

© 2013 Communication&Society/Comunicación y Sociedad ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2174-0895

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COMMUNICATION&SOCIETY/
COMUNICACIÓN Y SOCIEDAD
Vol. XXVI • N.4 • 2013 • pp. 25-51

How to cite this article:

HARLOW, S. & HARP, D., "Alternative media in a digital era: Comparing news and information use among activists in the United States and Latin America", *Communication&Society/Comunicación y Sociedad*, Vol. 26, n. 4, 2013, pp. 25-51.

Alternative media in a digital era: Comparing news and information use among activists in the United States and Latin America

Medios alternativos en una era digital: comparando el uso de noticias e información entre activistas en Estados Unidos y en América Latina

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Submitted: May 22, 2013

Approved: August 17, 2013

ABSTRACT: As activists increasingly use the Internet to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, disseminate their own messages, and mobilize protests, this study explores how activists in the United States and Latin America view activism in relation to mainstream and alternative media, particularly online media. Results from a quantitative and qualitative survey show activists distrust mainstream, corporate media and most

frequently get their news online. Also, despite the digital divide and concerns about corporate control of the Internet, activists were positive about the role of the Internet as an alternative public space for staying informed and for waging activism.

RESUMEN: *Porque los activistas utilizan cada vez más Internet para eludir los guardianes tradicionales de medios, difundir sus propios mensajes y movilizar a las protestas, este estudio explora cómo los activistas en los Estados Unidos y América Latina piensan sobre el activismo en relación con los medios de comunicación convencionales y alternativos, en particular los medios de comunicación en línea. Los resultados de una encuesta cuantitativa y cualitativa muestran que los activistas demuestran desconfianza en los medios de comunicación corporativos y masivos, y que más frecuentemente obtienen sus noticias en línea. Además, a pesar de la brecha digital y la preocupación por el control corporativo de Internet, los activistas fueron positivos sobre el papel de Internet como un espacio público y alternativo para mantenerse informado y para ejercer el activismo.*

Keywords: Activism, alternative media, digital media, social media.

Palabras clave: *activismo, medios alternativos, medios digitales, redes sociales.*

1. Introduction

After appearing on the map in the 1970s and 1980s, scholarly research on alternative media – whether alternative newspapers, community radio, zines, or even digital formats like YouTube and blogs– has burgeoned since the turn of the century. Most of this research, however, focuses on the production processes and the content produced, rather than empirically studying the audiences, or users, themselves¹. Further, most communications research shows a distinct Western bias². As such, this study attempts to bridge these two gaps, first by examining activists’ media consumption (both alternative and mainstream), and second by comparing media use between activist audiences in the United States and Latin America. Such comparative research allows for a richer view of how audiences –in this case, activists– interact with and view alternative and mainstream media. Considering the rapid changes in communication systems,

¹ Cfr. DOWNING, John, “The Independent Media Center movement and the anarchist socialist tradition”, in COULDRY, Nick and CURRAN, James (eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2003, pp. 243-257; RAUCH, Jennifer, “Activists as interpretive communities: Rituals of consumption and interaction in an alternative media audience,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 29(6), 2007, pp. 994-1013.

² Cfr. COULDRY, Nick, “Part 1: Researching media internationalization: Comparative media research as if we really mean it”, *Global Media and Communication*, 3(3), 2007, pp. 247-271.

including the globalizing effect of digital media, it is essential that research consider audiences and users beyond those in the much-analyzed Western world³.

Better understanding alternative media audiences and users is important considering the complex and often-strained relationship between activists and mainstream media⁴. Excluded and marginalized from the mainstream press, activists and those involved in social movements historically have created their own media or relied on alternative media for a non-hegemonic perspective⁵. With Twitter and Facebook –both easily arguably forms of online alternative media– playing critical roles in recent revolutions and protests, understanding what forms of media activists use and trust is crucial for understanding what role alternative media play in activism. What’s more, considering that mainstream media credibility is at an all-time low⁶, and in light of the fact that this Web 2.0 era of participation and interactivity means anyone is potentially both a media producer and consumer simultaneously, examining activists’ perceptions of mainstream media and alternative media –including newspapers, community radio, and digital formats like blogs or social media– could give us insight into whether mainstream media truly are as much of an obstacle to activism and social movements as previous research suggests. Further, by examining U.S. and Latin American activists, this research offers a cross cultural analysis, which takes on the much needed work of offering an understanding of how media audiences from different regions of the world use and perceive of mass media and alternative media. Using a framework of alternative media scholarship, this study examines survey results from U.S. and Latin American activists to explore how activists use –in terms of production and consumption– both mainstream and alternative media, particularly online media. Specifically, the research asks where activists get their news, how much importance they place on different forms of media, and their views on corporate/mainstream media in the context of activism. We suggest that better understanding how U.S. and Latin American activists view activism in relation to mainstream and alternative media is important for understanding more broadly how the rapidly changing media environment is impacting social movements around the globe. Recent research illustrated online social network sites play an important role in contemporary activism in the United States and Latin America and that activists are using these tools in similar ways⁷. However, along with this knowledge, essential questions about how traditional media’s role in activists’ work must be answered in order to contextualize these changes. This present research fills that gap.

³ Cfr. MELLADO, Claudia, MOREIRA, Sonia Virginia, *et al.*, “Comparing journalism cultures in Latin America: The case of Chile, Brazil and Mexico”, *The International Communication Gazette*, 74(1), 2012, pp. 60-77.

⁴ Cfr. GITLIN, Todd, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980.

⁵ Cfr. KESSLER, Lauren, *The dissident press: Alternative journalism in American history*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA., 1984; DOWNING, John, *Radical media: Rebellious communication and social movements*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2001.

⁶ Cfr. JONES, David A., “Shooting the messenger: Explaining public discontent with the news media”, *Politics & Policy* 33(2), 2005, pp. 242-262; DAUTRICH, Kenneth and HARTLEY, Thomas H., *How the news media fail American voters: Causes, consequences, and remedies*, Columbia University, New York, 1999, p. 15.

⁷ Cfr. HARLOW, Summer & HARP, Dustin, “Collective Action on the Web: A cross-cultural study of social networking sites and online and offline activism in the United States and Latin America”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 15, 2012, pp. 196-216.

2.1. *Alternative vs. mainstream media*

Scholars cannot agree on a definition of alternative media, or even decide upon a preferred term. Leading alternative media scholar John D.H. Downing refers to “radical media”, arguing that “alternative” tells us nothing since “everything, at some point, is alternative to something else”⁸. For Downing⁹, radical media are the media of social movements: non-mainstream and counterhegemonic, offering counter-information and aimed at social change. Rodriguez¹⁰ builds on Downing’s definition to proffer the concept of ‘citizens’ media’ that strives to avoid the entrapment of binary thinking. Citizens’ media implies citizens are actively contributing to the mediascape, challenging and re-creating their identities, so that the communication process itself becomes empowering. Couldry and Curran¹¹ are not as concerned with whether media are “politically radical or socially empowering”, but rather focus on media production processes that challenge media power. Atton’s¹² definition of alternative media is probably most inclusive, emphasizing process over content, and seeing the conversion of consumers into producers – “prosumers” who use media as both producers and consumers simultaneously– as what makes something alternative. Regardless of the term used, what they have in common is “the desire to foster substantially different structures and processes of communication that make possible egalitarian, interactive, and emancipatory discourse”¹³.

While, as Rodriguez noted, “alternative” is more than just “non-mainstream” and should be defined more by what it is than what it is not¹⁴, there is no denying that alternative media are, indeed, an alternative to mainstream media. Alternative media emerge when marginalized groups, “denied access to the mainstream media marketplace”¹⁵, create their own “dissident” marketplace. Martín Barbero likewise noted that alternative forms of communication are created when people are prevented from expressing themselves and excluded from the monopolies of mainstream media¹⁶.

