use Facebook (Internet World Stats, 2012). Further, just 2.5 percent of the population reads its news online (IUDOP, 2012). Despite the deep digital divide, however, only a few older journalists ascribed the newspaper’s sluggishness to adopt new technologies to the fact that the bulk of the country lacked computer access. For example, Gonzalo said:

We use the necessary form of communication to interact with our readers...When people want to denounce something, or communicate with us, they talk to us by phone or come here...I feel that, like it or not, we are still not in grave need of Facebook or Twitter for this kind of communication...There are more phone calls than Twitter messages or Facebook messages.

Like the majority of *CoLatino* journalists, however, Ana said that blaming the digital divide had become a crutch, and not even an accurate one:

A lot of people here think that because people are from the communities, with little economic resources, that these people cannot have access to new technologies, even though it is not necessarily true. So we do not evolve in this aspect, and we do not generate the ability to approach people via another form beyond just the newspaper.

She compared lack of Internet access to illiteracy: just because a large percentage of the population could not read did not mean *CoLatino* should not publish: “On the contrary, it is about trying to improve and evolve,” she said. A large swath of the country’s population used the Internet, and *CoLatino* needed to make sure journalists had the training and equipment to serve the newspaper’s connected audience, interviewees said.

Norma noted that “almost everybody is buying cell phones with Internet. You might not have a computer, but you have Internet on your cellular...People that you would not even imagine have access and have Facebook.” Likewise Blanca said that the official Internet penetration rate did not tell the full story: “If you notice, even the market vendors walk around with a Blackberry. Do you understand? I see people who are 80 years old walk around with a Blackberry...It is surprising to what lengths we have gone with technology.” Still, Fernando said, most of the people who need the newspaper—the poor with whom the newspaper identifies—are not the ones with Internet access. “So what we look to do with implementing these new tools is maintain the people we have, but reach more people in other places,” he said.

Thus, despite unequal access to and use of new technologies, in general the *CoLatino* journalists interviewed expressed optimism about the role such tools could play in terms of alternative media and social change. The journalists wanted to incorporate social media into their daily work routines, even though they were unsure how to do so

and lacked the smartphones that could facilitate doing so. Gonzalo spoke of the way the Internet could perhaps bring in more advertising, generating more resources that could be spent on technology. Social networks allow people with similar ideas to come together in their own space, Blanca said. Prior to Facebook, José said, there was no easy way to bring together a multitude of people to demonstrate or support a cause. “But now someone gets an idea, ‘let’s form a group,’ right? And then it starts to spread, to be shared, and more and more people are joining. It is a tool that, if you know how to use it...can benefit society.” Social media pick up the slack because alternative media outlets, small and with limited resources, cannot cover everything, Tomás said: “That is why social networks are so important. Even though not everyone has access, they can still have an impact.”

OVERCOMING FRIVOLOUS USES AND LIMITING PERSPECTIVES

All that being said, obstacles remain; namely, getting readers to participate and to use technologies in liberating ways. José noted that few Salvadorans read the news, and even fewer read the news online: “They prefer to look at a photo or watch a video.” Despite this recognition, though, the newspaper made no efforts to post videos or to create photo galleries. Gonzalo said that for Salvadorans, the Internet was about “enjoying the wars between Pepsi and Coke” or spreading rumors, so that even if *CoLatino* used social media effectively and to help people, it still has its limits because of users:

Education levels here are so low that what do you think the youth of today are going to look at on the Internet in a cyber café? I tell you: pornography. Games. They’re playing, they’re not reading something of political or social, much less economic, interest.

For Esteban, a 52-year-old journalist, “social networks reflect the crudest part of the universe.” He said that if he posts an important analysis about the environment on social media, no one comments, but “if I post that Shakira is pregnant, everyone comments, as many as 100 comments.” Rafael, a 25-year-old photographer, referred to the “immature” uses of Facebook related to “I feel bad, I hurt here, whatever,” that, while they still reign on Facebook, slowly are changing as people use social media more for news and “alternative communication.” Technology could be useful for bigger things, Carmen said, but only if people understand how to use it, and only if that understanding goes beyond using it to “chat or post stupidities.” Again, however, despite recognizing the differences between frivolous and liberating uses of technology, the journalists did not do anything to ensure their uses were liberating, or to teach users how to occupy these tools in non-frivolous ways. They criticized the users, and said something needed to be done, but they did not take the next logical step to say that as journalists they had the power to do something. Thus, while stating that *CoLatino’s* mission was to help people and offer solutions via information, in practice that help seemed limited to smaller, more concrete problems that could be related back to politics and the left-right divide. What’s more, without training and equipment, the journalists also seemed to recognize that they were hardly in a position to lead a campaign on emancipatory uses of social media. Additionally, participating in such a campaign could be seen to contradict their identities as journalists, not activists.

Thus, the journalists themselves also presented an obstacle to using technologies in liberating ways, as their understandings of social media and digital tools mostly were limited to their usefulness for providing news and informing the people. For example, when talking about social media, the journalists mostly used phrases referring to “another way to transmit information,” like “speed,” “reach,” “diaspora,” “instant information,”

“real time,” and “in-depth.” As Ana said, when she thinks of “new technologies,” she thinks of a tool to improve her job of providing information that helps people.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

As noted in Chapter 1, a 2012 *CoLatino* article touted the newspaper’s commitment to giving ordinary people normally marginalized from the mainstream media a place to express themselves, thus contributing “to the deepening of democracy and the construction of a just, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development model” (Vilches, 2012). However, based on in-depth interviews and observations conducted as part of ethnographic fieldwork, it seems that *CoLatino* created more of a space for representation than for actual expression or participation. And when it came to technology, a seeming lack of resources, training, vision, and even desire also prevented *CoLatino* from using digital tools to move beyond representation and interaction to actual expression and participation.

Returning to the research questions guiding this study, then, analysis suggests that ICTs, online social media in particular, slowly but surely started to change *CoLatino*’s news processes, but the journalists continued to cling to their roles as mediators and their professional identities as “journalists.” In other words, despite the participatory potential afforded by Facebook and other digital tools, and despite the interviewees’ recognition of this potential, these subjects perceived ICTs as facilitating their responsibility to speak on behalf of the voiceless, rather than as creating a way for the voiceless to speak for themselves. This is evidenced by the various themes that emerged during analysis, such as a pride in being “alternative” and giving a voice to the voiceless. However, there was a clear disconnect between journalists’ stated desire to encourage participation in and

through the media (Carpentier, 2011), and their practice of only diffusing information and offering access to and representation in the media.

Interviewees repeatedly spoke about their perception of *CoLatino* as an open space for citizens to freely express themselves; they said the newspaper's open-door policy and attention to marginalized sectors of society made *CoLatino* the only place *el pueblo*, or the people, could come to be heard. But while these subjects talked about expression and participation, what they really seemed to mean was representation. They assigned so much value to their identities as journalists—albeit “committed” journalists—that they were seemingly unwilling to relinquish their roles as mediators and open wide the gates. The gates were not closed to the topics, voices, and perspectives normally locked out by mainstream media, but neither were they open to full-on citizen participation. As Carpentier (2011) noted, representation and interaction are not the same as participation. Citizens were unable to participate directly in the media process, and as a result were unable to fully participate in a broader discursive sphere. The lack of direct participation is not surprising considering most of these interviewees distinguished between themselves as journalists and the communities they covered. From their perspective, they were journalists that drew close to and identified with the people and their problems, even, perhaps, behaving as advocates, but they did not become active participants and were not activists. Thus, when they talked about the potential of using social media and digital technologies, they did so more in terms of information and interaction—reaching larger, more widespread audiences quickly and cheaply, thus helping them better inform and be informed about the communities they covered—than participation *in* technology and participation *through* technology. Likewise, the newspaper's website itself offered no new levels of participation beyond the printed

version, as reader comments on stories were prohibited and no citizens were allotted blogs.

Much of this limited view about the role of ICTs in alternative media and social change can be attributed to the digital divide, both in terms of the journalists' lack of training and resources, as well as their audience's lack of access or know-how. The lack of vision about ways to incorporate ICTs among editors and other higher-ups at the newspaper trickled down to the reporters and photographers. This is not to say that the journalists did not want to experiment with digital tools—they did, and, unlike their superiors, they saw value in using technologies even if much of their audience was excluded. Smartphone use was surging, they argued, adding that all youth used Facebook, and if the newspaper did not, it would be left behind. Still, no one made a concerted effort to lobby for new equipment or for opening a space for online comments, or even took it upon his or her self to post news updates to Facebook or Twitter. In fact, the lack of understanding about who was in charge of the newspaper's Facebook page, and whether anyone knew how to log in, was emblematic of this lack of vision, suggesting that while “new” technologies might seem exciting and perhaps potentially useful, they were not a priority. Such a lack of priority is not necessarily a surprise, however, in light of the newspaper's limited resources. After all, what good is a Twitter strategy if the journalists do not have company-provided smartphones?

Despite these challenges, though, *CoLatino* interviewees' use of social media had begun to evolve. Although most subjects primarily utilized their Facebook accounts for chatting with friends and family, playing games, or viewing photos, they also said they had started to use Facebook for contacting sources, monitoring their beats, and reading the news. A couple of journalists even created two accounts: one personal and one professional. Additionally, their personal use of Facebook for the Santiago campaign

demonstrated that social media can be used for liberating purposes in El Salvador. The problem, at least in terms of alternative media, is finding a way to transfer that successful and liberating personal use of Facebook to organized campaigns that alternative media outlets could mount. As the journalists noted, *CoLatino* is a trusted brand, carrying more weight than a Facebook campaign started by just anyone.

Other than the Santiago campaign, however, the subjects for the most part did not use their accounts to post their own stories, nor did they use them to generate debate or call for action. They saw Facebook as a personal platform, not a work-related one. Further, their professional identity as journalists, and their desire to maintain journalistic credibility, also could explain why they did not use Facebook for debate or action, as doing so could be construed as activism rather than journalism. They did not want to damage their reputations and credibility by violating traditional journalistic norms of objectivity. Nor were they willing to reconsider the role of objectivity or to weigh the value of perceived loss of credibility loss versus the gain of citizen participation via technologies. In reality then, these interviewees did not necessarily use Facebook much differently than the public at large that they criticized for using social media in frivolous ways. For these journalists, the greatest obstacle they saw to using ICTs for social change was getting users to think about Facebook differently: as a tool for information, debate and action, and not just as a toy. Somewhat ironically, however, the journalists themselves also could be viewed as obstacles in that they limited their vision for ICTs' potential to the informative, rather than the participatory, realm. What's more, they failed to even recognize the full informative potential of ICTs, lacking not just knowledge about what tools were available, but also lacking understanding of how to capitalize on them.

Thus, this chapter showed that the incorporation of ICTs into *CoLatino's* news processes still was in the nascent stage: interviewees had yet to recognize the full

liberating potential of digital tools. A lack of ability to comment on stories on the newspaper's website and a lack of updated social media accounts meant that users had no real opportunities to participate *in* the news processes via technology. What's more, the subjects' pride in their professional identity as journalists also precluded any real participation *through* technology. *CoLatino* journalists, thus, served as mediators, even advocates, for the voiceless. However, despite having verbalized their recognition of the participatory and liberating potential of ICTs, the journalists maintained their mediator roles, speaking on behalf of the voiceless rather than using technology to let the voiceless speak for themselves.

Chapter 6: Radio Victoria

Brothers of El Salvador and the world: At this moment Radio Venceremos, the voice of the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), begins broadcasting from somewhere in El Salvador to accompany the Salvadoran people step by step in their march towards final victory over centuries of oppression.

— Radio Venceremos, Jan. 10, 1981

On May 28, 2013, the coordinating committee of Radio Victoria sent the mayor of the town of Victoria a letter seeking permission to use the Villa Victoria Park to celebrate the community radio station's 20th anniversary. On July 3 the station finally received word that it could use the park for its Sunday, July 14 celebration and community arts fair. Days later, however, that permission was rescinded without explanation. Having already advertised the time and location of the anniversary celebration, and convinced the permit denial was just another of the mayor's attempts to make things difficult for Radio Victoria, station workers decided to occupy the park—the celebration would go on, with or without permission. Just as had happened numerous other times in the station's 20-year history, radio workers and listeners joined forces to right what they perceived as a wrong. So, at 10 p.m. the Saturday before the celebration, workers, volunteers and radio supporters arrived at the park with signs and blankets, prepared to spend the night and “reclaim the park for the people,” they said. Throughout the night they decorated the park for the celebration, set up sound equipment on the stage for the next day's performers, and prepared the radio equipment to broadcast live from the event.

The morning of the anniversary event dawned sunny and warm. Women arrived with pots of homemade tamales wrapped in palm leaves to feed celebration-goers, and local community members set up tables to sell hand-crafted wooden jewelry boxes, embroidery, and other arts and crafts. Bright balloons were taped to park tables and benches, and throughout the park signs of support and congratulations from local NGOs mixed with protest signs denouncing the mayor's actions. "Stop! Occupied!" read signs at the park's entrance. Other handmade signs, in a nod to the radio station's name, proclaimed, "Victories are won with the people, not the power," and "The art festival will be one more victory." In one last attempt to shut down the event, the city cut off electricity to the park, but a nearby neighbor agreed to provide power, so extension cords were run from her house to the park. Town police circled on foot outside the park—station workers referred to it as an intimidation attempt—but their presence and the lack of permit did not keep people away, as more than 300 people arrived by foot or by bus from surrounding communities.

"Twenty years ago Santa Marta dreamed of having a voice, its own communication medium, and here we are," said Miranda¹⁸, a member of the radio's coordinating committee, during the event. "Twenty years does not just mean 20 years for Radio Victoria, but 20 years for alternative media in El Salvador...Radio Victoria is the alternative for those who have been denied the right to express themselves."

In the 20 years of Radio Victoria's existence, the mayor's attempts to derail the celebration were not the first time the station struggled to be heard. The left-leaning community radio station in the remote department of Cabañas on the border with Honduras often finds itself in conflict with the local right-wing government. The long-

¹⁸ Interviewees' names were changed to protect their privacy.

time mayor regularly makes statements—some call them threats—against the station and against Santa Marta, the community in which Radio Victoria started. The mayor also refuses to give the station interviews, alleging that radio workers would just misquote him, interviewees said. Strained relations with the mayor stem in part from his connections with Canada’s mining company Pacific Rim, against which the radio campaigns. Repeated death threats against station workers, coupled with the killings of local anti-mining activists, led the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2009 to grant precautionary measures to provide permanent police protection for the radio and its journalists. Two plain-clothed cops sit on benches outside the station, and some of the journalists who received threats are supposed to travel with police protection. One journalist, Pedro, who lives in a remote community, sleeps at the station during the week in an effort to keep safe. When he goes home on weekends—accompanied by his assigned police officer—he always stays somewhere different, making it harder for anyone to track him.

Rather than silence the station, however, these threats only strengthened workers’ resolve to continue fighting for the community, and giving it a voice. “The radio has continued in spite of everything. It hasn’t let its guard down, it has remained standing because we believe this is a project not just for us youths, but there are thousands of people who follow and believe in the project and believe that it is worth it to continue,” said Angelina, a 20-year-old who joined the radio in 2010.

Relying on ethnographic observations, such as of the 20th anniversary celebration as well as daily activities, and interviews collected during intensive fieldwork at Radio Victoria, this chapter explored to what extent this small Salvadoran community radio station, working with limited resources and living under constant threats, managed to integrate digital technologies in liberating ways, and how ICTs influenced engagement

with communities. Analysis of observations of radio activities and interviews with 24 radio workers, volunteers and listeners revealed patterns as to how subjects perceived of the role of the radio and its relation to participation, activism and technology. For example, interviewees repeatedly spoke of the importance of accompaniment and their perception of the radio as part of the community, and the community as part of the radio. They also linked accompaniment with education, empowerment, and activism, viewing it all as fundamental to their responsibilities as a community radio station. Unsurprisingly the digital divide also occurred as a frequent topic, with interviewees addressing the issue via three other important themes that surfaced during analysis: the creation of a new digital, global community the radio serves; the realization that social media are best as complementary tools supporting the radio's efforts; and the need to employ counter uses of new technologies so as to overcome any "consumerist" or "capitalist" uses. Each of these themes is treated in detail below with an eye toward examining whether Radio Victoria's experiences with social media contribute to workers' and listeners' participation *in* technology and *through* technology.

ACCOMPANIMENT: "I AM PART OF RADIO VICTORIA BECAUSE I PARTICIPATE"

A major narrative underlying the interviews with Radio Victoria workers was that of accompaniment and the role ICTs could play in facilitating, even improving, that accompaniment. Subjects perceived their responsibility as one of accompanying the community in its struggles and its successes—a responsibility, they said, learned from tales of the experiences of revolutionary station Radio Venceremos that broadcast during El Salvador's civil war. This dedication to the public is evidenced by Radio Victoria interviewees' word choice. For example, of the top 100 words interviewees used¹⁹, the

¹⁹ According to a word frequency generated by NVivo.

most frequent words employed, other than “radio,” were “people” and “community.” For interviewees, if the radio only informed the public or played pop music, and did not accompany the community, then it would be “nothing,” contributing to problems by sitting back with arms crossed. Elías, a 31-year-old member of the radio’s coordinating committee who has been part of the radio since 1997, said:

What motivated me to be in the radio is the ability to do a job that really helps the communities, because it is not just about playing music or doing whatever, but it is about accompanying the communities in all of their processes, fights, triumphs, and achievements. So for us it is important, and I personally feel that working here I am helping contribute a little to the fact that our communities are awakening.

Radio Victoria participates in the communities, and the communities participate in Radio Victoria, creating a mutual accompaniment. For example, the buses into and out of Victoria are packed with community members in t-shirts proclaiming, “I am part of Radio Victoria because I participate.” That participation with the communities includes not just informing people, but interviewing them, taking their calls and complaints on the air, denouncing what is happening in their communities, supporting them in all their struggles, and celebrating their achievements.

And the microphone always is open to community members who want to express themselves. For example, in January 2013 three teens from Santa Marta arrived at the station to give on-air advice to their fellow students at the start of the new school year. Remember to eat well and get enough sleep so that you have energy and are not tired or bored in school, the teens advised. The radio also created a network of community correspondents as a way to encourage participation. These correspondents call into the station, reporting on happenings in their communities via cell phone. Someone on the radio’s news team then puts the phone up to a microphone to record the call so that it can be edited into a digital file and played on the air as part of the noon newscast. Local

bands that perform music with alternative messages, such as one local group that plays revolutionary songs and another that raps about social issues, use the station to record their songs, which then are played on the air.

The radio identifies with and supports the people, and the people in turn identify with the radio and support the radio, said 20-year-old Camila, who joined the radio in 2008. In subjects' minds, the radio could not be separated from the community. This sense of accompaniment is born out by interviewees' language. When they spoke about the radio, they said "we," just as when they spoke about the communities, their language included themselves as part of the community. As Pedro, a 23-year-old member of the news team, said, "I go to the people and I relate with them as one of them...In reality I am part of them because I come from the community." This ideal of accompaniment is evidenced by Radio Escucha, a program of 10 groups of listeners in various communities throughout Cabañas that the radio workers see as a direct form of mutual accompaniment. The radio gave group members a series of workshops, such as on human rights and communication, and the listeners offer feedback about what the radio broadcasts, and tell the radio what topics they want to hear or what problems their communities face. As one Radio Escucha member said, the opportunity to participate with the radio makes her feel like, despite being older in age, her voice still matters.

Interviewees recognized that accompaniment did not mean they were going to be able to solve all of a community's problems, but at least via their support they could perhaps influence authorities, or influence the communities to make or demand changes. Pedro said:

As part of the radio I have the ability to be able to influence institutions and tell them, 'look, this and this are happening in my community. I want you to resolve it.' ...Because our role is not only to come here or be here every day or to be on the radio talking, but how we can involve ourselves to be part of the solution of

the problems of the people... We want to be close to the people because that is how we can construct a better society, but we cannot do much from behind the microphone. There is little we can do. We can do more if we go to where the people are.

The ideals of accompaniment and participation also are reflected in the way the station is run. Radio Victoria is organized horizontally, and although a coordinating committee oversees operations, all workers and volunteers have an equal voice. Programming includes not just the community members who want to participate, but also the topics that normally are excluded by mainstream media: the radio defines its five focuses as gender equity, the environment, human rights, identity and culture, and education and participative communication.

ACTIVISM AND EMPOWERMENT

Interviewees perceived of accompaniment as a form of activism. Not having journalism degrees meant they did not really consider themselves professional journalists. Rather, most of them saw themselves as activists committing acts of journalism. “Those of us who make up the radio nowadays are social activists, in fact,” said Angelina, a 20-year-old who joined the station in 2010. She said the radio’s role is to influence, raise consciousness, and give communities the tools for change. It is impossible to do community radio and not be an activist, said Jesús, 30, part of the radio’s coordinating committee: “You have to involve yourself in the communities...that is, walk with the communities” in order to be able to understand them and talk about them and with them on the air. Miguel, 24, who has worked with the station since 2006, said the radio is doing activism “from the moment in which you are pushing activities or accompanying activities that you know are going to bring a benefit to the population and you are informing them and at the same time saying to them, ‘well, we can accompany, we can go, if you have time...let’s go.’” For example, when it comes to the polemic issue of

mining, the radio provides information, denounces the mining companies' activities, demands solutions on the behalf of the effected communities, and calls on the communities to take action. The radio "invites" the people to act and participate, interviewees said. Luis, 25 and a member of the coordinating committee, said, "We mobilize a ton of people through the radio." For example, when the mayor of Victoria refused to give Santa Marta its fair share of tax money that by law is supposed to be apportioned to the different communities (he said Santa Martans were ungrateful and thus did not deserve the funding), the radio station advertised a community-organized demonstration and "invited" people to protest in front of the mayor's house. "The people (from Santa Marta) came, and there were people from other communities and from Victoria that came and supported the movement. So we see that we are influencing these people," Luis said.

Whether it is the communities' anti-mining efforts, or an attempt to prevent a landfill that was planned in the small community of San Isidro, the radio's modus operandi is the same, Elías said:

The communities organize, the radio offers information so the people can understand the issue, and the radio in all of the processes of demonstrations, marches, and all of that, the complaints and everything, we are there accompanying them, giving people spaces to express themselves... We take sides and our side is the one of the people... What the people say, that is where we are. And yes, we take a position. We are not an impartial media outlet because we form part of something, which is the community.

If police or soldiers unfairly arrest or beat someone, then the radio's responsibility is to fight for that person, interviewees said. Likewise, when community members opposing a mining company were beaten, the radio was there for them, denouncing the violence and calling for justice. Their activism also is proactive, not always in reaction to some human rights violation. For example, the station daily runs cuñas educativas, or

educational radio spots, about such issues as not throwing garbage on the streets, domestic violence, sexual harassment, drug addiction, AIDS, and suicide²⁰. One such spot that generated conversation featured a man whistling suggestively at a woman—a common occurrence on the streets of El Salvador—with a narrator warning that even whistling is degrading and can be considered violence.

Thus, Radio Victoria is a school, empowering the workers as it empowers listeners. “First we learn it ourselves, and then we go teach it in the communities,” Jesús said. Elías said: “We learned how to do radio here. Here we do not have a manual that says this is how radio has to be. No, we ourselves invented how to do radio here. So Radio Victoria is its own model of radio.” It is not enough for Radio Victoria to open spaces for participation and to put someone in front of a microphone, Jesús said:

The first time I was in front of a microphone I didn’t want to talk. It was hard for me to be able to speak into a microphone. The people are not used to it...so (the radio) has to look for ways for people to do it and not feel so much pressure in front of the microphone. This means helping the people to communicate...They have to be guided and instructed.

Part of helping community members to overcome their fear of speaking into a microphone involves an open door policy; the doors of the station always are wide open for anyone to wander in and watch whoever is in the studio or watch people recording the news or educational spots. Seeing young, untrained people from the community talking into the microphone is one way of helping overcome one’s fear of speaking, interviewees said. The station also regularly offers workshops in the communities, training anyone interested in participating in the radio and participating in their communities. The

²⁰ Interviewees pointed out that community radio plays an important educational role, supplementing little, often inadequate, official schooling. A 2009 report from the Salvadoran government’s education ministry (MINED, 2009) showed that residents of Cabañas aged 15 and older averaged just 4.4 years of formal education, two years less than the national average at the time. In Victoria, where Radio Victoria is located, the average was even lower: 3.7 years. Literacy in Cabañas was 71 percent, or 10.5 percentage points lower than the national average. Again, the average for Victoria was even lower, at 66 percent.

workshops are part of the station's efforts to break Cabañas' tradition of silence, where people are not accustomed to speaking up because of years of oppression and repression, interviewees said. "People are scared or apathetic," in part because of the civil war, which was particularly brutal in this part of Cabañas²¹, said Marcos, 32, part of the coordinating committee. "People are trained to think they do not need to have an opinion. The government tells them everything is ok, so they believe everything is ok. We are trying to change that." To drive home his point, Marcos, who was on turn in the studio, then spoke into the microphone and said on the air, "If you have a problem in your community, call us and denounce it, because this radio is your voice." Shortly thereafter, a man called to say the community of San Marcos had been without electricity since the previous day. Marcos then told the news team to see what it could find out because, he said, they do not just inform about and denounce problems, but they also seek solutions.

RADIO AND SOCIAL MEDIA: COMPLEMENTARY TOOLS TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Reaching people, and getting them to participate and speak up, still is accomplished best via radio in a place like Cabañas where Internet access is limited and even non-existent in many communities. If the radio had tried to mobilize people to protest the mayor's denial of funding via social media alone, then few, if any, people would have participated, interviewees said. They did not want to discount the Arab Spring, but Facebook and Twitter cannot have the same impact as they did in Egypt, Marcos said, adding that "if the majority of people had the opportunity to access the

²¹ Cabañas was the site of at least seven military-led massacres that resulted in the deaths of at least 900 civilians during the early 1980s (de Dios & Moran, 2012). During the *Piedras Coloradas* (Colored Stones) massacre on March 17, 1981, hundreds of residents of Santa Marta (where Radio Victoria began) and other nearby communities were killed fleeing air and artillery fire as they attempted to cross the Lempa River and escape into Honduras (Garrett, 2012).

Internet, yes, you can achieve changes.” Still, as one community and Radio Escucha member said:

We have always lived like this, without technology. I think for us it is not important because we do not have access to these things. We do not know how to use them, we cannot have them, so it is not important. What is important is the radio because everyone can listen to it, and it tells us everything that is happening.

For now, then, radio still has the most impact, but that impact can be extended utilizing social media to interact with people who do have access, and who can share information with people who do not have access. Radio and the Internet complement each other, subjects said, adding that the more people gain access to the Internet, the easier it will be for the radio workers to know what is happening in their communities so they can accompany them.

Because Internet access is so limited throughout Cabañas, the radio station serves as a sort of way station, as youth from throughout the department descend on Radio Victoria every day to use the station’s computers, whether for homework or checking Facebook. What’s more, said Emilio, 21, who works in production, the community’s youth all use Facebook, more than they listen to the radio, so when they grow up they will be more accustomed to using the Internet for information than the radio, meaning Radio Victoria must serve this youth population now or the station will not have a future. Also, Internet access rapidly changes, said Lucas, 27, who hosts a youth program called *Sin Farsas* (Without Farces):

I am not that old, and in 10 years I have seen things our grandparents would not have been able to imagine 30 or 40 years ago. Just more than 10 years ago we did not have a cellular, or even a computer. And now they seem to us fundamental. It is an everyday occurrence to see a young kid with a cell.

Increasing access to technologies does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with an equivalent increase in understanding of those technologies, however. “If you ask anyone

in the radio if they can create a blog, practically nobody will tell you they can. They just use email, and it is because of fear. They just have not tried, so it is a fear of the unknown,” Luis said. Most radio workers underwent little to no digital training, and most of what they knew—especially about social media—was from a friend or colleague showing them the ropes, or from what little exploration they had done on their own. “After I got a computer I familiarized myself a little in the most general things, but without going deep, really,...and in the radio, being in front of a computer day by day, you have to learn to operate it, and that is how I learned to use a computer, but in a very general way,” Angelina said. Anita, 22 and part of the news team, said she learned the basics of how to turn on a computer and go online in school, but that her real training came at the radio: “For me, coming here was a lovely experience, a school that for me is still a school because I continue to learn new things.” A few interviewees swore that they had never even touched a computer before coming to the radio. Interviewees learned on the job how to edit digital sound or broadcast live from the studio. “Like we say here, the radio gives access to the people who want to come to learn,” Luis said.

Still, learning from friends and colleagues meant that if the person with the knowledge left the station, then much of that knowledge would leave, too. For example, Angelina said she is not supposed to touch the levels on the console in the studio, because they have been set by way of experimenting since no one really understood how to change or set the levels. Likewise, markings on a donated console used for production indicated which buttons did what. The manual was in another language with another alphabet, Emilio said, so no one knew the ins and outs of how it worked. Relying on friends and colleagues as teachers also meant that if their friends did not use a particular digital tool, then the radio workers did not, either. For example, Twitter: no one they knew used it, so they saw no value in using it. It is the same reason that about five years

ago they all switched from the social networking site Hi-5 to Facebook: all their friends and contacts were there. Jesús explained:

If we do not understand some tools, we are not going to use them, like Twitter...I know that through Twitter I can be recording, sending videos from one place to another, but I do not know how to do it. So the radio begins to understand something and then says, “OK, these tools are important because we know how to use them, and we are going to use them better.”

