

Beyond representation: Exploring participation in and through technology at an alternative newspaper in El Salvador

Más allá de la representación: Explorando la participación en y a través de la tecnología en un periódico alternativo en El Salvador

Além da representação: Explorando a participação através da tecnologia em um jornal alternativo em El Salvador

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic case study explores whether and how the Salvadoran alternative newspaper *Diario CoLatino* incorporated new technologies, specifically online social media, to encourage citizen participation in the media process (in technology) and in a larger discursive sphere (through technology). This study contributes to the literature by including technology as fundamental to the study of alternative media and by expanding our conceptualization of the digital divide to include whether social media are used in “liberating” ways.

Keywords: Activism, alternative media, El Salvador, ethnography, newspapers, participation, social media.

RESUMEN

Este estudio de caso etnográfico explora si y cómo el periódico alternativo salvadoreño Diario CoLatino incorporó las nuevas tecnologías, especialmente las redes sociales, para fomentar la participación ciudadana en el proceso de comunicación (en tecnología) y en una esfera discursiva más grande (a través de la tecnología). Este estudio contribuye a la literatura académica mediante la inclusión de la tecnología como fundamental para el estudio de los medios alternativos y por la expansión de nuestra conceptualización de la brecha digital para incluir si los medios sociales se utilizan en maneras “libertadoras”.

Palabras clave: Activismo, medios de comunicación alternativos, El Salvador, etnografía, periódicos, participación, redes sociales.

RESUMO

Este estudo de caso etnográfico investiga se e como o jornal alternativo *Diário CoLatino* de El Salvador incorporou novas tecnologias, em especial as redes sociais, para promover a participação dos cidadãos no processo midiático (na tecnologia) e em uma esfera discursiva maior (através da tecnologia). Este estudo contribui para a literatura acadêmica ao incluir a tecnologia como elemento fundamental para o estudo de meios alternativos e ao expandir nossa conceituação da brecha digital considerando se é que as mídias sociais são usadas de maneiras “libertadoras”.

Palavras-chave: Ativismo, meios de comunicação alternativos, El Salvador, etnografia, jornais, participação, redes sociais.

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INTRODUCTION

Chipped paint peels from the dull peach-colored cement walls plastered over with a half-dozen posters of the assassinated Archbishop Oscar Romero—revered 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, justice for those disappeared during the civil war. In the small, windowless, rectangular newsroom of the alternative newspaper *Diario CoLatino*, are 11 desktop computers—a mix of old, new, and rebuilt Macs and PCs—for roughly twice as many reporters and photographers. A couple of the computers are too slow to access Facebook, and one of them is too old 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 often 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.

CoLatino workers take pride in the way the newspaper has weathered more than 100 years in print, and they wear decades of physical and verbal attacks against the newspaper as a badge of honor, proof that it is a newspaper “in resistance.” 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 ethnographic case study explored the extent to which this Salvadoran alternative newspaper used technology to open a space for citizen participation (participation in technology via content production) and encourage social justice (participation through technology via an engaged citizenry). Diamond (2010) referred to such uses of technology as “liberation technology.” Studying alternative media's liberating use of technology in El Salvador is important in light of the way the mainstream Salvadoran press has evolved into a conservative, elitist media system common to most of Latin America: 40 percent of the country's 23 national TV channels are controlled by just two companies (Pérez & Carballo, 2013), and of the country's five newspapers, four belong to just two families (Valencia, 2005). Rockwell and Janus (2002) argued that traditional media in Central America further the interests of the elite, helping maintain their control rather than opening a space for alternative voices. Alternative out-

lets and the Internet, by contrast, represent a space for those voices normally excluded from mainstream media (Cristancho & Iglesias, 2013, p. 39). With this in mind, this qualitative study of *CoLatino* explored the following broad research questions:

- How are new technologies changing the identity and news processes of *CoLatino* and its reporters?
- How is citizen participation in alternative media changing because of new technologies?
- What key obstacles does *CoLatino* face in incorporating digital technologies, and how do these obstacles influence the usefulness and relevancy that reporters assign to these technologies?
- Under what circumstances has *CoLatino* managed (or not) to successfully use digital technologies in liberating ways?

