

**Social Change and Social Media: Latin American Activists' Use of Digital Tools in the
Face of the Digital Divide**

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Abstract: This quantitative and qualitative analysis of Latin American activists' survey responses examined whether and how, in the face of the digital divide, online social media can be used to work toward social change and to strengthen democracy. Analysis showed respondents saw lack of Internet access and lack of technological skills as some of the top challenges to incorporating social media in activism. Still, they did not see the Internet as threatening democracy and social justice. Rather, analysis suggests social media are creating alternative public spheres, opening dialogic, safe, global, and digital spaces that promote public discourse and participation, both of which are foundational for democracy.

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Introduction

A free press, freedom of expression, and the availability of alternative information are fundamental for political participation and democracy (Dahl, 1998; Smith, 2005). Gans (2003) advocated for a “multiperspectival” journalism from the ground up, in which everyday citizens’ voices – and not just those of the ruling elite – are privileged in the news, adding diversity and thus strengthening democracy. According to Gans’ (2003) normative theory of democracy, journalists are crucial for informing citizens, as informed citizens are more likely to participate politically, and the more citizens participate, the more democratic a country is. Historically, the mainstream media have been criticized for failing to adequately inform citizens – especially when it comes to the activities of activists, social movements, and other marginalized groups (Kessler, 1986; Gitlin, 1980) – thus potentially hindering political participation. What’s more, critics contend that mainstream media have become commodified, and the wealthier and more powerful the concentrated, media conglomerates become, the “poorer the prospects for participatory democracy” (McChesney, 1999: 2).

As such, activists and other groups excluded from mainstream media turn to creating their own alternative, more democratic forms of communication (Kessler, 1986; Downing, 2001), which in this digital information age often means the use of online social networking sites (SNS) and other new technologies that serve as both the communication channel for activists and the actual “field” of activism itself (Lievrouw, 2011). Thus, in light of the way activists from the Arab World to the Western Hemisphere are employing the Internet and SNS to sidestep mainstream media and stage protests demanding social justice, this study of quantitative and qualitative survey data explores how activists in Latin America view the potential of online social media for strengthening activism and democracy and contributing to social justice. Such a study is timely and important for adding to a burgeoning understanding of the role of the Internet in activism and alternative media, and the focus on Latin America helps fill a gap in the literature when it comes to communication research of non-Western countries (Coudry, 2007; Takahashi, 2007; Mellado et al., 2012). Additionally, much of the scholarship on social media and activism focuses on authoritarian regimes (e.g. Faris, 2008; Diamond, 2010), rather than democratic yet digitally divided countries like those of Latin America.

In today’s digital era of Web 2.0 and interactivity, scholars have praised the Internet’s democratic potential, spotlighting its ability to increase access to information, encourage free speech, and mobilize citizen participation (Ackerly, 2003; Curran, 2008; Castells, 2009). What’s more, the Internet provides noncommercial, non-hegemonic media options, and affords opportunities for diverse and marginalized voices to express themselves, potentially contributing to a strengthening of press freedom in Latin America (Bennett, 2004; Curran, 2003; Dizard, 2010; Steenveld, 2004; Herman & McChesney, 1997). Still, some studies have expressed caution about the ability of the Internet for aiding activism in digitally divided countries or communities. As such, this study uses Fraser’s (1990) concept of “counterpublics” as a theoretical lens to look specifically at Latin America, and examine the usefulness of bringing electronic tools into activists’ repertoire of contention in a digitally divided region where “new” media tools might not be the best way to advocate for social change and strengthen democracy.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Counterpublics and activist publics

Whether mobile phones, YouTube, blogs or social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, new digital tools theoretically open up what Fraser (1990) referred to as alternative public spheres, allowing for online horizontal communication that overcomes traditional boundaries of time and space (Castells, 2001). Habermas (1989) posited the idea of a single public sphere – whether physical or mediated – in which people could come together to rationally debate, discuss and reach a consensus on issues of shared public concern. Such a space, he contended, was fundamental for true democracy. Habermas’ idealized conceptualization, however, fails to take into account dissent, protesters, social movements, or anything that might run counter to the dominant public voices. Fraser (1990) suggested that Habermas’ notion operated according to more procedural, than substantive, principles of equality. Noting that this idea of a singular public sphere excluded women, minorities, and other non-elites, she introduced the existence of multiple counter-public spheres where subordinated groups could come together to express themselves on their own terms and work toward consensus and achievement of their own goals. Such “counterpublics” allow for multiple competing discourses, rather than one hegemonic discourse.