In other words, the station does not begin to see a tool as valuable unless the workers know how to use it, and use it well. For example, someone helped many of the workers to create Skype accounts, and took time to show them how to use Skype, so subjects perceived of Skype as useful for conducting interviews. However, while many of the workers had been guided in opening YouTube accounts, they did not receive much instruction on uploading or recording videos, so the platform for them remained mostly useless. Similarly, no one understood Twitter, so no one used it. As Jesús said, though, if someone can explain to them how to use a tool, and show them how it can benefit their daily work, then they will adopt it.

Lack of resources also plays a large role in determining which tools radio workers use. As a community radio station, they rely on what grant money they can receive from international foundations, money and equipment donations from non-profit organizations, and some local advertising. Advertising remains limited, though, as many local business owners are less comfortable with radio advertising and more accustomed to riding through town in a pickup truck using a loudspeaker to advertise their goods. Also, because it is a radio station, money first goes into paying for upkeep of radio towers and broadcasting equipment. Thus, while they might like to send workers out with digital cameras or video recorders instead of just audio recorders, it is not a priority. And in a country where robbery is common, “walking around with a Blackberry can get you

killed,” as Elías said, so perhaps it also is not the wisest idea to purchase the latest in digital technology.

SOCIAL MEDIA: CHANGES IN PARTICIPATION AND PARTICIPANTS

Despite the digital divide, the radio workers interviewed saw a usefulness for social media, and said they had changed as a result of incorporating ICTs. Their interest in social media is born out by word frequencies²², which show “Facebook” and “social networks” as part of the top 10 most-used terms among interviewees. They said they used Facebook to complement their role of accompaniment as they “walked along side the communities,” and just as they opened the microphones directly to community members, they viewed social media as another way for the community to express itself. Encouraging commenting via social media could help break the culture of silence endemic to El Salvador, interviewees believed. Their incursions into social media (so far mainly just Facebook), they said, changed how people participated. For example, a measure to allow Salvadorans living outside the country to vote in the upcoming 2014 presidential election generated debate over the airwaves and via social media, and allowed users to speak with each other, instead of just speak to the radio worker behind the microphone. Likewise, the mayor’s refusal to give Radio Victoria permission to use the town square for its anniversary celebration and art fair generated hundreds of combined likes and birthday greetings on the station’s Facebook page, thanking it for fighting for the community. Also, in 2013 the radio station began a social media campaign, “el pueblo unido jamás será vencido” (the people united will never be defeated), publishing stories and YouTube videos celebrating people “who had changed the history of humanity,” like Oscar Romero, Che Guevara, Mao Tse Tung, and Martin

²² Top 100 word frequencies were generated by NVivo.

Luther King, Jr. This campaign generated dozens of likes, shares and comments, all of which helped to raise consciousness and empower people to fight for social change, as Emilio wrote on Facebook. And although Jesús' editorials, such as about the right to clean water or against the dangers of mining, that were published as Facebook notes, prompted more likes and shares than comments, the radio workers still viewed it as another level of participation that went beyond merely requesting a song or greeting a friend. Social media, they said, perhaps could be used for debates among multiple users; something not necessarily feasible via radio.

What's more, interviewees believed social media changed participation not just in the radio, but in the community, as well. For example, the radio published via Facebook information about the mayor's denial of funding for Santa Marta and the resultant demonstrations, which helped attract the attention of the federal government, which forced the mayor to abide by the law. Marcos explained:

Friends of Santa Marta published the news that the community had organized...And the people outside of Santa Marta, the people from there that one way or another do not live there, had the opportunity to interact with people from the community that have access to social networks, they could be interacting and giving their points of view...So from this point of view I feel that it worked...Let me tell you that I am really convinced that technologies and social networks have a great power.

In addition to how people participated, who participated also changed. The radio now serves a different community because of the Internet, interviewees said. Radio Victoria is a community station with two communities, Angelina noted: one that is reached via the radio antenna and towers, and the other that is reached online, whether through live streaming or Facebook. The Internet provides the channel for the Salvadorans living abroad to stay connected with their home country. Former community members living in the capital of San Salvador (a bumpy 90-minute car ride away) also

want to stay in touch and be informed about what is going on back home, and that is why social media are so important, interviewees said. In fact, most of the radio's Facebook traffic comes from outside of Cabañas, subjects said. Anita explained that Salvador's diaspora regularly posts messages on the radio's Facebook page, weighing in about a topic that interests them, or simply asking the station to relay a message over the air to their friends and family without Facebook access. Similarly, community members without Facebook regularly call the station, asking workers to post or send a message to their loved ones. "Maybe their families do not have Facebook or do not have a computer, but we do. So their messages, their greetings, their announcements on social networks can be heard on the radio," Marcos said. Camila noted:

With today's technology you can connect from your cellular, and there is no one who does not have a cellular. So you can participate on Facebook with your cellular, even if you are out of the country. Facebook is a way for us to include participation from more sectors, whether from inside or outside the department, or even borders.

The Internet, then, amplifies the radio's coverage beyond what its towers can do, which in turn, interviewees said, amplifies participation, which then amplifies the actions communities can take. As Emilio explained: "We can mount combined campaigns with the people in the United States and with the people here. The people in the United States can take action on Facebook, and the people here" can participate in some kind of offline action, he said. Thus, interviewees perceived of the Internet as complementary to the radio, each an important tool to reach different audiences, and together, achieving greater impact. Just as the radio cannot function without the community, social media cannot function without the radio, and vice versa. Anita summed it up: "Both the radio and social networks are fundamental. They have their advantages and disadvantages, but both are fundamental...The two are linked." In effect, the linkage between Internet use and

radio announcements to people without phones allows 21st century technology to preserve that of the 20th century, which is critically important in any nation with uneven communication development—especially where advanced technology often reflects class and urban divides.

FINDING COUNTER USES FOR “CAPITALIST” TECHNOLOGIES

This recognition of the ways ICTs facilitated participation and expanded the radio’s reach was tempered by what Radio Victoria workers saw as one of the biggest disadvantages of using social media: the possibility of furthering consumerism by utilizing a capitalist platform. In their interviews these subjects emphasized the importance of counter uses of social media. Anita said:

Even though the vision of the radio is against all of this, we have a need for Facebook, we have a need for Twitter. We have a need for things that are capitalist. If we do not have Facebook or we do not have Internet, how are the people who are not in the department or who do not live in El Salvador who want to listen to us going to do so?

Miranda, 27, a member of the news team, noted that just because Facebook or Twitter might have certain policies or practices, that does not mean they at the radio have to follow them: “I believe that if the system gives you weapons, you learn to use them in your way,” she said. Facebook can be tailored for community radio, you just have to know how to use the tools, adapt them and take advantage of them “to enrich your work,” she said. Using tools in counter ways, said Miguel, helps “create a consciousness” among the people. Elías said one of his counter uses is to follow Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa’s Facebook page and former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s page, and to use Facebook to get “alternative” information about other Latin American countries. He said:

If the system created the tools, use the tools against the system. If the grand capitalist system creates a network to keep the people asleep—and it is a way to keep people asleep when all you do is look at photos Fulano²³ posted, or who is in love, who is sad, who is happy—if you are only going to look at this or look at advertising, you are not going to think about problems you have in the community...So you are sleeping. So a passive society is easy to dominate...But you can use these networks in another way, like in the Middle East, for example. Everything they did was via social networks.

Although Joaquin, 22 and a part of the news team, said he did not think online social media could have the same impact in El Salvador as in Egypt, that did not mean he thought such tools should be discarded. “Power is in very few hands and these few hands are strong,” he said. Knowing how to use Facebook and Twitter, and knowing how to use them for doing more than just looking at photos or chatting, was a way to redistribute that power, he said. Similarly, Jesús saw the radio’s incursion into Facebook as another way to “break the monopoly of traditional communication, the concentration of media.” The radio can use Facebook as one more place where the community can express itself and denounce politicians or businesses. Just because Facebook was created as a business does not mean that it has to be used to cater to business interests, interviewees said. Emilio said the radio needs to exploit Facebook, especially when it comes to reaching youth, who nowadays check Facebook before email or surfing the web:

We can do campaigns via Facebook...Not everyone listens to the radio, for example popular²⁴ music, not all youth like the old popular music, but they like rap and rock. But Facebook they all use, so why not do campaigns or inform people from there? I think it is a great, great tool that we can exploit, it is beneficial to the radio and to the people.

Beyond simply talking about the need to use digital tools in counter ways, however, interviewees believed they little by little were making progress in using social media in “alternative” ways. Posting information on Facebook about community

²³ Fulano is a generic male name used to represent the idea of “so and so” or “any Tom, Dick or Harry.”

²⁴ Popular as in “of the people,” not as in pop music.

activities—whether cultural events, social events, or community-organized marches or protests—is part of that effort to use ICTs in liberating ways, as is soliciting user feedback and encouraging debate via the Facebook page, and not just through the radio waves. Interviewees also discussed their ideas to create an educational spot on the air talking about Facebook use and the possibility of utilizing Facebook for “more than the common, more than the commercial,” as Miguel said, adding that the problem is a lack of knowledge of possible counter uses. “There are a lot of things on the Internet, but you don’t know how to access them, or you don’t know how to find the most truthful source.” The radio must get users to realize that they do not take full advantage of the tools, and thus miss out on something that can help improve their communities, he said.

Interviewees recognized that part of getting their listeners to use social media in liberating ways depended not just on teaching them how to do so, but leading by example. Just as the radio led by example to try to change the way people speak to be more inclusive and less obscene (for example saying “he or she” instead of just “he”), interviewees believed they could get users to occupy Facebook in more emancipatory ways than just chatting with friends. Instead of simply posting “I am here in the studio,” Angelina said, the broadcasters must use Facebook to give users useful and up-to-date information. Camila said that at the start of the new year she began posting debate questions on Facebook during her Sunday shift in the studio. She also reads the Facebook questions and comments aloud, soliciting complementary participation via the phone lines:

If you post an incentive for people to mobilize or to give their opinion via Facebook, that is very different than just posting saying you are online. Asking questions via Facebook, like ‘what do you think of the environment?’ or ‘what you do think about the spaces for youth in Victoria?’ or whatever, give an opinion, I think that is more beneficial than just being online and not giving people the option to think and to write.

Anita saw social media as fundamental for motivating people to act, and the more information and community support the radio can offer online, the more likely people are to organize offline she said, which is why she said whenever she hears of a community organizing on Facebook, she makes a point to mention it on the air. All the youth have Facebook and Twitter, and are aware of the Arab Spring, she said, so the radio must capitalize on that by getting users to think, “If they can do it, why don’t we in our own communities organize?”

Interviewees also expressed a desire to take more advantage not just of social media, but of open software, as well. Using open software helps cut down on costs, Marcos said, but more importantly it shows the world that Radio Victoria practices what it preaches by trying to be different and not feed the beast of consumerism. The plan for 2013 was to start changing software on the studio’s computers from licensed programs to open ones. Doing so, Marcos said, ensures the radio does not add to the coffers of companies that profit off the sale of knowledge.

Despite some advances, though, interviewees realized they have yet to achieve the full liberating potential of these tools. First, the radio station manages multiple Facebook accounts, leading some workers not to post anything at all because they are unsure which account they should use. The need to monitor various accounts also led to some information falling between the cracks. For example, a spokesperson for a local youth prison said he invited the station via Facebook to cover a prison school graduation ceremony. No one at the station saw the Facebook message, however. The prison spokesperson eventually called the radio to let the news team know about the event, and Radio Victoria sent a reporter to the graduation. This incident illustrates that at least for the radio, person-to-person connection remains most effective.

The news team, small and always on deadline, struggled to find a way to integrate social media updates into its routines, in part because the radio had yet to define whether the news program should post on a page separate from the studio's page. Still other interviewees, unaccustomed to incorporating Facebook into their practices, simply posted "I'm here with you today in the studio. Thanks for listening." Such greetings are nice, subjects said, but hardly likely to encourage much participation or raise anyone's consciousness. And while interviewees thought it was great that Facebook can deliver messages to and from people living outside of El Salvador, they wanted Facebook to be used for more, such as multimedia educational campaigns. For example, Anita said she wished they used video more:

Listening to something helps you, but sometimes images speak more than a thousand words. So if you say 'this woman needs a roof over her head' and you show the image, then people say 'wow, it is true. She does need it, just look.' So instead of just telling people that the woman needs it, just imagine what could happen if we could show people...It would have more impact if we could post it to Twitter and Facebook.

Thus, there was not exactly a tension between how subjects perceived of the value of Facebook and their actual uses of Facebook, but rather their practices lagged behind their desires, as often is the case when adopting new tools. Jesús explained it as a learning curve:

We were not experts in the topic of mining. The radio did not have the slightest idea what was a strip-mining project nor how it worked. But we had to go through a process to learn how it worked and the problems that could occur. From there we began to do an information campaign...and the same thing can happen with social networks. The radio team learns to use them, understand how they work, and then begins to do a campaign via the radio...and for the people without Internet, the radio could be a space where they could come to learn.

The radio producers' own lack of access to technology also factors into the slowness to fully adopt new technologies and put them to liberating uses. For example,

for a while the radio transmitted video via the Internet of people working at the station or broadcasting from the studio, but it took up too much capacity so the station had to stop. Internet in general at the station often does not work, and citywide power blackouts exacerbate the problem. The users also present an obstacle, as even though they demanded a radio presence on Facebook, they still have not yet fully embraced Facebook for communication, interviewees said. Jesús noted that people learned to use Facebook for entertainment, posting photos, or greeting someone, and therefore lacked a concept of Facebook as good for learning, debate, and conversation:

Technology can help a lot with communication, facilitate a lot of things, but it also is a distractor when you do not know how to use it...But as I told you, if I learned how to better use Facebook, Twitter, all of these spaces, a web page, then I can share it, creating capacity in the people. So that then when I say, 'hey, the radio says let's put in motion something for whatever day via Twitter,' then the people can mobilize via Twitter and know how to do it. But right now they do not know how.

The interviewees thus believed that the radio plays, and will continue to play, a fundamental part in ensuring that, as access to and adoption of new technologies increase, "we do not become more consumerist, more aligned with the capitalist system" and that the potential good and liberating uses of technologies are not outweighed by their disadvantages, as Luis said.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Interviewees perceived the incorporation of online social media into Radio Victoria's practices as another channel for communicating with community members and allowing community members to communicate with each other. ICTs influenced how the radio engages with communities, as interviewees believed social media could amplify their ability to accompany the people, and vice versa. This especially was clear when it came to the radio's consciousness-raising and mobilization efforts: the station workers'

endeavors to use social media to inform people about “alternative” information and to “invite” them to protest generated not only likes, comments, and shares via Facebook, but also, such as in the case of the mayor’s refusal to grant Santa Marta funding, resulted in an offline win. What’s more, subjects saw ICTs as facilitating participation of listeners, especially those outside of Cabañas and El Salvador. Obstacles remain, as most of the radio’s audience has little to no Internet access, and the station workers themselves have limited digital know-how. For example, while interviewees made efforts to improve their Facebook use, they essentially ignored Twitter because they did not understand it, their audience did not use it, and they did not see any benefits Twitter offered that Facebook did not. Also a challenge is finding a way to use social media in counter-hegemonic ways; interviewees believed that users employ more frivolous than emancipatory uses of Facebook. But although they were troubled by social media’s underlying consumerist platform and goals, interviewees believed in the possibility of counter uses of technology, and in some cases they successfully used social media in liberating ways.

Workers at Radio Victoria saw their mission as one of accompaniment: the radio was part of the community and the community was part of the radio. The always-open door—particularly unusual in a country where most doors are behind locked gates and 10-foot-high walls topped with barbed wire—contributes to a sense of ownership. Not only do listeners call into the station, but they also regularly come by to use the Internet, record an announcement, or simply watch the broadcasters at work. The radio goes into the community to listen to and report people’s stories, but people also were welcome to tell their own stories themselves on the air. The station solicits listeners’ stories via a network of correspondents comprised of community members who had undergone some of the radio’s training workshops. What’s more, the microphones are open to community

members who want to come to the station to host a program, participate in an interview, or record an ad, greeting, or even a song or album.

For these interviewees, however, accompaniment demanded not just an openness to community participation in the radio process, but also an encouragement of participation in the community. Radio workers participate in communities' festivals and soccer tournaments, attending themselves and urging listeners to attend as well. Likewise when it came to marches, demonstrations, or other kinds of activism: the radio "invited" listeners to act, and radio workers themselves participated in the events, accompanying the communities in their fights and struggles. Subjects saw themselves as activists and community members, not journalists, and so they did not believe they were beholden to what they considered false, unachievable, and undesirable norms of objectivity. They took a stance, and that stance was with the community. Beyond participation and activism, the station workers perceived of accompaniment as leading to awareness and empowerment, of both radio workers and listeners. As such, the radio offered community workshops teaching people how to get involved in the radio and in their communities. Additionally, the station ran educational spots about social issues, such as how to recognize sexual harassment or how to use gender-inclusive language, in an effort to raise listeners' consciousness and, ultimately, perhaps change their behaviors.

Social media, then, were seen as another means for reaching out to listeners, encouraging them to participate and have a voice. The radio's incorporation of Facebook changed, or rather expanded, who could participate and have a say as the social media platform created a new audience for the community radio station. Facebook meant that "community" no longer referred to those people living within range of one of the station's radio towers. Rather, social media indeed had created an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) wherein El Salvador's diaspora, as well as former community members

who had moved to the capital city, constituted a socially constructed community based on shared interests and shared perceptions of belonging, rather than shared geography. Most interesting is that, because of Facebook, this global community was not limited to simply informing itself about what was going on in their home communities, but instead they could actually communicate and participate. Facebook, via the radio, allowed them to communicate with their friends and families who had no Internet access, and vice versa. What's more, by liking posts on the radio's Facebook page, publishing their own commentary, or sharing the radio's posts on their own personal pages, these imagined community members potentially influenced others who else might never have known or cared what was happening in Cabañas.

Still, while the Internet helped create an online audience for the radio, the primary audience remained mostly unconnected. Even though interviewees noted that "all" the youth use Facebook, that use still was constrained by a lack of regular Internet access. Radio, not social media, remained the best way to reach the communities, interviewees said, although they noted that perhaps youth were best reached via social media and not the radio. Having access to radio 24 hours a day, seven days a week, seemed more useful to them than having access to the Internet for one hour once a week. Furthermore, radio workers' own lack of home access, coupled with a lack of formal training—some had never even touched a computer before coming to work at the radio—and a recognition that their audience did not all have Internet or smartphones, resulted in somewhat of a dismissal of new tools, such as Twitter. As subjects repeated during interviews, a new tool was only useful to them if they fully understood how to use it for liberating ends, and if their audience used it as well. Because everyone they knew used Facebook and not Twitter, then, interviewees adopted the former but not the latter. Most workers learned what they knew about technology via friends or colleagues. The radio, thus, was limited

by a lack of deep institutional and technical knowledge. If someone who knew how to fully manage a particular tool left the radio, then most likely any deeper understanding of how to use that tool also disappeared. Radio workers made efforts to build institutional knowledge by sharing anything they learned with other workers and with community members, but for the most part even these trainers' digital literacy was limited since few had undergone any in-depth or sustained digital training: most of their digital training gave them just a superficial grasp of technology obtained during a workshop.

Little access with little training, then, combined to create a tendency for consumerist uses of the Internet, subjects said. Facebook was a capitalist platform created to make money, not start revolutions. Most users logged on whenever they had Internet access simply to look at photos, play games, or chat with friends, interviewees said. Most users—perhaps themselves included—had never considered the full communication and participation potential of the Internet, radio workers said, adding that they did not want the radio to contribute to any such consumerist uses. They saw the radio as a role model, leading by example in showing communities how they could use social media for social change. These interviewees recognized potential counter uses of ICTs and had even managed to successfully use social media in liberating ways. For example, they used Facebook to post editorials with anti-mining and pro-environmental opinions that otherwise their audience might never have read considering the conservative, business-friendly bent of the mainstream media. Similarly, they posted stories and videos celebrating leaders of social change. Such posts garnered likes, comments, and shares, suggesting they contributed at least in some small way to informing the public, raising awareness or perhaps even leading to action and social change.

Radio workers also recognized the potential power of Facebook when they used it to support the radio's over-the-air "invitation" to protest the mayor's denial of funding

for Santa Marta. Because of Facebook, news of the mayor's actions and the demonstration spread all the way to the national government, which stepped in and forced the mayor to give the community its funds. In a department like Cabañas, where Internet access and know-how is limited, Facebook serves as a complementary tool, expanding the radio's reach, and thus its influence and impact. The station's online, global community, then, was no less important than its offline, geographically bound one. Each community served a different purpose, so those different purposes demanded different tools and different means to reach them.

Thus, this chapter showed how a community radio station in El Salvador made inroads into using social media to facilitate its mission to accompany the people. Just as Radio Victoria used the airwaves to encourage participation in the radio and through the radio, it also took beginning strides in using social media for participation *in* technology and *through* technology. Wary of consumerist uses of capitalist social media platforms, however, radio workers strove to do more than take song requests via Facebook. Instead, they also published editorials about "alternative" topics taboo in mainstream media, and posted examples of social justice leaders in an effort to raise consciousness and inspire community members to act. The radio also issued "invitations" on air and via Facebook for community members to participate in community actions. What's more, social media increased the station's reach, creating an international online community. The radio served as an intermediary between the new online community and the local, mostly offline community. The station's combined use of Facebook and airwaves allowed the online and offline communities to communicate with each other, instead of just with the radio. Subjects did not see the digital divide as an unsurmountable obstacle: their innovative ways of using digital technology to complement analog technology allowed them to find ways around the problem of lack of access. Thus, despite the digital divide, a

lack of training and a lack of resources, Radio Victoria interviewees perceived of Facebook and other digital tools as furthering their mission of providing multi-directional communication and accompanying the people. They believed technology could be liberating, and they took it upon themselves as part of their responsibility to the community to both teach and lead by example, and thus show how the radio's use of social media could foster participation *in* technology and participation *through* technology.

Chapter 7: *Voces*

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.

— Desmond Tutu, South African Nobel Peace Prize winner

Six young people, all in their 20s, sat around a long conference table on the back patio of the two-story home in San Salvador where the online alternative newspaper *Voces* is housed on the bottom floor. The four men and two women, journalism students at the local private Central American University, had just embarked on a month-long internship at *Voces*. A couple of the students took notes in a notebook, but most recorded their first intern meeting with digital audio recorders or their cell phones.

“*Voces* is different than what you are used to,” Alejandro²⁵, *Voces*’ only full-time reporter, told the students. He explained that because they were working for an alternative newspaper, it was important that when reporting they look for “independent and different topics and sources.” Marisol, a part-time reporter in charge of the interns, added, “The difference between us and other media is that we cover civil society, so you need to make sure you are interviewing social organizations and people and not just congress members.”

Every story needed a photo, they told the interns, then checked to see what kind of camera equipment the interns had access to, since *Voces* owed just one available digital camera. Two of the interns owned point-and-shoot cameras, and the others said they would use their cell phone cameras.

²⁵ Subjects’ names were changed to protect their privacy. The *Voces* director, Oscar, gave permission for his real name to be used.

Marisol, herself a journalism student at the national public university, explained to the interns that because *Voces* is an online newspaper, they would be expected to generate a lot of copy quickly so that the website could stay fresh, regularly updated with original content. “We do not have the luxury of time to write and publish a story like in the printed press, because the idea is to write and publish a story as soon after an event as possible,” she told them. The interns nodded; they were excited to write for an online-only publication, they said.

Despite Marisol’s avowal of *Voces*’ digital-ness, however, and contrary to the interns’ expectations, the reality was that the newspaper seemed digital mostly in name only: the website was not updated as news happened (because some stories were published days after an event occurred, Marisol always deleted mentions of days so that stories seemed more current and relevant, she said). Stories included no links, and just one photo accompanied most text. All the photos appear in the same size, and the “multimedia” section of the site, updated on average less than once a month, includes few videos or photo galleries, and no audio. What the newspaper might have lacked in multimedia features, though, it made up for in theoretical opportunities for interactivity. Stories on the website include space for reader comments, and a section titled “Citizen Voices” includes blogs from various community members. Another section publishes press releases from community groups and civil society organizations. As *Voces* journalists repeatedly said, they were part of an alternative, community newspaper that just happened to be online. Being online is not what made *Voces* alternative, they said. Rather, *Voces* was alternative because of its focus on giving a voice to the voiceless, they said. Journalists focused on encouraging participation in the media process, instead of experimenting with the newest technological gadgets.

This chapter interrogated the extent to which *Voces*, an online alternative newspaper, used technology to open spaces for participation, and what kinds of participation. Analysis of ethnographic data, including formal and informal interviews with 23 *Voces* journalists and contributors, revealed several common themes linking the ways interviewees thought about the potential role of ICTs in alternative media for encouraging participation and social change. One such theme was a commitment to “openness,” whether to voices, ideas, or contributors. A second important theme was that of communication vs. information, and a resultant tension between interviewees’ ideal of communicating via technology and the reality of only informing via technology. Finally, interviewees also discussed the digital divide and its effect on *Voces*’ audience and influence, and the struggle to be an online newspaper in a mostly offline country where 75 percent of the population lacks Internet access.

“OPENNESS”

The *Voces* homepage includes a link to stories about media democratization. *Voces* belongs to part of a consortium of community media outlets, civil society organizations, and academics fighting to democratize El Salvador’s media. The group in 2013 submitted to the legislature a proposal to change the way the government allots radio frequencies to make the process—currently an auction where frequencies go to the highest bidder—less biased against alternative, community radio. Also in 2013 the group called on the president and legislature to support media pluralism and to ensure that the inevitable digitization of television and radio does not lead to further media concentration.

Voces journalists seemed to take to heart the newspaper’s commitment to media pluralism, regularly covering any news related to democratization of media. Bringing

visibility to marginalized communities and opening a space for participation, according to full-time journalist Alejandro, is:

part of achieving media democratization in a real manner. And it is a part of democratizing Salvadoran society in a general manner, not a democracy that just represents one or two, but a democracy that really is participatory where all have the right to express an opinion, to be heard, to be attended to, to be given solutions.

“Our source is the people, and what interests us is the people,” said Oscar, the newspaper’s founder. As such, Rodrigo, a columnist, said, *Voces* fulfills the role of an activist, working to change the country by opening the media to citizen participation and thus breaking the media monopoly. Marisol, one of two part-time reporters, said that openness means encouraging participation in the media and in society: “When I say participation, I am not just talking about citizen journalism or people posting photos of rainbows to social networks or people calling in traffic tips, but actual participation as citizens, denouncing and serving as sources.”

The name of the newspaper itself, “Voices” in English, is emblematic of this openness and pluralism. Jacobo, a *Voces* board member, said:

The name *Voces* captures the concept of alternative, citizen, participatory journalism that we were looking for. Society is plural, and sometimes we mistakenly believe there is one solo voice, or only one truth, and that is not true...My voice joins in a concert with other voices and makes a choir. And this is the concept of *Voces*.

Rodrigo’s is one of those voices. As a contributor, Rodrigo said, he sees his column as a way “to open a small space to express myself and give a different perspective or different opinion, and that can change one person. That is how you fight, one person at a time. It does not have to be a grand thing.” El Salvador cannot talk about the quality of democracy without first ensuring media plurality, Oscar said. “We want to convert *Voces* into a platform, a stage, where the people can talk, be heard, and be read,”

he said. Similarly, Dorotea, an intern, said her time with *Voces* taught her that “instead of giving voice to someone who always has a voice, I learned to go to those who are really affected.” The idea behind *Voces* is to break mainstream media’s monopoly over “the word” so that people will understand they have the power, and the right, to go to the streets and take a photo that can be posted online to denounce societal problems, Jacobo said: “It seems that only certain people who manage to report for mainstream media have the right to write and express opinion. But the people on foot, the people who ride the bus, the people who wait in line, these people have not activated their right, and *Voces*, hopefully, can make a contribution in this sense.” In this sense, Jacobo said he viewed *Voces* as “an instrument to exercise human rights” since one of the main structural problems in El Salvador is injustice: injustice in the way goods and riches are distributed, and injustice in the lack of plurality of media ownership. He said:

The communication media in El Salvador primarily are comprised by economic groups and families linked not just to the communication industry but linked to other sectors of the economy, sectors that have held political and economic power for a long time... We believe that this is a grave distortion of freedom of expression and of the right to communication, because communication, as a human right²⁶, transcend the dynamics of the market. That is to say, not everything that is communicated has to be merchandise.

In an effort to democratize the media and get away from the concept of information as a good that is for sale and thus tied to economic interests, *Voces* is “open,” subjects repeatedly said. It is open to new and different voices, opinions, and ideas, and does not let political or business interests influence what is published. Thiago, the newspaper’s director, said that a few weeks earlier a student from the University of El Salvador visited *Voces* and asked: “‘Why do you open the doors to people who are not journalists? Only journalists should write.’ In the end I think we convinced her that other

²⁶ See Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

people also have the right to express themselves, and furthermore it is not a profession in which one necessarily must have a degree in order to write.”