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Alternative media, typically regarded as the media of dissidents and social movements (Downing, 2001; Kessler, 1984), often are defined in opposition to mainstream or corporate media; they serve the interests of marginalized groups that the mainstream media tend to ignore, underrepresent, or even misrepresent. Downing (1984) differentiated alternative media from mainstream media in their purpose, organization, production processes, content, and audiences. Other scholars (Bailey, Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2008; Vinelli & Rodríguez Esperón, 2004) have contended that alternative media are diverse, dynamic and contingent, a practice and a process. Viewing alternative media as multi-dimensional, as opposed to the binary thinking of alternative vs. mainstream, helps prevent a marginalization of alternative media viewed as powerless in comparison to powerful corporate media (Rodríguez, 2001).

Generally scholars approach the study of alternative media from two perspectives: content and process. Downing's (2001) content-oriented definition views alternative media as media that express an “alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (p. v). He saw alternative media producers as communicators/activists similar to Gramsci's notion of the “organic intellectual,” with alternative media producers interacting with their audiences and encouraging them to think critically and challenge hegemonic discourses and power hierarchies. Likewise, Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) argued that content must be critical, challenging the status quo, in order to be alternative.

In contrast, Atton (2002) prioritized the process, noting the importance of empowering ordinary citizens to produce their own media. Rodríguez's (2001) concept of "citizen media" also emphasizes the importance of participation: everyday citizens participate in the mediascape, contesting hegemonic power structures through the very process of intervention in the media. Gumucio Dagron (2004) also identified participation as the foundation for alternative media: "the alternative spirit remains as long as the participatory component is not minimized and excluded" (p. 48).

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). Simpson Grinberg (1986) viewed alternative communication in Latin America as "social resistance" that "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).

PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

The current era of Web 2.0 and digital participation and interactivity, in which a media consumer can simultaneously be a producer, means that an emphasis on the production process results in almost anything serving 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 as participation. A focus on the participatory process 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? Thus, it is important to consider not just the ability to participate afforded by new technologies, but also the type and purpose of participation (frivolous or liberating?).

Freire (1970), considered the Latin American founding father of participatory communication, advocated for dialogue and horizontal communication leading to

self-awareness, emancipation and, ultimately, social change. Dialogue is at the heart of self-realization, and through dialogue individuals can transform their worlds. Participation, Freire believed, would reduce power imbalances. While his 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" (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, scholars built on Freire's work to emphasize citizen participation in alternative communication. 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).

Today's digital mediascape means the line between producer and audience, and between alternative and mainstream, is increasingly blurred as new communication technologies create the possibility of voices formerly excluded by the mainstream media to participate in media production processes and thus challenge media hegemony. For example, Couldry and Curran (2003) posited that 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. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, alternative media are those with critical content and a participatory process. Further, this study suggests that rapidly evolving communication technologies demand an understanding of alternative media that incorporates technology use and whether said technologies are used to enhance critical content and citizen participation, serving as a form of "liberation technology" (Diamond, 2010).

Diamond (2010) proffered the notion of "liberation technologies," or "any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom" (p. 70). For example, Diamond noted the way in which the Inter-

net, 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 (p. 71). Along these same lines, numerous scholars (Ackerly, 2006 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).

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 liberating about these technologies. Unlike the printing press, telegraph, radio, or other “analog” communication devices, 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 study seeks to answer, then, is whether, how, and why an alternative newspaper in El Salvador used these tools to their full liberating capacity.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

When analyzing liberation technology and its connection to alternative media, it is useful to consider Carpentier’s (2011) dimensions of minimalist (unidirectional) participation vs. maximalist (multidirectional) participation. Carpentier 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), with participation in the media ultimately enabling participation through the media.

Carpentier’s (2011) idea of 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 (as content producers) and participation *through* technology (as engaged citizenry) that potentially achieves the use of liberating technologies and

fulfills Freire’s (1970) model of dialogical communication. In fact, it can be argued that the key to applying Freire in today’s digital context 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?