Similar to counterpublics, Wahl-Jorgenson (2001) offered the notion of an “activist public,” that focuses on “the achievement of activist goals as the locus of public action and interaction” (p. 308). And unlike counterpublics, activist publics can be subordinate or dominant as they struggle to achieve political goals. Because the discourse of the activist public is mostly excluded from mainstream media for going against their “normative visions” (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2001, p. 308), alternative media have become the mediated site of activist publics and counterpublics. In this digital information age, the Internet, and SNS in particular, are easily viewed as the latest incarnation of counterpublics where activists can communicate freely. The question, however, is whether, in light of the digital divide, Latin American activists are able to use social media and the Internet to create their own alternative spaces for horizontal, democratic communication and social change.

Alternative media online

Alternative media historically have been the media of activists (Kessler, 1984; Downing, 2001). Whether aimed at offering a space for emancipatory discourse, empowering subaltern groups, or simply producing journalism from the bottom-up, alternative media serve as “contraflows” to break up the hegemony and homogeneity of mainstream media (Atwood, 1986; Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001; Atton, 2002; Thussu, 2006). Considering media agendas most often are set by the “center” states and the “core” elites (Galtung, 1971; Schiller, 1976; Thussu, 2006), alternative and citizens’ media – especially in periphery states like in Latin America – are crucial for offering non-commercialized, -privatized, -hegemonic, or -Westernized perspectives (Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001).

In today’s digital era, scholars look to the Internet for its potential contributions to alternative media. In light of the historically complex relationship between activists and mainstream media – studies repeatedly show the press marginalizes, deligitimizes and more often than not entirely ignores protesters (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1999; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Lewis et al., 2004) – the Internet, especially with the interactive and participatory capabilities of Web 2.0, has signaled a way for activists to circumvent the

gatekeepers of traditional media, taking control of their own messages, in terms of production, content, and dissemination (Bennett, 2004; Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). The Internet – SNS in particular – opens a space for ordinary individuals who tend to get overlooked in media discourses. For example, digital communication tools allow anyone – in theory, although of course, not in practice considering the digital divide – to act as a journalist, providing a viewpoint alternative to those of transnational corporations and mainstream media (Curran, 2003; Bennett, 2004; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). While scholars often refer to the Internet’s fragmented audiences and its tendency to cater to niches (Stroud, 2011), the possibility exists that SNS, with users’ wide social networks, could actually broaden activists’ reach, allowing them to stop simply preaching to the converted. What’s more, the Internet raises the opportunity for activists’ online information to cross over into the mainstream media realm, thus even further extending activists’ audiences (Bennett, 2004; Peretti, 2001).

Digital activism

Beyond allowing for the cheap and fast spread of information, the opening of such online alternative, horizontal communication channels also opens the possibility of global resistance and activism (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Bimber et al., 2005). From the Zapatistas in Mexico – the world’s “first informational guerrilla movement” (Castells, 2004) – in 1994 and the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999, to the Arab Spring and global Occupy movement of 2011, the Internet has proven to be critical to transnational communication, information, organization, and mobilization (Castells, 2001; Juris, 2005; Cardoso and Pereira Neto, 2004; Rolfe, 2005). Many scholars contend that the Internet is just one more tool in the “repertoire of contention” (Tilly, 1978) and that there is nothing inherently new, different or better about online activism. Along those same lines, some research argues that not only are online interactions unable to create the levels of trust required to sustain any kind of meaningful collective action (Diani, 2000; Polat, 2005), but that in fact the Internet in some instances is harmful to activism, resulting in increased government surveillance, as well as “clicktivism” and “slacktivism,” or weakened participation and dedication resulting in a less meaningful activism (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Van de Donk et al., 2004). As van de Donk and colleagues (2004) noted, “The Internet may facilitate the traditional forms of protest such as rallies, demonstrations, and collection of signatures, but it will hardly replace these forms” (p. 18).