The newspaper’s commitment to openness means little, if any, editing of what is published on the website. This is not a written policy, but rather a recognized and accepted practice. For example, when Marisol received a story via email from a contributor in Venezuela, she read it to make sure there were no obvious spelling or grammatical errors, and then she posted it to the site. She did not necessarily look for flaws in the author’s argument, unanswered questions, factual errors, or anything related to content. Her job, she said, was to let the author’s authentic voice be heard and it was not her place to edit him or her. That freedom from editing—what some called censorship—attracted many citizen contributors to *Voces*. As Laura, a citizen columnist, said, “My work is published intact...To me this is incredible because I am used to being edited. So this is why this newspaper called my attention, because it allows journalists, columnists, whomever to express an opinion.” Likewise, Vicente, an intern, said at the end of his time with *Voces* that what he liked best was that his stories “were not manipulated or changed to reflect a different point of view.” Jacobo praised the newspaper’s openness to covering different topics or covering them from alternative perspectives or with an alternative focus, but he worried that perhaps the ideal of openness had converted into a hands-off practice: “We have gone to the extreme of not even correcting problems with form. We need to do a self-evaluation of this. We have arrived to the point of letting go some spelling or writing errors because of this belief that we should not change anything.” For example, a story about a controversial privatization law, written before the legislature voted, included a statement saying that at the time of publication, the law had not yet been approved. Four days later, however, when the story

was published, the law already had been approved. Not wanting to change the reporter's work, Marisol published the story without updating it to reflect the law's passage.

Such openness also is problematic because the invitation to participate was extended to anyone, even though the newspaper has a particular, leftist point of view. As interviewees said, *Voces* does not claim to be impartial, nor is it interested in counterbalancing sources, printing what the ruling elites say and then balancing it with what the popular sectors say. Jacobo said:

For us the powerful sectors have thousands of mediums to express themselves, but not in *Voces*. So we consciously privilege who can express themselves. We have a democratic vision for communication and for the world. So we want our columnists to share this ideal of the world, that we live in an unjust society that has to be transformed.

So far, subjects said, *Voces* had not faced a dilemma of whether to publish a contribution that went against the newspaper's stance, but if that happened, the newspaper's own editorial line of openness and participation dictates that it would be published, Thiago said, although Marisol admitted to deleting quotes that were critical of the left or went against *Voces'* stance of social inclusion. At an online newspaper that values openness, trying to "close" information, especially in this era of digital communication, "would be absurd," Alejandro said. "There has to be more participation. The more participation there is, the more opinions. And in this sea of opinion, something is going to result that is going to be more positive," he said.

Although *Voces* in theory is open to participation in the media process from anyone, subjects recognized that participation is automatically limited by who has the literacy skills that prepared them to write for a newspaper, and who has access to the Internet. Thiago said he often feels like the newspaper has to beg to get citizens to write their own columns. The result is that rather than marginalized communities writing for

Voces, NGOs that support those communities write about those communities. Likewise, interviewees said community members' perspectives were included by using them as sources, quoting them and writing about issues that mattered to them. *Voces* welcomed their first-hand participation, Marisol said, but the reality of poor education levels coupled with the digital divide means that for the most part only elites can directly participate in an online-only publication. Interviewees did not necessarily see this as a deal-breaker, however, as long as marginalized voices were included in some way. As Thiago said, *Voces* "is betting" on the future, on more access, and, ultimately, more participation. After all, subjects said, *Voces*, and the potential for people to participate in the media process, only existed because of new technologies.

COMMUNICATION VS. INFORMATION

The real problem with media in El Salvador, interviewees said, is that they are not concerned about opening spaces for participation; they are mediums of information, not communication. In other words, they diffuse information rather than serve as a conduit for multi-directional communication. A banner ad at the top of the *Voces* homepage proclaims, "Communication is a human right." Interviewees believed that if they only informed people, without also facilitating communication, then they did not fulfill their obligations as journalists. Communication, they said, was essential for getting people to think critically, which in turn helped them form opinions, make decisions, and take action. Marisol said: "More participation, more interaction, this is what *Voces* does, interact with the people through sources that are part of social organizations, or through readers who have the ability to leave messages, express their opinions, and write."

Technology, interviewees believed, opened the possibility to more communication, more interaction, and more opportunities for people to express

themselves. “Being virtual opens the door so a lot of people can participate,” said Gael, a citizen contributor. Similarly, Marta, a *Voces* board member, said the newspaper “is a space for expression for people who have nowhere to express themselves.” However, when interviewees discussed how technology, and social media in particular, specifically had benefitted them, their speech turned from hailing the general potential for communication, to explaining how social media helped them diffuse information. Jacobo said:

Today I have the possibility of taking my camera, my telephone, to a march, write a story, do my analysis, and post it via a channel that I create...Before if I wanted to reach 3,000 people to tell them what I think about the behavior of the president or the legislative assembly, I had to print a series of fliers, go to the park, and begin handing them out one by one. Today I have another way. Of these 3,000 people I find five who think like I do and 2,500 who do not, but I can disseminate my thoughts.

Similarly, Roberto, a citizen contributor, said that technologies allow him to reach new audiences. “If I write for a newspaper that has 3,500 followers, then I reach 3,500 people that otherwise I never would,” he said. Alejandro said social networks were “a new field of diffusion of information and ideas.” Facebook, he said, is useful for “multiplying the reach” and “level of impact” of a medium like *Voces*. Besides Facebook and Blogger, Laura said she also publishes her columns on Google+ because “it is another diffusion medium, and as a journalist you have to have covered all that you can...If you have information, share it.” Gael said that for him, the ability to participate via technology meant:

Your thoughts reach a ton of people you do not even know. I get friendship requests on Facebook from people I do not know but who have read my column. The truth is you never know who is going to read you...So even though *Voces* is small, thanks to diffusion on social networks, you can reach the people really interested in reading, who often are the decision makers in this country.

For Thiago, Facebook and Twitter “have changed the way journalism is done because they have become a way of diffusing information, as well as a source of information.” Clearly, then, these subjects viewed social media as most useful for getting their stories out to wider audiences. In other words, ICTs were useful to them more for informing than communicating. Nobody mentioned ways they personally had seen *Voces*’ social media accounts used to create a debate or conversation of any kind. Further, they said they could not recall responding to any reader comments on the *Voces* website or the *Voces* Facebook page. If anyone did leave a comment, Roberto said, he did not have time to respond, and responding was not his priority.

Subjects’ perception of online social media as a tool for diffusing information perhaps is related to the fact that, even though they said they believed opening these digital spaces for participation allows individuals to communicate their own ideas and opinions as well as communicate with each other and with *Voces*, this kind of communication did not occur on the *Voces* website or Facebook page. As Laura pointed out, readers do not write comments reacting to stories on the *Voces* website, nor do they post comments on Facebook. The most interaction that occurs is when someone “likes” a story posted to Facebook, she said: “Likes are easy to give. And what are they liking? Just a headline. How are you going to comment on something you have not read and do not know?”

Marisol and Alejandro updated the *Voces* website throughout the day with stories written by themselves, interns, or contributors, or press releases from civil society organizations. After five or so new stories were published, they then posted all of those stories to Facebook, one after the other, so that rather than Facebook being updated throughout the day whenever news happened, activity came in bursts with numerous posts at one time. Marisol and Alejandro also regularly delayed publishing new stories to

the website for an hour or so at a time, giving people a chance to read the stories already on the website and ensuring the new stories would not get “lost” by being pushed to the bottom of the page, Alejandro said. Alejandro or Marisol copied and pasted all the story links from the *Voces* website to the Facebook page, and only sometimes posted a headline to accompany the link. They seemingly never posted any kind of commentary, analysis or even a pulled quote. Thus, they used Facebook as a diffusion tool to spread their stories, and not as a communication tool to get people talking about their stories. The way interviewees spoke about Facebook also gives weight to this conceptualization of Facebook as a diffusion rather than communication tool. Subjects commented on how good Facebook was for driving traffic to *Voces*’ webpage and for raising *Voces*’ profile and visibility. For example, if *Voces* published a story about, or a press release from, the Red Cross or the Confederation of Unions, then those organizations shared the story via their own Facebook pages, “which increases our reach a lot,” Marisol said. In fact, 60 percent of the *Voces* site’s traffic (about 2,000 total visits per month) arrived via Facebook, Thiago said, illustrating the use of Facebook as a tool for diffusing information, rather than encouraging conversation.

Voces citizen contributors noted that their columns received likes and occasionally were shared via Facebook, but they said that readers rarely—if ever—commented on the website or posted a comment to Facebook. Gael said he never receives comments on his columns, but that on Facebook the links to his columns always garner “likes.” Those likes, he said, “help with diffusion.” Because *Voces* is a small newspaper, it needs Facebook to get the news to the people, he said. Margarita, another citizen columnist, also said her stories do not generate comments, just likes, although occasionally she receives an email or Facebook message from a reader. Rodrigo worried that the lack of comments means people do not really read the stories, or it means they

accept the stories at face value without questioning them or considering their importance.

Jacobo said:

We have to devise a strategy,...use technologies for what they can do, which is allow us to debate with the people. True, this alone is not going to change a decision of President Funes or the Legislative Assembly, but expressing an opinion, I believe, is worth it. The interactivity part is a deficit I think we still have.

Most subjects did not have an answer for why stories posted on *Voces*' webpage prompted few reader comments, or why the Facebook page generated little activity beyond "liking" and the occasional shared post. Laura said it was because *Voces* used technology to inform, rather than to take advantage of multimedia elements that encourage communication and interaction. She said *Voces* simply translated the concept of print journalism to digital journalism, which is a problem because "digital journalism is very different than print journalism...Social networks are basically multimedia, so if *Voces* used more multimedia, maybe there would be more interaction...Multimedia is vital for attracting attention." Readers also need to be made aware that there is a space open for them to comment and interact so that "the citizen knows, 'I am important,'" Laura said. A few interviewees speculated that people abstain from commenting because, in such a polarized country where years of war and oppression taught people it was best to keep their opinions to themselves, they do not want to stir up controversy. "They do not want everyone to know what it is they think. I think for them it would be better to enter a debate anonymously," which Facebook does not permit, Gael said. Rather than comment, then, they expressed their opinions by "liking" or sharing posts. At the same time, however, Gael and others said Facebook was changing this culture of silence, as Salvadorans used Facebook to create citizen protest movements, such as in the Beatriz case—international debate via Facebook, Twitter, and eventually mainstream media over

whether a young, sick woman by the name of Beatriz should be allowed to have a therapeutic abortion in order to save her life (abortion is illegal in El Salvador)—or a 2011 “constitutional crisis” in which the legislature temporarily annulled the country’s highest court, the constitutional court. That willingness to debate had not yet made its way to the *Voces* site, however, interviewees said. Jacobo attributed the lack of comments in part to a lack of “democratic” uses of the Internet:

We do not see these technologies necessarily effectively contributing to the cultural and political growth of the population...Technologies themselves do not resolve the problem, but they must be accompanied by state development, educational, cultural, political, and social policies for the population. Then we will achieve a use of these technologies for development processes, and a return to thought. Excessive entertainment generates smoke screens so that the population is not interested in national problems. It is easier to be on an entertainment page than to be discussing a ruling by the Constitutional Court, for example.

Unlike the *Voces* contributors, most of its employed journalists did not necessarily see the lack of comments as a lack of participation. Marisol referred to *Voces*’ readers as an active audience, and she viewed “liking” something similar to giving an opinion. If readers like an article, she said, “it is because they have read it, analyzed it, understood it, are in agreement, or they can reject it or accept the information.” Likewise, Alejandro said *Voces*’ Facebook page generates “a lot of opinion.” He said he always is surprised by what gets the most attention on Facebook, and he has yet to figure out a pattern. For example, one Saturday he posted a story about an anniversary of the indigenous uprising in Peru led by Túpac Amaru, which received more than 200 views on Facebook. Typically a post gets about 30-40 views on Facebook, he said. Another story about the United Nations’ day against homophobia—“a story you’re not going to see in mainstream media”—also prompted more than 100 views, Alejandro said. “To me this shows that

people want to read these kinds of stories, but without alternative media, there would be no place for them to read this kind of information,” he said.

Also, the journalists said, Facebook is not just for getting readers to participate, but it also facilitates communication with sources and colleagues. Subjects noted the way NGOs, institutions and other civil society groups use Facebook to publish press releases or announcements of events. “The information no longer just goes to journalists, but it is on Facebook for anyone to see,” Marisol said. To communicate with the *Voces* interns, Marisol created a Facebook group called *Voces UCA*²⁷. She posted messages for them as well as information from press releases related to stories they were covering. Rather than call the interns on their cells to assign them stories or ask them questions, she typically used Facebook’s or Gmail’s chat system. Interestingly, when Marisol posted a message on the group Facebook page for the interns, she always signed it with her name, like in the format of a letter, even though her photo and name automatically appeared next to anything she posted. Such a practice of signing her name, not common to Facebook, indicates unfamiliarity with Facebook conventions and the way people throughout the global Facebook community publish posts. Marisol said she only created her Facebook account when she started working for *Voces*. Neither she, Alejandro nor Thiago regularly used their Facebook accounts for personal or professional reasons. Thiago said he recognized that *Voces* lacked a social media strategy, and probably needed someone dedicated fulltime to Facebook and Twitter in order to get more reader interaction, but a lack of time and resources made it impossible.

Although Marisol and Alejandro updated Facebook, they did not know how to access the *Voces* Twitter account. One intern covering an anti-mining forum called

²⁷ UCA is the Spanish abbreviation for the private José Simeón Cañas Central American University.

Marisol to ask for the password to the Twitter account so she could tweet from the event. Marisol turned to Thiago for help because she said neither she nor Alejandro knew anything about Twitter. Thiago told the intern to use her own account and include “@voces” in her tweets, and meanwhile, he said, he would look up the access information for the *Voces* Twitter account. On a different occasion, that same intern asked about the possibility of publishing a video, or including links in her story. Marisol and Alejandro did not know what to tell her, so later checked with Thiago, who encouraged the video but rejected her proposal to use links. He did not want to send readers away from the *Voces* site, he said.

AN ONLINE NEWSPAPER IN AN OFFLINE COUNTRY

This unfamiliarity with Facebook and lack of knowledge about Twitter can in part be attributed to the digital divide, and more specifically, lack of technology training. *Voces* may be an online only newspaper, but that did not mean its reporters and citizen contributors considered themselves “online” journalists. Most interview subjects had undergone little, if any, training in how to use digital tools and programs. Thiago, for example, said he never took a computer course, but rather used the Internet to help him learn what he wanted to know. None of the *Voces* workers know HTML, he said, which is why the website is a WordPress site, so writers only have to copy and paste their stories from Word directly into the site, without having to write any code. “We just do it, and learn little by little as we go,” he said. Marisol knew the very basics of Photoshop, and used it to resize photos. She learned the program in a class at the university, but she said she did not remember much. She knows the minimum to get by, she said, so she relies on trial and error to figure out what she needs to do. Alejandro struggled with Photoshop, so he posted photos on the web without resizing them, and when Marisol got

a chance, she edited the photos to fit the standard size *Voces* uses for all its photos. They said they did not know how to include links in stories, although they were vaguely aware that the *Voces* platform allowed links if they wanted to use them.

Ultimately, which tools they use depends on the audience, subjects said. If more people use Facebook, then that is what *Voces* will use, they said. “If I see that no one uses Hi-5²⁸, then I am not going to use it, because my message will not arrive like it could with Facebook,” Marisol said. Similarly, readers have come to expect multimedia elements, so *Voces* wants to include more video, audio, and photo galleries. “You have to adapt, keeping in mind what the people or what the people use,” Marisol said. Of course, understanding the tools also is fundamental. “How am I going to use something if I do not understand it?” Marisol asked. Santiago, a part-time reporter, said he opens a lot of accounts on various platforms, but if the utility for him is not immediately obvious, then he just stops using it. Roberto said he uses whatever tools “are most popular and that will reach the most people.” Plus, he said, his skillset is limited: he does not know how to record or edit video, so he does not use YouTube. The beauty of technology, however, subjects said, is if they want to learn, the Internet makes it easy to do so. Plus, they said, most social media platforms are relatively intuitive if you have a basic understanding of the Internet (i.e. knowing how to navigate links or click on “help” buttons to answer questions).

A basic understanding of the Internet, however, is not necessarily the norm in a country like El Salvador. *Voces* must keep in mind the ever-present digital divide, Oscar said. If the people cannot come to, or access, *Voces*, then *Voces* must go to the people, he said. Because of the digital divide, *Voces* needs to have an offline presence, and not just

²⁸ Hi-5 is a San Francisco-based social networking site popular in Latin America until Facebook became dominant. In 2009 Hi-5 retooled its platform to focus on social gaming.

an online one, in order to have an effect, subjects said. For them, having an effect meant not just including marginalized voices as sources and contributors, but also reaching the people who needed the information to “make their lives better,” Oscar said. Reaching them requires going offline, such as through special printed supplements for different sectors of society, like farmers, women or indigenous communities, published occasionally throughout the year. Alejandro pointed out that *Voces* started as a weekly print newspaper, and while lack of resources led to its demise, it needs to do what it can to find a way to publish regularly again. Currently *Voces* publishes print versions just a few times a year with special editions aimed at particular communities, like indigenous groups. Those editions are only published if *Voces* receives special funding, like a grant, to pay for publication. Without a regular print edition, Gael said, social and online media like *Voces* are “niche” media with little influence outside of the capital city where there is little Internet access. “It does not serve anything to have good online newspapers” if the “niche” of readers does not grow, he said. Dolores, a *Voces* board member, noted that beyond lack of access, the main problem is that people do not read newspapers. “How do we get them to read so we can respond to their needs? I don’t use Facebook, not everyone uses Facebook, so there have to be other ways, like if *Voces* held a forum to debate an important issue, like what the Beatriz case means for society,” she said. Because *Voces* is online, interviewees perceived of the newspaper as a type of mediator, publishing civil society’s messages while relying on NGOs and other social organizations to relay those messages to the people without Internet access, and vice versa. Thus, because *Voces*’ readers and contributors were limited to those with Internet access, yet the newspaper’s mission was aimed at informing and helping those communities typically without access, the *Voces* writers by default ended up representing and speaking on behalf of those

communities, since those communities did not have the technological wherewithal to speak for themselves.

Although interviewees recognized the digital divide limited the amount of citizen participation in the media process, who has access to the Internet perhaps is more important than the percentage of people with access to the Internet, Roberto said. It might be a small percentage with access, and they might be elites who do not necessarily concern themselves with non-elites, but “they are the decision makers, people who have influence over other people. In this sense, while small, it is significant.” Similarly, Gael said that *Voces*’ “niche” audience cannot be discounted because it is offering that audience something it cannot get from the mainstream media: “Even though it is a small number of people reading alternative media, I think it makes a small change in those people.” And that small individual change, he said, eventually can lead to greater social change. After all, interviewees said, *Voces*’ ultimate goal is to encourage participation in the media process, and in society. As Alejandro said, every day one more person has access to the Internet. “And that person talks with his family, his family talks, and his friends. It is something that spreads, first with the Internet, and then person to person...Intercommunication exists at a social level.” For Alejandro, technology changes who has access to what kinds of information, and by way of being online, *Voces* reaches an audience who previously might not have read alternative news. Because *Voces* posts on Facebook links to all of its stories, people can stumble upon *Voces* and thus be exposed to new ways of thinking, he said, and that is what can generate change in society. Marta, a board member, said that despite *Voces*’ limited reach, it is important to “maintain a newspaper that, while digital, allows us to have active participation in the reality our country is living.” Further, Margarita said, being online allows Salvadorans

living abroad to “know something about their homeland. And the only way of doing that is with digital media... *Voces* can reach different people than a printed newspaper.”

Thus, interviewees saw their fight for media democracy as including the fight for the right to digital technologies²⁹. Rather than renounce technology because so much of the population lacks access, social organizations—*Voces* included—must strengthen their efforts to improve access, and find creative ways to include in society and politics those who do not have access, subjects said. And this, Jacobo said, is how technology can be used as a “tool for change.” Waiting until poor, rural areas have the economic capacity to access the Internet will do nothing, Gael said. Rather, it is up to civil society and media like *Voces* to influence policy so that the government makes access a priority, he said. Rodrigo recognized the potential of online media like *Voces*, blogs, or even Facebook and Twitter to help democratize the media, but cautioned:

These are very limited instruments because only a small percentage of the population has access, and that population is normally educated. So how do you use technology to change the life of a kid who is in Juapotepti, Cabañas?... (A tweet) is not going to take away the hunger or malnutrition of a child there.

Marisol—despite not using Twitter and rarely using Facebook—was more positive. Technology allows a newspaper like *Voces* to exist in the first place, she said. It brings more sources into the public’s view, and creates more connections between the media and civil society. And just because everyone does not have access does not mean those people are necessarily kept in the dark, as the civil society organizations with which *Voces* works can ensure the people without access to the Internet are informed, she said. Roberto noted that technology democratizes media by allowing people to access more information faster, and often without censorship. Alejandro said he believed access to technology, like education, eventually will come to be seen as a right, and when that

²⁹ The United Nations in 2011 declared access to the Internet a human right.

happens, it will transform digital tools into development tools. The more people who have access, Thiago said, the greater influence *Voces* will have. Interviewees' views align with arguments made more than 30 years ago with the MacBride Commission and the New World Information and Communication Order, indicating that while the free flow of information might be seen as a right, it is not sufficiently acted upon.

In addition to their concern with democratizing communication and access to technologies, interviewees also said it was important to ensure “democratic use” of the Internet. In general they were pessimistic about the ways youth use the Internet. “What are people connecting to with technologies? What do they see? What do they enjoy? Sadly, one can see that the majority of the youth, for example, connect for entertainment activities,” Jacobo said. Margarita said that if you walk into a cyber café, all you see are youths “gorging themselves” on games and entertainment, and Rodrigo said he believes they are more interested in pornography sites than news sites. He also pointed out that technology can be a tool that placates people into thinking they helped society when they really did nothing:

Voting on Facebook to save the whales, or “liking” Angelina Jolie’s mastectomy to save women from breast cancer does not necessarily do anything. People think they have done their part without leaving home. It is nothing; it is false. What receives more comments on Facebook: Paris Jackson’s suicide attempt or 10 children killed by a drone on the other side of the world?

Still, social change is possible in any country with Internet, including El Salvador, if digital tools are used for more than entertainment, interviewees said, adding that *Voces*, through its connection with civil society groups, can play a part in democratizing Internet use. Civil society organizations regularly use Facebook to organize and mobilize, subjects said. For example, Alejandro said, that year’s May Day march was larger than ever because of the calls put out via social networks. Likewise Gael noted the way social

media amplified the case of Beatriz. “It shows you how social networks can make a big deal out of any topic,” he said. People question, even change, their own opinions based on what others have posted on Facebook or Twitter, Santiago said, which is why how *Voces* uses social media could influence citizen participation in social change. Marta said:

I have in Facebook a tool that allows me to easily express my political position regarding aspects of national or international life, and to reach an unimaginable quantity of people. It is a tool for my work. It is a tool for my fight...There are people who say to me that it is a waste of time. This depends on how you use it...To me it can be a very important political tool...Of course, if one is friends only with a fashion magazine or a store, then yes, it is a waste of time. But I think there is a way to that it can be a tool. But the majority of people do not yet see that.

The challenge then, interviewees said, is for *Voces*, an online newspaper, to take advantage of its digital-ness while simultaneously overcoming limitations of the digital divide in order to find a way for people to recognize and utilize the Internet as a tool for participation in society.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Voces, as an online-only alternative publication, was unable to take full advantage of the participatory potential of the Internet: the digital divide limited who could participate in the media process, and the journalists’ digital knowledge also was limited, preventing them from knowing how to encourage participation. Also, because it is online, and therefore directly reaching only a fraction of the population, *Voces*’ influence on citizens’ participation in society also was limited, yet still meaningful as those readers with access tended to be decision makers, subjects said. Analysis of ethnographic data revealed three major underlying themes: the importance of media pluralism and an openness to alternative voices, ideas, and contributors; the use of technology for diffusing

information despite a desire to use it for communicating; and the struggle with finding a place for an online newspaper in a mostly offline country.

Interviewees at *Voces* emphasized the importance of media pluralism, and in fact *Voces* is helping lead the fight for media democratization in El Salvador. For interviewees, true media pluralism required more than a variety of media options. They saw plurality as a commitment to openness: openness to different topics and perspectives, different voices as sources, and different contributors. They equated openness with participation of anyone and everyone, and said *Voces*' aim was to encourage participation in the media process via citizen contributors, as well as encourage participation in a conversation or debate via reader comments on the *Voces* website and Facebook page. Just like the MacBride Commission in 1980, the *Voces* subjects perceived of participation as key to media democratization, which they saw as key to true political democracy. But just as the ideals of the Commission have yet to be fulfilled, so, too, do those of *Voces*.

The openness which interviewees idealized came with challenges. First, journalists working at *Voces* made a concerted effort to change as little as possible in any submissions coming from citizen contributors or civil society groups, which sometimes resulted in the publication of errors, whether grammatical or factual. Considering that *Voces* is a relatively new newspaper trying to attract readers and establish credibility, such a hands-off philosophy, while attractive to contributors, could work against it in terms of reader trust and respect. Second, interviewees' conversion of a commitment to openness to participation into a hands-off attitude also could result in the publication of stories in conflict with the newspaper's leftist stance, as journalists saw participation and openness as trumping editorial line. With alternative media fighting the rightist mainstream media for marginalized citizens' right to be heard, allowing anyone, even elites with ready access to the mainstream media, to participate in *Voces* ultimately could

undermine its alternativeness. On the other hand, if *Voces* used Facebook for dialogue, instead of merely diffusing information, then journalists could respond to contributions from elites and thus perhaps stimulate reader participation in a conversation. Finally, while *Voces* was open to participation via technology, participation was limited by that technology. Only literate people somewhat technologically savvy could participate, resulting in somewhat elitist citizen contributions. In other words, despite being open to participation from marginalized community members, participation was de facto limited to journalists, civil society organizations (and their press releases), or citizen bloggers speaking on behalf of those community members. Thus, while technology allowed for more citizen contributions to the media process, it did not necessarily broaden the scope of who was participating directly. The most marginalized sectors of society remained without direct access to *Voces*: rather than voicing their perspectives via technology, their views simply were represented or mediated. Full participation in technology is not yet feasible for *Voces*. The challenge, then, is for an online-only alternative publication like *Voces* to find ways to encourage participation, not just among the elites with Internet access, but also among those sectors without access.

The second major theme to emerge, that of informing versus communicating, showed that interviewees perceived of ICTs, and social media in particular, as important for increasing participation. They noted that by virtue of being online, anyone could participate in the media process, whether by writing a blog/column, or posting reader comments. Technology, subjects said, was important for opening communication between *Voces* and civil society, and well as among readers. However, despite the recognition of the communication potential of ICTs, when it came to specific benefits interviewees had experienced, they spoke in terms of diffusing information and not communicating. For example, no one brought up the way they had used Facebook to start

a conversation with readers, to foment debate, or even to call for action or participation in society. Rather, interviewees mentioned the way Facebook allowed *Voces* to extend its audience, and allowed their perspectives to reach complete strangers that otherwise they never would be able to access. Facebook, they all said, facilitated the diffusion of information. While they believed in theory that ICTs could facilitate communication and even action, in practice they viewed social media as most useful for informing. Even though they said *Voces* was a communication medium, and not just an information medium, their use of social media did not lend support to this assertion. In this way, there was a conflict between how interviewees said they wanted to use technology, and how they actually used it in practice. Story links were posted to Facebook without any kind of commentary to generate conversation, as interviewees perceived of Facebook as a way to drive traffic to the *Voces* website, and not necessarily as a way to promote debate.

Perhaps because Facebook was used mostly for diffusion, it did not generate much interactivity beyond users “liking” a post. What’s more, subjects said, the *Voces* Facebook page offered nothing more than the *Voces* website, and the website did not offer much more than a printed newspaper could, leading some interviewees to link the lack of user interactivity with the lack of multimedia elements. The journalists’ and contributors’ own lack of digital savviness contributed to the lack of multimedia elements, which in turn hampered interaction and participation. While the citizen contributors lamented the lack of user participation in the communication process, the *Voces* employees interestingly did not equate a lack of comments on the website or Facebook page with a lack of participation. Instead, they viewed the “likes” on a Facebook post as an important way for readers to express their opinions. This difference between contributors and employees perhaps can be attributed to professional identity. The contributors, citizens who had jobs outside of journalism, valued their ability to

participate and thus perhaps recognized the importance of bringing more voices into the communication process. They saw their ability to write and be published on the *Voces* site as participation, and thus simply “liking” something was merely interactivity, not participation. The employees, however, as journalists, perhaps saw their role as different than that of the contributors: they were the journalists and the contributors were just that—citizens contributing to the communication process. Thus, any input, no matter how small, even if it was just “liking” something on Facebook, they believed was a way to open a space for new and different opinions, which, as Couldry and Curran (2003) argued, gives citizens some measure of power normally held by mainstream media.