In the United States, alternative media are the media of dissidents and social movements,¹⁷ linked to counterculture, anarchists, ethnic media, community media, and the underground press¹⁸. These typically small media offer a space for citizen voices, proffering alternative

⁸ DOWNING, John, *op. cit.*, p. ix

⁹ DOWNING, John, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Cfr. RODRIGUEZ, Clemencia, *Fissures in the mediascape*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ, 2011.

¹¹ COULDRY, Nick and CURRAN, James (eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2003, p. 7.

¹² Cfr. ATTON, Chris, *Alternative media*, Sage Publications, London, 2002.

¹³ ATWOOD, Rita, “Assessing critical mass communication scholarship in the Americas: The relationship of theory and practice”, in ATWOOD, Rita and McANANY, Emile G. (eds.), *Communication & Latin American society: Trends in critical research, 1960-1985*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1986, p. 19.

¹⁴ RODRÍGUEZ, Clemencia, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ KESSLER, Lauren, *op. cit.*, p. 15

¹⁶ Cfr. MARTÍN BARBERO, Jesús, “Communicational and technological changes in the public sphere”, in GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN, Alfonso and TUFTE, Thomas (eds.), *Communication for social change anthology: Historical and contemporary readings*, Communication for Social Change Consortium, South Orange, NJ, 2006, pp. 997-1002.

¹⁷ DOWNING, John, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Cfr. ARMSTRONG, David, *A trumpet to arms: Alternative media in America*, South End Press, Boston, 1981; KESSLER, Lauren, *op. cit.*; DOWNING, John, *op. cit.*; RODRÍGUEZ, Clemencia, *op. cit.*

narratives that “question the regime of objectivity”¹⁹. In a study of alternative weeklies in California, Benson²⁰ found independent ownership, publisher commitment to criticality, and audience involvement to be fundamental tenets of alternative media. U.S. alternative media also quote more non-official sources than the mainstream media²¹, and more favorably cover protests and activist issues than the mainstream media²². Atkinson²³ viewed U.S. alternative media in terms of their relation to a “politics of resistance” and their opposition to mainstream media, the status quo, the government, or capitalism.

Latin America’s small but growing alternative media market offers an alternative space for voices systematically marginalized by the corporate and conservative conglomerates that dominate the region’s mainstream media²⁴. Mainstream media cater to business and political elites’ interests, rather than the interests of the people²⁵, and these media oligopolies, “aligned with official power, with political cronies, with economic interests, and with ideologies, in an almost feudal style of journalism”²⁶, highlight the need for an independent, autonomous, counter-hegemonic alternative media that helps to empower everyday citizens and communities typically excluded by the mainstream media²⁷.

Whether in the U.S. or Latin America, having access to alternative channels of communication is especially important for activists and social movements, which traditionally have been marginalized in mainstream news coverage²⁸. Researchers found mainstream media, when covering protests, follow a set routine, or a “protest paradigm”, wherein news stories’ themes, a reliance on official sources, and an emphasis on violence and the spectacle of it all serve to de-

¹⁹ Cfr. Atton, Chris, “Alternative and citizen journalism”, in Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin and Hanitzsch, Thomas (eds.), *The handbook of journalism studies*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 272.

²⁰ Cfr. BENSON, Rodney, “Commercialism and critique: California’s alternative weeklies”, in COULDRY, Nick and CURRAN, James (eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2003, pp. 111-127.

²¹ Cfr. HARCUP, Tony, “‘The Unspoken – Said.’ The journalism of alternative media”, *Journalism*, 4(3), 2003, pp. 356-376.

²² DOWNING, John, *op. cit.*; Cfr. MCLEOD, Douglas M. and HERTOG, James K., “Social control, social change and the mass media’s role in the regulation of protest groups”, in DEMERS, David Pierce and VISWANATH, K. (eds.), *Mass Media, Social Control and Social Change: A Macro-Social Perspective*, Iowa State University Press, Ames, 1999, pp. 305-332.

²³ Cfr. ATKINSON, Joshua, *Alternative media and politics of resistance: A communication perspective*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2010.

²⁴ Cfr. CAÑIZÁLEZ, Andrés and LUGO-OCANDO, Jairo, “Beyond national media systems: A medium for Latin America and the struggle for integration”, in LUGO-OCANDO, Jairo (ed.), *The media in Latin America*, Open University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 209-225; WAISBORD, Silvio, *Watchdog journalism in South America: News, accountability, and democracy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000; ROCKWELL, Rick and JANUS, Noreene, “The triumph of the media elite in postwar Central America”, in FOX, Elizabeth and WAISBORD, Silvio R. (eds.), *Latin politics, global media*, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, 2002, pp. 47-68.

²⁵ Cfr. TORRICO VILLANUEVA, Erick, “The media in Bolivia: The market-driven economy, ‘shock therapy’ and the democracy that ended”, in LUGO-OCANDO, Jairo (ed.), *The media in Latin America*, Open University Press, New York, pp. 29-45; Cfr. ALDANA-AMABILE, Susana, “The media in Paraguay: From the coverage of political democracy to the obsession with violence”, in LUGO-OCANDO, Jairo (ed.), *The media in Latin America*, Open University Press, New York, pp. 167-178; ROCKWELL, Rick and JANUS, Noreene, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Cfr. ROCKWELL, Rick and JANUS, Noreene, *Media power in Central America*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2003, p. 8.

²⁷ RODRIGUEZ, Clemencia, *op. cit.*

²⁸ GITLIN, Todd, *op. cit.*

legitimize protesters, discrediting and potentially undermining a social movement²⁹. As Nicodemus showed, mainstream media can promote acquiescence to the status quo by creating a “sense of powerlessness” with stories “emphasizing continual defeat and providing a rationale for residents to opt out of the political process altogether”³⁰. Such stories lead marginalized groups to believe “they cannot change society”³¹. The media, then, play a powerful role in determining the success of activism because a movement not covered by the media in fact does not even exist³². No wonder that activists turn to alternative media as a way to counter the negative images created when mainstream media rely on the protest paradigm³³. When considering the protest paradigm, the medium matters, as research comparing coverage of the 2011 Egyptian protests in *The New York Times*, Twitter, and Global Voices Online showed that the *Times*, a traditional newspaper, was more likely to fall back on the protest paradigm than either Twitter or Global Voices, an online citizen journalism site emphasizing alternative voices and views³⁴.

2.2. *Alternative media online*

In today’s Internet age, the ability of the former audience to act as information producers and bypass the gatekeepers of mainstream media is greater than ever³⁵, making it easier for activists and other alternative media consumers to control, produce, and quickly and cheaply disseminate their own message³⁶. This new convergent media environment in which we live offers users unprecedented levels of participation –a key component of alternative media–, empowering citizens and affording them more collective negotiating power, which ultimately could lead to increased political participation and democratic change³⁷. As such, the dividing line between the people creating and those consuming alternative media is blurred, meaning that this study,

²⁹ Cfr. CHAN, Joseph Man, LEE, Chin-Chuan, “The journalistic paradigm on civil protests: A case study of Hong Kong”, in ARNO, Andrew and DISSANAYAKE, Wimal (eds.), *The News Media in National and International Conflict*, Westview, Boulder, CO, 1984, pp. 183-202; MCLEOD, Douglas M., and HERTOOG, James K., *op cit.*

³⁰ NICODEMUS, Diane M, “Mobilizing information: Local news and the formation of a viable political community”, *Political Communication*, 21(2), 2004, p. 171.

³¹ WOLIVER, Laura R., *From outrage to action: The politics of grass-roots dissent*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1993, p. 70.