Still, the success of the Arab Spring and the spread of protests from country to country indicate that perhaps these scholars are being overly pessimistic. More and more research suggests that the Internet can indeed help promote a collective identity and establish a sense of community necessary for mobilizing people not just online, but also offline (Hara 2008; Nip 2004; Wojcieszak 2009). Garrett’s (2006) review of studies on social movements and information communication technologies (ICTs) showed that ICTs can unite dispersed actors so that their small-scale acts of support can be pooled for greater collective action and social change. Further, recent research shows that online activism can facilitate and translate into offline activism (Harlow, 2012; Harlow & Harp, 2012), perhaps even allowing collectives to form and movements to take shape that otherwise might not have occurred but for new technologies (Juris, 2005; Rolfe, 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009). The Internet could perhaps even be creating new forms of activism (Cardoso & Pereira Neto, 2004; Rolfe, 2005). For example, exclusively online “cyberactivism” or “online direct activism” can entail virtual sit-ins or protests, an e-vote, cyberpetitions, email bombs, virtual blockades, or cyberattacks such as hacking into target websites (McCaughy & Ayers, 2003; Rolfe, 2005).

The digital divide

Despite the Internet's seeming democratic potential for free expression, alternative communication, political participation and resistance of the status quo (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009; Siapera, 2004), there is no denying that access is far from universal, especially in an economically, politically, and socially stratified region like Latin America (Hoffman and Centeno, 2003). In general, scholars have found that the Internet benefits the already information-rich, and further hurts the information-poor, as the gap between the two widens. Ribeiro (1998: 332) posited that the greatest threats to "virtual democracy" are computer illiteracy, such as a lack of education or "access and knowledge to the codes of the network," and out-of-date infrastructure, including high equipment costs. Lack of Internet access, or the proverbial digital divide, now means much more than just Internet penetration rates, as scholars contend that lack of skills and lack of interest also factor into the digital divide, making it in reality an economic, political and cultural divide (Fuchs, 2009; Goldstein, 2007; Bonfadelli, 2002). In fact, Gumucio Dagron (2006) called the so-called digital divide a "false problem," characterizing it as "just a flashy manifestation of other divides that have been around for decades" (p. 979). Polat's (2005) review of the Internet and its impact on political participation showed that the "advantaged" populations, in terms of economic and education status – people who already were more likely to participate politically – were the ones who tended to benefit the most from the Internet. And while Internet access is increasing across the globe, research demonstrates that disparities still exist along racial and ethnic lines (Robinson, DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2003).

As such, research must consider whether any activism born online in fact automatically excludes the bulk of the world's population and thus weakens democracy, leading to further power inequalities and social injustice. As Lim (2003) argued, "information that circulates only among the members of a small 'elite' loses its power to mobilize people to challenge the cordons of hegemonic power. No revolution can happen without involving society on a wider scale" (p. 274). Atton (2004) similarly questioned the Internet's potential for social change in light of the "obstacles to empowerment that legislation, inequalities of access, limits on media literacy and the real-world situations of disempowerment necessarily place on groups and individuals" (p. 24). Any democratic potential for SNS also must be carefully weighed, especially considering that previous research indicates Facebook is more elite than other social media sites, and that a user's race, ethnicity and parental education all lead to unequal SNS participation, potentially contributing to digital inequality (Hargittai, 2007). Further, McAnany (1986) called attention to the need to consider whether Western technologies can be applied in non-Western contexts without reinforcing the status quo. "When new technologies are introduced to a different social setting, what is transferred is not only technology itself, but also the social use of it, a set of assumptions and practices that emerged from another context and other needs" (Gumucio Dagron, 2001; pp. 23-24).

