



Twitterati as Instruments of Change? Reappropriating Social Media for Dialogue and Action via El Salvador's Citizen Debate Site Política Stereo

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This ethnographic study of El Salvador's social media citizen debate site Política Stereo explores whether and how the site used online social media to prompt citizen debate, participation, and action. The analysis investigates whether Política Stereo encouraged citizen participation *in* technology and *through* technology. Política Stereo served as a digital counter public sphere, encouraging debate and action by emphasizing dialogue among users with opposing viewpoints. Its experience suggests online debate can translate into off-line action. Further, this study indicates the emergence of a Salvadoran Twitterati and a social media divide with implications for activism in digitally divided countries.

Keywords: activism, alternative media, Latin America, participation, social media

In June 2011, thousands of Salvadorans took to the streets protesting the legislature's decision to limit the authority of El Salvador's highest court, the Constitutional Court. Decree 743, which required court rulings to be unanimous, rather than based on a judges' majority, prompted protesters to rally via Facebook and Twitter, calling themselves "Los Indignados SV" (The Indignant—El Salvador) after Spain's 15-M movement, launched a few weeks earlier. On July 28, after weeks of protests and media coverage, the decree was overturned. The Decree 743 protests resemble recent protest activity around the world—the Arab Spring, Spain's *Los Indignados*, Chilean student protests—in that online social networking sites were fundamental to organizing protests, perhaps even fueling them (Anduiza, Cristancho, & Sabucedo, 2013; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012). El Salvador is not alone: widespread use of online social media has characterized much recent political action throughout Latin America (Valenzuela et al., 2012). The role of online social media in activism merits attention from a communication research perspective—especially an alternative media perspective, in light of mainstream media's marginalization of protesters (McLeod & Hertog, 1999)—because of the way the online

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communication processes themselves have become forms of organization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) and even sites where collective action occurs (Lievrouw, 2011).

To better understand how alternative media producers use social media, and whether alternative media can use new technologies in liberating ways to spur social change (Diamond, 2010), this ethnographic study will explore how El Salvador's *Política Stereo* (Politics [in] Stereo), a citizen-debate social media site active during the Decree 743 protests, serves as a form of alternative media, using ICTs to prompt participation in the media, in technology, in a national discursive sphere, and in civic and political life. This study contributes to the understanding of alternative media and social change in a digital era, and adds to the growing literature examining social media's role in activism in developing countries. It has the further aim of moving beyond the technological determinism present in much current scholarship, recognizing that technology use does not automatically lead to social justice: technologies can be used for oppression as much as for liberation. Likewise, the limits presented by the digital divide should not be regarded deterministically as insurmountable. Therefore, this research investigated the circumstances under which *Política Stereo* managed to encourage citizen participation *in* technology (as content producers) and *through* technology (as engaged citizenry). Broadly, this study posed three main questions:

- RQ1. How do Política Stereo interviewees discuss online social media's impact on citizen debate, participation, and action?*
- RQ2. To what extent is Política Stereo interacting with users via Facebook?*
- RQ3. To what extent is Política Stereo using Facebook to motivate citizens to act or mobilize?*

Alternative and Activist Media

Before Facebook, Twitter, or even the much-studied online alternative news site IndyMedia (Kidd, 2003), social movements and activists used alternative media to control their own information and image, circumventing mainstream media by publishing bulletins, alternative newspapers, and magazines, handing out flyers, engaging in graffiti, or taking to the airwaves via both clandestine and community radio and television stations (Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Downing, 2001). Over the past 20 years, beginning with the Zapatistas in Mexico in 1994 and the Seattle protests of 1999, alternative media and activists have embraced the use of digital technologies. These groups initiated use of email, online social media, blogs, podcasts, video-sharing platforms, and numerous other tools to create campaigns, online petitions, virtual sit-ins, and interactive communities, and to prompt myriad other online and off-line actions (Harlow, 2012; Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Online social media, including social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, are particularly commended for helping facilitate participation and protests (Anduiza et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2012). Diamond (2010) referred to digital communication tools' capacity to bring about social change as "liberation technology." ICTs are now seen as essential to creating alternative media for progressive social change and efforts to achieve social justice (Kenix, 2009; Raghavan, 2009).