³² Cfr. RUCHT, Dieter, “The quadruple 'A': Media strategies of protest movements since the 1960s”, in VAN DE DONK, Wim, LOADER, Brian D., *et al.*, *Cyberprotest: New media, citizens and social movements*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 29-56.

³³ Downing, John, *op. cit.*; Cfr. PADOVANI, Cinzia, “Citizens' communication and the 2009 G8 summit in L'Aquila, Italy”, *International Journal of Communication* 4, 2010, pp. 416-439.

³⁴ Cfr. HARLOW, Summer and JOHNSON, Thomas J., “Overthrowing the protest paradigm? How The New York Times, Global Voices and Twitter covered the Egyptian Revolution”, *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 2011, pp. 1359-1374.

³⁵ Cfr. ROBINSON, Sue, “Someone's gotta be in control here”, *Journalism Practice*, 1, 2007, pp. 305-321.

³⁶ Cfr. BENNETT, W. Lance, “Communicating global activism: Strengths and vulnerabilities of networked politics”, in VAN DE DONK, Wim, LOADER, Brian D., *et al.*, *Cyberprotest: New media, citizens and social movements*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 123-146.

³⁷ Cfr. JENKINS, Henry, “What happened before YouTube”, in BURGESS, Jean and GREEN, Joshua (eds.), *YouTube*, Polity Press, Malden, MA, 2009, pp. 109-125.

exploring how activists are using media, is at once a study of producers and consumers. Not only do activists consume alternative and mainstream media, but they also are able to produce alternative “media” –whether text, video, photos or audio– more quickly and cheaply due to the ever-increasing access to the Internet and other digital tools. Users, then, are in fact “prosumers” because of the opportunities for participation afforded by the Internet.

According to Castells, online social networks, blogs, p2p sharing, and other interactive aspects of the Internet have created a new communication system: “mass self-communication”, which “has the potential to make possible unlimited diversity and autonomous production of most of the communication flows that construct meaning in the public mind”³⁸. As Postmes and Brunsting noted, online alternative media give “movements and activists the power of mass communication”³⁹. Because of the Internet, individuals can now simultaneously control their own message and reach mass audiences, easily bypassing not just the mainstream media, but even traditional alternative media like zines or community radio. For alternative media, the Internet allows activists and other marginalized groups systematically ignored by the mainstream media to reach new and dispersed audiences not restricted by the limits of time, space, distance or even ideology⁴⁰ –meaning the Internet extends and widens alternative media’s reach to audiences with differing opinions and beliefs who otherwise might only read mainstream media. The Internet even offers the opportunity for activists’ online information to cross over into the mainstream media, thus further extending the reach of alternative and activist media⁴¹.

2.3. *Social media and activism*

Increasingly, online social media like Facebook and Twitter are heralded for their role in activism, such as was seen during the Arab Spring, or with movements like Los Indignados in Spain or Occupy Wall Street in the United States. In fact, online social media now are the most common gateway into activism, according to a 2009 survey by DigiActive⁴². Literature about online activism and using online social media for activism tends to fall into one of three camps: there is nothing inherently new or different about online tools, online tools facilitate and amplify

³⁸ CASTELLS, Manuel, *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 71.

³⁹ POSTMES, Tom, and BRUNSTING, Suzanne, “Collective action in the age of the Internet: Mass communication and online mobilization”, *Social Science Computer Review*, 20(3), 2002, p. 294.

⁴⁰ Cfr. CASTELLS, Manuel, *The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, business and society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001; JURIS, Jeffrey S, “The new digital media and activist networking within anti-corporate globalization movements”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 597(1), 2005, pp. 189-208; VEGH, Sandor, “Classifying forms of online activism: The case of cyberprotests against the World Bank”, in McCaughey, Martha and Ayers, Michael D. (eds.), *Cyberactivism: Online activism in theory and practice*, Routledge, New York, pp. 71-95; RIBEIRO, Gustavo Lins, “Cybercultural politics: Political activism at a distance in a transnational world”, in Alvarez, Sonia E., Dagnino, Evelina, et al. (eds.), *Cultures of politics, politics of cultures: Re-visioning Latin American social movements*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, pp. 325-352.

⁴¹ BENNETT, W. Lance, *op. cit.*; Cfr. PERETTI, Jonah, “Culture jamming, memes, social networks, and the emerging media ecology: The ‘Nike sweatshop email’ as object-to-think-with”, *Peretti Media Online*, 2001.

⁴² Cfr. BRODOCK, Katherine, et al., “Digital activism survey report 2009”, 2009, retrieved from http://www.digiactive.org/wpcontent/uploads/Research4_SurveyReport2009.pdf

offline activism, or online activism is causing a sea-change with long-term impacts⁴³. A comparative study of activists in the United States and Latin America showed surveyed activists believed that online social media help spur offline activism⁴⁴. Other studies have demonstrated that online activism translates into offline activism, and vice versa⁴⁵. For example, Wojcieszak's study of online neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist groups found collective identity was strengthened through these online groups, and the more users participated online, the more they also participated politically offline⁴⁶.

Still, some scholars have expressed concern over potential conflicts of interest from using such commercial and consumerist platforms like Facebook or Twitter to promote social change. Atton warned that the Internet, as a "global capitalist project," could in fact be used to "disarm, prevent, distort or incorporate social practices that attempt resistance"⁴⁷. Other scholars are skeptical of the democratic, horizontal communication potential of the Internet, especially considering unequal access and digital illiteracy⁴⁸. Scholars refer to a digital divide, both within and between countries, that is comprised not merely of lack of access to the Internet, but also lack of access to new equipment, lack of know-how, and even lack of interest in or usefulness for new technologies⁴⁹. As Lim pointed out, any emancipatory, counter-hegemonic, alternative information found online is worthless unless it also moves offline, as "information that circulates only among the members of a small 'elite' loses its power to mobilize people to challenge the cordons of hegemonic power. No revolution can happen without involving society on a wider scale"⁵⁰.

Previous research indicates that alternative media mostly preach to the converted, so activists and social movements need the mainstream media if they want the general public to hear their

⁴³ Cfr. EARL, Jennifer, KIMPORT, Katrina, *et al.*, "Changing the world one webpage at a time: Conceptualizing and explaining Internet activism", *Mobilization: An International Journal*, 15(4), pp. 425-446.

⁴⁴ Harlow, Summer and Harp, Dustin, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Cfr. HARLOW, Summer, "Social media and social movements: Facebook and an online Guatemalan justice movement that moved offline", *New Media & Society*, 14, 2012, pp. 225-243; HARA, Noriko, "Internet use for political mobilization: Voices of participants", *First Monday* 13(7), 2008; NIP, Joyce Y.M., "The Queer Sisters and its electronic bulletin board: A study of the Internet for social movement mobilization", in VAN DE DONK, Wim, LOADER, Brian D., *et al.* (eds.), *Cyberprotest: New media, citizens and social movements*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 233-258.

⁴⁶ Cfr. WOJCIESZAK, Magdalena, "Carrying online participation offline: Mobilization by radical online groups and politically dissimilar offline ties", *Journal of Communication*, 59, 2009, pp. 564-586.

⁴⁷ ATTON, Chris, *An alternative Internet: Radical media, politics and creativity*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁸ Cfr. LE GRIGNOU, Brigitte, and PATOU, Charles, "ATTAC(k)ing expertise: Does the internet really democratize knowledge?", in VAN DE DONK, WIM, LOADER, Brian D., *et al.* (eds.), *Cyberprotest: New media, citizens and social movements*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 164-179; BONFADELLI, Heinz, "The Internet and knowledge gaps: A theoretical and empirical investigation", *European Journal of Communication*, 17(1), 2002, pp. 65-84.