Nevertheless, the digital divide does not necessarily have to remove new technologies from the activist's toolbox. As social movement scholars noted, which tactics from the "repertoire of contention" (Tilly, 1978) are adopted, ignored, rejected, or adapted depends on an organization's specific political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam & Rucht, 1993). Who has access to electronic tactics, who can afford to use them, and who would actually benefit from them must be considered, but that does not mean that an "electronic repertoire of contention" is for the global elite only (Costanza-Chock, 2001). For example, some research

points to the ways activists have worked around obstacles related to access, such as by printing and distributing hard copies of online information (Friedman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007). Further, those global elites can use digital technologies to mobilize support for those who lack access, and “even extremely marginalized groups with little to no Internet access have been successful in some ways in using the Internet to gain attention, the Zapatistas being the ‘classic’ example” (Costanza-Chock, 2001, p. 14). Thus, despite the so-called digital divide, whether the street protests denouncing election fraud in Iran, the peace marches in Colombia, or, more recently, the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, Facebook has become a key tactic in activists’ electronic repertoires. Still, considering that these social media social movements are occurring in some of the least-wired countries in the world, it is worth exploring how much of an impact activism via digital media can have when much of the population lacks access to these technologies.

Latin America

Latin America has a long history of alternative media serving as a counterforce to the concentrated, hegemonic, mainstream media corporations of the region and the uneven North-South information flows (Atwood, 1986; Reyes Matta, 1986; Huesca, 1994). Simpson Grinberg (1986) viewed alternative communication in Latin America as a form of “social resistance,” as “this form of communication constitutes an alternative to the dominant discourse of power at all levels” (p. 169). Based on Freire’s (1970) concept of *conscientization*, or the notion that dialogue and horizontal communication are necessary for empowerment and social change, the ideas of citizen participation, self-expression, and dialogue over monologue are fundamental tenets to alternative media in Latin America, where ordinary voices are mostly excluded from an elite mainstream media (Beltrán, 1980; Huesca, 2006).

Alternative media are critical in a region where a truly free, independent press has been hindered by repression coming in the form of violence against journalists, authoritarian-era laws that restrict watchdog reporting, and consolidated, oligarchic media ownership that favors interests of the elites over the public’s interests (Hughes & Lawson, 2005; Rockwell & Janus, 2002; Torrico Villanueva, 2008; Aldana-Amabile, 2008). Historically, the region’s media are more commercial- and market-oriented than journalistic (Cañizález & Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Waisbord, 2000; Rockwell & Janus, 2003), aimed at protecting hegemonic, elite control by excluding alternative voices (Rockwell & Janus, 2002) so that “homogeneity rules over diversity in content and cultural forms” (Sandoval-Garcia, 2008, p. 100). Such clientelistic relationships between media owners and the political elites hindered the development of a truly free press, as journalists are limited in terms of their assertiveness and independence (Hughes & Lawson, 2005; Porto, 2007). As such, while outright government-imposed prior censorship is rare, “Latin American media are hardly free from threats and pressures from political actors of all stripes... Indeed, the last decade has witnessed a serious erosion of press freedom throughout the region” (Hughes & Lawson, 2005: 10).

When it comes to activism in Latin America, the Zapatistas are not the only ones who turned to the Internet when faced with exclusion by mainstream media. Throughout the region, indigenous organizations, women’s rights groups, and the GLBT movements have employed new digital technologies for informing and mobilizing (Salazar, 2002; Torres Nabel, 2009). Still, online activism often is hamstrung because of the digital divide (Salazar, 2002; Sandoval, 2009). Roughly 60 percent of the region’s population lacks Internet access, and only about a quarter uses Facebook (Internet World Stats, 2011). Of course, as previously noted, that does not necessarily mean those populations have no access to friends, family, or other community

members who can access the Internet and disseminate information to them second-hand (Friedman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007).

Research questions

Thus, using a quantitative and qualitative survey of activists from throughout Latin America, this exploratory study examines whether respondents believe that digital technologies – in particular, online social media – are transforming activism, and contributing to social change and the strengthening of democracy. Based on the preceding literature regarding press and democracy, alternative media, and online activism, framed within the theory of counter-public spheres, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What do Latin American activists see as the major challenges to incorporating SNS into activism?

RQ2: How do Latin American activists view the role of SNS in terms of democracy and social change?

RQ3: What do Latin American activists say about the democratizing potential of SNS and online activism?