Scholars have not settled on a definition for alternative media, often using "alternative" to encompass media described as radical (Downing, 2001), citizens' (Rodriguez, 2001), community, grassroots, participatory, activist, or counter-informational. Without a single definition, scholars typically approach alternative media by examining the production process and the content produced, often reducing alternative communication to binary conceptualizations: alternative or activist versus mainstream, grassroots versus top-down, noncommercial versus commercial.

Alternative communication research in Latin America faces a similar lack of consensus about what alternative means. Still, common threads exist: alternative media aim for social and political change, resist hegemony, and support activism, and they must be analyzed and understood within their own particular economic, political cultural, and social contexts (Kejval, 2010). Like Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2008), Vinelli and Rodríguez Esperón (2004) consider alternative media to be an ongoing practice, not a state of being, making a fixed definition not only impossible but also undesirable, given dynamic, contextual alternative media that change depending on local specificities.

A Mestizaje Approach

Historically, research on alternative media in Latin America trended toward dualisms falling into three main clusters: "processes and structures," "goals and content," and "essence of communication" (Huesca, 1994, pp. 55–56). The critique of these dualisms resulted in hybridization, syncretism, or *mestizaje* (Huesca, 1994). Martín Barbero (1993) applied the latter concept, based on the idea of racial mixing, to media because popular culture, or a subculture, simultaneously adopts, adapts, and resists the dominant culture, thus creating something new. Downing (2001, p. 159), who viewed alternative media as the media of activists, argued that the "mestizaje of the popular and the oppositional, even of the hegemonic," is a "hybrid quality" characteristic of radical media. Atton (2002) 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 that alternative media are hybrids indicative of struggle or tension between cultures, traditions, classes, and countries (Martín Barbero, 1993). A mestizaje approach to alternative media helps answer Rodríguez's (2001) concern that alternative media are often dismissed as the "other" media. Similarly, Portales (1981) critiqued the assumption that alternative media are the solution to one-way, commercial, monopolistic mass media, arguing that this notion marginalizes alternative media instead of creating a new, hybrid, multidirectional, horizontal model of communication.

This concept of mestizaje is also useful for thinking about computer-mediated communication, because online social media, which themselves are hybrids, allow for multidirectional information and communication flows, blending aspects of mainstream and alternative media. As Lievrouw (2011) noted, online alternative/activist media embody this mediated, hybridized, multidimensional mode of communication. Further, El Salvador still relies on 20th-century communication technologies, so the online and the off-line blend together, necessitating 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.

Thus, an examination of the evolution of alternative and activist media vis-à-vis digital technologies requires "alternative media" to be regarded as a multidimensional, overlapping discursive term that labels and disqualifies certain practices and products, taking into account not just content, process, and product, but also the digital tools themselves. It seems most useful to recognize the diversity and contingency of alternative media by combining various definitions, thus presenting 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 explore how digital tools are adapted to benefit a local context and whether those tools serve counterhegemonic uses.

Atton's (2002) definition of alternative media as participatory and contextual is useful as an umbrella designation for everything from blogs and Twitter to Facebook and YouTube, yet that very inclusiveness undermines his definition. The focus on participation as "alternative" becomes meaningless in a Web 2.0 era that is nothing but participatory. Scholars today cannot just stop at whether online media are participatory but must go beyond Atton to account for online media's mobilizing and emancipatory potential. Rodriguez's (2001) concept of citizens' media emphasizes process/participation and power relations, empowerment, and both individual and social change, and thus is useful in digital participatory media culture. However, as this concept does not explicitly state the role of the media, Rodriguez's definition must be adapted to include Lievrouw's (2011) notion of new media as activism in and of themselves.

In an economically stratified, digitally divided region like Latin America (the latest data place El Salvador's Internet penetration rate at 24.5%), participation and new technologies alone do not prompt social change or justice. Also demanding consideration are the different realities—cultural, developmental, economic, social, and political—of El Salvador, where the mainstream media comprise an oligopoly closely linked to political and economic power groups, and media concentration causes media discourse to largely ignore the most vulnerable and marginalized sectors of society (Cristancho Cuesta & Iglesias, 2013).