The third theme, that of the struggle to be an online newspaper in a mostly offline country, is related to the first two. Openness, or the ability for anyone to participate, inherently is limited by who has access to the Internet. Further, low education and literacy levels also could negatively influence participation. Likewise, the ability to use technology for communication, rather than simply information, also is constrained by who has access to the Internet. The way people use the Internet, whether for frivolous or liberating purposes, also influences the extent to which users participate in technology and through technology. Similarly, *Voces* subjects’ own limited understanding of digital tools also affected which tools were adopted and how they were utilized. As a result of these limitations, subjects recognized the importance of supplementing *Voces*’ online presence with special printed editions or even offline activities like forums or workshops in an effort to reach the communities that *Voces* prioritized but that did not necessarily have regular Internet access. However, special editions and workshops cost money, so print editions to complement the online version were rare, limited to just once or twice a year and with limited numbers printed. As an alternative not-for-profit newspaper with limited resources, *Voces* was online not because it wanted to be at the cutting edge of all

things digital, but because an online newspaper is cheaper to operate than television, print, or radio. Interviewees said they wished *Voces* were a print newspaper, but that there was no money to pay for it. Still, even if *Voces*' reach was limited because of the digital divide, and even if it was more likely to be read by elites with Internet access than marginalized community members without access, subjects noted that they believed the online newspaper could influence an important sector of the community: decision makers with the power to make changes in favor of the communities and alternative topics covered in *Voces*. They believed in the power of the media for change, and hoped that providing information and perspectives otherwise excluded from the public's view could motivate changes in decision makers' behavior. For example, interviewees believed the alternative, mainstream, and social media attention the Beatriz case ultimately garnered influenced the government's decision to let her undergo a premature C-section. It also is worth noting that even though just a quarter of the population has Internet access, that still represents 1.5 million people who, thanks to technology, have the ability to read and interact with alternative information online via *Voces*.

The reality is that while *Voces* wanted to be open to direct participation from marginalized voices, the limitations of the digital divide meant that it had to settle for writing on behalf of those marginalized voices, and hoping that those with access to *Voces*, such as civil society organizations, would share relevant information with those without access. Ultimately, *Voces* used technology to create a space—an online alternative newspaper—open to citizen participation in the media process. However, that openness was constrained by the digital divide, limited to those citizens with literacy and technological skills. Further, *Voces*' Facebook page was perceived mostly as a way to drive traffic to the *Voces* website, thus perhaps contributing to a lack of comments; interaction essentially was limited to users "liking" a post instead of talking about the

post. Comments on the website also were rare, due in part to the country's culture of silence, but also perhaps because of lack of multimedia elements that might encourage user interaction. By using Facebook and the website as information tools rather than communication ones, *Voces*, while offering participation *in* technology for those with Internet access, failed to achieve participation *through* technology. *Voces* interviewees espoused the importance of using digital tools in liberating, participatory ways, but their desire was hampered by the reality of a lack of Internet access as well as a seeming lack of interest on the part of citizens to engage in any kind of online conversation or debate. If an online alternative media site like *Voces* struggled to encourage participation in technology, let alone through technology, then any kind of participatory communication leading to social change seems remote at best. Still, as interviewees noted, people often shape their opinions, make decisions, and take action based on what they see on social media. The challenge, then, is for *Voces* to understand what it needs to do in order to bridge the digital divide and use ICTs not just to diffuse information, but also to communicate, generating participation *in* technology and *through* technology.

Chapter 8: Política Stereo

The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum....
— Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good*

The young woman sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair, shifting her younger-than-one-year-old daughter from side to side in order to quiet the child's crying. Rogelio³⁰, wearing a navy photographer's vest with the Política Stereo citizen debate site's logo emblazoned on a front side pocket, outlined for the new mother, whose daughter was born with kidney problems, the questions he was about to ask her during the interview. Pablo, meanwhile, set up the mini digital video camera, positioning it to capture in the shot the woman and Rogelio sitting in front of the mayor's desk, with the mayor in the background between them. The interview, about dozens of cases of kidney failure and other health problems reported in a town just outside San Salvador and blamed on water contaminated by a now-closed chemical plant, was part of a new series of videos Política Stereo was producing for its Facebook page and Vimeo channel. Rogelio and Pablo, two of three Salvadoran youth responsible for overseeing Política Stereo's social media accounts, hoped that producing more videos and original content would attract more audience members, and thus contribute to their goal of getting El Salvador to debate, they said. Originally Política Stereo began as a citizen journalism and debate website, but became a social media-only project, with the website having fallen into disuse: only the Facebook, Twitter, and Vimeo accounts are updated regularly.

The three youths running Política Stereo do so mostly on a volunteer basis, as all three have regular day jobs: Rogelio does communication for a non-profit organization,

³⁰ Interviewees' names were changed to protect their identity.

Pablo works in a call center, and Gustavo is a freelance journalist with a law degree. They work from their homes, communicating by phone or Skype and meeting once or twice a week at a café in the chic Zona Rosa district of San Salvador to plan upcoming interviews and video debates. Their aim, they said, is to present an accurate view of the reality of living in El Salvador—something the mainstream media do not do, they said. Case in point: the interview with the mother of the sick baby. The mayor said he hoped the exposure of the case on *Política Stereo* would prompt the national government or the chemical company to clean up the contamination. In addition to producing original content, including organizing, recording, and publishing debates between politicians and other decision makers, *Política Stereo* also seeks contributions from citizens and aggregates news from the local media. The ultimate goal, according to the *Política Stereo* Facebook page, is to “promote open citizen debate” via social media.

In light of this mission, this chapter analyzed ethnographic data, including formal and informal interviews with 22 *Política Stereo* workers, contributors, and readers, to explore to what extent *Política Stereo* successfully used online social media to prompt citizen debate, participation, and action. Four main themes emerged during analysis, contributing to a better understanding of how *Política Stereo* encouraged participation in technology and through technology. The first theme was that of *Política Stereo* as a digital counter public sphere, an online space for citizens to express themselves. Second was the concept of “hearing the other side” (Mutz, 2006), or the importance of being exposed to oppositional viewpoints. Whether online debate and participation can translate into offline participation and action was the third theme to surface. The final theme to materialize was that of the digital divide and the exclusivity not just of being an online-only project, but of being a social media one at that. Each of these themes is examined in detail below.

A DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Habermas (1989 [1962]) articulated the notion of a public sphere, or public spaces for rational deliberation. However, this idealized conception based on an 18th-century bourgeoisie public sphere was exclusionary, not accounting for the people (i.e. women, minorities, and poor) without access. Recognizing this weakness, Fraser (1990) reconceived the public sphere as multiple alternative or “counter” public spheres for like-minded individuals typically on the margins of society to gather, deliberate and contribute to public opinion. When considering the way interviewees spoke about *Política Stereo*, it became obvious that subjects believed the social media project functioned as a type of digital counter public sphere, a place for them to voice their opinions that, without Facebook, they would not have been able to do. Rogelio said:

I think we all want to be heard, and we all have something to say. Social networks guarantee that at least you will have a voice in all this universe of Salvadorans...Participation is this, to be part of the discussions, part of the debates, opining, to be giving your points of view, to be expressing yourself, and not sitting back to watch things happen.

Manuel, the founder of *Política Stereo* and a Salvadoran now living in Austin, Texas, said: “We encourage people to just get in the rain. Just get in the rain, your ideas are valid, you know. Nobody’s right, nobody’s wrong. Let’s just duke it out intellectually.”

Diego, a regular contributor to *Política Stereo*, said he likes reading users’ comments and understanding how they think. *Política Stereo* is a space for people from different standpoints to get together and deliberate, he said: “There is a lot of extremism still. There are not just people who think like soldiers, but also like guerrillas...There are evangelicals...and ideologues from the left and right...and they all come together...to do mental exercises that make them think.” The mainstream media “filter” reader comments and do not open a space for people who think differently than the conservative, corporate,

elite media, Diego said, which is why he thinks the opportunity to participate in a conversation via Política Stereo is so important. Lorenzo, who daily posts comments and participates in discussions on the Política Stereo Facebook page, said he views his participation as a way to “influence decisions” made by authorities who otherwise would not know his opinions. “Virtual debate generates opinion,” he said, and that “pressures decision makers.” Similarly, Javier, another regular user, said Política Stereo is the only space he has access to where his opinions can reach the ears of decision makers and thus perhaps have some kind of influence on the direction of his country.

Politicians, activists, opinion leaders, and ordinary citizens participate in, and interact via, Política Stereo, interviewees said. They saw Política Stereo as offering a non-partisan space for politicians and officials to learn first-hand what the public thinks, and for the public to interrogate the officials. They believed the ability to directly converse with officials could change how those officials think and behave. Common citizens, those without “political value” or money, cannot just approach a politician, attend the general assembly, or call decision makers on the phone, Rogelio said. “But in social networks, we are all equal. Although the name on your profile is shorter or longer, we are all just profiles on social networks. The platform equalizes people independently of their economic condition.”

Besides debating each other, Política Stereo also offers citizens the ability to participate by sending in articles to be published, or weighing in on which politicians or decision makers they want to see interviewed, or what questions should be asked during those interviews. Opening up that process means citizens then will be awaiting the publication of the interview to see how the politician responded to the questions they submitted, which in turn generates more debate, interviewees said. “If we are doing something you do not like, write an article, send it to us, and we will publish your

opinion. It is that easy...Our idea is simply to provide the space,” Rogelio said. As a result, Política Stereo facilitates citizen communication. Traditional media inform, Rogelio said, but Política Stereo communicates:

Communication flows two ways. You have feedback from your readers, from your contributors...The citizens themselves generate opinion, they are interviewers with their questions when we go before an official. They are the ones who, through the option to share or copy and paste, can disseminate what is being given on our space.

Política Stereo “analyzes why things happen, rather than simply give the news,” Rogelio said. The site not only publishes its own articles and analyses, but also publishes those of citizens, and initiates and participates in conversations with users. Also, as interviewees noted, citizens do not have the ability to refute or question anything published in mainstream media. “But in social networks you can. And in Política Stereo you can because one of the requirements for our collaborators is that they be available to respond to any questioners,” Rogelio said, adding:

We are not trying to get people to set aside traditional media, but simply let them have a different option, a different opinion, and they can generate their own criteria, and generate critical thinking, which can lead them to make decisions at election time, or go before an official and give their opinion about the real necessities they have as a person, and this is why I think it is important to have a debate platform...to open doors for citizens that, outside of the virtual, are closed.

Because it is social media, interviewees said, users can be subversive, sarcastic, and question anything, whether religion, politics, or society in general. “Social networks are liberating, cathartic, because one can say what one wants,” Diego said, adding that sometimes he skips reading the posted articles, and prefers to read users’ comments so he can know “what the people think.” For him, what is most interesting is that often commenters bring up ideas and topics different than the original theme of the debate, creating a sense that citizens are free to debate whatever matters most to them in that

moment, he said, adding, “I started to get involved when I realized at last I had a place I could say something, how cool, how cool, and in a certain manner it was freeing, and also fun.” Política Stereo lets users bring up taboo topics, interviewees said. Further, by virtue of being online, information and messages citizens post on Política Stereo can reach the public “without having to beg” the mainstream media for space, Gustavo said. Similarly, Jeremias, a regular contributor, noted that if he publishes something on his own Facebook page, it only reaches his 200 friends who, for the most part, think like he does, and so thus his opinion has little effect. In contrast, when he publishes on the Política Stereo Facebook page, his opinions and thoughts go out to more than 20,000 people, most of them strangers, and so a meaningful conversation or debate is more likely to occur, he said. Política Stereo is open to contributions from anyone, Rogelio said: “We all have the ability to express ourselves, and this is what interests us (at Política Stereo), that ideas be expressed and known by the public, and of course, debated. Democratic spaces are not exclusionary. If they are, they are not democratic.” Eduardo, a regular contributor and freelance journalist, cautioned, however, that it is not enough to have a democratic place to speak; people also have to speak rationally and deliberately, reflecting on why they believe what they are saying in order for debate to have any meaning.

“HEARING THE OTHER SIDE”

Eduardo’s concern reflects the second theme, “hearing the other side” (Mutz, 2006), that appeared during interviews and observations with the Política Stereo contributors. British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) contended that dissent was necessary for liberty, and in fact humanity was harmed when opinions were silenced. Dissent, he argued, was fundamental for proving what was true and disproving what was not, and confronting differing opinions helped one understand what one believed and

why. Similarly, Mutz (2006), who examined how cross-cutting political discussions between people with differing views affect opinion formation and political participation in the United States, posited that oppositional viewpoints help individuals better articulate their own positions, as well as increase an individual's tolerance and understanding of legitimate opposing viewpoints. Ultimately Mutz questioned whether deliberative and participative democracies in fact undermine each other, as she found that political disagreements and discussions came at the expense of participating in politics: the more people talked with people who thought differently than them, the less they participated in civic groups and activities and the less they voted or supported candidates. Mutz's idea of "hearing the other side" was a common theme linking interviews with *Política Stereo* subjects. Interviewees lauded *Política Stereo* for offering a space for everyone, regardless of political leanings, to express themselves freely, but they were divided on whether *Política Stereo* truly achieved cross-cutting political citizen debate, or whether it just provided a forum for political attacks and flame-throwing.

Not all interviewees were convinced that a back-and-forth argument between two differing perspectives could be considered "debate." Eduardo worried that because Salvadorans are accustomed to yellow and sensational journalism, they post comments to create a spectacle rather than generate thought. "They have to put their emotions aside and think," he said. Sometimes the comments are "too visceral," said Sergio, a regular contributor. Posts often are more controversial than thought provoking, aimed at stone-throwing rather than real debate. And unfortunately, he said, "this is what the people like. The people visit, comment, 'like,' and share." Calling the Salvadoran population "feisty," Manuel said *Política Stereo* incites people to comment by posting stories or information accompanied by provocative questions in all capital letters. For example, regular readers recognize "juzgue usted," the equivalent of "you be the judge," as a signature phrase

accompanying many Política Stereo posts. Such phrases, Manuel said, “are ways to elicit that heightened response on social media.” It is just that kind of phrase, however, that some interviewees said catered too much to sensationalism instead of rational thought. Sergio said Política Stereo uses too many caricatures and other posts with “little academic value that are just polemic...to get people to throw stones...and generate traffic...People on Política Stereo get carried away with passions, throwing more wood on the fire.” Eduardo said he would like to see less stories related to “the spectacle, superficial and easy things, gossip about accidents, and things about artists,” and more serious information “that makes the people reflect...makes the people think, forces them to change.”

Despite these concerns, however, all interviewees agreed Política Stereo offers a much-needed space for open political debate in a polarized country where there is little middle ground. As Manuel said, “conversations are loaded,” so Política Stereo entered the mix to try to get people to talk to each other rationally. “I think there is a severe lack of constructive debate,” he said. “I think ideas are not framed the right way. They're always framed in win or lose. I will win, you will lose, and we will impose our agenda on you.” By organizing debates between politicians or community members, and then streaming them live or posting the videos of the debates online, Política Stereo aimed to show how debate can be done, and then encourage the debate to continue via Facebook or Twitter. Manuel said:

Let's exercise our brains. Let's actually take some time to listen to these positions...if this is a channel for education, and you can in fact change people's way of thinking just in general, if you can stop stereotyping people because of their ideology, that in and of itself is change...What I hope to do is, by exposing people to topics...in a little bit less of a biased way, and a more open way, participative way...change their mentality a little bit.

The word “respectful” appeared often during interviews, indicating that for subjects, respecting differing opinions was vital for true debate. Rogelio said Política Stereo strives to create a “respectful dialogue” because:

Debate should not be a hysterical argument that leads to more polarization than there already is in El Salvador. On the contrary, debate should serve to unite and to find meeting points between your point of view and mine and from there take away collective ideas or at least acquire an understanding of something you did not know.

When one of his stories or pieces is published on the Política Stereo Facebook page, Sergio said he reads the comments users posted, “liking” the ones that seem most “sensible” and as though the people “understood” what he wrote. Even if users disagreed with him, he still will “like” their comments, he said, because that is part of a respectful debate process—being exposed to and appreciating views different than your own. After all, he said, there is no universal truth: “This is what it is about, about different opinions, so we arrive at a better understanding of reality.”

Debate is essential for raising consciousness and arriving at that better understanding of reality, Gustavo said:

We (at Política Stereo) believe that change starts with us. So if people are not really committed, if there is no awareness of change, then it is very difficult to demand change...So this is what we want, what we are trying for...to be a little better than yesterday. And that is a win.

Jeremias said debate is fundamental both for democracy and human interaction. In general, however, he said El Salvador suffers from what he called a “culture of antagonism,” wherein if “someone thinks differently than me, I attack him. I do not try to reason with him, no, I attack him, period...We are carried away by visceral energy, or emotions, and not so much reason.” Still, Política Stereo is starting to “break” that habit by opening a space for debate, and actually showing how debate can be done, Jeremias

said. Política Stereo does not just publish stories and information, but “says, ‘look, here is this topic, and here is one position and here is another. What do you all think?’”

Política Stereo, unlike any other media outlet, actually generates debates, and more than people simply “liking” comments, interviewees said. Max, a journalism university student and activist, recalled the way he and a right-leaning user engaged in a long-running debate about numerous topics on Política Stereo, each one questioning the other’s facts and offering new information, rather than simply stating their opinions. They did not necessarily convince each other, but it still was an important “exercise in democracy,” Max said. Manuel said:

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen debates of two people that are yelling at each other at the beginning of the post and at the end of the post they’re exchanging information and they connect...and all of a sudden they’re like friends on Facebook...They literally duked it out on Política Stereo and now they’re like, you know, friends.

What’s more, interviewees said, Política Stereo offers a space for debate that they cannot achieve with their own Facebook accounts alone. Diego gave the example of how he posted to his personal Facebook page a critique of a newspaper editorial that he said attacked the indigenous Nahuat history of El Salvador. “When I posted it, nobody participated,” he said. “Nobody ‘liked’ it or anything. But when I posted it to Política Stereo, people began to comment.” Jeremias got involved with Política Stereo when he wrote a post opposing an article on the Política Stereo Twitter feed. “I said I disagreed with what they were saying, and I gave them my arguments. So we entered into a dynamic debate. I rebutted them, they answered me, and I rebutted them again.” Jeremias’ experience with that debate led Rogelio to ask him to regularly contribute content to Política Stereo, and as a result Jeremias began hosting an opinion show, “The Things by their Names,” recorded once a week and uploaded to the site.

Interviewees said it was important to recognize that Política Stereo offered not just an open space for cross-cutting political debate, but also a safe space. Diego noted the way Política Stereo took advantage of Facebook as a:

tool that has become very strong, at least in this country, a country where the people still cannot speak very freely. Facebook has become the voice of the people that before could not say things. By just posting something against someone, against the media, against a person, against a brand, and to say so openly, I think the Salvadoran feels liberated, feels like this tool is the power to say things and not feel threatened, and although the people say negative comments or comments contrary to what one thinks, one does not feel like I'm going to be shot or macheted when I leave my house.

Before he wrote for Política Stereo, Jeremias posted controversial articles and opinions on his personal Facebook page “because I like the debate.” That debate turned sour, however, when someone anonymously threatened him via Facebook after he wrote about the role of Ronaldo D'Aubuisson, a major in the Salvadoran Army and founder of the right-wing ARENA party, in the 1980 assassination of Monseñor Romero. Jeremias deleted the posting and decided to open an anonymous Facebook account for any further controversial posts he might publish. The benefit of Política Stereo, Jeremias said, is he can publish as himself without fear of being threatened because it is one thing to threaten an individual, and another to take on 20,000 Facebook fans. Similarly, Rogelio said the Internet offers safety in numbers. If everyone else is expressing themselves, then it is easier for you to do so as well, he said: “If you are one person on a street you are not likely to denounce something because you could be beaten, maybe even killed. But if 100 people are denouncing something on the web, how is a congressman going to go after all 100 of them? Or single one out? It is more difficult.”

MOVING THE DEBATE FROM ONLINE TO OFFLINE

Just as those who study the Internet and activism debate the role of online social media in prompting offline activism, so, too, these interviewees questioned the importance of a virtual debate that does not influence the real world. As Diego said:

A lot of people do nothing more than comment because they want to talk, but really what counts is action, because if there is no action, then it is just a comment...Why is there no action? What does it serve if we talk, talk, talk? There's a saying in English: 'talk the walk, walk the talk.'

Similarly, Gustavo said there is an “abysmal” distance between the virtual world and the real one: “It is a good exercise that people participate electronically, but the world is not going to change with this participation, or our country in this case. Virtual is good, but the real solution to all of this is in the streets.” Actions taken online, he said, need to be paired with actions taken offline.

In general, interviewees perceived of *Política Stereo* as a space that encouraged participation both online and offline. They said that the debates and conversations via social media were not simply an exercise in “gossip,” as Diego phrased it. Rather, they said they believed the information posted to *Política Stereo*, and the debates it generated, could result in a real-world impact. “One can create events and create initiatives at the virtual level that can have an influence at the real level,” Gustavo said. Rogelio said social media content can generate not just opinion, but also change: “I do not think you necessarily have to march in the street, you do not necessarily have to be a part of a political party in order to make an impact. You do not have to be part of a union. You just need to have a space to influence.” Lorenzo argued that from the moment *Política Stereo* educates its audience about “topics of public interest and relevance” and content aimed at “the acquisition of consciousness,” then the project already has contributed to the “generation of social change.”

Interviewees cited the way regular contributors to Política Stereo now comprise El Salvador's own Twitterati, or those elite tweeters with hundreds, even thousands, of followers and whose tweets attract attention from ordinary users, decision makers, and mainstream media. In a sort of two-step flow, wherein opinion leaders receive the media message and then pass it along to opinion followers (Lazarsfeld et. al, 1944), these Twitterati thus become opinion leaders (Lang & Lang, 2006) who serve as intermediaries between online news and information and the offline public. Ronaldo is one of those who became an opinion leader in part because of what he posted on Política Stereo and other digital, alternative sites. Ronaldo made a name for himself online first, then started to appear on television regularly because of his views online. In effect, subjects said, social media and Política Stereo created "spokespeople" for various causes. These spokespeople use the Internet to raise awareness or promote their opinions, ultimately becoming messengers for those without Internet access, whether via face-to-face contact (Ernesto noted how organizations and even government agencies ask members of the Twitterati to conduct workshops on social media) or by being interviewed on television as representatives of the Internet youth. "There are a lot of people who have become spokespeople outside of social media. They say, 'look at this news, I'm going to send it you by email'...So the ripple goes beyond social media...and becomes topics of conversation," Diego said.

In addition to creating a community of social media users with offline influence, Política Stereo also sometimes sets the news media's agenda. If something posted on Política Stereo's Facebook page generates a lot of online debate, then it will end up in mainstream media, interviewees said. Manuel cited a sexual abuse scandal in the legislative assembly that Política Stereo wrote about and eventually the mainstream newspapers had to write about it, too, since it was trending on social media. Ernesto

noted that before social media, citizens had to be “well-connected” in order to influence the mainstream media’s agenda. The advent of social media, however, and the creation of a Twitterati, means ordinary citizens now have access to the mainstream media as they often are quoted and cited as “experts,” he said. El Salvador is a small country, so it is easy to create a presence on Twitter, and thus have influence, he said. What’s more, just about any event tweeted with a hashtag tends to draw the attention of the mainstream media now, he said, which gives citizens with social media know-how an advantage in terms of promoting their opinions or an event. Were it not for social media, mainstream media would never notice many, if not most, of ordinary citizens’ activities or opinions, interviewees said.

Política Stereo also contributes to offline change by bringing together like-minded people who can work together to spread a message or promote a cause, interviewees said. Interviewees said sometimes debates started online migrated to text messaging via the WhatsApp cell phone messaging service, or even to a coffee shop in San Salvador. While “democracy is not constructed online,” Jeremias said, what is constructed online are groups of people with shared interests and goals who together can work offline toward democracy, he said. He met numerous people face-to-face via Facebook and Política Stereo, which are especially useful for communicating with Salvadorans living abroad, he said. “You have to work in the countryside, without stopping work on social networks,” Jeremias said. “Social networks alone are not going to change everything, because access to social networks is not that broad...but they are good for helping us come together and to meet and to decide to do something.” Magdalena, another user, noted the way Facebook in general, not just Política Stereo, can turn groups of friends into political groups or activist groups. She said: “They are no longer friends who get together to talk about boyfriends or to go to bars, but they get together to talk about the situation that

affects them. So they become political subjects...groups of friends that join together to talk about other things.”

Generally Política Stereo limits its role to facilitating online participation and debate. During the “constitutional crisis”³¹ of 2011, however, Política Stereo took an activist stance, using Facebook and Twitter to promote marches and other protest activity against Decree 743, which essentially paralyzed the country’s highest court. Política Stereo helped create a ripple effect, Diego said, as protesters’ online and offline actions made it into the mainstream media. Many interviewees went so far as to say that without social media, no one would have known, or cared, what the legislative assembly was doing. The problem, Ernesto said, is that Política Stereo has strayed from this activist role, and no longer gets directly involved in causes, which he said perhaps could prevent the debate occurring online from moving offline. Gustavo, however, saw it differently: Política Stereo does not need to serve as an activist, because its role is to give individuals the tools, the information, they need to be activists or to participate civically and politically. Similarly, Rogelio said that Política Stereo is “of the people,” and that means people have the “freedom” to write what they want and react how they want to what is written. Unlike the 2011 protest movement that political parties co-opted, Rogelio said, Política Stereo is independent, and therefore does not directly call for action; instead it aims to raise people’s consciousness so they take action. Ultimately, they said, the goal is for citizens to participate in online debate that helps them to participate offline.

³¹ In June 2011, thousands of Salvadorans took to the streets protesting the legislative assembly’s decision to limit the authority of the country’s highest court, the Constitutional Court. Legislators issued Decree 743, which required any court rulings to be unanimous, rather than based on a majority of four out of five judges. Protesters rallied via Facebook and Twitter, calling themselves “*Los Indignados SV*” (The Indignant—El Salvador) after Spain’s 15-M movement that had started a few weeks earlier. On July 28, the decree was overturned. Política Stereo interviewees said that while the movement started out as bipartisan, eventually it was co-opted by political parties from both side of the spectrum looking to use the protesters’ momentum for political gains unrelated to the decree or constitutionality.

Despite what subjects saw as the successful use of social media for protest in 2011, they also cautioned that posting something on Política Stereo's Facebook page does not automatically lead to change. "There are still a lot of people who are asleep," Diego said, who all they do is "like" posts on Facebook. And a lot of what is posted is people just attacking each other "like gossip women on a street corner," he said. Jeremias expressed concern that social media in fact could lull people into inactivity and a false sense of accomplishment:

We are becoming somewhat lazy. We are satisfied with Twitter, even if no one reads us...we vent our frustration via Twitter and we feel that all of the world heard us, even though no one heard us...So you do not act, and you are accustomed only to talk, yell, insult, using capital letters, and you vent through your fingers. And all of your action is through your fingers. But you do not act in real life. You do not act to change reality.

For Ernesto, social media are more useful for diffusing messages and influencing the media than convoking nation-wide social movements. An event gets 50,000 likes, but then just 50 people attend, he said. Likes alone are not enough, Diego said. Politicians in El Salvador are not afraid of "likes" because they realize how little of the population actually uses Facebook. Sergio suggested that most of the people "liking" protest events on Facebook do not actually show up on the day of the event because they are not part of the poorer sectors of society most in need of some kind of political or social change to better their lives. Rather, the ones following the movements on social media are "people who have a certain level of comfort," and the Internet has low penetration in the "most problematic" areas of the country where people might be more inclined to participate, he said. Política Stereo's audience is middle class and above, Gustavo said:

They live in a bubble, because really San Salvador is a bubble...We try to show them the reality they do not want to see...There are people who complain about crime but do not complain about corruption...They think the person is a criminal just for being poor, and that is not the case. The person entered in crime because

of a lack of opportunities, family disintegration resulting from numerous factors, number one being immigration. But what produced immigration? The majority of people do not see it like this, so that is what we are trying to do.

And not just the middle class presents a challenge: lack of access in rural areas, coupled with entertainment-use only of digital tools, also limits the ability of technology to contribute to change, interviewees said. The challenge, then, is to burst the middle class's bubble and make them realize their participation is essential for change, and get the people who live outside the capital city to use the Internet to inform themselves, and raise their consciousness, Gustavo said.

THE ELITE TWEET

The digital divide, and the exclusivity associated with being an online-only project, was the final theme to surface during analysis of the *Política Stereo* data. Gabino, a journalism professor, pointed out that the problem with so-called alternative sites like *Política Stereo* being digital is that they are relevant only to the middle class and “privileged sectors” of society. As such, he said, he has “qualms” as to their true potential for promoting democracy. The main disadvantage of Facebook, Diego said, is that “the majority of the population of this country does not have access to the Internet and does not know how this tool works, so use of this tool is very segregated.” Also, because access is so limited, a lot of the people who do use the Internet are unsure how to utilize it to find the information they need, he said. Gustavo noted that much of *Política Stereo*'s audience is comprised of students and Salvadorans living abroad—in other words, people more likely to have access to a computer, the Internet, and thus Facebook.