Methods

This exploratory study used a quantitative and qualitative survey to examine how Latin American activists are using SNS in their activism. A Spanish-language Web survey with closed- and open-ended questions was distributed to Latin American activists in September 2010. Two approaches were utilized to obtain a diverse and representative, albeit convenience, sample. Although not generalizable, such a convenience, or purposive, sampling method is justifiable as the aim was to seek out *relevant* subjects to fulfill a certain purpose (du Plooy, 1995) – in this case, the study targeted activists who use SNS.

The first sampling approach involved compiling a list of 100 known Latin American activists. In an attempt to obtain a quota sample (Potter, 1996), efforts were made to include activists from all Spanish-speaking countries in the Western Hemisphere, and to include an equal number of men and women. Further, guided by the 16 major social movement categories identified by the *Encyclopedia of American Social Movements* (2004), researchers worked to include a diverse array of causes, movements, and activists. The 100 activists identified were sent an email invitation to complete the online survey, and two follow-up email reminders were sent.

For the second approach, survey invitations and a link to the online survey were posted on 20 Latin American activist websites, listservs, blogs, and online groups. The survey invitations encouraged respondents to forward the survey to other potentially relevant subjects. This kind of “snowball” sampling is useful for increasing the sample size and creating a more representative and accurate sample (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Neuendorf, 2002).

Survey data was collected for five weeks starting Sept. 1, 2010, and 133 Latin American activists participated in the survey. Of those, 30 percent stemmed from the original list of 100 identified activists.

RQ1-2 were answered using closed-ended survey questions that asked respondents to name the top three challenges to incorporating SNS into their activism, and how much they agreed with the statement that SNS in activism are a threat to democracy and social justice. RQ3 was answered by using textual analysis to qualitatively analyze the open-ended responses to questions about the potential usefulness of SNS for activism. Textual analysis, which starts from

a “long preliminary soak” (Hall, 1975, p. 15) in which researchers immerse themselves in the data, allows themes to surface from the texts. Such a method is useful for discovering latent meanings and “implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of text” (Fursich, 2008, p. 4).

Results

Sample overview

In general, about 57 percent of survey respondents were male and 43 percent were female, and they came from all 18 Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America (not counting the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico). Most (60 percent) were aged 30 to 50. They were highly educated, as roughly 29 percent had graduated with a master’s degree, M.D., or doctorate and 33 percent had college degrees. About 41 percent said their annual household income was between \$10,000 and \$29,999 a year, and 46 percent said it was less than \$10,000. Most (84 percent) lived in a city or urban environment. The majority (85 percent) said they have Internet in their home, 68 percent said they use SNS for activism, and 63 percent said their activism occurs equally offline and online.

RQ1

Answering RQ1, which asked what were the top challenges to using SNS in activism, analysis showed that surveyed Latin American activists believed technology itself was hindering the use of SNS for activism (see Table 1). The majority of respondents (59 percent) cited lack of Internet access as the biggest obstacle, followed by lack of participation (49 percent) and lack of technical skills (44 percent). Interestingly, analysis showed no significant differences between whether activists had Internet in their own homes ($\chi^2 = 1.536$, $df = 1$, $p = .215$), or whether they considered their activism to occur mostly online, mostly offline, or equally online and offline ($\chi^2 = 1.243$, $df = 2$, $p = .537$), and the belief that Internet access was the top challenge to employing SNS for activism.

RQ2

Considering RQ2, which questioned how much activists believed that SNS are bad for democracy, results showed that nearly three-fifths of respondents (58 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that SNS and the Internet in general threaten democracy and social justice (see Table 2). Just 16 percent agreed or strongly agreed that SNS threaten democracy. What’s more, there was no significant difference in respondents who said they used SNS in activism and those who did not and how they viewed the impact of SNS on democracy ($\chi^2 = 2.280$, $df = 4$, $p = .684$), and regardless of whether their activism took place online, offline, or equally both, respondents had similar views toward SNS and its impact on democracy and social justice ($\chi^2 = 3.883$, $df = 8$, $p = .868$).

RQ3

RQ3 probed Latin American activists’ views on the democratizing potential of SNS and the Internet (see Table 3). Qualitative analysis found four dominant themes emerged from respondents’ open-ended survey answers, which in general indicated activists saw SNS as beneficial for democracy and social justice, despite limitations of the digital divide. The main overarching themes that surfaced during analysis related to SNS and democracy were *dialogic spaces*, *safe spaces*, *global spaces*, and *digital spaces*. Within the *digital spaces* theme there also

emerged the subthemes of *closed spaces* and *imaginary spaces*.