Therefore, concurring with Bailey et al.'s (2008) recognition of the diversity and contingency of alternative media, this article takes a multipronged approach to understand alternative media in El Salvador. Rather than characterizing *Política Stereo* as simply alternative in process or content, or according to a mainstream-alternative binary, the study approached the meaning of "alternative" by identifying a series of elements that factor into whether something is alternative. This approach considered a media site's objectives (Is it a political project? Does it offer counterhegemonic content?), organization (Is it organized horizontally or hierarchically? Where does funding come from? Does it self-identify as alternative?), audience (Does it offer real or symbolic participation? Do audiences 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?). So far the liberating use of technology (Diamond, 2010) has not necessarily been a fundamental perspective in the study and understanding of alternative media, but this article contends that in the current digital media ecosystem, failing to consider how, and not just whether, alternative media projects employ new technologies constrains the ability to fully understand alternative media's changing role and growing importance in this age of online activism.

Alternative Media and Activism Online

Despite real concerns over the digital divide, including lack of computer access and know-how, and a potentially increasing gap between the information-rich and information-poor (Bonfadelli, 2002), scholars often herald the Internet for its promise of democratic, horizontal communication (Curran, 2003). For producers and consumers of alternative media—whose voices and views are traditionally excluded from mainstream media (Kessler, 1984)—the Internet seems to be an alternative space where information and counter-information can easily and cheaply circulate, uninhibited by the gatekeepers 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 demonstration coverage to break free of the protest paradigm (Chan & Lee, 1984) by legitimizing protesters and serving as commentators and even actors. From the Zapatistas in Mexico in 1994 and the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle to the Arab Spring and global Occupy movement of 2011, the Internet has proven critical to activists' communication, information, organization, mobilization, and collective identity (Cardoso & Pereira Neto, 2004; Garcia-Jimenez, Zamora Medina, & Martinez Fernandez, 2014; Juris, 2005; Rolfe, 2005). Kellner (2000) argued that the "rise of the Internet expands the realm for democratic participation and debate and creates new public spaces for political intervention" (p. 280).

Fraser (1990) referred to these spaces as counter public spheres. Revisiting Habermas' (1962/1989) original romanticized concept of a public sphere, Fraser (1990) posited that marginalized groups excluded from the male- and elite-dominated universal public sphere create their own multiple, subaltern counter public spheres in which to articulate their identities and debate ideas. Scholars link alternative media with the creation of multiple, counterhegemonic discursive spheres where normally marginalized voices can express themselves and participate in citizenship (Dahlgren, 2006; Harcup, 2011; Rodriguez, 2001). Acknowledging alternative media's role in constructing public spheres is important, as previous studies showed that contestation occurring via alternative media can influence what appears in mainstream media, which then can influence citizen action and public policy (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006).

Participation and Technology

In analyzing technology's liberating potential (Diamond, 2010) and its connection to alternative media and activism, it is useful to consider Carpentier's (2011) dimensions of minimalist (unidirectional) versus maximalist (multidirectional) participation. Seeing the media as a social sphere facilitating democratic participation, communication, and representation, Carpentier distinguished between participation *in* the media (i.e., nonprofessional participation in the media production and decision-making process) and participation *through* the media (i.e., participating in public dialogue, debate, and deliberation, and being able to represent oneself in public spheres), noting that participation *in* the media (as content producers) ultimately enables participation *through* the media (as engaged citizenry).

Carpentier's (2011) dimensions of minimalist and maximalist media participation, when borrowed to apply to technology, are useful for examining the role of ICT in alternative media and activism. Thus,

this study considers the extent to which alternative media can foster citizen participation *in* and *through* technology, and perhaps contribute to social justice.

Background

El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, with roughly 6 million people. Freedom House (2014) considers El Salvador a "free" country ranked at 2 for political rights and 3 for civil rights, where 1 is most free and 7 least free. Still, most Salvadorans in a nationwide survey (62.9%) said they were dissatisfied with democracy (Latinobarómetro, 2011). The top three qualities respondents said hurt El Salvador's democracy were corruption (29%), lack of citizen participation (28%), and lack of social justice (27%).