DIGITAL DIVIDE

Using technologies in liberating ways requires considering not just how they are being used, but who is using them. 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 study. Only about half of the Latin American and Caribbean population has Internet access, and that number drops to 28.5 percent in El Salvador (Internet World Stats, 2014). Thus, any discussion of the democratic potential of the Internet in El Salvador must consider the digital divide.

Theorizing of the digital divide has moved beyond a binary conceptualization based on access (Bonfadelli, 2002)—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 (Fuchs, 2009; Robinson, DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2003; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). Further, the ways in which technologies are used can contribute to other divides. For example, some scholars have criticized hegemonic uses of the Internet (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Technology alone 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 (Gumucio Dagron, 2001). Therefore, any study of online alternative media 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.

BACKGROUND

More than 100 years old, *Diario CoLatino* is El Salvador's largest alternative newspaper, run by a cooperative comprised of 20 newspaper employees. According to *CoLatino'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), *CoLatino* suffered various physical and verbal attacks, including a fire that nearly destroyed its printing presses: international cooperation provided funding to restore them. 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). Thus, this study examines whether *CoLatino* utilizes new technologies to fulfill its alternative goals.

METHODS

This ethnographic case study¹, conducted from August 2012 to August 2013 as part of a larger project on alternative media and technology in El Salvador, used in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 *CoLatino* editors, reporters, photographers, and readers. Using a grounded theory approach, wherein meaning and understanding are generated via interactions in social processes (Birks & Mills, 2011; Blumer, 1986), the interview transcripts were analyzed for themes and patterns related to interview subjects' perceptions of how technologies impacted identity, production practices, citizen participation, and social change.

The interviews revealed various themes, such as a disconnect between the desire to encourage participation in and through the media, and the practice of only dif-

fusing information and offering access to and representation in the media. A tension between the importance journalists afforded to the role of ICTs and their inability to fully understand or use them also came 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. 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.

This study addresses each of these themes that emerged during analysis, and concludes by showing how they relate back to the five guiding research questions outlined in the introduction, 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.

FINDINGS

PARTICIPATION VS. REPRESENTATION

Most days someone from the community calls or drops by *CoLatino* to talk about a community problem and ask for a story to be written, and journalists typically follow up on story tips. For example, one man in his fifties made the two-hour-long trek from the city of Ahuachapán to San Salvador to ask the newspaper to report 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. *CoLatino*, he said, was "the only newspaper that fights for the people... I knew that if I wanted to get publicity for our cause, (*CoLatino*) would publish it. It is the newspaper of the people." 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 the "*compromiso social*," or social commitment that most claim to have.

Still, *CoLatino* journalists' definitions of participation and empowerment were more about access or representation, than actual participation. 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. *CoLatino*, they said, served as a mediator, speaking up for the people, rather than letting the people say it themselves.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The journalists' interpretation of participation as closer to representation is tied to their identities as professional journalists. Pilar², a 40-something journalist, explained that while the public was welcome to come to the newspaper with concerns, it was the journalist's job as a professional to investigate and write about it. The journalists said that covering a story themselves, instead of just letting a community member write about it, gave more importance and credibility to the issue. "We're the professionals," Carmen, in her 30s, said.

The newspaper's preference for representation instead of actual participation was about more than professional identity; it also stemmed from the fact that *CoLatino* is a political project to support leftist, progressive causes. Allowing too much participation, then, could potentially disrupt that political mission. As Francisco, *CoLatino*'s director, 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.

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 the print version online, and that's it," Ana, 33, said. For example, *CoLatino*'s website at the time did not allow readers to make comments on any stories, or upload 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," said 35-year-old Fernando, the webmaster. "We left it open once, and people said all kinds of barbarities." Also, despite the capacity to publish blogs on the newspaper's website, the higher-ups decided against offering citizens direct access to the production process without having someone dedicated fulltime to supervise what was posted, and they did not have the resources to hire anyone to do so. Gonzalo, an editor and co-op member, 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, considering that interviewees repeatedly said 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 nominal participation was repeated when it came to *CoLatino*'s social media accounts, which tended just to be a link to a story or diffusion of information, without any real analysis or a call for citizen commentary or participation. Furthermore, the updates 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.