⁴⁹ Cfr. FUCHS, Christian, "The role of income inequality in a multivariate cross-national analysis of the digital divide", *Social Science Computer Review*, 27, 2009, pp. 41-58; GOLDSTEIN, Roxana, "Contributing to socially relevant public policies on e-governance: The case of the genesis of the communes in Buenos Aires City", in GASCÓ-HERNÁNDEZ, Mila (ed.), *Latin America online: Cases, successes and pitfalls*, IRM Press, Hershey, PA, 2007, pp. 277-318.

⁵⁰ LIM, Merlyna, "The Internet, social networks, and reform in Indonesia", in COULDRY, Nick and CURRAN, James (eds.), *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2003, p. 274.

message⁵¹. In this new Digital Era, however, perhaps the ability of activists to access their own communication channels via the Internet means a lessening in importance for mainstream media. Not only do digital technologies enable ordinary citizens (i.e, users) to rely less on mainstream media as their main source of information, but the Internet also affords the possibility for these citizens' messages (i.e., producers) to cross over from the alternative realm to mainstream media⁵². Lievrouw recognized this possibility, suggesting that new media activists might be "redefining what counts as 'mainstream' in a post-mass media age"⁵³.

2.4. Distrust of the mainstream media

The rise in participatory, alternative online media has in part contributed to a decline in the credibility of the U.S. traditional mainstream media, which are criticized for being controlled by corporate interests⁵⁴. Credibility typically is studied in terms of trustworthiness and expertise⁵⁵. U.S. audiences choose media and information they trust over those they do not⁵⁶, and the decline in trust of the mainstream media could stem from the perception that media are biased and focus too much on scandals, thus failing in their roles as watchdogs of government⁵⁷. Without confidence in the media, "the public is left without the ability to discern the important issues of the day"⁵⁸.

In Latin America, the rise of consolidated, corporate media conglomerates⁵⁹ contributed to an increase in research on alternative communication as scholars began "trying to find out how people in different settings have opposed or resisted the dominant power structure and the dominant (usually transnational) communication structure"⁶⁰. A symbiotic, quid-pro-quo relationship between the media and ruling elites means that the media often work to further their

⁵¹ KESSLER, Lauren, *op. cit.*; GITLIN, Todd, *op. cit.*; MCLEOD, Douglas and HERTOOG, James, *op. cit.*

⁵² BENNETT, W. Lance, *op. cit.*; PERETTI, Jonah, *op. cit.*

⁵³ LIEVROUW, Leah A, *Alternative and activist new media*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Cfr. HERMAN, Edward, and CHOMSKY, Noam, "A propaganda model", in DURHAM, Meenakshi Gigi and KELLNER, Douglas (eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Key works*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, 1988, pp. 257-294; RAINIE, Lee, and HERRIGAN, John, "Election 2006 online," 2007, retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org>; SINGER, Jane B., "Journalists and news bloggers: Complements, contradictions, and challenges", in BRUNS, Axel and JACOBS, Joanne (eds.), *Uses of blogs*, Peter Lang, New York, 2006, pp. 23-32.

⁵⁵ Cfr. FLANAGIN, Andrew J., and METZGER, Miriam J. Metzger, "From Encyclopaedia Britannica to Wikipedia: Generational differences in the perceived credibility of online encyclopedia information", *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(3), 2011, pp. 355-374.

⁵⁶ Cfr. CHAFFEE, Steven H. and MCLEOD, J.M., "Consumer decisions and information use", in WARD, Scott and ROBERTSON, Thomas (eds.), *Consumer behavior: Theoretical sources*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973, pp. 385-415.

⁵⁷ Cfr. JONES, David A., "Shooting the messenger: Explaining public discontent with the news media", *Politics & Policy* 33(2), 2005, pp. 242-262.

⁵⁸ Cfr. DAUTRICH, Kenneth, & HARTLEY, Thomas H., *How the news media fail American voters: Causes, consequences, and remedies*, Columbia University, New York, 1999, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Cfr. FOX, Elizabeth, and WAISBORD, Silvio R., *Latin politics, global media*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2002.

⁶⁰ Cfr. MCANANY, Emile G., "Seminal ideas in Latin American critical communication research: An agenda for the North", in ATWOOD, Rita and MCANANY, Emile G. (eds.), *Communication and Latin American society: Trends in critical research, 1960-1985*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1986, pp. 28-47.

own interests, rather than those of society⁶¹, and the public sphere has been commodified so that “homogeneity rules over diversity in content and cultural forms”⁶². The exclusion of ordinary citizens from the region’s mainstream media has prompted “the development of new actors and forms of communication that are recreating cultural identities”⁶³. Community media, community radio in particular, have proven crucial to providing an alternative place for self-expression in Latin America⁶⁴.

In one of the few studies examining alternative media audiences, Rauch found that subjects who participated in her study “put little store in mainstream news messages,” trivializing their mainstream media consumption⁶⁵. This rejection of the mainstream media and professed preference for alternative media was a form of “symbolic resistance” and a way to create a sense of community, distinguishing themselves as alternative media users⁶⁶.

For social movements, then, alternative media form a space for community, serving as counter public spheres, through and across which activists communicate⁶⁷. Rather than one idealized dominant public sphere as Habermas suggested, Fraser posited multiple counterpublics, allowing marginalized groups to articulate their identities as they think through ideas and issues without having to be exposed to the mainstream sphere⁶⁸. As Benkler noted, “The emergence of a substantial nonmarket alternative path for cultural conversation increases the degrees of freedom available to individuals and groups to engage in cultural production and exchange”⁶⁹, which creates a space for contrary opinions and allows users the freedom to construct their own cultural symbols. Thus, examining activists’ media uses and preferences is important for understanding whether alternative media truly are offering a counterpublic where activists can come together and, potentially, mobilize for change.

In light of the preceding literature regarding alternative media and activism, the protest paradigm, the role of online alternative media in social movements, and media credibility, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: Where do activists most often get their news?

RQ2: How much importance do these activists place on using printed alternative media, community radio, television, online alternative media, or social media in activism?

RQ3: What do these activists think about the role of corporate/mainstream media in democracy and social justice?

⁶¹ Cfr. GONZÁLEZ-RODRÍGUEZ, Gustavo, “The media in Chile: The restoration of democracy and the subsequent concentration of media ownership”, in LUGO-OCANDO, Jairo (ed.), *The media in Latin America*, Open University Press, New York, 2008, pp. 61-77.

⁶² Cfr. SANDOVAL-GARCÍA, Carlos, “The media in Costa Rica: Many media, scarce communication”, in LUGO-OCANDO, Jairo, *The media in Latin America*, Open University Press, New York, p. 100.

⁶³ Cfr. MARTÍN-BARBERO, Jesús, “The mediated genres and cultural identity of the people”, *Culture and Communication Media*, Pontificia University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain, 2000, p. 125.

⁶⁴ Cfr. AGOSTA, Diana E., “Constructing civil society, supporting local development: A case study of community radio in postwar El Salvador”, *Democratic Communiqué*, 21 (1), 2007, pp. 4-26.

⁶⁵ RAUCH, Jennifer, *op. cit.*, p. 1.007.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ Cfr. FRASER, Nancy, “Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy”, *Social Text* 25/26, 1990, pp. 56-80.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

⁶⁹ Cfr. BENKLER, Yochai, *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*, Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 293.

RQ4: How do activists in the United States and Latin America view activism in relation to mainstream and alternative media?

3.1. *Methods*

This study examining U.S. and Latin American activists' perceptions of mainstream and alternative media relied on an online survey of closed- and open-ended questions distributed to U.S. English-speaking and Latin American Spanish-speaking activists. Although there are limitations to employing online surveys, the authors deemed this method the most appropriate way to recruit subjects since the goal was to specifically reach activists who engage in online activism. A two-way approach to sampling was used to obtain a diverse and representative, although not generalizable, sample.