El Salvador's media environment mirrors that of most Latin American countries: Mainstream media are commercial, conservative, and less journalistic in purpose than commerce- and market-oriented, favoring business and political interests over those of society (Cañizález & Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Rockwell & Janus, 2003). In the neoconservative media oligopolies of Central America, "homogeneity rules over diversity in content and cultural forms" (Sandoval-García, 2008, p. 100). In El Salvador, one family owns the three most-viewed television stations, as well as powerful advertising agencies. Four of the country's five newspapers belong to just two families (Valencia, 2005).

Social media dominate the Internet, as Latin American users spend 30% of their time online on social networking sites (Breuer & Welp, 2014). El Salvador's 1.5 million Internet users represent 25% 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, and Twitter the ninth (ibid.).

Methods

This triangulated study relied on qualitative and quantitative data, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis conducted from August 2012 to August 2013 as part of a larger project on alternative media and social media in El Salvador. In-depth, semistructured interviews were conducted with 22 of Política Stereo's leaders, contributors, and readers. From 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 in the interview subjects' perceptions of how technologies impacted identity, production practices, citizen participation, and social change.

Four main themes emerged during analysis. The first was that Política Stereo served as a digital counter public sphere, an online space where citizens expressed themselves. Second was the concept of "hearing the other side" (Mutz, 2006), or the importance of being exposed to oppositional viewpoints. The third theme to surface concerned whether online debate and participation translates into off-line participation and action. The final theme was the digital divide and the exclusivity of being not just an online-only project but a social media one at that.

This study also included a content analysis of *Política Stereo*'s Facebook page, exploring how much *Política Stereo* encouraged user interaction, participation, and mobilization. Three Salvadorans coded two constructed weeks of posts for the number of "likes," comments, and shares each post received. Nominal variables included what the post was about, and whether the author responded to any comments by other users, or acted as an observer, commentator, or actor/catalyst. A bivariate variable accounted for whether or not the post was framed as mobilizing/motivational—as a call to action motivating people to participate in any kind of civic or political action.

After two training sessions, intercoder 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 Cohen's Kappa of .64 (the variable that coded for presence of a mobilizing frame) to a high of 1 (variables included the 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 exceeded the acceptable minimum standard (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000).

Findings

Política Stereo

Created in response to Salvadoran citizens' frustrations with the lack of political debate during the 2009 presidential elections, *Política Stereo* started as a citizen journalism site offering news, information, and discussion to generate debate around the national public agenda. Based on the model of *Política Stereo Chile*, a citizen debate website started in 2008, *Política Stereo El Salvador* saw its popularity increase in the summer of 2011 during the Decree 743 protests fueled in part by the site's leaders. Their idea was to use digital tools—in particular social media—to encourage civic and political participation, especially among El Salvador's youth. The *Política Stereo* founders quickly realized that most of the interaction and activity were occurring via social media rather than the website, so they shifted its attention to Facebook, Twitter, and Vimeo, letting the website fall into disuse. A Salvadoran nonprofit organization created and funded mostly by a left-leaning Salvadoran entrepreneur living in the United States, *Política Stereo* is largely run by a volunteer "creative committee": a handful of college-educated, middle-class youths living in San Salvador and working on the site from their homes in their free time. Its Facebook page styles it a "community of thinkers" promoting citizen debate and aimed at eventually becoming a citizen movement. At last count *Política Stereo* had amassed 62,049 fans on Facebook and 8,604 followers on Twitter.

The three youths who ran *Política Stereo* communicated by phone or Skype, or at a local upscale café. They did so mostly on a volunteer basis, as all had regular day jobs: Rogelio² did communication for a nonprofit organization, Pablo worked in a call center, and Gustavo was a freelance journalist with a law

² Interview subjects' names were changed to protect their privacy.

degree. Their aim was to present an accurate view of the reality of living in El Salvador—something the mainstream media do not do, they said. In addition to producing original content, including organizing, recording, and publishing debates between politicians and other decision makers, *Política Stereo* also seeks content from citizens and aggregates news from the local media. The main objective, according to the *Política Stereo* Facebook page, is to “promote open citizen debate” via social media with the end goal of becoming a “citizen movement.”