Rogelio noted that because *Política Stereo* is on social media, it must do what it can to reach people without Internet, and that means trying to crossover into the mainstream media to reach people who only watch television or listen to the radio:

If on social media there is a question asked of a congress member and the answer is important for mainstream media (and they have people monitoring what is moving on social media), they are going to take it and replicate it and make it into a story...So people do not necessarily have to have access to the Internet to know what is happening on social networks.

Eduardo said he realizes most people do not have Internet access, but the hope is that those with access will transmit the message. "You have to start somewhere," he said. Likewise, Manuel said: "There is hope that technology is a big democratizer, right? And people with cell phone and their mobile carriers in El Salvador can, and will eventually, participate. That's one hope, right? And we can get there. And it's worth it to create infrastructure now so that when they get there, it's there." Further, while the percentage with Internet access may be small, that still represents 1.5 million people who do have access, "and this is enough to have an influence," Sergio said. Javier added that the advantage of El Salvador is that it is small, so those with Internet access can talk to those without access and share information from the web that otherwise they might never get from mainstream media. However, it must be noted that while mainstream media can be used to spread online messages offline, the reality of urban-rural divides and inequalities could inhibit connected citizens' ability to communicate information to disconnected citizens.

Any media outlet that has to rely on an Internet connection is going to be limited in El Salvador, interviewees said, perceiving of lack of access and exclusivity as two different things, the latter being more intentional and purposefully restrictive. Still, the importance of social media is "increasing exponentially in El Salvador because social media hasn't even matured there," Manuel said. Despite the digital divide, *Política Stereo* still can have an impact because of the 90-10 rule, he said:

Ten percent at the top, 90 percent at the bottom... The people that do have access and do participate in these virtual agoras, or whatever you want to call it, they

have a high degree of influence offline. They are the influencers. They are the pivots of their social group... So if I'm participating in Política Stereo... and I'm in there and I'm really absorbing these ideas, and I really have a wake up call one day when I have a debate with the author of one of these arguments... there's a high likelihood that I'm going to bring that topic up in my real, non-virtual life. And I will try to influence people. And that's the big bet. That's what I'm betting on.

Similarly, Rogelio said:

We do not think we have an elite audience, because really there are people from different economic stratum who have access... There are people who walk around connected via their phones 24 hours, and others who connect once a week to talk on Skype with someone who outside of the country and sends remittances, and during these moments they can go on Facebook and participate. What is important is that people get involved and begin to use new technologies in a productive way.

Although Facebook is the social media platform of choice for most Salvadorans, interviewees said, they preferred Twitter, and some even assigned more value to Twitter than to Facebook as a tool for debate and participation. In fact, Gustavo said Política Stereo's debate is moving from Facebook to Twitter. "We have identified Facebook as more visual," he said, adding that on Facebook, they emphasize images more than stories in order to generate more traffic. That is not to say that Facebook is no longer useful for debate, Gustavo said, but they now are concentrating more on Twitter's potential for debate—and a higher quality of debate. Gustavo said he still sees a lot of "analysis" in the comments participants post on Facebook, but in general "there is a lot of offense, comments that do not contribute any substance, which is why we are seeing the true debate on Twitter now... It is a more serious debate than what Facebook produces." Similarly, Eduardo said, Facebook is more popular, geared for youth and the masses. By contrast, "Twitter is more reflexive, more for thinking people, more intellectual." Twitter is better for calling people to action than Facebook "because the people on Twitter, I feel, have more influence and power" as it is a smaller, more select population that uses Twitter than uses Facebook, Ernesto said.

It used to be that users worried about how many friends they had on Facebook, but now what is most important is the number of people who follow them on Twitter, Diego said, adding that whoever reports something first on Twitter “wins.” Manuel noted that Twitter is misunderstood in El Salvador, but still it is growing faster than Facebook “because of the ease of the use of mobile,” he said. Facebook is slow to load because of the images, making Twitter more popular among smartphone users, subjects said.

Twitter, interviewees said, is key to raising *Política Stereo*’s visibility and credibility. *Política Stereo* follows politicians on Twitter, contacts them via Twitter soliciting interviews, and re-tweets them. In turn, those politicians follow *Política Stereo*, which increases *Política Stereo*’s reach, subjects said. All of the mainstream media outlets also follow *Política Stereo* on Twitter, they said. “Twitter is like you just take a bath in the stream of the consciousness of the collective, and then you just get out of the bath, in and out of the bath. You can’t possibly follow it,” Manuel said, which is why *Política Stereo* was in the middle of revamping its Twitter strategy, and ending the practice of having anything posted on Facebook automatically re-posted on Twitter. Gustavo was devising a plan to determine what content worked best for Facebook and what was best for Twitter, especially with the upcoming presidential elections in 2014. “We want to be relevant with what we’re saying and not just put stuff that people aren’t going to have to analyze, because things are going to be moving much faster,” Manuel said.

Besides Facebook and Twitter, *Política Stereo* also experimented with using other social media platforms for debate and participation. YouTube and Vimeo are the “trendy” social media sites now, interviewees said. Google Hangouts also proves useful for recording debates involving Salvadorans living in the United States, Gustavo said.

Subjects noted the importance of WhatsApp³² for communicating, saying that conversations started online via Facebook often continue via WhatsApp on their phones. As Ernesto noted, it is more convenient than Facebook because you do not have to log into the site, like with Facebook, because WhatsApp is always on. Plus, interviewees said, WhatsApp was simpler to use and easier and cheaper to access on a smartphone than Facebook. Many also said they had more contacts on WhatsApp than on Facebook. Política Stereo will remain on social networking sites, because that is where the youth are, subjects said, but that does not mean Facebook always will be the main hub of activity. As interviewees pointed out, much of the activity of late has shifted away from Facebook. “The youth does not want to be like his father, so of course if the father is on Facebook, I do not want to be there,” Gustavo said.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Ethnographic data collected on Política Stereo suggests that the site successfully used online social media to promote citizen debate, participation and even some action. However, because just a quarter of the Salvadoran population has Internet access or uses Facebook, that success was limited by the reality of serving only a small educated, more elite public. Still, for at least 25 percent of the population, Política Stereo served as a digital counter public sphere (Fraser, 1990), offering an online space for citizens to express themselves and contribute to a broader discursive sphere. Mainstream media typically filter reader comments posted to their websites, so interviewees saw in Política Stereo their only real opportunity not just to speak, but also to be heard outside their own personal networks. Política Stereo, they said, opened a space for them to talk and learn

³² WhatsApp, a mobile messaging service Facebook purchased for \$19 billion in February 2014, has more than 450 million active monthly users. The service is dominant in the developing world, including Latin America, because it allows users to send text, photo, or video messages without the costly per-message fee typically charged by phone service providers (Leiser, 2014).

about alternative, controversial, or taboo topics. They perceived of participation in these online conversations as a way for them to influence decision makers, and they believed that by voicing their opinions or debating with other users they indeed could effect change, even if in just one person. *Política Stereo*, thus, serves as a type of digital counter public sphere for opinions and voices normally excluded from the mainstream media. Papacharissi (2002) argued that a digital public sphere differs from a digital public space, in that the former is aimed at enhancing democracy and the latter enhancing discussion. In the case of *Política Stereo*, interviewees believed their discussion indeed furthered democracy, as the site offered a new space in a typically closed media environment to not just speak, but to be heard.

Fuchs (2014) offered a series of questions to help determine whether a certain online platform could be considered a digital public sphere: Is the media organization democratically owned? Is there censorship? Are elites or pro-capitalist and uncritical perspectives overrepresented? Who produces the content, and how influential and useful is it? Is the site being used for political communication, and if so, by whom? Is the site independent of government and economic interests? What is the quality of the political discussion? Following this rubric, it is easy to see why interviewees saw *Política Stereo* as a digital counter public sphere. Although Facebook and Twitter are corporately owned, *Política Stereo* is a non-profit organization and interviewees touted its independence from government and economic ties. Posts were not censored, and in fact controversial and conflicting viewpoints were welcomed. Citizens produced the content, or aggregated compilations from other media outlets. The site was created specifically for political communication, and in general subjects believed *Política Stereo* generated quality debate, especially considering that open and respectful debate remains a relatively new concept

for Salvadorans, they said. Additionally it was influential debate, as *Política Stereo* had created a community of opinion leaders, subjects said.

Where *Política Stereo* falls short, however, is in terms of who is participating and whether elites are overrepresented. Because it is a digital sphere in a country where just 25 percent of the population has Internet access, *Política Stereo* remains somewhat exclusive, similar to Habermas' (1989[1962]) original romanticized notion of the bourgeoisie public sphere. *Política Stereo* interviewees talked about the site as open to contributions from anyone, but by doing so they discounted the reality of the site being inaccessible to those without online social media accounts. Further, as a site catering to political dialogue, access to social media is only part of the equation for participation: any participants also must have more than functional literacy skills, as they must be confident enough to enter into critical political debates. *Política Stereo*, then, is not simply a digital public sphere, but in fact a social media public sphere, which perhaps can be seen as even more exclusionary. Still, interviewees said, 25 percent of the population—more than 1.5 million persons—is substantial, so creating a counter public sphere for these citizens to debate and express themselves is an important step for strengthening democracy.

Also noteworthy is the fact that interviewees perceived of *Política Stereo* as a safe space for them to voice controversial opinions—particularly important in a polarized country with a history of oppression of counterhegemonic opinions. Even as some critics (Morozov, 2011) pan the “dark side” of the Internet for its government and corporate surveillance, these interviewees saw the Internet, and the thousands-strong networks of social media, as offering safety in numbers. What they were too scared to post on their own personal Facebook pages they had the courage to publish on the *Política Stereo* page. Just as individuals are more likely to participate in offline acts if a group of people

already is participating, so they are perhaps more likely to participate in a polemic online debate if others already have weighed in.

The online debate occurring on *Política Stereo* often offers more than just “I’m right/you’re wrong” arguments. Interviewees spoke of the reasoned debates they participated in with users who thought differently than they did. Although they did not necessarily change their stances, they at least “heard the other side” (Mutz, 2006), allowing them to learn something new and perhaps better articulate their own viewpoints. Subjects blamed a lack of a tradition of debate and a culture of silence, due in part to endemic educational inequalities and years of oppression and war, for the fact that perhaps not everyone comes away from the debates with a better understanding of their own position or that of the opposition. At the same time, however, they also believed that in general the debates are constructive and respectful. Some interviewees said they would like to see a little less sensationalism—such as caricatures, jokes, or the rhetorical “you be the judge” statement accompanying posts—but in a country where readers are accustomed to yellow journalism and the *nota roja* (literally “red” news, referring to stories about violence and accidents), such tactics they said are part of driving traffic to the site and engaging users in debate.

Also, unlike stories posted to most other media sites, subjects said, those on *Política Stereo* generate more than just “likes.” Rather, users actively participate in cross-cutting political conversations and debates. *Política Stereo*’s open-arms welcome of comments about anything from anyone perhaps helps explain users’ tendency to comment and not just “like” posts. If they know their post will not be deleted, and if they know other users will potentially read and comment on it, then perhaps they will be more likely to partake in the debate. Additionally, the contributors and content producers interviewed said they also participated in the conversations, responding to what users

posted about their stories. This interaction between the producers and consumers—something traditionally missing from Salvador’s mainstream media—also perhaps contributed to users’ participation in the debates.

Of course, interviewees said, the ability to participate in political debate is important for individuals’ own empowerment, but the online talk must have some kind of offline impact in order to play a part in wider social change. In general, they believed *Política Stereo* contributes to, or at least encourages, action as well as debate. Their perception, however, runs counter to Mutz’s (2006) finding that the more people talk with those with differing perspectives, the less likely they are to participate. Subjects said that via Facebook and *Política Stereo* they connected with like-minded people, forming groups that then met offline and worked to enact some kind of change. For these interviewees, social media was an easy way to find people with similar goals and interests. Also, these relationships were not constrained to the online realm, as interviewees said they all had met up with people face-to-face after originally meeting them online. Analysis suggests they did not see these online relationships as less valid or important than offline ones because they did not distinguish between relationships formed online and those formed offline since both resulted in offline activities. What mattered was not where the relationship was born, but rather where it bore fruit. In other words, their online relationships needed to have an offline component if they wanted to walk the walk, and not just talk the talk. *Política Stereo*, then, became a digital meeting ground for encountering like-minded people interested in similar offline activities. What’s more, via *Política Stereo*, users have access to thousands of potential collaborators or supporters who might be willing to join them in a project or cause, and as a result potentially increase the number of participants in any offline bouts of collective action.

In addition to facilitating such collaborations, *Política Stereo* and social media also created a type of *Twitterati*, or regular Twitter users who amassed large numbers of Twitter followers. Interviewees noted that *Política Stereo* contributors had become well known in both the digital and virtual worlds. What they post online attracts the attention of other online users, as well as the mainstream media, which then interviews them, turning them into experts, or opinion leaders, for both online and offline audiences. If enough people talk about something on social media, then the mainstream media have to take notice, interviewees said. As a result, the online opinions posted on *Política Stereo* often make it to the real world via mainstream media. Without *Política Stereo*, and the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard by the tens of thousands of people in the *Política Stereo* network, ordinary citizens—especially those with non-mainstream perspectives—seemingly never would have had the chance to become opinion leaders, and thus possibly influence decision makers. For these interviewees, the development of a *Twitterati* suggested that participating in *Política Stereo* debates was not just a way for users to vent. Rather, they believed they had influence with politicians and citizens, and the potential to perhaps effect changes in thought, if not also behavior.

Some interviewees wanted to see *Política Stereo* use its influence and that of the *Twitterati* to directly call for action, as happened during the summer of 2011 with opposition to Decree 743. They believe that in times of crisis, online debate could only go so far. Posting photo galleries and videos of demonstrations and hashtags supporting protesters generated debate, but also helped encourage users to take to the streets, in their view. Other interviewees, however, believed *Política Stereo*'s primary role was to encourage citizen participation in online debate, which ideally would raise their awareness and ultimately prompt offline participation. These subjects' reluctance to directly call for action could be related to their position that *Política Stereo* is non-

partisan and open to contributions and perspectives from anyone about anything. Calling for action for a particular cause, then, could potentially violate that non-partisan stance. This attitude falls in line with Mutz's (2006) conclusions: people do not want to participate because they do not want to offend the people who think differently than they do.

Noteworthy in interviewees' discussions of the importance of translating the online debate into offline action is the way the digital divide factors into their conceptualizations of so-called "clicktivism" and "slactivism," or the concern that online activism is not as meaningful as, and perhaps is even harmful to, offline activism. Interviewees perceived of the number of "likes" as important for attracting attention to generate debate, yet they also recognized that "likes" alone did not carry much weight. They attributed this to the fact that because most of the population is offline, the number of "likes" does not necessarily represent public opinion at large. As one subject said, politicians do not fear "likes" because no matter how many "likes" a post receives, that politician still knows the bulk of the country will never see the post. "Likes" alone, then, do not seem to have the power to sway decision makers, they said. Comments, by contrast, have more of an impact because they can be quoted in mainstream media and thus reach disconnected audiences. What's more, interviewees said "likes" could not measure the level of interest in offline participation in protest activity, again because of the digital divide. Even if 50,000 Facebook users "like" a planned protest, chances are few of those users will actually attend, interviewees said, because those Facebook users mostly come from the middle- to upper-classes, sectors that are more comfortable and therefore less likely to protest. People without Facebook access, those who cannot click "like," are the ones more likely to protest, but without Internet they are less likely to be aware of a call for action that went out over social media. The findings from these interviews suggest that while *Política Stereo* and social media are useful for generating

citizen participation in online debate, they are less useful for prompting offline participation in protest activity in a digitally divided country. Much of the *Política Stereo* and social media activity seems to remain at an intellectual level, or, when offline action does occur, such as when online individuals form offline groups, that action is limited in scope to social change projects, rather than nation-wide social movements.

The impact of the digital divide on *Política Stereo* also is interesting to note in terms of how interviewees perceived of its relationship to social media. Not only is *Política Stereo* an online-only medium in a mostly offline country, but it is a social media-only medium, which perhaps adds another layer of exclusivity: users must have access to the Internet and be social media users. Still, as interviewees said, social media use is growing exponentially, especially among youth. Every 18-year-old has a Facebook account, they said, and in order to generate debate, they have to go where the people go: social media. Of course, this is just their perception: youth are the dominant Facebook users (Breuer & Welp, 2014), and Facebook use continues to grow, yet still it reaches only 25 percent of the population. Thus, their belief that “every” 18-year-old uses Facebook illustrates the eliteness of *Política Stereo* contributors and readers who perhaps only interact with others within the connected 25 percent.

Interestingly, unlike many social media users in El Salvador, these interviewees preferred Twitter to Facebook. They saw Facebook as a place for frivolous activity, and perceived of Twitter as serious and intellectual. As a result, *Política Stereo* was changing its social media strategy to create more of a Twitter presence. Subjects seemed to see the writing on the wall; Facebook was becoming passé, if it had not already become so. Salvadorans’ increasing use of smartphones also indicated to these interviewees that Twitter, which loads faster than Facebook because it lacks all the heavy images, would be better suited to capture newly online users who have smart phones but no home

computers. Such a focus on Twitter is noteworthy considering that Facebook is by far the dominant social media platform in El Salvador. Their preference for Twitter, and their perception of Twitter as for intellectuals and Facebook for the masses, indicate a potential elitism. Política Stereo's mission may be to open a participation space for citizens normally excluded from the mainstream media, but limiting that space to Twitter is the equivalent of closing the space to most of the country's population. Also, reserving Twitter for "serious" debate and using Facebook for the more trivial could work against Política Stereo, as Facebook users wanting real debate are likely to stop visiting the Política Stereo page if all they find is sensationalism and flame-throwing. While it is safe to bet that Facebook's dominance comes with an expiration date, it seems premature to give up on Facebook already and move to another social media platform, especially when so few of the already-small population of Internet users actually regularly utilize Twitter. After all, Política Stereo has more than 28,000 fans on Facebook, but only about 6,800 followers on Twitter. Further, tweepz.com, which keeps track of Twitter users, shows that less than 3,000 Twitter users place El Salvador as their location. True, Twitter might be the future of debate in El Salvador, but for now it seems to be an elite platform that would run counter to Política Stereo's goal of open citizen debate.

In summary, the case of Política Stereo shows how online social media can be used successfully to promote citizen debate, participation, and perhaps even action. During analysis, four main themes surfaced helping to explain how Política Stereo encouraged participation both *in* and *through* technology. Interviewees perceived of Política Stereo as a digital counter public sphere open—and safe—for anyone and any idea. More than just a place for citizens to express themselves, Política Stereo became somewhere for citizens to "hear the other side" (Mutz, 2006) and engage with users who thought differently than them. Still, online debate must be accompanied by offline action

in order to make a difference, subjects said. They believed *Política Stereo*'s influence extended from the virtual into the real world, noting how *Política Stereo* helped promote a protest movement in 2011, getting involved in the action instead of just encouraging others to do so. They also pointed to the creation of a *Twitterati* that served as experts and opinion leaders in the mainstream media, which helped bridge the digital divide. However, they recognized that as an online-only medium, and especially as a social media-only medium, some citizens would be left out of the debate. Their desire to focus more on Twitter than Facebook also could potentially exclude even more people. Ultimately, though, *Política Stereo*—despite the limits of the digital divide—seemed to use social media to work toward an ideal level of openness to participation in the media production process, political debate, and even civic and political action.

Chapter 9: Content Analysis

Because document analysis is a fundamental aspect of ethnography (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), this dissertation includes a content analysis of the four alternative media projects' Facebook pages, as well as the posts published on those pages. The content analysis explored to what extent the alternative media groups took advantage of Facebook's social and multimedia features to encourage user interaction and engage them in conversation. The analysis also aimed to discover whether the alternative media projects used Facebook as a channel to encourage participation and mobilization. Analyzing Facebook and its multimedia and interactive features allows for new understandings of "technology as text" (Woolgar, 1991, quoted in Pauwels, 2005, p. 605) in order to gain deeper insight into the culture of a group and the media it produces.

This examination of Facebook pages and posts complements the interviews and observations conducted with the four Salvadoran groups under study, as the codebook for the content analysis was developed based on observations as well as what subjects said during their interviews. The interviews probed alternative media producers and consumers for information about how they incorporated new technologies, and to what end. It quickly became evident that most of the interviewees used Facebook, rather than Twitter, thus justifying the decision to analyze the content of the groups' Facebook pages.

During the interviews many of the subjects hailed the participatory potential of Facebook for opening alternative, digital spaces for citizens to express themselves. They saw Facebook's interactivity as allowing for quick and easy access to the media – digital divide notwithstanding. Still, they also expressed doubt over their technical abilities to take full advantage of all the tools Facebook provides that could facilitate interaction with

their audiences, and some even were concerned that perhaps using Facebook to its full participatory potential would open the gates too far, undermining their roles as “journalists.” Additionally, in terms of the role of alternative media in social change, the subjects also discussed the potential for Facebook to be used to call for action and motivate people to participate civically and politically, even though many suggested that using these tools in such liberating ways would require re-programming users’ habits so they could appreciate Facebook’s usefulness for more than just perusing photos or chatting with friends.

This content analysis, then, is grounded in those interviews, using subjects’ own thoughts about technology and participation to craft a codebook exploring how these alternative media projects used Facebook. Based on the interviews, the content analysis addressed the following research questions: What is the relationship between the extent to which the four alternative media projects took advantage of Facebook’s social potential (i.e. the number of photos, videos, events and notes, and embedding of Twitter or other social media platforms), and the number of page fans and the number of fans “talking about” the page?; how did interactivity (i.e. liking, commenting, sharing, and responding) vary among posts published to the four Salvadoran alternative media projects’ Facebook pages?; what is the relationship between interactivity and the posting of multimedia elements (i.e. links, photos, videos)?; what is the relationship between interactivity and whether the post included accompanying text (i.e. headline, pulled quote, commentary/analysis, or greeting)?; and finally, were the Facebook posts used to motivate citizens to act or to mobilize?

RESULTS

Overview

Frequencies were produced for all the variables. When considering the type of post published on the four Facebook pages, nearly half (47.7 percent) were links back to that media site's own website. About 22 percent were short commentaries (less than 500 words) written by the site, 10 percent were photos, 8 percent were commentaries written by a fan or friend of the page, about 6 percent were greetings or announcements from the site, about 3 percent were long news stories or commentaries without a link, about 2 percent were videos, and 1 percent were links to stories from another media outlet's webpage. In terms of the topics of the posts, 47.7 percent were about the government or politics; 15.8 percent were about culture or cultural and community events; 8.9 percent were about activists, social movements, or civil society organizations and efforts; 8.1 percent were related to crime, violence or police; 6.5 percent were about the economy or business, 6 percent were about weather and science; 4.9 percent were greetings; 3.9 percent were related to health news; 2.5 percent were about education; 1.6 percent were about sports, and 1.2 percent were "other."

Users commented on only 16.7 percent of posts. Of all the posts with comments, only 21 percent contained comments written by the media site in response to other users. Roughly 95 percent of all posts with links included accompanying text, meaning that 5 percent of posts with links included the link and nothing else. Headlines and pulled quotes were by far the most common type of text published alongside links, accounting for 83.7 percent of posts with links. About 9 percent included commentaries/analysis/opinion, and 7.4 percent were greetings and other similar types of comments. Only 4.7 percent of all posts were coded as motivational or a call to action, mobilizing people to act.

Fans and “likes”

RQ1 explored the relationship between the extent to which the four alternative media projects took advantage of Facebook’s social potential (i.e. number of photos, videos, events and notes, and link to Twitter), and the number of page fans and the number of fans “talking about” the page. Analyzing the Facebook pages in general, rather than the posts themselves, showed that while all four alternative media projects took advantage of Facebook’s social potential to some extent, there were large discrepancies. For example, Radio Victoria posted just one video, while Política Stereo posted 152. The number of photos ranged from a low of 265 at Radio Victoria, to highs of 3,169 at Política Stereo and 3,140 at *Diario CoLatino*. All but *CoLatino* used the Facebook page to post events and notes. *Diario CoLatino* and Política Stereo both had Twitter feeds embedded into the Facebook page, but only Política Stereo also embedded feeds from Vimeo, UStream and Livestream.

Statistical analysis of the Facebook pages showed a significant and positive correlation between the number of people “talking about” the page, as well as the number of fans, and the degree to which the pages were taking advantage of Facebook’s social potential (i.e. number of photos, videos, events, polls and notes). Analysis revealed a significant and positive correlation between the number of fans and the number of videos ($r = .980, p < .05$), events ($r = .971, p < .05$), and polls ($r = .989, p < .05$) available on the page (See Table 9.1). Likewise, results showed a significant and positive correlation between the number of people talking about the page and the number of videos ($r = .994, p < .01$), events ($r = .960, p < .05$), and polls ($r = .995, p < .01$). Photos and notes, however, were not significantly correlated to the number of fans or the number of people talking about the page.

Table 9.1: Correlations of Facebook page popularity numbers and use of social multimedia variables^a

	Number of fans or friends	Number of “talking about”	Photos	Videos	Events	Polls	Notes
# of page fans	_____	.992**	.638	.980*	.971*	.987*	.440
# “talking about”	.992**	_____	.661	.994**	.960*	.995**	.529
Photos	.638	.661	_____	.593	.439	.580	.077
Videos	.980*	.994**	.593	_____	.969*	.999**	.608
Events	.971*	.960*	.439	.969*	_____	.979*	.520
Polls	.987*	.995**	.580	.999**	.979*	_____	.577
Notes	.440	.529	.077	.608	.520	.577	_____

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

^aListwise N=4

Interactivity with users

In answering RQ2, about the way in which interactivity (i.e. liking, commenting, sharing, and responding) varied among posts published on the four alternative media projects’ Facebook pages, results showed Política Stereo exhibited significantly more levels of interactivity than the other three sites (see Table 9.2). Differences in interactivity among the four sites were assessed using ANOVA tests, which revealed significant differences regarding number of “likes” per post $F(3, 550) = 34.018, p < .001$; number of comments per post $F(3, 550) = 203.743, p < .001$; and number of times users shared the post $F(3, 550) = 22.697, p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey tests showed that Política Stereo had significantly more ($p < .01$) “likes” per post ($M=70.64, S.D. = 70.039$) than

Radio Victoria (M=33.14, S.D. = 137.908), *Diario CoLatino* (M=2.21, S.D. = 58.66), or *Voces* (M=.11, S.D. = .385). Política Stereo posts also generated significantly more comments (M=39.25, S.D. = 36.080) than Radio Victoria (M=2.57, S.D. = 5.053), *Diario CoLatino* (M=.24, S.D. = 1.012), and *Voces* (M=.01, S.D. = .113). Política Stereo again led the pack with the number of posts that were shared by other users (M=41, S.D. = 50.506), with shares significantly higher than those at Radio Victoria (M=16.676, S.D. = 96.754), *Diario CoLatino* (M=.569, S.D. = 2.617) and *Voces* (M=.038, S.D. = .192).

Table 9.2: Means and standard deviations for Facebook levels of interactivity by comments posted to each alternative media project’s page^a

	DC	RV	V	PS
“Likes” (SD)	2.21 (5.87)	33.14 (137.91)	.11 (.39)	70.64 (70.04)
Comments (SD)	.24 (1.01)	2.57 (5.05)	.01 (.11)	39.25 (36.08)
Shares (SD)	.57 (2.62)	16.68 (96.75)	.04 (.19)	41.00 (50.51)

^a *Diario CoLatino* (DC), Radio Victoria (RV), *Voces* (V), and Política Stereo (PS)

A Chi-square test comparing how often the sites responded to comments posted by users (see Table 9.3) showed Radio Victoria was significantly more likely ($\chi^2 = 8.174$, $df=3$, $p < .05$) to respond to what users posted, with the station responding 39.3 percent of the time, compared with *Diario CoLatino*, which responded to others’ comments 14.3 percent of the time, and Política Stereo and *Voces*, which responded 13.3 percent and 0 percent of the time, respectively.

Table 9.3: A comparison of how often each alternative media site responded to users' comments on Facebook

Did the site respond?	Diario CoLatino (n)	Radio Victoria (n)	Voces (n)	Política Stereo (n)	Total (n)
Yes	14.3% (5)	39.3% (11)	0% (0)	13.3% (4)	21.1% (20)
No	85.7% (30)	60.7% (17)	100% (2)	86.7% (26)	78.9% (75)
Total	100% (35)	100% (28)	100% (2)	100% (30)	100% (95)

$\chi^2 = 8.174, df=3, p < .05$

Additionally, results of an independent sample T-test showed that the number of comments a post generated was significantly related to whether the site responded to users' comments on that post ($F = 22.821, t = -1.331, p < .001$). The mean number of comments when a site posted a response to users' comments was 27.13, compared with a mean of 12.04 comments if the site posted no response at all. In other words, responding to users' comments made a significant and positive difference in the number of comments. The mean number of likes and shares also was higher on posts that included responses from the site, but differences were not significant.