First, the initial sample was obtained by compiling two lists, each of 100 known activists in each region. As no master list of activists exists in the United States or Latin America, these activists were identified using news accounts, web searches and activist reports. Further, efforts were made to purposefully include various causes and geographic regions, as well as ages, genders, and political leanings. In the end, diverse causes, movements, and activists were identified so that all 16 major social movement categories outlined in the *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*⁷⁰, such as environmental, global justice, women, LGBT, etc., were represented. Aimed at obtaining a quota sample⁷¹, efforts were made to include an equal number of women and men from throughout the United States and from all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. All 200 activists identified were sent an email invitation to complete the Web-based survey; two follow-up reminders also were sent.

Second, 20 activist websites, listserves, blogs, and online groups were identified in both regions. Researchers posted an invitation to these websites asking activists to participate in the same Web-based survey. Respondents were encouraged via the websites and email to forward the survey to other potentially relevant subjects. Such a snowball sampling method is useful for increasing sample size and generating a more accurate account of the subject under study⁷².

The result of this two-pronged sampling approach was a convenience, or "purposive" sample, in which researchers use their own judgment to create a sample of *relevant* subjects that fulfills a certain purpose, and thus is not representative of or generalizable to the population at large⁷³. In this case, such a convenience sample is warranted because there exists no master list of U.S. and Latin American activists from which a random sample could be drawn. Respondents said they participated in the following causes: workers' rights, women's rights, human rights, indigenous

⁷⁰ Cfr. NESS, Imanuel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2004.

⁷¹ Cfr. POTTER, W. James, *An analysis of thinking and research about qualitative methods*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, 1996.

⁷² Cfr. LINDLOF, Thomas R., and TAYLOR, Bryan C., *Qualitative communication research methods*, 3rd ed, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011.

⁷³ Cfr. DU PLOOY, Trudie, "Sampling in communication research", in DU PLOOY, Gertruida M. (ed.), *Introduction to communication: Communication research*, The University of South Africa Rustica Press, Ndabeni, 1995, pp. 48-66.

rights, animal rights, violence prevention, abortion rights, health issues (particularly in relation to HIV and AIDS), environmental issues, education, migration, open software, and LGBT rights. Survey data was collected for five weeks beginning Sept. 1, 2010. For the United States, 128 participants responded to the survey, 26 percent from the list of 100 identified activists and the remainder reached via the snowball recruiting method. For Latin America, 133 subjects responded, 30 percent from the original list of activists. There is no way to determine how many activists saw the invitation posted to one of the 20 websites, listserves, or blogs and decided not to respond. Respondents were not required to answer every question of the survey; questions could be skipped resulting in varying Ns for the different survey questions. Despite the notoriously lower response rates for online surveys⁷⁴, researchers determined that the Internet was the best way to survey respondents because their Internet use was one of the main emphases of the study. What's more, online surveys have been found to be useful for accessing hard-to-reach or hard-to-identify populations⁷⁵, and no master list of all activists in the United States and Latin America is readily available, thus justifying researchers' decision to employ an online survey and obtain a convenience sample.

As the aim of this survey was to produce a comparative study, researchers made sure to emphasize qualitatively identical concepts across both regions in both Spanish and English⁷⁶. The authors are fluent in at least one of the two languages of the survey, and familiar with the cultures under study. The analysis focused on both similarities and differences between the two regions.

Closed-ended survey questions, used to answer RQ1-3, measured where activists most often obtained their local, national, and international news; how important a role they believed printed alternative media, community radio, television, and online alternative media *currently* and *should* play in activism; and to what degree activists believe that corporate/mainstream media threaten democracy and social justice. Open-ended survey questions, used to answer RQ4, probed activists' views about the relationship between media and activism.

To qualitatively analyze RQ4, researchers employed a discourse analysis of the open-ended survey questions. Discourse analysis, a method without strict guidelines to steer the analysis, allows for themes to emerge from texts. Starting with Stuart Hall's notion of a "long preliminary soak"⁷⁷, the researchers immersed themselves in the qualitative data –reading and re-reading until new themes no longer emerged. The method "allows the researcher to discern latent meaning but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of text"⁷⁸. After identifying themes in the data from both regions, the researchers compared and contrasted the results.

⁷⁴ Cfr. SAX, L. J., GILMARTIN, S. K. and BRYANT, A. N., "Assessing response rates and nonresponse bias in Web and paper surveys", *Research in Higher Education*, 44, 2003, pp. 409-432; KAPLOWITZ, M. D., HADLOCK, T. D. and LEVINE, R., "A comparison of Web and mail survey response rates", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 68, 2004, pp. 94-101.

⁷⁵ Cfr. GRANELLO, D. H. and WHEATON, J. E., "Online data collection: Strategies for research", *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 82, 2004, pp. 387-393.

⁷⁶ Cfr. BLUMLER, Jay George, and GUREVITCH, Michael, *The crisis of political communication*, Routledge, London, 1995; CHANG, Tsan-Kuo, BERG, Pat Pat, FUNG, Anthony Ying-Him, *et al.*, "Comparing nations in mass communication research, 1970-97: A critical assessment of how we know what we know", *International Communication Gazette*, 63(5), 2001, pp. 415-434.

⁷⁷ Cfr. HALL, Stuart, "Introduction", in SMITH, Anthony Charles, *et al.* (eds.), *Paper voices: The popular press and social change, 1935-1965*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1975, p. 15.

⁷⁸ Cfr. FURSICH, Elfriede, "In defense of textual analysis", *Journalism Studies*, 10(2), 2008, p. 4.

4.1. Results

Answering RQ1, which questioned where activists most often got their news, results showed that activists from both regions more frequently cited email (39 percent), social media (32 percent), and online news sites (29 percent) as where they often got their news rather than word of mouth (26 percent), newspapers (20 percent), radio (22 percent), or television (13 percent). When comparing respondents in the two regions, interestingly, significantly more Latin American respondents (56 percent) than U.S. respondents (14 percent) said they often got their news from television ($\chi^2 = 32.643$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). Likewise, significantly more Latin American activists (56 percent) than U.S. activists (33 percent) cited radio as a frequent source for news ($\chi^2 = 9.639$, $df = 3$, $p < .05$).

Analysis of data for RQ2, which questioned how important a role printed alternative media, community radio, television, online alternative media and online social media play in activism, showed that Latin American respondents generally and more frequently than U.S. respondents believed in the importance of these media outlets for their role in activism (see Table 1). Respondents from both regions indicated that online and social media are and should have a more significant role in activism compared to printed alternative media.

Slightly more Latin American respondents (58 percent) than U.S. respondents (46 percent) agreed that printed alternative media *currently* play an important role in activism (see Table 1), but the difference was not significant. However, when it came to the role that respondents said printed alternative media *should* play in activism, the difference between Latin American respondents and U.S. respondents was significant, as 80 percent of Latin Americans surveyed agreed that printed alternative media *should* play an important role in activism, versus 54 percent of U.S. respondents ($\chi^2 = 11.030$, $df = 4$, $p < .01$).

Table 1. How activists in Latin America versus the U.S. see the importance of printed alternative media in activism

Role of printed alternative media	Strength of accordance	Latin American respondents	U.S. respondents
Strength of agreement that printed alternative media <i>currently</i> play an important role in activism ¹	Strongly/somewhat disagree	12 (15.2%)	13 (19.4%)
	Neutral	21 (26.6%)	23 (34.3%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	46 (58.2%)	31 (46.3%)
	Total (100%)	n=79	n=67
Strength of agreement that printed alternative media <i>should</i> play an important role in activism ²	Strongly/somewhat disagree	6 (7.7%)	10 (14.9%)
	Neutral	10 (12.8%)	21 (31.3%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	62 (79.5%)	36 (53.7%)
	Total (100%)	n=78	n=67

¹ $\chi^2 = 2.081$, $df = 2$, $p = .353$

² $\chi^2 = 11.030$, $df = 4$, $p < .01$

Analysis also showed significantly more Latin American respondents (65 percent) than U.S. respondents (41 percent) said alternative/community radio (see Table 2) *currently* plays an important role in activism ($\chi^2= 8.037$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$). Likewise, significantly more Latin American activists (87 percent) than U.S. activists (66 percent) said alternative/community radio *should* play an important role in activism ($\chi^2= 10.945$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$).