A Digital Counter Public Sphere

Their utterances about *Política Stereo* offering a space for political discussion indicate that the interviewees believed *Política Stereo* functioned as what Fraser (1990) might have called a type of digital counter public sphere—a place for them to voice opinions that would have remained unspoken, if not for Facebook. For example, Rogelio said: “Participation in this (site) means we can be part of the discussions, part of the debates, opining . . . and not sitting back to watch things happen.” Diego, a regular contributor, noted that he values *Política Stereo* because mainstream media “filter” reader comments and do not make space for people who think differently from the conservative, corporate, elite media.

Interviewees also saw *Política Stereo* as offering a space for politicians and officials to learn firsthand what the public thinks, and for the public to interrogate officials. Lorenzo, who participated daily in discussions on the site’s Facebook page, viewed his comments as a way to “influence” decision makers. “Virtual debate generates opinion,” he said, which “pressures decision makers.” 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.”

Besides debate, *Política Stereo* also offers citizens the ability to participate by sending in articles for publication or opining on which politicians or decision makers they want to see debate or be interviewed, and on what issues. Thus *Política Stereo* facilitates citizen communication—unlike traditional media, which simply inform, Rogelio said:

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.

Because it is social media, interviewees said, users can be subversive and sarcastic, and can question anything, be it religion, politics, or society in general. “Social networks are liberating, cathartic, because one can say what one wants,” Diego said. However, Eduardo, a regular contributor and freelance journalist, cautioned that having a democratic place to speak is not enough; people must also speak rationally and deliberately for debate to have any meaning.

"Hearing the Other Side"

Eduardo's concern reflects the second theme, "hearing the other side" (Mutz, 2006). 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 people better articulate their own positions, and increase an individual's tolerance and understanding of legitimate opposing viewpoints. However, Mutz also asked whether deliberative and participative democracies in fact undermine each other, as she found that the more people talked with those with whom they disagreed, the less they participated in civic groups and activities and the less they voted. Interviewees lauded *Política Stereo* for offering a space for all, regardless of political leanings, to express themselves freely. However, the interviewees did not imply that no topic was off-limits, or that contradictory views were accepted without restriction. In the end, they were divided on whether *Política Stereo* truly achieved respectful, cross-cutting political citizen debate or just provided a forum for political attacks and flame-throwing. They also said they took care not to dampen political discussion by censoring comments (unless they were libelous or threatening).

Eduardo worried that Salvadorans accustomed to sensational journalism might post comments to create a spectacle. Sometimes the comments are "too visceral," said Sergio, a regular contributor. Posts often are more controversial than thought provoking, he added. Manuel said *Política Stereo* incites people to comment by posting information accompanied by provocative questions in all capital letters. For example, regular readers recognize "juzgue usted" ("you be the judge") as a signature phrase accompanying many posts. Such phrases, Manuel said, "elicit that heightened response on social media." As some interviewees noted, however, precisely that kind of phrase caters too much to sensationalism instead of rational thought. Sergio said *Política Stereo* uses too many posts with "little academic value that are just polemic . . . to get people to throw stones . . . and generate traffic."

Despite these concerns, interviewees agreed *Política Stereo* offers a much-needed space for open political debate in a polarized country. Manuel explained that "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. "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 streaming them live or posting videos of them online, *Política Stereo* aimed to show how debate can be done and then encourage continued debate both online and off-line. Such political debate, they said, had potential to spark political change. For example, 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.

Moreover, interviewees said, *Política Stereo* offers a space for debate that they cannot achieve using their own Facebook accounts. Diego, for instance, mentioned posting a critique of a newspaper editorial attacking the indigenous Nahuat history of El Salvador to his personal Facebook page. "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." Further, Política Stereo offers a safe space for debate, Rogelio 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 Off-Line

Just as scholars question whether online social media prompt off-line activism, so too did the interviewees question the importance of a virtual debate that does not influence action in the real world. 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 remarked on the "abysmal" distance between the virtual and the real world: "Virtual is good, but the real solution to all of this is in the streets."