In their open-ended responses, many Latin American activists hailed the democratic potential of using SNS and the Internet in activism as creating democratic spaces for communication and participation. Criticizing the mainstream media for excluding ordinary citizens' voices and marginalizing activists and their causes, respondents saw SNS as a way to bypass traditional media and open their own *dialogic spaces* to promote public debate, discourse, and participation. As one respondent said, SNS are a "source for dialogue and exchange of opinion/concepts." Similarly, another respondent noted that SNS have helped "open spaces for dialogue that shorten distances, facilitate communication between activists and citizens and allow for communication to a larger audience." With people increasingly having access to the Internet and turning to SNS for news and information, activists, too, must go online to "communicate their activities and open spaces for dialogue," another respondent said. Since the mainstream press "closes spaces to social protest," as one activist phrased it, the Internet and its participatory possibilities thus can represent "equitable and democratic access" to the public conversation, allowing community information to come from the communities themselves, another respondent said. As one activist summarized it: "Social networks and other tools available on the Internet have given a voice back to the community. They allow you to be the protagonist of your story...to write it and not let others write it" for you.

The idea of *safe spaces* also surfaced as a major theme, as respondents suggested that SNS and the Internet strengthened democracy by offering activists a way to skirt potential repression that could result from offline activism. One activist commented that with more and more people "reluctant" to take to the streets, whether for safety or economic reasons, online activism provided them a way to get involved. Another activist explained how important the Internet is for HIV/AIDS activism and awareness, as many people are too scared to talk to doctors for fear of others finding out about their illness.

Still, while respondents said SNS ideally represent a safe space for expression, many said that in reality corporate control and government censorship and surveillance are threatening SNS' democratic potential. For instance, one respondent commented, "Social networks managed by corporations are restrictive and not democratic. Social networks should be free so that users have control over their data and the information they publish." Respondents also noted that so much of activists' personal information online could lead to repression and other potential dangers. Likewise, they cited the possibility of SNS and the Internet being used to wage campaigns against democracy and the social justice that activists were working toward. As one respondent said, "The Internet has lost its egalitarian character. If I possess a lot of money, I can pay an army of people to delegitimize activists' discourse...The Internet no longer is just the platform of alternative voices, but also of the establishment."

The third theme to emerge during qualitative analysis was that of *global spaces*. Respondents saw the ability of SNS and the Internet to "amplify" their activism and raise awareness around the world as contributing to a global social justice. SNS "allow us to act in different times and spaces and do it in a coordinated way," one respondent said, while another said the Internet "allows you to ally yourself with people with your same objectives and to work together." Another respondent cited the way protests had been organized in multiple cities throughout the country, all in the span of hours. Numerous activists commented on the increased efficacy the Internet offers in terms of informing the public and recruiting resources and supporters. They saw the Internet as increasing their reach, allowing them to communicate with existing supporters worldwide, as well as reach people who otherwise might never had been

made aware of or gotten involved with a particular cause. “Now there is one more space for activism. Many people who could not find a place, now the Internet is a space that suits them well.” However, some did express caution of the globalization of a movement, warning that a cause might get lost among a worldwide proliferation of causes. Recognizing that two-edged sword, one respondent said, “Local movements can ‘lose’ their local supporters, but ‘gain’ distant followers.”

Digital spaces was the final theme to come from the textual analysis. Respondents suggested that SNS are just the latest tool in the activist’s toolbox, but that in order to push for social change and social justice in this Digital Era, activists must be technologically savvy. “Facebook, Twitter, and the others are trends that will pass as have many other Internet trends. What’s important is for citizens to truly appropriate information tools to enhance activism,” one respondent said. Similarly others respondents predicted that SNS soon will be replaced by more advanced technologies, meaning that activists need a digital-first mentality to be able to employ online technology for offline change.