Looking at the newspaper's Facebook page was no different than viewing *CoLatino*'s website or the printed version of the newspaper. *CoLatino*'s Facebook use was unidirectional, diffusing information to the audience, rather than multi-directional, creating conversations between *CoLatino* and its readers, and among readers. During the timeframe that interviews were conducted for this research, the newspaper's Facebook and Twitter accounts remained mostly inactive. 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 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 it. Raquel, a 39-year-old photographer, said she "supposed" the newspaper had a Facebook page, but she had 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 webmaster—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 timely 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.

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, a 35-year-old reporter, said. Also, few had undergone any digital training that would allow them to post photos, videos or audio online. As 20-something Rosario said, 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 even know what is out there.” Thus, that lack of digital training affected what tools they adopted. If they heard about it and everyone was using it, they gave 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.

EVOLVING USE OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

Only half of the journalists used Twitter, and of those who had opened accounts, most had let them fall into disuse. 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, but used Twitter to monitor what was going on. Mateo, a 27-year-old reporter, said he used Twitter to post information and news, while Facebook was more personal. Rosario complained that Twitter focused on the banal. Plus, she said, she was not that “egotistical” to think people needed to read about what she did all day.

While all journalists interviewed had Facebook accounts, few posted their news articles 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 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. We communicate and talk about other things that have nothing to do with journalism,” Raquel said. Ana noted that she started to learn how great Facebook could be for keeping track of what her sources did on the issues 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? 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; she worried that because she had Facebook friends from polarized ideological stances, posting news might lead to a debate, which she did not want to encourage on her own “personal space.”

A couple of journalists had created two accounts: one personal, one professional; the idea was 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 doing. Linda also checked Facebook throughout the day for any press releases coming out of the presidential office. While most press releases arrived via fax or email, more and more 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 so reporters were able to cover the event at the last minute.

Thus, although their Facebook use evolved as they increasingly used the platform for contacting sources and following information associated with their beats, 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 their personal Facebook accounts 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. “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 campaign for Santiago showed her that Facebook was useful not just for communicating, but also for “moving the masses” and “convoking people.”

A LACK OF DIGITAL-FIRST VISION

When it came to applying 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. "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, a 40-something photographer, said. Raquel noted that they are only trained—and paid—to write, or take photos, and any additional multimedia responsibilities would take up too much time. Rather than take the initiative to give their audio to the webmaster (all journalists record their interviews with digital audio devices), or ask the photographer 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 admitted that the journalists were correct, and that providing the latest technologies was not a priority, 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 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... What is most important to us? To be able to pay the salaries of all the workers," Gonzalo said. Journalists, most with no smartphones of their own, focused on writing and publishing their stories when they returned to the newsroom, and not 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. 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 to post story updates on social media³.

Journalists expressed a desire to integrate social media into their daily practices, but just like they were dubious of allowing readers to comment on their stories on the website, they were apprehensive that "too much" citizen participation via social media would damage the newspaper's credibility and their own journalistic identities. Raquel worried that, rather than creating a dialogue, users would turn to Facebook to complain about the newspaper. Likewise, reporters noted the way inaccurate information spreads like wildfire on social media, and they said they did not want to be a part of that because it was not how "real" journalists should behave. Norma said that too much of a focus on social media and interaction distracted from their jobs as journalists: if they worried about updating social media, they might not pay as much attention to the story.

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 was only slightly mitigated by recognition that access to technology was limited in El Salvador. Despite the 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 they 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.

The majority of *CoLatino* journalists, however, said that blaming the digital divide had become a crutch. Ana explained:

A lot of people here think that because people are from the communities, with little economic resources, they 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. 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. As Norma said, "almost everybody is buying cell phones with Internet. You might not have a computer, but you have Internet on your mobile phone... People that you would not even imagine have access and have Facebook."