Interactivity and multimedia elements

In examination of RQ3, which explored the relationship between interactivity and the posting of multimedia elements (i.e. links, photos, videos), bivariate correlation tests indicated that multimedia elements like links and photos were positively and significantly related to interactivity (see Table 9.4). In other words, the more links and photos that were posted, the more likely users were to "like" a post, comment on it, or share it with their own network of friends. For example, the number of "likes" a post generated was positively and significantly related to the number of links ($r = .085, p < .05$) and photos (r

= .165, $p < .001$) posted in the original post and accompanying comments. Similarly, the number of comments a post received was significantly and positively related to the post's number of accompanying links ($r = .245$, $p < .05$), photos ($r = .217$, $p < .001$), and videos ($r = .096$, $p < .05$). The number of times a post was shared also was significantly and positively related to the number of photos ($r = .122$, $p < .01$), but a correlation only approached significance when it came to the number of accompanying links ($r = .079$, $p = .064$). The number of videos was not significantly correlated with the number of likes or shares.

Table 9.4: Correlations of interactivity and multimedia variables^a

	# of likes	# of links	# of photos	# of videos	# of comments	# of shares
# of likes	_____	.085*	.165**	.062	.419**	.959**
# of links	.085*	_____	.306**	.051	.245**	.079
# of photos	.165**	.306**	_____	.077	.217**	.122**
# of videos	.062	.051	.077	_____	.096*	.026
# of comments	.419**	.245**	.217**	.096*	_____	.399**
# of shares	.959**	.079	.122**	.026	.399**	_____

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

^a Listwise N=554

Interactivity and commentary

To get at the idea of how much original effort a site needs to put into Facebook in order to generate interactivity, RQ4 measured the relationship between interactivity and whether posted links included accompanying text (i.e. headline, pulled quote, commentary/analysis, or greeting). In other words, RQ4 aimed at analyzing whether simply posting a link by itself, or posting it with a headline, pulled quote, or some kind of commentary or analysis, would be related to higher levels of interactivity among users. Interesting to note is that results of an ANOVA test showed that the kind of text (i.e. headline, pulled quote, or commentary) written to accompany posted links was significantly related to levels of interactivity. Results showed significant differences regarding the number of “likes” per post $F(3, 273) = 27.644, p < .001$; number of comments per post $F(3, 273) = 26.894, p < .001$; and number of times users shared the post $F(3, 273) = 13.509, p < .001$. Post-hoc Tukey tests indicated that posting commentary to accompany a link generated significantly more likes ($M=25, S.D. = 43.746$), comments ($M=17.67, S.D. = 31.803$), and shares ($M=9.571, S.D. = 24.338$) than simply either posting a headline or a pulled quote.

A call to action

Finally, RQ5 examined whether the posts published on the alternative media projects’ Facebook pages were used to motivate citizens to act or to mobilize—a fundamental role of alternative media. Results of an ANOVA test pointed to significant differences among the four alternative media projects and whether they were posting motivational calls to action via Facebook $F(3, 566) = 57.533, p < .001$. According to Post-hoc Tukey tests, both *Política Stereo* ($M=.33, S.D. = .479$) and *Radio Victoria* ($M=.28, S.D. = .452$) published significantly more motivational posts than *Diario CoLatino* ($M=.01, S.D. = .095$) or *Voces* ($M=0, S.D. = 0$). Still, that is not to say that

Política Stereo and Radio Victoria overwhelmingly posted calls to action (see Table 9.5): only 33.3 percent of Política Stereo posts and only 27.7 percent of Radio Victoria posts were coded as motivating ($\chi^2 = 133.20$, $df=3$, $p < .001$).

Table 9.5: A comparison of how often each alternative media site published motivational/call-to-arms posts

Were there motivational posts?	<i>Diario CoLatino</i> (n)	Radio Victoria (n)	<i>Voces</i> (n)	Política Stereo (n)	Total (n)
Yes	.9% (3)	27.7% (13)	0% (0)	33.3% (11)	4.7% (27)
No	99.1% (329)	72.3% (34)	100% (158)	66.7% (22)	95.3% (543)
Total	100% (332)	100% (47)	100% (158)	100% (33)	100% (570)

$\chi^2 = 133.20$, $df=3$, $p < .001$

Looking at the topics of the posts also sheds light on whether Facebook truly was used to motivate people to action. Most of the posts published on the *Diario CoLatino* (39.5%), *Voces* (50.6%), and Política Stereo (48.5%) Facebook pages were related to the government or politics. In contrast, most of Radio Victoria's posts (51.1%) were a type of *saludo* (greeting). Only 8.9 percent of all the posts were coded as related to information about social movements, civil society, or activism.

Preliminary conclusions

Understanding how these four alternative media projects in El Salvador use Facebook is important for offering insight into the liberating potential of new technologies for contributing to participation both *in* technology and *through* technology. This content analysis of Facebook pages and posts, based on interviews conducted with

alternative media producers and consumers, adds to that understanding by empirically examining the relationship between user interactivity and the alternative media projects' use of Facebook's social and multimedia elements.

Analysis revealed that the more multimedia elements were included with Facebook comments, the more users interacted. Of the four alternative media groups, Política Stereo's Facebook page garnered significantly more interaction—in terms of users “liking” comments, posting comments or sharing comments—than *Diario CoLatino*, Radio Victoria, or *Voces*. In general, the number of posted links, photos, and videos all were significantly and positively associated with the number of comments users posted. Links and photos also were significantly and positively related to the number of “likes” and shares a comment received. In other words, the inclusion of multimedia elements seems to be what got users commenting and participating in a Facebook conversation or debate.

What's more, merely posting links to a story or photo or video were not necessarily enough, as this analysis demonstrated. Increased levels of interactivity (liking, commenting, and sharing) were tied to what kind of text was included along with a posted link. Yes, a link on its own generated more interactivity, but a link with commentary, too, did so much more. Results showed that if a site posted some kind of original commentary or analysis with a link, significantly more users would like the post, comment on it, or share it than they would a link accompanied just by a headline or a pulled quote. This finding is particularly relevant to *Voces*, which overwhelmingly relied on re-posted headlines with its links, and which also had the lowest number of posts liked, commented on, or shared, in comparison with the other three sites studied. If alternative media truly want to use Facebook to open alternative sites for dialogue, then,

they must take the time to write original commentary or analysis, and not just re-post a headline along with a link.

Also noteworthy is the finding that the average number of comments on a post increased significantly if the alternative media site posted a response to a user's comment. The mean number of likes and shares also increased, although the differences were not significant. This result indicates that if an alternative media project wants to get a conversation started among users, it has to do more than just start the conversation. Rather, the site must participate in the conversation by responding to what audience members post. Among the four sites, Radio Victoria was most likely to respond to users' comments. Considering that it is a community radio station, and that the majority of posts published on the site were greetings to users, it comes as no surprise that Radio Victoria was the most conscientious among the four sites when it came to talking back to users and keeping the conversation going.

The mean increase in user comments, likes, and shares that went along with a site responding to what audience members posted also suggests that the media consumers might want—even expect—the media site to talk back to them. For so long communication between media and consumers was one way. Technology like Facebook, however, opens the possibility for multi-directional communication, not just between the media producers and consumers, but among the different consumers, as well. Alternative media producers long have advocated for audience participation in the communication process, and what this finding suggests is that the communication process does not end with publication, whether it be in a newspaper or on a Facebook page. Instead, it seems that perhaps the communication process is continuous: Facebook not only impacts the role of the audience by allowing users to participate in a conversation, but it also changes expectations for how the alternative media producers themselves are supposed to

participate in that conversation. Generating interactivity—user comments, likes, and shares—means not only grabbing users’ attention via multimedia elements like links, photos, and videos, but it also means giving them something beyond what is included in a link (i.e. commentary vs. headline), as well as engaging them in a conversation by responding to their comments. It follows, then, that taking advantage of Facebook’s multi-directional communication capacity should be a fundamental part of alternative media if their mission indeed is to open alternative spaces for dialogic communication.

In addition to analyzing Facebook posts in terms of interactivity, this analysis also examined the Facebook pages themselves, looking at each site’s overall number of fans or friends, and the extent to which the site took advantage of Facebook’s social elements by posting photos, videos, events, notes, and polls. Just as multimedia features significantly impacted levels of user interactivity, so, too, did social and multimedia elements factor into a site’s popularity with users. The more videos, events, and polls that were published, the more fans or friends a site had and the more users were “talking about” that site. This finding suggests that while posting links or comments to a page perhaps generates conversation, if a Facebook page also does not go beyond the standard offer of photo albums and also provide users with additional social and multimedia elements like videos, events, and polls, then the site might not have much of a fan base from which to pull to start a conversation in the first place. In other words, perhaps the “extra” items like videos, events, and polls help initially attract fans or friends to the site, and the multimedia posts and commentary are what get them to participate in a conversation.

It also is worth calling attention to the fact that *Diario CoLatino* and *Política Stereo* were the only two sites to actually embed Twitter feeds on their Facebook pages, which reinforces those interviewees who repeatedly said they did not use Twitter because

they did not understand it, and because everyone they knew was on Facebook, not Twitter.

As this content analysis demonstrated, using Facebook as a way to open space for dialogue speaks to alternative media's ability to enable user participation *in* technology. However, this dissertation also is interested in users' ability to participate *through* technology. In partial answer to this concern, Facebook posts were analyzed to determine whether the four alternative media projects used the social media platform to call for action or motivate people to participation civically or politically. Results revealed, however, that while participation and social change were stated goals of all four alternative media sites, most of their posts did not reflect this mission. While Política Stereo and Radio Victoria published more motivating posts calling for action than either *Diario CoLatino* or *Voces* (which published none), the large majority of the posts published to their pages were not explicitly motivating ones. Also, three of the four sites (Política Stereo, *Diario CoLatino*, and *Voces*) published posts mostly with news and information about politics or the government, rather than social movements or civil society. While Radio Victoria focused less on politics and more on greeting its audience, its Facebook page also still did not publish many posts related to social movements, civil society, or activism. This is not to say that the political information or the salutations were not useful—on the contrary, since they helped to spark conversation and debate, which, of course, is essential to alternative media, and ultimately, could foster civic and political participation. Likewise, this content analysis looked at explicit, not implicit, content, meaning that just because a post was about the government did not mean that it could not also motivate someone to action. The marginalization of social movements by the mainstream media, coupled with the limited reach of alternative media, mean that Facebook represents a way for alternative media to spread dissident views to wider,

perhaps more diverse, audiences. These four Salvadoran alternative media projects, however, seem to be failing to make the most of Facebook's liberating potential³³.

Thus, while the content analysis showed the ways in which *Diario CoLatino*, Radio Victoria, *Voces*, and Política Stereo attempted to use Facebook's multimedia and social features to generate interactivity, conversation, and debate, it also showed that they lag when it comes to using Facebook to encourage action, and not just words. In other words, the analysis seems to indicate that for these four alternative media projects, Facebook indeed is a channel for encouraging participation *in* technology, but it has not yet been fully realized as the conduit to participation *through* technology.

³³ It should be noted that the digital divide factors into this failure to take full advantage of Facebook as a form of liberation technology. This is discussed further in the overall conclusions for this dissertation.

Chapter 10: A Comparative Analysis

If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed.

— Paulo Freire

Rodríguez and colleagues (2014) outlined four challenges confronting the field of communication for social change. They suggested that future research into alternative media and its use of new media technologies should: be situated within a historical context, take into account the political economy of ICTs, recognize the broad and ever-changing complex processes of communication, and be grounded within existing communication for social change literature. In line with Rodríguez et al.'s direction, this chapter aimed to avoid any technological determinism by placing analysis of the four Salvadoran alternative media projects' ICT use within the historical, cultural, economic, political, and social specificities of El Salvador. This comparison of the four alternative media projects, two “traditional” or legacy media sites and two “new” media sites, is based on ethnographic data, including formal and informal interviews as well as participant observation, collected during 12 months of on-site research. Comparing and contrasting the four projects adds to our understanding of how, within a digitally divided country, alternative media can use digital technologies in potentially liberating ways, and to what extent they can open spaces for citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology.

DIARIO COLATINO VS. RADIO VICTORIA

The two “traditional” media projects, *Diario CoLatino* and Radio Victoria, share various commonalities, mostly related to their roles as “legacy” alternative media outlets

seeking to provide a voice for the voiceless. Interviewees from both sites said they offered an alternative to the mainstream media in terms of content, sources quoted, and even audience, attracting readers or listeners interested in their leftist or progressive editorial lines. As small alternative media outlets, both sites struggled with a lack of resources. *Diario CoLatino* for years has been the target of an advertising boycott led by the conservative National Private Business Association. Prior to the left's election to the presidency in 2009, the newspaper also was intentionally excluded from any government advertising. President Mauricio Funes' election did not help matters much, however, as the new leftist government still chose to advertise with the mainstream media, rather than *CoLatino*. As a result, the newspaper relies on foreign foundations and advertising or sponsorships from NGOs, unions and other groups paying to have their messages published.

Just as the newspaper suffers from lack of government advertising, Radio Victoria suffers from lack of government recognition. Community media are not officially recognized under Salvadoran law, and because of lack of funding to purchase its own frequency, Radio Victoria is forced to share one FM frequency with 20 community radio stations across the country. As a result, the station fades in and out throughout Cabañas, and often the signals of other community stations are picked up instead of Radio Victoria. Most of the station's funding comes from international foundations and local NGOs. In the cases of both media outlets, limited funds mean limited resources for technology. Neither of the two traditional media projects at the time of research provided smartphones for their workers, and in both cases interviewees said the latest technological tools were not necessarily a priority. Their audiences were by and large offline, so while they saw some potential for incorporating digital tools into their daily processes, they also realized that any technology would only complement, rather than

replace, their existing efforts in print or radio. Such findings build on previous work showing how activists and NGOs in developing countries bridged the digital divide by using digital and analog tools in conjunction, such as by printing and then distributing hard copies of online information (Friedman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007). Thus, the excitement over the reach, immediacy, and liberating potential of ICTs should not be overshadowed by the continuing importance—and dominance—of “old-fashioned” media in digitally divided regions.

Interviewees at both the newspaper and the radio spoke of a lack of vision, and the lack of a social media strategy, which some attributed to the lack of resources. At *Diario CoLatino*, the lack of a social media strategy was manifested by the fact that no one knew how to access the Facebook or Twitter accounts, and no one knew who was responsible for updating the accounts. While *CoLatino* could not find a way to update its one Facebook account, Radio Victoria’s problems related to updating its multiple Facebook accounts. Radio workers were unclear as to whether they should post to the studio’s Facebook page, the news program’s page, or some other account. Also, like at the newspaper, not everyone at the radio knew how to access the accounts. As a result, content was updated only sporadically, depending on who was on the air and how busy they were taking calls.

A lack of digital training among workers at both *Diario CoLatino* and Radio Victoria exacerbated the confusion surrounding social media processes. In both cases, less than half of interviewees had undergone any kind of digital training, and those who had received training had only attended basic workshops and not received extensive training. Still, considering that *Diario CoLatino* employed a professional web master and had an online version of its newspaper, it could have been expected that the newspaper would have had an easier path to social media than the radio. The lack of vision and

priority—common to both traditional media sites—that interviewees discussed helps explain why, despite the advantage of a web master and web presence, the newspaper faced the same struggles as the radio.

Interviewees at both sites essentially dismissed Twitter, preferring Facebook because to them, it made more sense than Twitter: they did not understand (or like) Twitter's 140-character limit or the site's ability to follow (and be followed by) strangers, and they preferred the photos on Facebook as well as Facebook's ability to chat with friends. Their preference for Facebook is worth noting because it suggests social media platforms have different purposes, and therefore a catchall social media strategy for alternative media might overlook the nuances of what different platforms can offer under different circumstances. Also interesting is that the *CoLatino* and Radio Victoria interviewees assigned value to digital tools in similar ways: if everyone they knew used it, then they would, too. What's more, they typically needed someone to show them how to use new tools, and in most cases they only knew the basics of how a tool worked. In other words, if their friends were not using a particular tool, and thus there was no one to teach them how to use that tool, then chances are that tool would never become part of their repertoire, thus limiting the extent to which they can incorporate new technologies. Additionally, while most interviewees had access to a home computer or laptop (although most did not have Internet at home), most of them did not have their own personal smartphones. As a result, most of their time spent on social media occurred during school or work hours when they had downtime. In general, then, for these interviewees at the traditional media sites, the lack of resources and training resulted in an appreciation for the potential of digital tools, but an under appreciation in their actual utilization.

Although the traditional media sites shared similarities, unsurprisingly, in terms of resources and digital training, they differed when it came to their professional identities,

the way they conceptualized participation, and to what end they used social media. The *Diario CoLatino* interviewees saw themselves as journalists first, while the Radio Victoria subjects self-identified as activists or community members doing journalism. The *CoLatino* interviewees spoke about their journalistic responsibilities to inform with truth and objectivity or transparency. In contrast, the Radio Victoria interviewees viewed it as their responsibility to “accompany” the community by supporting community causes and participating in community events. Subjects said the radio was part of the community and the community part of the radio. Arguing that objectivity was a myth, they said they actively took a stance, positioning themselves on the side of the people.

The different ways in which they viewed their professional identities sheds light on the different ways in which they used (or did not use) technology to encourage participation: those who saw themselves as journalists first used social media in journalistic ways, such as to inform. In contrast, those who saw themselves as activists, or as part of the community, used social media to encourage activism and participation in the community. This finding adds a technological dimension to previous studies showing objectivity, detachment, impartiality and professional distance as cornerstones of ideal journalism that lend themselves to beliefs of journalistic integrity and credibility (i.e., Deuze, 2005; Schudson, 1978). Interviewees concerned about upholding their professional identities as journalists used social media in ways that adhered to journalistic norms of objectivity: they kept their professional distance by utilizing social media to disseminate information rather than call for action. Those subjects not constrained by professional norms or a desire to maintain a borderline between journalists and sources/audiences, however, used social media to encourage participation *in* and *through* technology. This finding suggests that professional identity thus impacts the extent to which digital tools can be used in liberating ways, as those adhering to journalistic norms

of objectivity seem less inclined to use technology to its full liberating potential to foment participation and push for social change. Further, this also builds on existing scholarship demonstrating that mainstream media's incorporation of new technologies poses challenges to the definition of who is a journalist (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze, 2005). As this dissertation showed, such a dilemma is not unique to mainstream media: alternative media journalists also struggle to maintain their professional identity and a separation between themselves and the public in the face of Web 2.0 participatory technologies.

The way in which the legacy alternative media sites viewed their professional identities also helps explain the differences in how they conceptualized participation. For *Diario CoLatino*, the way they spoke about participation actually was more akin to representation. Their professional identity as journalists meant that they valued their mediating roles, speaking on behalf of and representing marginalized groups. As journalists for an alternative newspaper, they were open to participation from the community, as long as that participation stayed at the level of input, or interaction. The *CoLatino* journalists sought out those community members traditionally marginalized by the mainstream media in order to include them as sources, both for story ideas and quotes. The people came to the newspaper with problems or issues that needed coverage, and then the journalists investigated and wrote about those issues. Community members had access to *CoLatino*, and could see themselves represented in the newspaper, but they could not directly participate beyond providing quotes or ideas. For the *Diario CoLatino* interviewees, maintaining this gatekeeping role was important for preserving their credibility as journalists. Also in keeping with their journalistic roles, the *CoLatino* subjects did not directly participate in activism or community events. Rather, they covered these events, serving as advocates rather than participants. Any activism they did

was as individuals, not as journalists, and not written about in the newspaper. It thus was a newspaper for the people, but not necessarily by the people.

Quite different was the way interviewees with Radio Victoria approached participation. Because their professional identity was as activists and community members, they participated in the community and thus opened the station's doors to any kind of participation by the community. Radio Victoria led community workshops, created community groups of listeners to offer feedback, broadcast live from community events, participated in community soccer tournaments, and even marched along side communities when they protested. The reverse also was true: community members recorded music, radio spots, and greetings that were played on the air. Rather than always serving as mediators, Radio Victoria workers let anyone get behind a microphone. Because these interviewees did not see themselves as professional journalists, they were not worried that opening up the radio to participation of any kind from anyone in the community would damage their credibility. In fact, not allowing full participation would have been more harmful to their community-first approach. Opening a space for citizen participation does not mean Radio Victoria workers did not value accuracy and credibility or that they would allow citizens to gossip on air. Participants still were expected to follow the station's five focuses: gender equity, the environment, human rights, identity and culture, and education and participative communication.

Diario CoLatino's representation approach and Radio Victoria's full participation style are mirrored in how they utilized social media, Facebook in particular. Neither site took full advantage of the social networking site and their pages were not updated regularly. Of course, this tendency is not necessarily limited to alternative media. A study of prominent mainstream newspapers in Latin America demonstrated that they also did not use basic online, multimedia features, let alone social media (Bachmann & Harlow,

2012). That being said, Radio Victoria more than *Diario CoLatino* made an effort to use Facebook in participatory ways, as Radio Victoria utilized the platform to communicate with its listeners and allow them to participate, while *Diario CoLatino* used it mostly just to inform, allowing merely interaction with readers. Considering that alternative media in theory are more participatory than mainstream media, it would follow that *Diario CoLatino* should make more of a concerted effort to use social media to encourage participation, both in the media production process and in a larger discursive sphere.

Unlike *Diario CoLatino*, Radio Victoria seemed to succeed at moving beyond mere interaction and open a dialogue with listeners. Most of what Radio Victoria publishes on Facebook are greetings or posts encouraging audience members to listen to the radio live online. Radio interviewees also regularly responded to users' posts, engaging them in conversations. Communication was multi-directional, as users talked with each other, and with radio workers. The station also used Facebook to call for action, or to raise people's consciousness like through educational posts, such as those about revolutionary leaders or dangerous effects from mining. *Diario CoLatino*, on the other hand, mostly posted headlines or links to stories published on the newspaper's website. Posts included little commentary or analysis, and the newspaper's journalists made no effort to respond to users' posts or generate a discussion. Again, as an alternative media outlet, it could be expected that *CoLatino* should make some sort of effort to engage readers as participants: as interviewees claimed, their goal was not simply to inform readers, but offer them a voice. The newspaper's use of Facebook, however, did not offer them a voice so much as just another place to receive information. Radio Victoria, then, used Facebook in a more participatory—perhaps even “alternative”—way than did *Diario CoLatino*. Radio Victoria encouraged participation in the media production process and in society at large via the radio and social media, while

Diario CoLatino used the newspaper and Facebook merely to inform, rather than promote the multi-directional dialogic communication, which as Freire (1970) emphasized, serves as a precursor for individual self awareness and eventual social change.

VOCES VS. POLÍTICA STEREO

When comparing and contrasting the two digital media sites, *Voces* and Política Stereo, they, like the two traditional media sites, appear to be more different than alike. Both face challenges associated with being online-only media in a country where just a quarter of the population has Internet access (Internet World Stats, 2012), but they differ when it comes to how they approach the digital divide and their use of technology. The two digital projects have limited reach: first because they are alternative and not catering to the masses like mainstream media, and second because they are online. No matter how much of the online population they attract, that population still tops out at roughly 1.5 million people. In addition to a limited reach, being online also is mostly class-bound, drawing more elite audiences because the people with the technological access and know-how to follow a digital media outlet tend to be wealthier and more educated than the population at large. Política Stereo, as a social media-only site, runs the risk of serving an even more exclusive audience as educated young people, particularly college students, tend to be the most common users of social media (Breuer & Welp, 2014).

As non-profit organizations, both *Voces* and Política Stereo grapple with a lack of resources to pay for equipment and writers, and so rely on small staffs and unpaid citizen content contributions to fill in the gaps. Subjects at *Voces* and Política Stereo say their goal is to achieve citizen participation, but again, because they are digital sites, that participation is mostly limited to citizens with literacy skills and technology know-how.

As a result, most of the contributors are from somewhat privileged sectors of society and therefore do not necessarily represent El Salvador's general population. These two sites do not necessarily want to target only elite audiences, but that is the end result.

Voces interviewees said they welcomed contributions from anyone, but the people contributing columns to the online newspaper's website were not the marginalized sectors of society that *Voces* aimed to serve. Rather, the contributors spoke on behalf of those sectors. Perhaps because it is directed specifically at marginalized sectors of society, *Voces* seemingly was more concerned about the lack of access to technology and reaching out to disconnected populations than was *Política Stereo*. For example, *Voces* periodically published print editions with special themes, such as related to the history, culture, and current lives of indigenous populations. *Política Stereo*, however, only published online, and interviewees said they had no intention to publish anything in print. Unlike *Voces*, *Política Stereo* was not necessarily focused on ensuring participation from all sectors of society. Interviewees in general believed that the most important information on the site would eventually make its way offline, whether by appearing in mainstream media or by word of mouth. As a result, *Política Stereo*'s version of participation seemed to be participation for the middle and upper classes, essentially giving only those with social media accounts the opportunity to contribute to the national discursive sphere.

While both *Voces* and *Política Stereo* share a (theoretical) commitment to participation, they differ in their approaches to using technology for participation. Despite both sites being online only, *Política Stereo* interviewees, unsurprisingly considering their attention to social media, were more digitally savvy than those from *Voces*. More of the *Política Stereo* subjects had smartphones, they had been using social media longer, and, unlike the *Voces* interviewees, they preferred Twitter to Facebook. In

keeping, perhaps, with their more elite audiences, the *Política Stereo* interviewees liked Twitter best because they saw it as more “intellectual” than Facebook, which seemed to them to be more for the frivolous uses of the masses. Just as the two traditional sites’ preference for Facebook indicates different purposes for different social media platforms, *Política Stereo*’s preference for Twitter suggests different audiences for different platforms. Alternative media outlets wanting to reach more than the elites, then, must stick to Facebook. This is not to suggest that alternative media in El Salvador disregard Twitter altogether, but rather alternative media outlets must be conscious of the potential differences in audiences and thus develop platform-specific social media strategies.

Voces subjects exhibited less familiarity with Facebook and technology in general than the people at *Política Stereo*, which perhaps is related to the fact that *Voces* generated much less online participation than did *Política Stereo*. Even though *Voces* allowed reader comments on its website, no one commented, which subjects attributed to a lack of multimedia elements to draw readers’ attention, as well as El Salvador’s culture of silence. The *Voces* Facebook page fostered no participation, either, and little interaction other than users “liking” posts. Again, “likes” but no comments perhaps suggests that *Voces* only reaches an audience that shares its same ideology. *Voces* posted stories to the Facebook page with no commentary or analysis, just a headline, which also could explain why no users posted comments. While some *Voces* interviewees said “likes” were a form of participation, those at *Política Stereo* believed comments, not “likes,” were what mattered. Comments are part of dialogic communication (Freire, 1970) while “likes” merely show agreement without contributing any thoughtful analysis to a broader discursive sphere. The online newspaper’s use of technology, thus, was not enough to encourage much participation—in the media production process or in a broader discursive sphere—especially when the audience it focused on was not necessarily

online. Technology was used to inform, rather than communicate, resulting in representation more than actual participation.

In contrast, *Política Stereo*, also open to contributions from anyone, actually succeeded at generating participation: users participated by sending in articles they had written, and by getting involved in online political debates. While *Voces*' editorial line was clearly left leaning, *Política Stereo* strove for non-partisanship, believing contributions from multiple sides of an issue contributed to debate and thus helped better inform people. When *Política Stereo* posted a link or a video, it generally included some kind of commentary, analysis, or rhetorical question to spark a conversation. Seemingly every post prompted user comments, and not just "likes." Further, unlike *Voces*, the *Política Stereo* debates often continued offline, with users getting together to talk or act. In fact, *Política Stereo* interviewees believed that by creating debate online, they were creating debate offline, and thus influencing decision makers as well as decisions made by ordinary citizens.

The two digital sites thus differed in their missions. *Voces* is a newspaper, and its workers journalists, or mediators. They said they valued participation, but ultimately they believed their job was to inform. They did not use Facebook to call for action, and while they published on the website NGOs' press releases or other groups' activity announcements, the journalists themselves did not join in any action. They wrote about events, but did not participate in them—after all, they were journalists attempting to adhere to journalistic norms of objectivity. *Política Stereo* subjects, however, were citizens, and not even necessarily citizen journalists. They assigned importance to journalism only so far as it could be used to inform debates and decisions. As interviewees said, their goal was communication, not simply information. As communicators, then, they participated in the debates directly, responding to other users'

comments. And, at least in the case of the anti-Decree 743 protests of 2011³⁴, they directly participated, as well as published photos and hashtags related to the demonstrations. Thus, the differences between *Voces* and *Política Stereo* indicate that simply being online or having a Facebook page does not automatically ensure participation in the media process or in a broader discursive sphere. Alternative media must incorporate social media as a communication, rather than information, tool in order to be able to utilize social media as a means for dialogic communication.

OLD VS. NEW MEDIA

When comparing the two traditional media projects with the two online ones, it becomes clear that whether or not a site is online only is not the deciding factor in whether it successfully uses ICTs to encourage participation *in* and *through* technology. The printed newspaper *Diario CoLatino* had more in common with the online newspaper *Voces* than it did with Radio Victoria, which was more similar to *Política Stereo*. Interviewees at both *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces* assigned value to the importance of citizen participation and providing a voice for the voiceless, but workers at both newspapers also simultaneously valued their roles as informers. Although *Voces* did not adhere to a gatekeeping role like *Diario CoLatino* did, its online-only status acted as a de facto gate, opening only to those participants with the literacy and technology skills needed to write an article or post a comment. As a result, both the newspapers ended up representing the marginalized communities they covered, instead of creating a space where the community members could speak for themselves.