Within this theme surfaced two subthemes: *closed spaces* and *imaginary spaces*. Many respondents warned that SNS and the Internet were closed – although not locked – for much of their countries’ populations, restricted by lack of access and digital know-how. While new tools are powerful with a lot of potential, they are not necessarily useful in every community. One respondent pointed out that if you ask many rural people what Twitter is, they will be clueless. Another noted that “SNS are only important for those who have Internet access,” but much of the population is still in a pre-Internet era where radio is the best means of communication. Activists also said that which digital tools are appropriate depends on the specific settings in which they will be used, as well as the specific purposes for which they will be used. Still, despite the acknowledgment that SNS were a closed space for much of their countries and circumstances, almost all respondents said those spaces were rapidly opening as Internet access and SNS use are “increasing everyday.” Further, one activist said, just because SNS are not that widespread does not mean they are not benefiting democracy and social justice. Several respondents noted how the younger generations are growing up digital, making future use of SNS in activism that much more important.

Beyond creating closed spaces, SNS and the Internet also are creating *imaginary spaces*, some activists worried. They expressed concern that SNS were creating the ability to virtually support a cause from afar, thus diminishing physical participation and creating a false sense of involvement – an imaginary activism. “Being a fan of a cause on Facebook does not change the government’s decisions nor change reality: Being in the real world, on the street, in meetings with decision makers, in real events, this is what (causes change),” one respondent said. Likewise, an activist said that online activism lets people “have a clear conscience” because they think they have done something while another said that SNS “create a fantasy” that pressing a button online is enough. Still, some respondents also acknowledged that perhaps masses of people liking a cause on Facebook could get the attention of decision makers, and at the very least these passive SNS users are participating in or supporting a cause more than they had in the past.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study showed that these surveyed Latin American activists – most of whom have home Internet access, use SNS for activism, and consider their activism to occur equally offline and online – believed that, despite limited Internet access and technological know-how, social

media and the Internet indeed can benefit democracy and social justice, creating “counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990) for debate and discourse where activists can communicate freely, mobilize supporters, and work toward social change.

Although analysis showed that lack of Internet access, lack of participation (perhaps because of lack of access) and lack of technical skills were the top challenges respondents cited for using SNS in activism, this did not stop them from acknowledging that such technologies are, and must be, part of activism today. The uneven spread of technology throughout Latin America makes it no surprise that respondents were well aware of the constraints placed on them by the digital divide. What is interesting, however, is that such technological limitations were not preventing them from adopting new digital tools in their activism. Rather, their open-ended responses indicated they saw activism as moving more and more online, as more and more people have Internet access and skills – especially young people – or access to networks of people who have Internet access. Thus, while a top challenge, lack of Internet access clearly was not seen as insurmountable.

Few respondents saw SNS and the Internet as a threat to democracy and social justice. Instead, responses suggested these Latin American activists believed SNS contribute to democracy and justice because of their potential for opening “counterpublics” (Fraser, 1990), or new spaces for democratic, horizontal communication and participation. In a region where mainstream media are ruled by corporate, elite interests, these activists said SNS allowed them to bypass these gatekeepers and create their own spaces for self-expression. Respondents saw SNS as facilitating democratic communication and participation, as communities excluded from the dominant discourse were given a voice and a say online. SNS, then, promote public debate, discourse and participation, giving activists, their supporters, and the communities they are fighting for access to *dialogic spaces* where discourse is not dictated from the top-down.

Along those same lines, respondents said SNS offer *safe spaces* that promote democracy by encouraging marginalized voices to speak up and by bolstering confidence of potential supporters, motivating them to join a cause. Still, some activists expressed concern that perhaps the Internet was not as safe a space as it should be, as it facilitates government surveillance, potentially undermining democracy and activists’ efforts for social justice. While respondents recognized this potential problem, however, no one discussed ways activist organizations could protect themselves online, suggesting that perhaps the digital divide and lack of digital skills were hindering activists from knowing what protective measures to take, or how to take them. In order for SNS to reach their full democratic potential, then, it is reasonable to suggest that activists first must better understand how to protect themselves online.