Thus, despite unequal access to and use of new technologies, in general *CoLatino* journalists expressed optimism about the role such tools could play in terms of alternative media and social change. 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, 20-something 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 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 create photo galleries. Gonzalo said that for Salvadorans, the Internet was about "enjoying the wars between Pepsi and Coke" so that even if *CoLatino* effectively used social media for good, that use is limited because of the public:

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." 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." 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. 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 as contradictory to 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 diffusing news.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As noted earlier, a 2012 *CoLatino* article touted the newspaper's commitment to giving ordinary people normally marginalized from the mainstream media a place to express themselves. However, based on in-depth interviews and observations, it seems that *CoLatino* created more of a space for representation than for citizen self-expression or participation. 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, analysis suggests that new technologies, 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. There was a disconnect between the journalists' desire to encourage participation in and through the media (Carpentier, 2011), and their practice of diffusing information and offering access to and representation in the media.

Interviewees assigned so much value to their identities as 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. When they discussed the potential of using social media and digital technologies, they did so more in terms of diffusing information—reaching larger, more widespread audiences quickly and cheaply, thus helping them better inform and be informed about the communities they covered—than of participation *in* technology and *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 at the newspaper trickled down to the reporters. This is not to say that the reporters 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 him- or herself to post news updates to Facebook or Twitter. 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 “new” technologies were not a priority. Such a lack of priority was tied to 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, *CoLatino* interviewees' use of social media had begun to evolve. Although most subjects primarily utilized their Facebook accounts for “frivolous” purposes like 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 campaign for Santiago demonstrated that social media could be used for liberating purposes in El Salvador. The challenge is finding a way to transfer that successful and liberating personal use of Facebook to organized campaigns that alternative media outlets could mount in an effort to encourage participation *through* technology.

Other than the campaign for Santiago, most interviewees 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 also were not willing to weigh the value of perceived loss of credibility versus the gain of citizen participation via technologies. Thus, these interviewees did not necessarily use Facebook much differently than the public that they criticized for using social media in frivolous ways. For these journalists, the greatest obstacle 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 because of their limited vision that saw ICTs' potential in the informative realm, rather than the participatory. Even more, they failed to recognize the full informative potential of ICTs, lacking not just knowledge about what tools were available, but also understanding of how to capitalize on them.

Thus, this study 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 of updated social media accounts meant that users had no real opportunities to participate in the news processes via technology. *CoLatino* journalists, despite having verbalized their recognition of the participatory and liberating potential of ICTs, maintained mediator roles, speaking on behalf of the voiceless rather than using technology to let the voiceless speak for themselves.

This research fundamentally contributes to the

literature by calling for a non-deterministic understanding of liberation technology to be a fundamental approach to the study of alternative media. If alternative media want to employ technologies like Facebook and Twitter for social change, they must take full advantage of their participatory potential, moving beyond mere representation or frivolous uses and using them instead to potentially achieve the Freirian archetype of dialogic communication by allowing for participation *in* technology (as content producers) and *through* technology (as engaged citizenry). While this study is limited because it relies on just one case study and thus is not generalizable, nevertheless it is useful for

offering a nuanced understanding of the role of ICTs in alternative media in a digitally divided country. Further, considering the way technologies like social networking sites play increasingly important roles in this post-Arab Spring era, this study is valuable for bettering our understanding of how alternative media can use technologies in liberating ways that can potentially encourage citizen participation and social change. Further studies should qualitatively and quantitatively examine alternative media's use of liberation technology in other Latin American countries, exploring the links between alternative media, technology, and participation.

FOOTNOTES

1. This research was conducted thanks to an Inter-American Foundation Grassroots Development Fellowship.
2. Names of journalists have been changed to protect their privacy. The director agreed to have his real name used.
3. At the conclusion of this research, the newspaper re-evaluated its position on smartphones, giving them to journalists to use in their jobs, albeit without any kind of training.

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