In general, interviewees perceived Política Stereo as a space that encouraged online and off-line participation. They did not consider the debates and conversations via social media simply an exercise in "gossip," as Diego phrased it. Rather, they held that the information posted to Política Stereo, and the debates it generated, could produce real-world effects. Rogelio said:

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.

Interviewees cited the regular contributors to Política Stereo who now comprise El Salvador's own Twitterati, or elite tweeters whose posts attract attention from decision makers and mainstream media as well as ordinary users. In a sort of two-step flow (Lang & Lang, 2006; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), these Twitterati become opinion leaders mediating between news and information online and the off-line public. Ronaldo became such an opinion leader, in part because of his Política Stereo posts during the Decree 743 protests. Having made a name for himself online, he then started to appear in television interviews. In effect, interviewees said, social media and Política Stereo created "spokespeople" for various causes who use the Internet to raise awareness or promote their opinions. Ultimately they become 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 representing the Internet youth in televised interviews.

Política Stereo also contributes to off-line change by bringing together like-minded people who can work together to spread a message or promote a cause, interviewees said. Sometimes, they observed, debates begun online migrate to text messaging or even to a coffee shop. "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," Jeremias said. Magdalena, another user, remarked on the way groups of friends on Facebook can turn into political or activist groups:

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. They become political subjects . . . groups of friends that join together to talk about other things.

During the Decree 743 protests, Política Stereo overtly took an activist stance, using Facebook and Twitter to promote marches and other protest activity. Política Stereo helped create a ripple effect, Diego said, when protesters' online and off-line actions made it into mainstream media. Many interviewees said that without social media, no one would have known, or cared, what the legislative assembly was doing. Política Stereo's activist role, Ernesto said, helps online debate move off-line. Ultimately, interviewees said, the goal is for citizens to participate in online debate that spurs their participation off-line.

Though the subjects saw the use of social media for protest in 2011 as successful, 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 do no more than "like" posts on Facebook. Jeremias expressed concern that social media could in fact lull people into 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.

Ernesto saw social media as more useful for spreading messages and influencing the media than convoking long-term social movements. An event gets 50,000 likes, but then just 50 people attend, he said.

The Elite Tweet

The digital divide, and the exclusivity associated with being an online-only project, was the final theme. Gabino, a journalism professor, pointed out that the problem with digital sites like Política Stereo is that they are relevant only to the middle class and "privileged sectors" of society. Diego likewise said,

"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."

Rogelio noted that because *Política Stereo* is on social media, it must do what it can to reach people without Internet, which means trying to cross over 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.

Whereas the percentage with Internet access may be small, it still represents 1.5 million people with access, "and this is enough to have an influence," Sergio said. Manuel argued:

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.

Although Facebook is the social media platform of choice for most Salvadorans, interviewees assigned more value to Twitter than to Facebook as a tool for debate and participation. According to Gustavo, *Política Stereo's* debate was moving from Facebook to Twitter and had come to focus more on Twitter's potential for debate—and on higher quality of debate. Gustavo said that though he still saw a lot of "analysis" in the comments posted by Facebook participants, 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," being a smaller, more select population than those using Facebook, Ernesto said.

Content Analysis

Interactivity

Based on this study's interviews, this content analysis used subjects' own thoughts to craft a codebook exploring how *Política Stereo* used Facebook to interact with and mobilize citizens. In terms of interactivity, analysis showed *Política Stereo* had a mean of 70.6 likes per post, 39.3 comments per post, and 41 shares per post. *Política Stereo* participated in the conversation, responding to users' posts 13% of the time.

The number of likes ($r = .569, p < .001$), comments ($r = .634, p < .001$), and shares ($r = .675, p < .001$) per post correlated significantly and positively with whether the author of the post had responded to any of the users' comments.