The way *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces* used social media also reflects a lack of full participation. The two newspapers used Facebook to disseminate stories. Posted links

³⁴ In 2011 the Legislative Assembly's decree limiting the authority of the Constitutional Court promoted massive protests in San Salvador.

included no more than a headline, generating “likes” rather than comments and dialogue. Further, the newspapers’ journalists did not utilize Facebook as a tool for discussion and participation, despite their professed commitment to citizen participation. They did not use Facebook to call for action or to encourage readers to participate in civic or political events. Rather than activists, they served as advocates. For them, Facebook was useful for diffusing information and reaching wider audiences. They used social media to inform, not taking full advantage of Facebook’s communication and participatory potential. In part this can be ascribed to a lack of resources and lack of digital training. Knowing that the majority of people they wrote about were not connected to the Internet also played a part.

At *Diario CoLatino*, a legitimate concern about offensive reader comments and a loss of credibility also factored into the newspaper’s emphasis of representation and information over participation and communication. While this did not necessarily worry *Voces*, in the end it, too, focused on representation and information more than participation and communication because the number of people who could directly participate automatically was restricted by the fact that *Voces* is only online. Neither newspaper, then, achieved full participation *in* technology or *through* technology, albeit for different reasons. *Voces* perhaps offered somewhat more participation in technology by opening a space for citizens to contribute columns, but again not all citizens could participate on account of the digital divide. Thus, by representing voices, instead of actually letting those voices speak for themselves, the newspapers failed to truly offer participation through technology, as they did not utilize social media as a tool for citizens to participate in a broader national discursive sphere. Just because they used digital tools, then, did not mean they used these tools to their full liberating potential.

Just as *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces* share commonalities, so do Radio Victoria and Política Stereo, despite the fact that one is a small, rural community radio station and the other a social media project led by middle-class youths in urban San Salvador. Like the other two sites, both Radio Victoria and Política Stereo purport to open space for citizen participation. Radio Victoria and Política Stereo solicit participation from anyone in any form. Community members in Cabañas can call into the radio and speak their minds live on the air, drop by the station and record a message or song to be played over the airwaves, or even send messages to friends and family via the radio's Facebook page. At Política Stereo, citizens can contribute by writing articles to be published on Facebook, posting comments or analyses of others' contributions, engaging in debate with other users, and suggesting questions to be asked of politicians during online debates. In both cases, users are participating in the media production process itself, as well as participating in a broader discursive sphere. Community members were not simply being represented at these two sites; they actually could speak for themselves. Furthermore, users' participation in the media can lead to real-world participation in civic and political life, interviewees said, citing the way radio listeners engaged in workshops and protests, or the way Política Stereo users met together offline to form political groups or started offering social media workshops or serving as "experts" for the mainstream media.

For both Radio Victoria and Política Stereo, the participation and communication were not one-way: Radio Victoria interviewees "accompanied" the communities, participating in community events and protests right along side the community members. They saw themselves as part of the community. More than advocates, these Radio Victoria subjects were activists, not just fighting for the communities, but fighting with them. Likewise, the Política Stereo subjects got involved in the conversations on Facebook, instigating debates and responding to users' posts, rather than simply serving

as discussion moderators. *Política Stereo* also promoted citizen protesters, such as those demonstrating against Decree 743 in 2011. Rather than journalists, they said they were citizens, members of El Salvador's "community of thinkers" and part of a local citizen movement with a global perspective, as the *Política Stereo* Facebook page says. Therefore, Radio Victoria and *Política Stereo* not only encouraged citizen participation in the communication process and in society, but interviewees themselves also reciprocated that participation and communicated with audience members, fostering multi-directional communication.

COMMON CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

Despite their differences, commonalities related to the context of being in El Salvador link all four sites, regardless of whether they are "traditional" or "new" media projects. A brutal civil war, during which the military targeted leftists, peasants, students, and anyone else who thought differently than the ruling elites, coupled with centuries of extreme inequality and oppression of non-elites, created a culture of silence—something common to much of Latin America. As a result, Salvadorans are unaccustomed to, and often fearful of, participating in any kind of speech or action that could be construed as political. Further, a history of an elitist mainstream media that caters to the interests of the haves and excludes the have-nots (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Rockwell & Janus, 2003) also presents a challenge in that Salvadorans do not participate in media processes because they never before have had the opportunity to do so. The exception, of course, is community radio, which was created so marginalized communities could have access to their own media (Rodríguez, 2001). Community radio in Latin America traditionally has played an important participatory role. For example, before cell phones, when many communities lacked access to telephones, community radio stations served (and continue

to serve) as a type of community telephone, broadcasting personal messages from community members, such as birth and death announcements, or informing people if someone was required to appear for a legal matter (Agosta, 2007; Rodríguez, 2001). In other words, community radio helped to “build civil society” by providing information about everyday events and concerns that could help citizens to “attend meetings, to vote, to receive information, or to participate in crucial programs like land distribution, health care, schooling, or social security...and share in the cultural life of the community and commemorate their particular histories” (Agosta, 2007, p. 6). It comes as no surprise, then, that Radio Victoria, as a community station, experienced higher levels of participation in the media production process than the other three sites.

The proverbial digital divide, of course, also represents a challenge for all four sites, including both the alternative media audiences and the producers themselves. Scholars define the digital divide not only in terms of physical access to computers or the Internet, but also access to the social capital—such as digital and non-digital literacy skills—needed to be able to utilize technologies, the use of which is stratified according to economic/social class, education, ethnicity, rural/urban setting, and age, among others (Bonfadelli, 2002; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Fuchs, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005). For the most part, the alternative media producers interviewed lacked digital know-how, just like the audiences they served. So no matter how much the projects wanted—or even managed—to incorporate ICTs and use them for participation, they all were confronted with the potential elitism of using a tool that excluded three-fourths of the population. Still, as some interviewees said, lack of access and exclusion were not the same thing: in other words, they believed using social media to communicate was not exclusionary in the same sense that mainstream media were. With the exception of *Política Stereo*, the sites strove to use online and offline media in

complementary ways to reach a broader audience and not completely exclude the people without Internet access (Friedman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007). Interesting to note is that from this challenge of the digital divide arose an opportunity for alternative media, *Voces* in particular, to fight for the democratization of technology. Also, even though the digital reach within El Salvador is limited, all four sites are better able to inform, and in some cases even communicate with and allow participation of, the Salvadoran diaspora. While the Internet may have excluded some audience members, it simultaneously extended the sites' reach to new and distant audiences, and extended those distant audiences' ability to participate in and through their hometown media.

Chapter 11: Discussion and Conclusions

*Ahora es la hora de mi turno
el turno del ofendido por años silencioso
a pesar de los gritos.*

Callad

callad.

Oíd.

— Roque Dalton, from the poem “El turno del ofendido”

Salvadoran voters in March 2014 narrowly elected former guerrilla Salvador Sánchez Cerén as the country’s second leftist president. The alternative media projects *Diario CoLatino*, Radio Victoria and *Voces* hailed his win as a sign the country was progressing. Política Stereo praised the peaceful and fair elections as emblematic of how far democracy had come since the peace accords were signed in 1992 to end the 12-year civil war. When failed right-wing candidate Norman Quijano at first refused to accept defeat and went so far as to call for military action and another election, all four alternative media projects used Facebook to criticize the right-wing party for its apparent attack on democracy. Via social media, the projects asked citizens to participate in online conversations about what they thought of Quijano’s actions and to let the world know that they respected democracy. Radio Victoria and Política Stereo even used Facebook to exhort voters to ignore Quijano’s call for violent protests and support Sánchez Cerén as the democratically elected president, demonstrating how alternative media can employ social media as a tool for democracy.

A year and a half before the 2014 elections, as the candidates made known their bids for president, I embarked on 12 months of ethnographic research in El Salvador to

shed light on whether and how, in a “free” country with a “partly free” press (Freedom House, 2013, 2014) where 63 percent of Salvadorans nationwide said they were dissatisfied with democracy (Latinobarómetro, 2011), alternative media could use information communication technologies (ICTs) to encourage citizen participation—in the media process and in a larger discursive sphere—, and thus perhaps strengthen democracy. Alternative media’s use of ICTs for social change, however, is complicated by a lack of access to (whether physical or financial barriers) and understanding of technologies: Internet reaches just 25 percent of El Salvador’s population (Internet World Stats, 2012), and use is stratified by age, education, income, and urban/rural setting (Breuer & Welp, 2014; ECLAC, 2013). This study therefore is important for illuminating the extent to which alternative media can use ICTs to encourage participation and perhaps influence social change within a context where technology has limited reach and democracy faces challenges from economic and social inequalities, political polarization, and a 12-year-civil war that left a legacy of violence and silence.

In light of previous research indicating that alternative media can contribute to participation in the media production process as well as to participation of citizens in a larger discursive sphere (Atton, 2009; Bailey et al., 2008; Dahlgren, 2006; Harcup, 2011; Rodríguez, 2001), this study explored how these alternative media projects’ incorporation and re-appropriation of digital tools, social media in particular, affected citizen participation in the media process (in technology) and citizen participation in political and civic life and a broader discursive sphere (through technology). This study was conducted during a pre-election period in which citizen participation was especially important as it could perhaps influence voters and candidates. Ultimately, this dissertation addressed the following overarching questions: What are the perceived changes, if any, to the Salvadoran alternative media projects’ identities and news

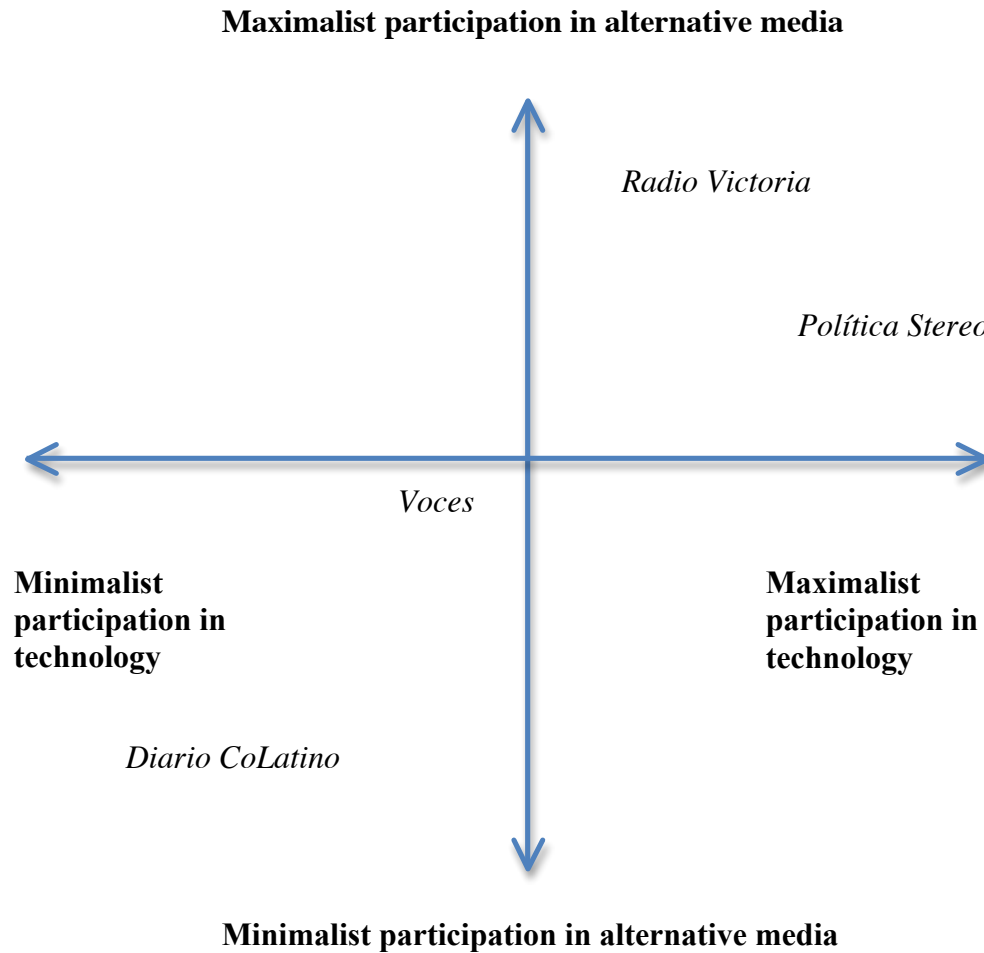
processes because of information communication technologies (ICTs), especially social media?; what are the perceived changes, if any, in the meaning of citizen participation in alternative media because of ICTs; what key obstacles do the alternative media projects face in incorporating ICTs, and how do those obstacles influence the usefulness and relevancy that the study participants assign to these tools?; under what circumstances have (or have not) these alternative media projects managed to successfully use ICTs in liberating ways?; and what are the perceived values, drawbacks, and challenges of using ICTs for social change? Understanding these questions is useful for helping explain the growing importance of alternative media and digital technologies in a post-Arab Spring era of digitally enhanced activism and social change. Alternative media's use of social media affects not just the changing role of media in a digital age, but also implies changes to democracy at large as citizens increasingly participate, and, perhaps, work toward social change via alternative media and ICTs.

PARTICIPATION IN AND THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Returning to Carpentier's (2011) conception of minimalist and maximalist versions of media participation provides a useful gauge for assessing the levels of participation afforded in the four Salvadoran alternative media projects under study. For Carpentier, the media represent a social sphere in which the possibility exists for participation in the media (non-professional participation in the media production and decision making process) and participation through the media (the ability to participate in public dialogue, debate and deliberation, and to represent one's self in the public spheres). In other words, citizens participate in the media production process, and that very participation in the media enables participation in discursive spheres and civic and political realms. With this in mind, then, this dissertation builds on Carpentier's concept

to evaluate whether these four Salvadoran alternative media projects offered the opportunity for participation in technology and through technology, and how participation in and through technology was related to the opportunity for citizen participation in and through alternative media (see Figure 11.1). In Figure 11.1, comprised of a minimalist to maximalist spectrum of participation in technology on the X axis and a minimalist to maximalist spectrum of participation in alternative media on the Y axis, *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces* fall in the bottom left quadrant representing lower levels of participation in technology and media, while Radio Victoria and Política Stereo appear in the upper right quadrant representing higher levels of participation in both technology and media.

Figure 11.1: Comparing Salvadoran alternative media projects' participation in and through technology and media



As noted previously, *Diario CoLatino* offered little space for participation in and through either media or technology, thus falling at the minimalist end of the spectrum for participation in media and participation in technology. Participation in the media production process was in fact participation-lite, limited to representation: *Diario CoLatino* quoted marginalized citizens and covered their stories, interests, and problems, but citizens had no real opportunities to speak for themselves. The same was true when it

came to technology. Readers could not comment on stories on the newspaper's website, they could not write blogs, and social media use was geared at informing readers rather than opening a dialogue with them. Similarly, *Voces* falls more on the minimalist end of the participation scale in terms of both media and technology. The newspaper invited citizens to participate in the media production process, but because it is an online outlet any participation is inherently limited. *Voces* used citizens as sources, and only minimally, if at all, edited their contributions. But citizens do not actually have a say in the decision making process. When considering technology, participation also is limited in that interviewees perceived of and used social media as an information dissemination tool to drive traffic to the *Voces* website; they used Facebook not to engage readers in debate or multi-directional communication, but to inform them. Participation is in fact reduced to interaction, as user activity does not go much beyond "liking" something on Facebook.

By way of contrast, Radio Victoria, in the upper right quadrant, offered full participation in and through the media, and although it strove to offer full participation in and through technology, that participation was constrained by a lack of technological access and know-how, both in terms of the audience members and the radio workers themselves. The radio attempted to bridge the divides by opening up the station to listeners who wanted to go online, and by transmitting over the air messages posted on Facebook, but widespread uneven Internet access and use means the station's attempts could only go so far. Radio Victoria's use of social media was inconsistent because of confusion over which Facebook page to use and lack of training about how best to utilize it. Further, when Radio Victoria interviewees attempted to spark a dialogue or call for action, in general the people with Internet access who could participate lived outside of Cabañas, or even outside of El Salvador. Social media, then, could not offer the same

levels of participation as could the radio, once again driving home the importance of social media as evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, tools. In other words, online social media are not overthrowing previous technologies, but rather analog technologies like radio seemingly are evolving into a complementary role that works in conjunction with digital technologies.

Whereas Radio Victoria attempted but could not quite achieve maximalist participation in and through technology, Política Stereo came closer. Like Radio Victoria, Política Stereo's participation was limited because of limited Internet access and use. However, as an urban outlet, Política Stereo catered to a more elite audience more likely to have Internet access and thus the ability to participate. The very fact of being online, though, without at least some sort of offline version (like *Voces*), automatically prevents Política Stereo from achieving full participation, as the bulk of Salvadoran society is excluded. Política Stereo facilitates participation in technology by offering a space for ordinary citizens to express themselves via articles or other contributions to the production process, and through technology by creating a space for debate and an entryway into a broader discursive sphere. Further, as an alternative site it focuses on topics and people normally excluded by El Salvador's elite, mainstream media. Still, until the digital divide is lessened, a social media project like Política Stereo can only do so much to offer participation that readjusts the power balance since for now, only a quarter of the population even has the chance to participate.

LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY

The position of each of the four Salvadoran alternative media projects in Figure 11.1 indicates a link between participation in and through media, and participation in and through technology. The sites less likely to open up the media process to citizen

contributions were also less likely to encourage participation in technology. The bottom left quadrant, where *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces* appear, is geared more toward representation in the media, diffusing information, and limited interaction via technology. In contrast, the upper right quadrant in which Radio Victoria and Política Stereo are located is for those alternative media sites offering participation in and through media and participation in and through technology. In other words, ideally this quadrant is reserved for emancipatory media using technology in liberating ways (Enzensberger, 1976; Diamond, 2010). Enzensberger's (1976) conception of emancipatory media focused on participation and as Diamond (2010, p. 70) defined it, liberation technology involves the use of ICTs to "expand political, social, and economic freedom," to expose abuses of power, and to challenge the status quo, all with the goal of leading to social change. Liberation technology does not assume technology is neutral, nor does it turn a blind eye to the fact that, as Western, capitalist tools, technology does not automatically benefit marginalized groups in developing countries and in some instances technology can be used to reinforce hegemonic power structures and maintain the status quo (McAnany, 1986; Gumucio Dagron, 2001). Technology can be just as oppressive as it is liberating. Thus, liberation technology is contingent upon on how it is used and in what contexts.

As this dissertation demonstrated, liberation technology (Diamond, 2010) is not automatic: contextual specificities influence what kinds of technology alternative media sites use and whether and how they use technology for participation. Such specificities include, of course, the digital divide, in terms of access (financial and physical), skills of producers and audiences, motivations, and types of uses. Education levels also contribute to some constituents' ability and willingness to use technologies. Professional identity, and an emphasis on a role as communicator or as diffuser of information, likewise factor into the way in which alternative media adopt and use technologies. Understanding how

these alternative media projects utilize digital tools, in particular online social media, requires an examination of who benefits from these tools, what are the disadvantages of and obstacles to using these tools, and whether these tools can actually encourage critical public debate, participation, and, ultimately, social change. Such a critical understanding of the role of technologies in alternative media is important for helping contextualize and extend current theories of participation, debate, and the public sphere as they relate to social change.

All four of the Salvadoran alternative media projects incorporated digital tools into their daily processes to various degrees. Unsurprisingly, the work routines at the traditional media projects, *Diario CoLatino* and Radio Victoria, changed the least because of technology: they did not have smart phones from which to tweet throughout the day, nor did they have the skills to edit videos to post to YouTube. This is not to say that new equipment and better digital training will automatically result in liberating uses of technologies, but overcoming such constraints of the digital divide is a fundamental factor in ultimately achieving liberation technology. The alternative media producers interviewed increasingly used their personal Facebook accounts, and occasionally Skype, to communicate with sources or audience members, follow the news, and even promote causes, such as in the case of the *Diario CoLatino* subjects' fundraising efforts for Santiago. In general, though, their personal Facebook use revolved around chatting with friends, looking at photos, and playing games. For the most part they did not update social media as they reported on a story, nor did they use social media to promote their stories. Radio Victoria interviewees made an effort to update the station's Facebook page and try to start online dialogues with listeners, but doing so had not yet been institutionalized as part of their daily routines: any updates depended on who was in the studio and whether s/he had the time or interest to post something on Facebook. For

being an online medium, *Voces*' daily routines also were not technologically centric. Contributors took photos that were posted online with stories, but videos were rare, audio nonexistent, and again, Facebook and Twitter sporadically updated. In contrast, *Política Stereo*, as an online-only outlet, took full advantage of technology, posting to Facebook and Twitter videos, photo galleries, links to articles, cartoons, and memes throughout the day.

The alternative media sites' incorporation of ICTs, particularly social media, also affected the role of citizen participation. Who participated, how they participated, and what they participated in varied among the projects under study, and this variance can in part be linked to professional identity, mission, and the digital divide, including access to and ability and desire to use new technologies. Those interviewees with a strong professional journalist identity, or who in practice favored a mission to inform audiences, rather than communicate with them, were more likely to use social media to diffuse information, allowing citizens merely to interact with content rather than participate in production or discourse. For example, *Diario CoLatino*'s technology use did not prompt much change in the way citizens could participate in the media production process. Citizens could not blog or post comments to the newspaper's website, because without the resources to hire someone to monitor reader participation, interviewees said, they were reluctant to open wide the gates and perhaps suffer from loss of credibility. Further, interviewees perceived of themselves as journalists, and they believed it was their job to speak on behalf of people and not necessarily let the people speak for themselves. Also perhaps because they saw themselves as journalists first, the *Diario CoLatino* subjects used Facebook to inform, rather than to communicate or open dialogue among readers, which also reduced citizen participation, limiting it to interaction in the form of "likes."

Similarly, *Voces'* use of technology did not result in much user participation, despite an openness toward citizen contributions in the production process. Because *Voces* is an online-only newspaper, who can participate is inherently limited by the digital divide. Additionally, the *Voces* contributors and journalists' perception of social media as an information tool rather than a communication or participatory one left little room for user activity beyond "likes." Thus, neither *Diario CoLatino* nor *Voces'* incorporation of technology succeeded in generating much participation in the production process, or in a broader counterpublic sphere. Both Radio Victoria and Política Stereo, however, achieved, to some extent, participation *in* technology and participation *through* technology.

The community radio station Radio Victoria's definition of "community" expanded as its Facebook page became a conduit for participation for those Salvadorans no longer living in Cabañas. Members of the diaspora could request songs, leave messages for friends and family members to be read on the air, and even access a link to listen to the station online. In addition to participating in the radio process via technology, ex-pats and other audience members with Internet access also used Facebook to help spread the word about and encourage participation in community events and even protest activity. Política Stereo used Facebook to publish citizens' contributions, such as articles, videos, and photos, and to foster political debate. Perhaps because interviewees at both of these sites considered themselves part of the community and not just representatives for the community, both Radio Victoria and Política Stereo found ways to overcome limitations of the digital divide to promote participation, and not just access and interaction.

In using new technologies, the four sites under study encountered several key obstacles and disadvantages that influenced the usefulness and relevancy interviewees

assigned to these digital tools. These challenges also affected the potential for using technologies in liberating ways. Chief among those was the digital divide, which comes as no surprise. The digital divide, or more accurately termed information inequality, is more than Internet access in El Salvador, although that is a fundamental factor since 75 percent of the country lacks access (Internet World Stats, 2012). Numerous scholars point to the fact that even though access is steadily increasing, the skills needed to use technologies remain stratified according to economic/social class, education, ethnicity, rural/urban setting, and age, among others (Bonfadelli, 2002; DiMaggio et al., 2004; Fuchs, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2005; Van Dijk, 2005). Such patterns are evident when examining the technology use of the four alternative media sites under study. Most interviewees had no or only some digital training, especially at rural Radio Victoria, where the majority of subjects, unlike those at the other three sites, had not graduated from college. Usage on the part of the audience members also came in to play as most interviewees said they chose which tools to use based on which tools the people they knew used. What's more, most subjects at the two traditional media sites needed someone to show them how to use a tool, such as how to open a social media or Skype account. Those at the two digital media sites were accustomed to conducting Google searches or watching YouTube videos to show them how to convert file formats, for example, but still were far from being experts in all things digital, they said.

As a result, with a few exceptions (such as at *Voces* or *Política Stereo*), in general most interviewees' digital repertoires were limited. Because most interviewees, whether the alternative media producers or consumers, are part of the information poor, adding digital tools to their wheelhouse is an uphill struggle, which could also explain their limited understanding or use of new technology: why bother experimenting with new software, hardware, or platforms that seem daunting or complicated, especially knowing,

at least in the case of the two traditional sites, that the majority of their audience members will not directly benefit? Improving digital literacy among alternative media producers would be a step toward liberation technology, but full participation in and through technology still would be hampered by the digital limitations of audience members.

In addition to gaps in access and skills, this dissertation, adding to the literature on the digital divide, suggests that the digital divide also must be thought of as encompassing inequalities in social media use, both in terms of which platforms are used, and how they are used. While all of the media producers interviewed used Facebook, regardless of their education levels or whether they lived in the city or countryside, many of the audience members interviewed did not. In fact, most of the audience members interviewed from rural communities—especially among the uneducated and those over the age of about 50—did not even use the Internet, let alone social media. In contrast, most audience members interviewed from San Salvador used Facebook, indicating that the urban/rural, education, and age divides of access are perhaps replicated when it comes to social media use.

Which platforms interviewees used also is another indication of a social media divide. Facebook was ubiquitous at the four alternative media projects, but Twitter hardly understood or used. Those few interviewees with a personal smartphone were the only ones who regularly used Twitter. Smartphones and cellular Internet access are really only affordable to the middle and upper classes, suggesting that, as some interviewees stated, Twitter, more than Facebook, is for more elite users. It appears, therefore, that a divide exists between who uses which platforms, which could affect what kinds of information circulate on Facebook vs. Twitter. If indeed, as some *Política Stereo* interviewees said, all the “serious debate” has shifted from Facebook to Twitter, then the perhaps non-elite Facebook users could miss out on the opportunity to contribute to a national discursive

sphere. The ability to participate as citizens in such a public sphere is a fundamental aspect of alternative media (Atton, 2009; Rodríguez, 2001). For example, Couldry (2006) highlighted the importance of normally marginalized voices to have access to alternative spaces where they can express themselves as citizens and thus participate in democracy.

Alternative media offer these spaces, creating ways

in which the public sphere, or spheres, can become more inclusive and less male, less bourgeois and less dominated by the market. It is by encouraging and reflecting a culture of participation that alternative media projects can be seen as supportive of active citizenship; and it is by being participatory forms of media that such projects themselves constitute a form of active citizenship. (Harcup, 2011, pp. 17-18)

Política Stereo's limited reach via social media thus falls short in offering adequate spaces for the public to participate in a discursive sphere and act as citizens, as only the middle and upper classes with online social media access and know-how can participate.

How interviewees used social media also seems to reflect a social media divide, again extending our conceptualization of the digital divide. Subjects generally indicated two potential uses of social media: frivolous and emancipatory. Into the frivolous category they dumped chatting with friends, looking at photos, playing games, following celebrities, and just generally wasting time. Frivolous did not necessarily have a negative connotation, though; after all, talking to friends and playing games are part of enjoying life. However, they also saw more important and useful features of social media, which they likened to the role of alternative media. Social media, like alternative media, could be used to inform, train, and transform³⁵. Such emancipatory or liberating uses included reading the news, seeking out alternative information and perspectives, expressing opinion, and offering analysis rather than updating friends on what they ate for breakfast.

³⁵ The actual Spanish is *informar*, *formar* and *transformar*, worth noting for their common root, *formar*.

Engaging in debate, supporting causes (online and offline) and calling for action (also online and offline) likewise fit into this category.

The concern underlying the differences between frivolous and emancipatory uses was that people who only utilized social media for frivolous purposes would be left out of a larger discursive sphere and left behind as others became empowered to participate civically and politically. In order to fully understand the effects of the digital divide—information inequalities—in El Salvador, researchers cannot simply focus on Internet access or even digital skills. Rather they also must take into account a new social media divide, one that includes differences in who is using social media, what platforms they are using, and whether they are using social networking sites for frivolous or emancipatory ends. Thus, being able to take full advantage of social media for liberating purposes must be considered part of democratizing technology. In other words, simply providing access to technology is not enough to balance information inequalities: access must be accompanied by digital literacy and, in this age of Web 2.0, equality of social media use. With an estimated one in four persons worldwide using social media (eMarketer, 2013) those who do not are potentially excluded from information and conversations that could perhaps raise their awareness or even prompt their participation in efforts toward social change.