Table 2. How activists in Latin America versus the U.S. see the importance of community radio in activism

Role of community radio	Strength of accordance	Latin American respondents	U.S. respondents
Strength of agreement that community radio <i>currently</i> plays an important role in activism ¹	Strongly/somewhat disagree	12 (15.2%)	17 (25.0%)
	Neutral	16 (20.3%)	23 (33.8%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	51 (64.6%)	28 (41.2%)
	Total (100%)	n=79	n=68
Strength of agreement that community radio <i>should</i> play an important role in activism ²	Strongly/somewhat disagree	6 (7.6%)	8 (11.8%)
	Neutral	4 (5.1%)	15 (22.1%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	69 (87.3%)	45 (66.2%)
	Total (100%)	n=79	n=68

¹ $\chi^2= 8.037$, $df = 2$, $p < .05$

² $\chi^2= 10.945$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$

Considering the role television occupies in activism (see Table 3), significantly more Latin American respondents (47 percent) than U.S. respondents (27 percent) agreed that television *currently* plays an important role in activism ($\chi^2= 9.511$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the difference was significant between Latin American respondents (76 percent) and U.S. respondents (49 percent) who said television *should* play an important role in activism ($\chi^2= 12.833$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$).

Table 3. How activists in Latin America versus the U.S. see the importance of television in activism

Role of television	Strength of accordance	Latin American respondents	U.S. respondents
Strength of agreement that television <i>currently</i> plays an important role in activism ¹	Strongly/somewhat disagree	32 (41.0%)	31 (45.6%)
	Neutral	9 (11.5%)	19 (27.9%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	37 (47.4%)	18 (26.5%)
	Total (100%)	n=78	n=68
Strength of agreement that television <i>should</i>	Strongly/somewhat disagree	7 (9.0%)	19 (27.9%)
	Neutral	12 (15.4%)	16 (23.5%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	59 (75.6%)	33 (48.5%)

play an important role in activism ²	Total (100%)	n=78	n=68
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¹ $\chi^2 = 9.511, df = 2, p < .01$

² $\chi^2 = 12.833, df = 2, p < .01$

When it came to the role of online alternative media in activism, respondents from both regions were equally optimistic that online alternative media is important for activism (see Table 4). About 76 percent of Latin American respondents and 72 percent of U.S. respondents said online alternative media *currently* play an important role in activism, and about 83 of Latin American respondents and 78 percent of U.S. respondents said online alternative media *should* play an important role in activism.

Table 4. How activists in Latin America versus the U.S. see the importance of online news in activism

Role of online news	Strength of accordance	Latin American respondents	U.S. respondents
Strength of agreement that online news <i>currently</i> plays an important role in activism ¹	Strongly/somewhat disagree	10 (12.8%)	4 (5.9%)
	Neutral	9 (11.5%)	15 (22.1%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	59 (75.6%)	49 (72.1%)
	Total (100%)	n=78	n=68
Strength of agreement that online news <i>should</i> play an important role in activism ²	Strongly/somewhat disagree	4 (5.2%)	5 (7.4%)
	Neutral	9 (11.7%)	10 (14.7%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	64 (83.1%)	53 (77.9%)
	Total (100%)	n=77	n=68

¹ $\chi^2 = 4.333, df = 2, p = .115$

² $\chi^2 = .642, df = 2, p = .726$

Similarly, there were no significant differences in activists' views about the role of social media in activism (see Table 5), as about 70 percent of Latin American respondents and 59 percent of U.S. respondents said SNS *currently* play an important role in activism, and 70 percent of Latin American respondents and 65 percent of U.S. respondents agreed SNS *should* play an important role in activism.

Table 5. How activists in Latin America versus the U.S. see the importance of SNS in activism

Role of SNS	Strength of accordance	Latin American respondents	U.S. respondents
Strength of agreement that	Strongly/somewhat disagree	8 (12.8%)	8 (5.9%)
	Neutral	16 (11.5%)	20 (22.1%)

SNS <i>currently</i> play an important role in activism ¹	Strongly/somewhat agree	55 (75.6%)	40 (72.1%)
	Total (100%)	n=79	n=68
Strength of agreement that SNS <i>should</i> play an important role in activism ²	Strongly/somewhat disagree	8 (10.1%)	9 (13.2%)
	Neutral	16 (20.3%)	15 (22.1%)
	Strongly/somewhat agree	55 (69.6%)	44 (64.7%)
	Total (100%)	n=79	n=68

¹ $x^2 = 2.001$, $df = 2$, $p = .368$

² $x^2 = .493$, $df = 2$, $p = .782$

Answering RQ3, which questioned activists' views toward the impact of corporate/mainstream media on democracy, analysis showed that significantly more U.S. respondents (74 percent) than Latin American respondents (49 percent) agreed that corporate/mainstream media threaten democracy and social justice ($x^2 = 10.323$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). Analysis showed a negative correlation between how much activists said they believed mainstream media threaten democracy and how much they believed television plays an important role in activism (Pearson's $R = -.162$). A positive correlation existed between how much activists said they believed mainstream media threaten democracy and how much they believed online alternative media should play a role in activism (Pearson's $R = .170$). Results also showed a positive correlation between television watching and distrust of mainstream media (Pearson's $R = .243$), with less frequent watching of television news related to the belief that corporate media threaten democracy.

RQ4 asked how activists in the United States and Latin America view activism in relation to mainstream and alternative media. Two overarching and interlocking themes –*economics* and *quality*– emerged in the qualitative analysis. Analysis of the Latin American responses revealed a third theme –*necessity*. Under each of these themes related subthemes surfaced. Within the *economics* theme two distinct subthemes surfaced: the problems of a corporate media system that values profit, and access to the Internet. Within the *quality* theme arose two subthemes: corporate media's lack of quality, and a concern with accuracy of online information. Latin American respondents also noted activists' *necessity* of traditional and digital media –the only theme unique to one of our regions.

One of the most prominent issues within the U.S. discourse related to the problems of the corporate media structure. Several respondents expressed concern with the funding structure of U.S. mainstream news and how that affects the quality of information. For example, "Corporate/mainstream media doesn't currently live up to its potential as a catalyst for social justice, as it is predominantly funded by those who impede justice" and "It isn't the lack of access to newspapers it is the lack of access to information you can trust that threatens democracy. It is that the story is written by the corporate structure". This idea of a biased media was echoed in other responses as well, including "media outlets that are obviously bought and paid for by certain political interests in the form of advertisers or other influence". Some respondents went beyond arguing that mainstream media presented a biased perspective that serves the needs of big business, arguing that "corporate media has the U.S. public almost completely brainwashed" and "TV and radio news coverage is biased and a joke". This qualitative perspective contextualizes the quantitative data noted above that suggests a majority

of U.S. activists surveyed do not believe that TV and radio are important or should be important for activism and that corporate media threaten democracy. One respondent also noted concern with “Net Neutrality and the possibility of corporate dominance of the internet,” though this was a much more prominent theme among Latin American respondents.