Call to Action

Regarding whether posts published on alternative media projects' Facebook pages were used to try to motivate citizens to act or to mobilize, results showed 33% of Política Stereo posts were coded as motivational. Nearly 50% of posts were coded as related to politics or the government, whereas only 21% specifically concerned activists, civil society, or social movements. About 48.5% of posts were coded as written from the viewpoint of a catalyst/actor, versus 30.3% coded as written by observers, and 21.2% by commentators.

The data (see Table 1) show that a post author's perspective as an observer, commentator, or actor/catalyst significantly affected the number of likes ($F = 3.45, df = 2, p < .05$) and comments ($F = 4.962, df = 2, p < .05$) the post received. Post hoc Tukey tests showed that posts written by commentators prompted significantly more likes ($M = 119.71, SD = 74.12$) and comments ($M = 69.57, SD = 42.13$) than posts published by observers or actors/catalysts.

Table 1. Facebook Interactivity per Author Classification.

	Observer	Commentator	Actor/catalyst
# likes (a)	37.8 (37.67)	119.71 (74.12)	58.63 (71.67)
# comments (b)	19.1 (19.87)	69.57 (42.13)	35.94 (34.54)
# shares (c)	32.22 (35.32)	72.43 (75.65)	23.93 (35.46)

Note. Cell entries are means, standard deviation in parentheses.

(a) $F = 3.45, df = 2, p < .05$

(b) $F = 4.96, df = 2, p < .05$

(c) $F = 2.49, df = 2, ns$

Discussion and Conclusions

In light of previous research indicating that alternative media can contribute to citizens' participation in both the media production process and a larger discursive sphere (Dahlgren, 2006; Harcup, 2011; Rodriguez, 2001), this study explored how Política Stereo's incorporation and reappropriation of social media opened a space for citizen participation, not just in the digital media production process but in political and civic life and a broader discursive sphere. This understanding helps 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 influences media's changing role in the digital age and implies changes in democracy overall as citizens increasingly participate—and perhaps work toward social justice—via alternative media and ICT.

Interviews showed that *Política Stereo* used online social media to promote citizen debate, participation, and even some action. But that success was limited, as only a quarter of the Salvadoran population has Internet access or uses Facebook. The reality was that *Política Stereo* served a small, educated, more elite public. Still, for at least 25% of the population, it operated as a digital counter public sphere (Fraser, 1990), offering an online space for citizens to express themselves and contribute to a broader discursive sphere. *Política Stereo* facilitated participation *in* technology by offering ordinary citizens a space 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. The ability to participate in such a public sphere is a fundamental aspect of alternative media (Atton, 2002; Rodriguez, 2001). Mainstream media typically filter reader comments posted to their websites, so interviewees saw *Política Stereo* as their only real opportunity to not just speak but also be heard outside their own personal networks. For them, participation in these online conversations was a way to influence decision makers and effect change.

However, the constraints of limited Internet access and use meant this space for participation was an online sphere in a mostly off-line country. *Política Stereo* thus remained somewhat exclusive, similar to Habermas' (1962/1989) original romanticized notion of the bourgeoisie public sphere. When interviewees characterized the site as open to contributions from anyone, they implicitly discounted the fact of the site's inaccessibility to those without online social media accounts. Being online, without at least some sort of off-line version, automatically prevented *Política Stereo* from achieving maximum participation (Carpentier, 2011). *Política Stereo*, then, is not so much a digital public sphere as a social media public sphere and is therefore perhaps even more exclusionary. Still, interviewees said, for the more than 1.5 million people with online access, creating a digital counter public sphere in which to debate and express themselves is important for strengthening democracy.