Of course, as some interviewees noted, technology and social media have their disadvantages and alternative media producers must be conscious of who benefits from their use. For example, interviewees at all four sites mentioned that social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are capitalist platforms working to benefit themselves as companies, and not necessarily working toward social change or the greater good of society. Interviewees recognized that social media could not benefit everyone (such as those without Internet access, they said), and that some benefit at others' expense (such

as if users turn to Facebook to make threats to silence the opposition, bully people with different lifestyles, or exploit the public for commercial purposes, they said). Likewise, they noted the way some citizens used cell phones, paying to send text messages to find out their horoscope or “love numbers,” instead of using those phones to document human rights abuses, for example. Still, subjects did not believe it was contradictory to use for-profit platforms in alternative media, as long as they applied counter uses to those platforms. To these interviewees, then, counter uses, such as utilizing Facebook to mount a protest campaign against a business, are part of reclaiming media power (Couldry & Curran, 2003) in an effort to prompt social change and to balance power inequalities in society. As some subjects said, knowing how to use social media, regardless of whether they had regular Internet access, helped to level the playing field, and not knowing how to use digital tools in a country run by elites who do only sets them further back.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Results from the content analysis of the four alternative media projects’ Facebook pages and posts add weight to the findings from the interviews and observations. The content analysis explored whether the alternative media projects took advantage of Facebook’s social and multimedia features to encourage user interaction and engage users in conversation, and whether the projects used Facebook as a channel to encourage participation and mobilization. This empirical analysis showed that the more multimedia elements, like links, photos, and videos, that were posted, the more users interacted and participated by “liking” comments, publishing comments, or sharing the post. Further, including some kind of commentary or analysis with a link, rather than just a headline or pulled quote, and responding to users’ comments, also prompted more interaction and participation. This finding indicates that for alternative media to use Facebook to create

dialogue and debate, they must actually participate in the conversation, taking the time to instigate and respond to comments. Opening a space for public discourse requires alternative media to actively become a part of the conversation if they want to keep the dialogue going and communicate rather than merely inform.

Política Stereo more than the other three sites took advantage of Facebook's multimedia and social potential, posting the most photos and videos, and prompting the most fans, "likes," user comments, and shares of posts. Radio Victoria came in second in terms of "likes," comments and shares. These results coincide with findings from the ethnographic data that suggest these two sites encouraged participation *in* and *through* technology. The sites engaged in conversation with users, just as interviewees indicated. Likewise, analysis of the *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces* posts showed fewer "likes," comments, and shares, again reflecting the way interviewees spoke of Facebook as a tool for diffusing information, rather than encouraging dialogic communication.

The content analysis also showed that although participation and social change were stated goals of all four alternative media sites, most of their Facebook posts did not necessarily reflect this mission. Most posts did not explicitly call for action or motivate users to participate in a civic or political act. In general most posts were about news and information related to politics or government, with few posts focused specifically on social movement actors or civil society organizations. Of course, this does not mean that the political information was less valuable or that it did not contribute to users' desire to participate in some type of collective action. However, it does suggest that these alternative media sites perhaps missed an opportunity to use Facebook to spread news about social movements and civil society to users who normally do not read alternative media but who could stumble across the information via social media. In general, then, the content analysis showed that these four projects attempted to use Facebook to interact

with users more than encourage them to take action. The projects, to an extent, managed to use Facebook to encourage participation *in* technology. But, considering the lack of comments overall and the lack of emphasis on mobilization or action, the sites in general had yet to achieve full, maximalist participation *through* technology.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

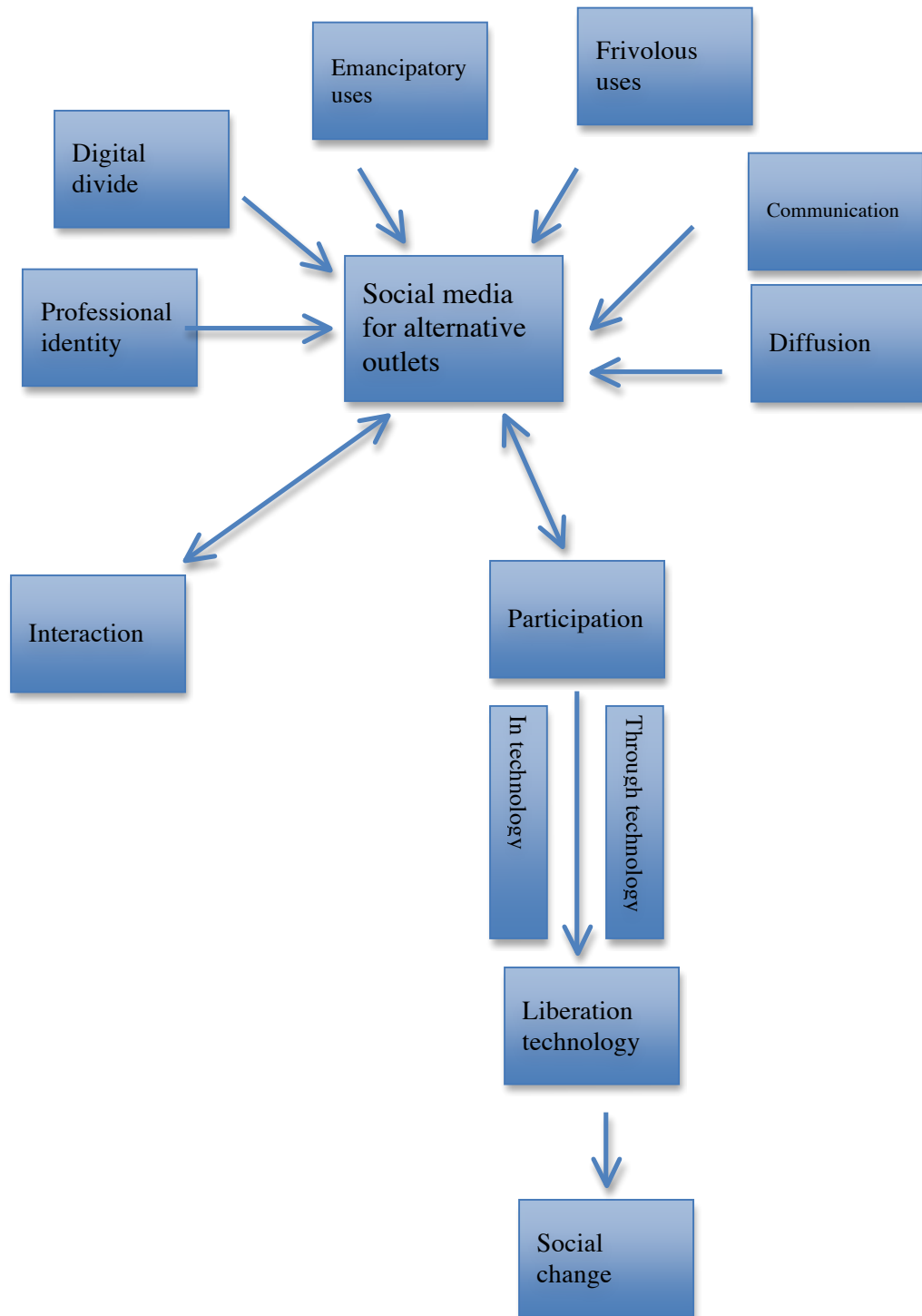
As noted in the Introduction of this dissertation, online alternative media have the potential to be more than just a digital version of analog alternative media. Whether alternative media use technology in liberating ways, this dissertation argues, should be part of the criteria for evaluating whether a media outlet is truly emancipatory (Enzensberger, 1976). Using technology as a fundamental approach to studying alternative media—questioning whether and how digital tools create new opportunities for participation; whether and how the tools can be used in liberating, counterhegemonic ways; and whether and how, despite the digital divide, alternative media producers and consumers take advantage of these tools’ liberating potential—allows researchers to better comprehend and explain alternative media’s changing role and increasing significance in the Digital Era.

Such a technologically nuanced understanding of alternative media in the 21st Century is especially important given the increased attention surrounding digital media’s potential for social change following the Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, *Los Indignados*, the Chilean protesters, and other so-called social media uprisings. Internet optimists tend to view the role of technology in social change from a technologically deterministic perspective, believing the Internet leads to greater public participation (i.e., Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Marmura, 2008). Pessimists, however, also look at the role of the Internet in technologically deterministic ways, focusing on the negative aspects

associated with unequal access and government control (Morozov, 2011; Gladwell, 2010). This dissertation moves beyond technological determinism by investigating under what circumstances alternative media can use technology in liberating ways. In other words, by taking into account the specificities of El Salvador's historic, political, cultural, social, and economic contexts, this study shows whether and how four alternative media projects incorporated liberating technologies (Diamond, 2010) by fostering citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology.

Achieving liberating uses of technology is not automatic, however. The ways in which these four Salvadoran alternative media projects used technology and social media indicate that achieving participation in and through technology is influenced by a number of factors (see Figure 11.2): professional identity (whether the alternative media producers see themselves as speaking on behalf of the people or whether they believe their job is to facilitate the people's ability to speak for themselves); the digital divide (technological limitations of both producers and consumers in terms of access, training, and motivations); whether the alternative media sites perceive of technologies as communication tools or information diffusing tools (are they using social media to facilitate and engage in dialogic communication or are they simply diffusing information and using Facebook to drive traffic to their website?); and whether the alternative media producers and consumers value frivolous or emancipatory uses of technology (do they choose to use Facebook as a consumerist platform to play games, look at photos, and post about mundane activities or do they employ counter-uses of Facebook, following alternative news, engaging in debate, and supporting causes online and offline?).

Figure 11.2: Factors influencing alternative media's liberating use of social media



These factors all influence whether alternative media use online social media to encourage interaction via technology or whether they utilize social media to foster participation *in* and *through* technology. Interaction, such as merely “liking” something on Facebook, is worthwhile in that it perhaps lets people feel like their opinion matters, but in and of itself does little to lead to social change. As interviewees noted, the number of “likes” a Facebook post receives on its own is not enough to influence decision makers. Alternative media have to make a concerted effort to go beyond interaction via technology, and actually offer participation *in* and *through* technology, in order to truly be able to use technology in liberating ways and, ultimately, work toward social change.

The MacBride Commission’s (UNESCO, 1980) call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) emphasized the importance of alternative media, media pluralism and multi-directional flows of information to counterbalance the top-down, asymmetric communication flows of mainstream media. More than three decades later, as alternative media continue struggling to contest existing power structures and striving to give voice to the voiceless, ICTs, and social media in particular, represent a potential to achieve Freire’s (1970) ideal of horizontal, dialogic communication that reduces power imbalances and leads to self-awareness, emancipation and, ultimately, social change. This potential, however, is constrained by the reality of El Salvador’s inequalities and the unequal uses of technology. Full participation in and through technology, therefore, does not automatically result from alternative media’s incorporation of digital tools. In fact, two of the four projects studied, *Diario CoLatino* and *Voces*, offered representation and interaction more than participation. This dissertation showed, then, that technologies are not inherently liberating, but neither is liberation technology unachievable. Rather, the liberating use of technology depends on a number of factors, as shown in Figure 11.2. Recognizing the limits of liberation

technology thus helps illuminate what alternative media can—and cannot—do, in a digitally divided context, to encourage participation *in* technology and participation *through* technology.

This dissertation also adds to the existing literature on the digital divide by extending our understanding to include inequalities in social media access, platform choice, and whether social media are used for frivolous or emancipatory ends. Age, education (digital and otherwise) and urban/rural setting did not seem to affect whether alternative media producers or contributors used Facebook, but demographics did seem to have an impact on whether alternative media consumers used Facebook: interviews with older, less educated rural audience members indicated they did not use Facebook, while youth, especially those with educations or living in the city, did. The social platforms interviewees used also suggest another divide. Twitter, unlike Facebook, seemed to be used more by educated alternative media producers and contributors from the middle and upper classes who owned smartphones. Motivation and training also factored into platform use, with those with less digital training more inclined to use Facebook simply because it was the platform all their friends used. The final aspect of this new social media divide that emerged from this study was that of whether social media were used for frivolous (i.e. looking at photos, playing games) or emancipatory (i.e. engaging in debate, supporting causes, calling for action) purposes. Not only does a social media divide create barriers for older, uneducated and rural users, but it also widens the information gap between frivolous and liberating social media users. Having access to social media, thus, does not necessarily close the information divide, as those users who turn to Facebook for frivolous ends are left out of any broader discursive sphere.

PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Because this dissertation focused on the ways in which alternative media utilize digital technologies, it is important to consider what these findings show about how the four projects studied herein can use social media more effectively. As stated numerous times, access to technology is important, but access alone does not guarantee liberating uses. Further, these study sites cannot allow lack of access, lack of resources or lack of training to prevent them from experimenting with creative ways of incorporating digital tools to complement their analog ones. All four sites must develop social media strategies that recognize differences between Facebook and Twitter uses and users. The alternative media journalists should update their personal social media accounts, as well as the organizational ones, with news and information as it happens—doing so could help establish these alternative media projects as the go-to sources for current and useful information. Smartphones are not a prerequisite for posting updates: nearly everyone interviewed had access to a cellphone that could be used to send an update via text to someone at the office who could post the information to Facebook via a laptop or desktop computer, for example.

Further, as the content analysis showed, these alternative media projects must do more than simply post headlines and links to information if they want to fulfill their stated goals of encouraging participation and debate. They must take the time to publish commentaries or analyses, or post questions soliciting user feedback. They also must engage with users by responding to user comments and becoming involved in any conversations or debate occurring via social media. The inclusion of multimedia elements like links, photos, and videos also is important for prompting user participation. If the mission of alternative media indeed is to open alternative spaces for dialogic communication, then they must take advantage of Facebook's potential for multi-

directional communication, using multimedia, comments and analyses to generate conversation among users, and between users and the media sites themselves.

Although these alternative media projects need to be cognizant that not all audience members have access to or use social media, they also cannot use the digital divide as an excuse to ignore new technologies. Because only about 25 percent of the population uses Facebook (Internet World Stats, 2012), alternative media in El Salvador have an opportunity to help shape future uses of social media, whether for frivolous or liberating ends. Alternative media producers can set an example, using social media not just to inform, but also to communicate and to call for action. They can use social media to develop campaigns encouraging users to utilize technology in liberating ways. The more alternative media can encourage participation *in* technology, then perhaps the more they will prompt participation *through* technology.

LIMITATIONS

This dissertation only begins to explore the liberating potential of online social media in alternative media. Because this study relies on ethnographic data, which offer a detailed picture of a particular time and place, the findings herein are not generalizable to alternative media worldwide, or even throughout Latin America. Still, in light of the common histories, inequalities, and media systems that El Salvador, Central America, and much of Latin America share, this study and its findings can shed light on the phenomenon of liberating technologies in alternative media, and serve as a blueprint for other similar projects throughout the region. Using ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation provides a nuanced snapshot in time of the way in which four alternative media sites in El Salvador incorporated digital tools, specifically social media. As with all qualitative work, the findings herein could vary at a different point in time or with

different alternative media sites. Ethnography's strengths are also, in a sense, its limitations: it is inductive, data is open to multiple interpretations, research is intense and narrowly focused, and analysis involves subjective interpretations of the meaning of human behavior and/or language (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Further, the grounded theory approach used to examine the ethnographic data implies that categorizations of themes and concepts that emerged from the interviews and observations relied on the researcher's discretion, and thus were subjective, so a different researcher could have included or discarded different themes and concepts.

Still, by comparing four different sites and finding patterns connecting them, such a method offers useful insights and meaning that can be used to help advance theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). What's more, ethnographic methods offer holistic description (Weis, 1994), and so by offering a comparative sample, it is likely that these findings regarding alternative media's technology use and challenges would be repeated among other alternative media outlets in El Salvador. Additionally, this dissertation's findings are strengthened by the fact that data were collected using a triangulated approach involving multiple methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and quantitative content analysis. Triangulation, or the comparison of at least two forms of evidence in order to help "bolster confidence in the objective reality of a research finding" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 274), strengthens arguments and produces a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Flick, 2004; Potter, 1996). Using multiple methods also helps to offset any weaknesses of a particular method (Jankowski & Wester, 1991).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research can advance this study by examining whether these patterns are replicated at alternative media outlets throughout Central America, as Central American

countries share a common context of civil war, centuries of inequality and oppression, and a consolidated, conservative mainstream media more concerned with the interests of the elites than non-elites. Also, a deeper analysis of alternative media audiences and how users are or are not benefiting from participation in and through technology would go a long way toward filling a gap in the alternative media literature on audience research.

Finally, because this is a study of Spanish speakers and alternative media producers and users, it is important that findings be translated into Spanish and made available to the benefit of alternative media in El Salvador and elsewhere. Rodríguez (2010) underscored the need for academic research to “be at the service of praxis...the knowledge we produce within academia is most valuable if and only if it becomes useful for those in the field trying to make our societies better places to live” (p. 133). Future endeavors should ensure more practical applications of this research for alternative media producers in El Salvador. Responding to Rodríguez’s exhortation, I plan not only to translate aspects of this dissertation for a Spanish-speaking audience, but also to produce non-academic works, such as practical guides, that alternative media practitioners in El Salvador and elsewhere in Latin American can use to their benefit.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes with a reminder of its original objective and a brief summary of the theoretical implications of the findings. A year of ethnographic research at four alternative media projects in El Salvador allowed for exploration of whether and how, in a digitally divided country, alternative media incorporated ICTs, particularly social media, for social change. Such a study is particularly relevant in light of the way digital technologies like social media facilitated participation and organization leading to protests and a push for social change from Egypt to Spain to Chile. Findings illustrated

differences in the ways alternative media used technology simply to represent and interact with users, or to open a space for participation *in* and *through* technology, encouraging users to contribute to the media process, a broader discursive sphere, and even civic and political actions. These findings extend our conceptualization of the digital divide to include inequalities in social media access, platform choice, and use (i.e. frivolous or emancipatory). In the end this dissertation adds to our understanding of liberation technology (Diamond, 2010), and sharpens future research by underscoring the importance of including technology as a fundamental approach to the study of alternative media. This dissertation contextualizes and extends current theories, as the findings show that social media use by alternative outlets is not just about the role of the media. Rather, the ability of alternative media in El Salvador to overcome limitations of the digital divide and use social media in liberating ways impacts society, citizen participation, and social change. Moving forward, it will be interesting to watch how alternative media and citizens use social media to protest or support the newly elected president and his initiatives.

Finally, it must be noted that whether or not alternative media succeed in using technology in liberating ways is not because the technology itself is or is not inherently liberating. As stated in the Introduction, technology cannot be separated from the users and the contexts within which they operate. Alternative media's liberating use of technologies, therefore, depends on contextual specificities, which in theory means that if those contexts are understood, and limitations overcome, then any alternative media outlet, not just those in El Salvador, should be able to adapt digital tools to put them to emancipatory uses, if they so desire. What this dissertation also suggests, then, is that researchers must avoid technological determinism, not just in terms of the liberating potential of technologies, but also as far as the digital divide is concerned. The ways in

which Radio Victoria, for example, uses Facebook to connect ex-pats with Internet access to their friends and families without Internet access demonstrates the creativity and innovation alternative media can use to find ways to adapt technologies and achieve liberating ends, without bowing to the constraints of the digital divide.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographics

Age

Gender

Education

Job

How much computer training have you had?

Do you have a personal Facebook account?

Do you have a personal Twitter account?

Do you maintain a blog?

Do you have a computer at home?

Do you have a smartphone?

I'm going to start with questions about (the name of the media project).

1. How did you come to be involved with this media project?
2. Why this particular project?
3. What is your role with this project?
4. Explain to me what you see as the purpose behind this project. What is the project's history?
5. What is the project's organizational structure? Who participates in the organizational structure? Who participates in the media project generally?
6. Walk me through a typical day for you so I understand what you do for the group.
7. How have your days changed/activities changed since you got involved with this project?

8. Talk to me about the groups' resources (i.e. funding, personnel, equipment, skills, etc).

What resources do you have and where do they come from?

9. Who are the projects' supporters?

10. Who is the target audience?

Now we're going to talk about (the group's) use of technology.

11. What new technologies do you use?

12. Why did you adopt those particular technologies?

13. How do you decide which technologies you will adopt and which you won't?

14. What do you like about them?

15. What do you dislike about them?

16. Once you've tried something, how do you decide whether you will continue to use it?

17. How successful would you characterize the results of having used these technologies?

18. Describe to me a particular time you successfully used these technologies, and what was the outcome?

19. Describe to me a particular time when the use of technologies turned out not to be successful.

20. What has changed in your daily activities since you began adopting these new technologies?

21. How has the organization in general changed since you began using these technologies?

22. How would you characterize those changes, in terms of good or bad?

23. How do you think activism in your community has changed because of these digital tools? In El Salvador? Worldwide?

24. How has communication in your community changed because of these digital tools? In El Salvador? Worldwide?

25. What kind of cyber security, or online protection, measures, if any, do you employ?
Why/why not?

26. What do you see as the differences between online activism and offline activism?
Under what circumstances is one preferable to the other?

Now let's talk about what working with (the project) has meant to you.

27. What have you personally learned about digital tools since working with this project?

28. What have you learned about the media production process?

29. Thinking about your personal and public life, how do you behave differently now, versus before you joined the project, based on what you have learned? In other words, how do you think you have changed? Why do you think you changed?

30. How do you think this project has changed the community at large, if at all?

31. What more could/should this group/project be doing?

Now let's talk about a particular successful action.

32. What was the cause you were fighting for?

33. Who was the target audience?

34. What was the action location (national, regional, local)?

35. Who/what was the action target (i.e. state, laws, identity issues, etc)?

36. How long did the action last?

37. Were actions online, offline, or both? Describe.

38. What digital applications were used? (i.e. website, blog, social media, games, email, chat, e-petitions, hacking, video, texting, Wikis or Wikipedia, etc)

39. What legacy "applications" were used? (i.e. pamphlet, flier, poster, newspaper ad, radio ad, TV ad, etc)

40. Were these applications used for action, for documentation, or for network building?

41. What about it was successful, and why?

Now let's talk about a particular action that wasn't necessarily successful.

42. What was the cause you were fighting for?
43. Who was the target audience?
44. What was the action location (national, regional, local)?
45. Who/what was the action target (i.e. state, laws, identity issues, etc)?
46. How long did the action last?
47. Were actions online, offline, or both? Describe.
48. What digital applications were used? (i.e. website, blog, social media, games, email, chat, e-petitions, hacking, video, texting, Wikis or Wikipedia, etc)
49. What legacy "applications" were used? (i.e. pamphlet, flier, poster, newspaper ad, radio ad, TV ad, etc)
50. Were these applications used for action, for documentation, or for network building?
51. What about it wasn't successful, and why?
52. What do you think could have made it successful?

Now let's talk about the media.

53. Describe the mainstream media in your community and in El Salvador in general.
54. How would you define alternative media?
55. Who reads alternative media? How is it publicized?
56. What does this project offer that is different than what the mainstream media offer?
57. Would you identify this project as "alternative"? Why/why not?
58. What types of news and information do you normally publish?
59. Does it ever make it into the mainstream media?
60. Describe your readers.
61. What are readers supposed to do with the information you provide (i.e. vote, attend a community meeting, sign a petition, support a particular cause or point of view, etc.)?

What are they doing with it? Has that changed at all with the introduction of digital technologies?

62. Who does this project represent/speak on behalf of?

63. How does your group go about deciding what to write about?

64. How does your group assign who will write which stories?

65. How is citizen participation/interaction encouraged/solicited?

66. How has that participation changed because of new digital tools?

67. Is news/information ever censored (why?) If so, by whom?

68. Do you believe self-censorship is a problem? Why do you think it occurs? Can you think of an example when you or someone you know self-censored or was censored?

69. Do you consider yourself an activist, a journalist, or an alternative journalist? Why?

70. What are your motivations for working as a journalist/activist?

71. How do you feel about using commercial media platforms (i.e. Facebook)? Does this make you any less “alternative”? What constraints, if any, do you face because of these commercial platforms?

72. Did you ever read/listen to revolutionary media during the war (i.e. Radio Venceremos)? What might you have learned from revolutionary media that you are applying to this project?

Now let’s talk about communication in general.

73. How do you personally stay informed?

74. What are the main ways your community stays informed?

75. How do you communicate with friends and families (i.e. Internet, face-to-face, text message, etc)?

76. When you learn of something, how do you spread the word?

77. How does communication flow within the project? In other words, where does the information originate, and who disseminates it and how?

78. How do you communicate with, inform, or reach out to group members? Group supporters? The mainstream media? Adversaries?

79. How does the group reach new potential supporters/members?

80. How has networking with group members changed because of new digital technologies? With supporters? Mainstream media?

81. How has communicating with group members changed because of new digital technologies? With supporters? Mainstream media?

82. Do you think there's a difference between using the tools to communicate, and using them for activism? How so?

APPENDIX B: CODEBOOK

For questions 1-15, the unit of analysis is each Facebook post and its accompanying comments/responses. For questions 16-26, the unit of analysis is the Facebook page.

1. Project site

1. Diario CoLatino
2. Radio Victoria
3. Voces
4. Política Stereo

2. Project platform

1. Offline
2. Online

3. Content type

1. Self-promotional link to news article/story on the same site's own website

2. Link to local news article/column/editorial (i.e. Prensa Grafica, TCS, etc.)

3. Link to international media

4. Link to other (describe _____)

5. Photo (source and description _____)

6. Video (source and description _____)

7. Audio (source and description _____)

8. Long news or commentary posted by same site (no link)

9. Brief commentary (less 500 words) posted by same site
 10. Brief commentary (less 500 words) posted by follower/audience member/reader
 11. Announcement (i.e. of a press conference, event, protest, march, etc.)
 12. Greeting
 13. Other (describe _____)
-
4. Date posted (i.e. 01/05/2011)
 5. How many times was the post liked/recommended (per Facebook's count)? (start with NA, 00, 01, 02, etc)
 6. How many comments did the story prompt (per Facebook's count)? (start with NA, 00, 01, 02, etc)
 7. Number of times the post was shared (per Facebook's count)? (start with NA, 00, 01, 02, etc.)
 8. Did the owner of the Facebook page respond to any of the users' comments?
 0. No
 01. Yes
 99. NA (there were no comments)
 9. Number of links included, including original post and comments (start with 0 or 01)

10. Number of photos included, including original post and comments (start with 0 or 01)

11. Number of videos included, including original post and comments (start with 0 or 01)

12. If the original post was a link, was there any text written by the same site to accompany it?

- 0. No
- 1. Yes
- 2. No link

13. If there was written text accompanying the link, was it:

- 1. The headline of the story being linked to
- 2. A quote from the story being linked to
- 3. Commentary/analysis
- 4. Greeting
- 5. Other (describe _____)
- 6. There was no accompanying text
- 99. NA (no link)

14. Subject of the story/post:

1. Activist/advocate or activist/advocacy organization news/information (i.e. human rights, environmental rights, women rights, minority rights, union rights, etc.)
2. Government/political-related news/information
3. Cultural/society/community-related news/information
4. Economic-related news/information
5. Educational-related news/information
6. Crime-related news/information
7. Culture of peace/historic memory/Civil War-related
8. Sports
9. Greeting
10. Health
11. Weather
12. Other _____

15. Is there a motivational frame present? Motivational frames incite individuals to act or mobilize, to participate in a civic or political event, or to somehow get involved in something, calling for some kind of action.

0. No
1. Yes

PAGE (The unit of analysis for questions 35-50 is each individual Facebook fan page – five in total).

16. Number of fans (start with 00, 01, 02, 03, etc.)

17. How many are “talking about” this page? (Start with 00, 01, 02, etc.)
18. How many photos are posted? (Start with 00, 01, 02, etc.)
19. How many events are listed? (Start with 00, 01, 02, etc.)
20. What are the events for? (Describe _____)
21. How many polls are listed? (Start with 00, 01, 02, etc.)
22. How many videos are listed? (Start with 00, 01, 02, etc.)
23. How many notes are listed? (Start with 00, 01, 02, etc.)
24. What does the “about” section say? (Copy and paste _____)
25. What is included as contact information?
 01. official website
 02. email
 03. twitter
 04. blog
 05. phone number
 06. physical address

07. other (describe _____)

26. Is a Twitter account embedded in the Facebook page?

00. No

01. Yes

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Vita

Summer Harlow obtained Bachelor of Journalism and Bachelor of Arts in Spanish degrees from the University of Missouri-Columbia. She received her M.A. in Latin American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. As a Ph.D. student at the University of Texas at Austin, Summer was named the School of Journalism's Jesse H. Jones fellow. Her dissertation research in El Salvador was funded through an Inter-American Foundation Grassroots Development Fellowship. A journalist with more than 10 years of experience, Summer began her reporting career covering the U.S. congress in Washington, D.C., for newspapers in Texas and Colorado. She has reported and blogged from the United States and Latin America, covering immigration, city government, transportation, minority affairs, and press freedom issues. Her main research inquiries relate to the links between journalism and activism, with an emphasis on Latin America, digital media, alternative media, and international communication. Her research has appeared in *New Media & Society*; *Journalism*; the *International Journal of Communication*; *Journalism Practice*; the *Howard Journal of Communication*; and *Information, Communication & Society*, among others. Summer remains connected to the field of journalism via freelancing, working with the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, and serving as a press freedom analyst for Freedom House. Beginning the fall of 2014 she will join Florida State University's College of Communication and Information as an assistant professor.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.