In commenting about access to information on the Internet, often U.S. survey respondents specifically named the digital divide, illustrating a realization that Internet access and skills could limit online activism’s reach and success. For example, one U.S. respondent said, “I’m concerned about the Digital Divide that prevents working class and immigrant communities from fully participating in online activism”. At the same time, these respondents offered caveats, resulting in a more positive sense of the issue. For example, one U.S. respondent said the “digital divide is an issue that effects the degree to which online activism is a positive force, however, I find that frequently people forget that many low SES (socio-economic status) people have access via their phones/ other mobile devices. I think this is still highly problematic, but it does mean that frequently, they are not being completely excluded from the discourse”. More than one U.S. respondent noted access issues in the United States were different than in other parts of the world. For example, one wrote, “The lack of access globally is huge but in the U.S. if you want to be engaged access is easier. Every library has access”. Despite the digital divide, the overall sense of the discourse was one of positivity toward the Internet as a form of communication for activists.

While quality of mainstream/corporate media was a prominent concern among U.S. respondents, some also noted their unease with the quality of information on the Internet. For example, one respondent wrote, “An uneducated and uninformed point of view can be easily promoted and passed along by the general public as truth, even though it isn’t because they are too lazy or apathetic to fact-check on their own”. Another person expressed concern not with the quality of the content but the quality of connections made in online communications: “The danger of the Internet is that radicals can now be in contact with other radicals all over the country and world, and can spend all their time discussing and arguing with those radicals, and feeling like they’re actually accomplishing something, rather than engaging in their communities to address people’s actual needs”.

Latin American respondents similarly expressed concern about corporate ownership of the media but many also noted concern for corporate ownership of the Internet as being detrimental for activism. As one respondent said, “Media are in the hands of groups of power that want to portray a false image of reality”, and another called mainstream media “biased” and “unreliable”. This is such a problem, another respondent noted, because “media are fundamental for activism. However, because (media) are in the hands of corporations with interests very different than those of solidarity, ethics, and development of communities, they offer little or no space for activism”. Similarly, one respondent said that activism requires a media where citizens, not corporations, have a voice. One respondent went so far as to say that mainstream media are “in the service of injustice”.

Concerning economics, corporate ownership of the Internet also surfaced as a strong subtheme in the analysis of Latin American respondents, while only one U.S. respondent noted this concern. Noting the power of companies like Google and Microsoft, one Latin American activist said, “They don’t belong to the people... In the end we are turning over private information, promoting the concentration of information in a few hands”. Another respondent registered concern with the “corporate”, “restrictive”, and “non-democratic” Internet, explaining, “freedom

of expression should also be guaranteed on the Internet”. Likewise, one activist noted the increase in censorship and government control of the Internet.

Access to the Internet –or the digital divide– emerged as another prominent theme in analysis of the Latin American respondents, much like that of the U.S. respondents. Many respondents highlighted the far-from-universal access to the Internet, noting that rural, poor, migrant, indigenous, and illiterate populations often are excluded from any sort of online activism or information because of lack of access. As one respondent said, radio was the only sure way of making sure all the public could be informed –a point that helps explain why Latin American survey respondents were significantly more likely than U.S. respondents to say that radio currently does and should play a role in activism.

The elite, corporate takeover of mainstream media is why Latin American respondents saw alternative media as being so important for activism. For example, one activist surveyed said, “Because alternative media do not respond to the prevailing logic, they can be used for authentic rebellion”. Similarly, another respondent said alternative media were “indispensable” for activism and political and social development. Criticizing the mainstream media as being in the hands of elites, one respondent said that alternative media and community radio were not enough for spreading alternative information. Rather, the Internet, especially Facebook and Twitter, seemed to be the only way in the future to share information that “the press has systematically silenced”. Likewise, noting the way mainstream media had mostly ignored a series of recent protests, one respondent said the Internet was “fundamental” for informing the public about, as well as mobilizing and organizing, protests and demonstrations. The fundamental need for media’s role in activism emerged as a prominent theme unique to Latin American respondents.

Interestingly, despite the Latin American respondents’ overwhelmingly negative view toward corporate media, many noted that activists need media, no matter how bad those media are. For example, one respondent said, “Activism has to make use of the communication possibilities that currently exist, and not lament the concentration of media. But rather they should generate the conditions for breaking through the information blockage and create media that are attractive to the population”. Another respondent also noted that activists need to be better trained in how to work with the mainstream media, and another suggested, “informing the media about social struggles so that they can be converted into allies”. One respondent even said that in this age of globalization, activists should take advantage of the globalized, corporate media as a “tool that can give us a lot of help in making contact with other people in the world”.

5.1. Discussion and conclusions

Recognizing that in today’s digital era the Internet has simultaneously rendered news consumers as producers and vice versa, this study aimed to study activists’ media use, interrogating their use –in terms of production and consumption– of mainstream and alternative media, and particularly online media. In general this comparative study showed that activists surveyed in the United States and Latin America are turning to alternative media for news, particularly using email, social media and online news. In turn, while differences exist between the two geographical locations when it comes to uses of these media outlets, surveyed respondents note a distrust of corporate media, which offers an explanation for why they are turning away from traditional

news media. These are important findings as we consider the rapid and current changes in the mass media environment and reflect upon how activists with access to traditional and alternative media are using and viewing these outlets in their work.

Illustrating their distrust in corporate media, more activists surveyed from both regions cited email as their most frequent source of news than any other source, and television was where they least often got their news. Also again showing optimism toward the Internet, despite the digital divide and corporate leanings, activists said they frequently got their news from online social media and online news sites. It is worth noting that regardless of whether they were from the United States or Latin America, surveyed activists were equally likely to say they frequently got their news online. The digital divide, then, was not necessarily an obstacle for these Latin American activists who found a way to not only regularly access the Internet, but also use it to consume news. While clearly this survey targeted those activists already online, they might be seen as serving an important link in the world of the digital divide. In other words, these activists themselves can serve as mediums, spreading the information they gain online to the populations they serve or represent who might not have the same levels of computer access or know-how as these activists. This might explain why surveyed activists in both regions expressed concern about the digital divide but also expressed optimism toward the Internet.

It also is important to point out that significantly more respondents from Latin America than the United States said they frequently got their news from radio and television, demonstrating that region's long history of electronic media dominance, likely due in part to high levels of illiteracy and few newspapers outside the capital cities. As such, even with the optimism toward using the Internet to consume news, it still is necessary for activists to put their time and effort into traditional media like community radio to ensure that less technologically savvy populations are not excluded from consumption or production processes.

Only about half of respondents from both regions said printed alternative media *currently* play an important role in activism. On one hand, such findings are somewhat surprising considering that traditionally, alternative media and social movements have been interdependent, as many scholars previously have noted⁷⁹. On the other hand, given the way alternative media often are marginalized and “ghettoized”⁸⁰, it is plausible that perhaps activists are disillusioned with traditional forms of alternative media. It is equally possible—considering that activists cited email, social media, and online news sites as the places they most often get their news—that as people move to a digital environment for news and information, traditional printed alternative media are losing their audience. Interestingly, 80 percent of Latin American respondents, compared with slightly more than half of U.S. respondents, said they believed printed alternative media *should* play an important role in activism. This could also indicate that in Latin America—a region with a rich tradition of alternative media and a long history of elite-controlled media working in collusion with politicians and business owners—activists still see an important role for printed alternative media in the future. This viewpoint is despite the high illiteracy rates in the region. This finding might indicate optimism in future literacy rates or simply a view that various forms of relatively inexpensive and accessible alternative media are important to these activists. The very real reality of the digital divide in terms of access and skills—both within

⁷⁹ Downing, John, *op. cit.*; RODRIGUEZ, Clemencia, *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ Cfr. GILLET, James, “The challenges of institutionalization for AIDS media activism”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 25(5), 2003, pp. 607-624.

Latin American countries and between the United States and Latin America—could help explain why respondents in Latin America, more than the U.S., saw printed media as important for social movements. In contrast, perhaps U.S. respondents viewed limited potential for printed alternative media in a nearly digitally saturated country.