Further exacerbating this exclusivity of being a social-media-only publication was *Política Stereo*'s social media platform preference: interviewees preferred Twitter to Facebook. They saw Facebook as a place for frivolous activity and regarded Twitter as serious and intellectual. This focus on Twitter is noteworthy, considering that Facebook is by far the dominant social media platform in El Salvador (Breuer & Welp, 2014). The preference for Twitter indicates potential for elitism and a new social media divide deserving further research. *Política Stereo*'s mission may be to open a participatory space for citizens, but limiting that space to Twitter essentially closes the space to most of the country's population. Meanwhile, reserving Twitter for "serious" debate and using Facebook for more trivial matters could work against *Política Stereo*, as Facebook users seeking real debate are likely to stop visiting the *Política Stereo* page if sensationalism and flame-throwing are all they find. Although it is a safe bet that Facebook's dominance comes with an expiration date, it seems premature to give up on Facebook so soon, especially considering that *Política Stereo* has more than 44,000 fans on Facebook but only about 8,000 followers on Twitter. It therefore seems that users, the platforms they use, and the purposes they use them for are subject to a social media digital divide that could affect what kinds of information circulate on Facebook vs. Twitter. If, as some *Política Stereo* interviewees said, all the "serious debate" has shifted from Facebook to Twitter, then nonelite Facebook users could miss out on the opportunity to contribute to a national discursive sphere. This article thus extends the understanding of the digital divide to include social media: who the users are, which platforms they are using, and whether they use them in frivolous or liberating ways.

Despite these limitations, interviewees still saw *Política Stereo* as a digital counter public sphere that was open—and safe—for anyone and any idea. More than just a place for citizens to express themselves, *Política Stereo* became a site where citizens could “hear the other side” (Mutz, 2006) and engage, online and off-line, with users whose thoughts differed from their own. But to make a difference, subjects said, online debate must be accompanied by off-line action. They held that *Política Stereo*’s influence extended from the virtual into the real world, noting how *Política Stereo* helped promote the protest movement of 2011, getting involved in the action instead of just encouraging others to do so. They also pointed to the creation of a Twitterati of experts and opinion leaders in the mainstream media who helped bridge the digital divide. Ultimately, *Política Stereo* seemed to use social media to encourage participation in the media production process, political debate, and even civic and political action.

The content analysis, however, only partially supported interviewees’ beliefs. It mirrored subjects’ notion of *Política Stereo* as a space for debate, in that the Facebook content analysis confirmed that *Política Stereo* encouraged citizen interaction. Further, user interaction (likes, comments, and shares) significantly increased when the authors of posts responded to users’ comments, suggesting that media consumers might want or even expect a media site to talk back to them. Alternative media producers have long advocated audience participation in the communication process, and findings indicate that the communication process does not end with publication, whether in a newspaper or on a Facebook page. Instead, the process seems continuous: Facebook impacts the role of the audience by allowing users to participate in a conversation, even as it also changes expectations about how alternative media producers should participate in that conversation. Generating interactivity means engaging users in a conversation by responding to their comments. Hence, alternative media whose mission is to open alternative spaces for participation and communication should take advantage of Facebook’s multidirectional communication as a fundamental capacity.

The content analysis also looked at whether *Política Stereo* used Facebook to call for action or motivate people to participate civically or politically. The findings revealed that although participation and social change were stated goals of *Política Stereo*, posts did not reflect this mission, as few were explicitly motivational. Further, less than a quarter of posts concerned social movements, civil society, or activism. Additionally, *Política Stereo*’s audience was not necessarily seeking calls to action: The posts garnering the most interaction were written from a commentator’s perspective, offering opinion rather than pushing for action. This—coupled with interviewees’ observations that even though protest events generated many “likes” on Facebook, only a small percentage of users actually attended them—suggests that *Política Stereo* is useful for encouraging online debate and participation, but less so for encouraging off-line participation. In other words, the analysis seems to indicate that for *Política Stereo*, Facebook is indeed a channel for encouraging participation *in* technology but has not been fully realized as the conduit to participation *through* technology.

This study contributes to the literature by including technology as a fundamental approach to studying alternative/activist media, and by expanding the conceptualization of the digital divide to include a social media divide. Such a critical understanding of the role of technologies in alternative media is key to contextualizing and extending current theories of participation, debate, and the public sphere as they relate to social change. This study is limited in that it relied on an ethnographic case study of one

alternative media project in one country, and thus is not generalizable. Still, it can shed light on liberating uses of technology in alternative media and serve as a blueprint for other, similar media projects in the region. Future research should analyze how different alternative/activist media projects throughout El Salvador and Latin America are incorporating new technologies for social change.

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