Still, respondents saw SNS as offering more rewards than risks, as the Internet allows for *global spaces* that reduce the costs of informing, communicating, and mobilizing, allowing activists to more easily unite across geographic and temporal borders to work for social justice. This finding provides further qualitative support for previous research that has shown SNS and the Internet not only facilitate online collective action, but prompt offline action as well (Bennett, 2004; Harlow, 2012; Juris, 2005; Nip, 2004). Respondents also noted that this “amplification” allows activists to gain new supporters, extending their reach to people who otherwise might not have known about a cause. Of course, as respondents noted, communicating within *digital spaces* means contending with *closed spaces* because of the digital divide, and also *imaginary spaces* as supporters could convince themselves they were participating in a cause simply because they clicked “like” on a Facebook page. Still, neither of these potential problems was enough for most of these activists to say that SNS and the Internet were hurting, rather than

helping, democracy and justice. Instead, they were optimistic that as access to the Internet – and thus to these *dialogic* and *safe spaces* for democratic communication and self-expression – increases, so too will public debate and online and offline participation. And as previous research shows, free speech and participation are the foundations of democracy.

While this study used a convenience sample and thus is not generalizable, it nevertheless is useful as the combined quantitative and qualitative analyses provide a rich, nuanced snapshot of how these Latin American activists view SNS and the Internet as “counterpublics” for alternative discourse that ultimately contribute to democracy and social justice. Further, in this digital era, the two-way sampling method used could serve as a guide for future research looking to reach online populations. As these surveyed activists were overwhelmingly from urban areas, future studies should explore whether the same optimism toward technology’s role in democracy and the same discounting of the digital divide would be expressed among rural activists. Other studies also should consider comparing Latin America with other regions, as well as singling out case studies for a more in-depth look at what SNS and the Internet mean not just for activists, but for their targets, as well.

Thus, while mostly descriptive, this study provides empirical evidence that despite the digital divide, these Latin American activists are assigning instrumental importance to social media for opening *dialogic*, *safe*, *global*, and *digital* spaces for public debate and discourse that encourage online and offline participation and contribute to democracy and social change. As such, for these activists, SNS represent alternative public spheres – “counterpublics” – where they can communicate freely, promoting their causes and organizing for change. Having their own communication spaces, respondents seemed to agree, has changed communication and activism.

What also is clear is that these respondents see SNS and the Internet, as well as offline participation, as integral to social change. In other words, activism simultaneously is both online and offline, not one or the other. Results also suggest that the spread of technology and access to it have not necessarily kept pace with the increased freedoms of speech afforded by SNS and the Internet. Still, the networks created via online technologies extend into the offline realm, meaning that information generated and disseminated online is not restricted to a virtual reality. Latin American respondents seemed to recognize this, as while they viewed lack of Internet access as the main challenge for using SNS in activism, at the same time they considered SNS to be a now essential part of activists’ repertoire of contention. Given these Latin American activists’ optimism, then, it seems clear that for them, SNS, the Internet and whatever other new technologies are still to come are the present and the future for democratic communication, activism, and social justice in general.

Table 1: Top challenges Latin American activists identified in using SNS in activism

Challenges in rank order	Frequencies (%)
Lack of Internet access	59%
Lack of member participation	49%
Technical skills to use SNS	44%
Lack of time	39%
Non responsiveness from target audience	38%
Fear of government surveillance	31%
Fear of corporate surveillance	15%

Table 2: How much Latin American agree that SNS and the Internet threaten democracy and social justice

Strength of agreement	Frequencies (%)
Strongly disagree	24%
Disagree	34%
Neutral	26%
Agree	11%
Strongly agree	5%

Table 3: How Latin American activists saw SNS and the Internet as contributing to democracy and social change

Creation of communication spaces	Contribution to activism, democracy
<i>Dialogic spaces</i>	Promote public debate, discourse and participation. Bypass exclusionary mainstream media. Communities speak for themselves.
<i>Safe spaces</i>	Avoid violence, repression associated with offline activism. Encourage reluctant supporters to speak out, join cause. Danger of being used for surveillance, anti-democratic purposes.
<i>Global spaces</i>	Fast, efficient, and cheap communication, mobilization. Amplify activism. Extend activists' reach to "unconverted."
<i>Digital spaces</i>	Activists must be digitally savvy, as offline change requires some online activism. Digital divide creates closed – but not locked – spaces. Encourage imaginary spaces and a false sense of participation.

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