Along those same lines, then, it comes as no surprise that in Latin America, a region with lower literacy than the United States, more respondents saw community radio as *currently* playing a more important role in activism than did U.S. respondents. Likewise, nearly one-third more respondents in Latin American said community radio *should* play an important part in activism. Considering not just literacy rates in Latin America, but also multiple indigenous populations speaking multiple languages and dispersed countries with often poor road infrastructure making newspaper delivery to the countryside difficult at best, community radio long has been a crucial part of the region's media ecosystem, making Latin American respondents' faith in this medium unsurprising. In the U.S., however, community radio has played a much more quiet role—no new urban community radio station licenses have been granted in a decade, and the Federal Communications Commission has a backlog of 6,500 applications for low-power FM stations⁸¹. Far fewer respondents in both regions said television *currently* plays an important role in activism. This finding makes sense given that, in general, television airwaves are off-limits to activists—unless they rely on (very limited) public access television—as it is essentially impossible for activists to create, control or disseminate their own messages via television. Respondents from both regions, however, were more optimistic in terms of the role they believed television *should* play in activism. About three-fourths of Latin American activists surveyed, and about half of U.S. activists surveyed, said television *should* play an important role. Such a finding corresponds with the fact that television is the dominant medium in both regions, suggesting that activists realize that if they want to reach the public at large, and not just preach to the converted, then TV could help. It is likely, too, that while activists would like TV to play a larger role, they are aware of the unfair treatment activist groups sometimes receive via this corporate owned medium. So while they believe television should play a larger role, they are realistic about the fact that it does not.

When looking at the Internet and social movements, about three-fourths of respondents from both regions saw online news sites as *currently* playing an important role in activism, and about four-fifths said these sites *should* play an important part in activism. Similarly, most respondents from both regions said social media *currently* play and *should* in the future play an important role in activism. Such a finding reinforces the somewhat utopian views of scholars who see the Internet, especially social media, as opening a more democratic, horizontal space for alternative views and information. It is interesting to note that despite the digital divide, Latin American respondents were even more optimistic about the importance of the Web for activism than were U.S. respondents. Also noteworthy is that this survey was conducted prior to the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, both of which were intertwined with online social media from the beginning. As such, it is worth speculating whether respondents' answers would have attributed even greater importance to the Internet in social movements.

⁸¹ Cfr. Harlow, Summer, "FCC rulings clear way for first new urban community radio stations in U.S. in decades," *The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas*, 2012, retrieved from <https://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/00-9406-fcc-rulings-clear-way-first-new-urban-community-radio-stations-us-decades>.

Activists' responses regarding the Internet also could signal an underlying belief that the Web represents a cheap and easy way around mainstream media, without the hassle of all the equipment and effort needed to publish an alternative newspaper, radio program or television show. What is clear is that these activists do not trust the mainstream media. More than three-fourths of U.S. respondents and about half of Latin American respondents said they believed corporate/mainstream media are bad for democracy and social justice. What's more, only a few – about one-fifth of Latin American respondents and less than a tenth of U.S. respondents– said they disagreed with the idea that mainstream media are a threat to democracy. This finding lends empirical corroboration to the idea that activists do not just turn to alternative media to get out their own message –they do so because of a mistrust of mainstream media. Interestingly, the data showed a correlation between television use and belief that corporate media harm democracy: the more respondents said they did not get their local news from television, the more they also believed that corporate media threaten democracy and social justice. Also, the more activists saw online news sites as being important for social movements, the more they had a negative view toward mainstream media. Again, this indicates activists see television as more corporate –and thus less trustworthy– than other news sources. It also suggests that, despite the fact that Facebook and YouTube clearly are giant corporations, these activists still viewed the Internet as more free and open to their alternative perspectives. As such, this finding could signify that the Egyptian Revolution was just the beginning, and that activists increasingly will be turning to online social media as a new alternative public sphere suitable not just for disseminating alternative information, but for mobilizing activism.

Analysis of surveyed activists' open-ended responses provided further evidence for this study's quantitative findings showing activists from both regions viewed mainstream media as harmful for democracy and social justice. Likewise, they viewed alternative media as the remedy for elite, corporate-controlled media. They saw corporate media as limiting citizen voices and access, which in turn hindered activism. Interestingly, while U.S. respondents expressed more concern for corporate ownership of traditional media, some Latin American respondents also expressed a concern for corporate ownership of the Internet. Considering that fewer people in Latin America have access to the Internet, these activists may be more keen to the financial and corporate realities behind the medium. On the other hand, in such a saturated population as the United States, the Internet seems to many an easily accessible place to freely express oneself.

Interestingly, respondents' views toward the Internet seemed contradictory, perhaps illustrating the difficulty of understanding a phenomenon in the midst of an ongoing evolution (or perhaps, even, revolution). While activists from both regions noted the very un-democratic digital divide, and Latin American respondents also noted the corporate takeover of the Internet, they were generally less pessimistic about the Internet than about mainstream media. In fact, despite lack of access and concerns about corporatism and increased censorship online, activists still seemed to see the Internet as perhaps representing the future of alternative media, and as creating an online alternative public sphere. This might be explained in two ways. First, the gatekeepers of traditional media are well known to these activists while the Internet, though it is not trouble free, has proven to be a space where people have more access to freely express opinions without the filters of gatekeepers. Second, the digital revolution has no signs of slowing while there are indications that traditional media, particularly in the United States, are having trouble maintaining market shares. Perhaps, then, this optimism toward the future of the Internet is a

simple result of understanding technological advances and the snowball effect that seems to explain digital media in the last decade.

While these results are not representative of all U.S. and Latin American activists, they offer preliminary empirical evidence of how activists in divergent geographic and cultural spaces think about and use traditional and alternative media in the contemporary landscape. An overwhelming distrust for corporate media coupled with an acknowledgement of its limits for promoting activism, along with an optimistic view of the potential of the Internet for activists' causes, may signal that activists in this new media ecosystem are less reliant on mainstream media as a tool in their work. As a result, perhaps the "protest paradigm"⁸² is no longer as much of a threat as media users are no longer limited to the mainstream media's negative portrayals of activists and protests. Rather, the Internet could be allowing activists to create a new paradigm in which online alternative media offer an alternative narrative and multiple visions about a protest movement. Also, despite the shortcomings of the Internet –namely, the digital divide and corporate ownership issues– surveyed activists indicated that the Internet is not just a source of information but also a tool for activism. These findings are important as scholars and activists alike attempt to understand the relationships between activists and media, both traditional and new. The comparative analysis is important as well, considering the global nature of communication systems and a penchant for United States-centered research. This study offers a broader understanding of the ways in which traditional and alternative media are viewed and used in activism, contributing to research in areas of globalization and communication.

This research leads to the belief that the Internet could play a greater role in activism than radio or alternative print media ever did, as respondents noted optimism in access to digital media (even while acknowledging the digital divide) and because of the democratizing nature of the Internet. In fact, one of the most important points to draw from this research might be how the Internet is seen as potentially democratizing alternative media. With this shift even the hegemony found in activist causes can be mitigated, as more activists –and not just leaders– are able to share messages via email, social media, and the Internet. In other words, the power to speak is dispersed among members of a cause rather than held by those with access to printing capabilities. This point, however, is made cautiously as it is important not to overstate the promise of the Internet or to ignore the digital divide –a significant problem to varying degrees around the world. Further, this is a small sample of a select group of activists. What can be concluded without hesitation is that among those activists surveyed in the United States and Latin America who are using the Internet, they believe it plays an important role in activism. Further, we can conclude that alternative media remain crucial for activism. The questions yet to be answered fully are what alternative medium will surface as most prominent in activist causes and how will that differ within and among geographical and cultural spaces.

⁸² MCLEOD, Douglas and HERTOG, James, *op cit*.

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