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Female slum community leaders and media activity: Beyond the Internet

Dirigentas de campamento y actividad mediática: más allá de Internet

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ABSTRACT
Discussions about the active character of contemporary audiences tend to be centered on new communication technologies and on the possibilities of content production offered by these technologies. This article, in contrast, proposes that we pay attention to the political character of certain media activities and to non-technological factors that influence the changing relation between audiences and media. Specifically, we focus on promotional culture as an important drive for activities aimed at influencing—and not directly producing— media content. This approach is illustrated through a case study about the relationship between female slum community leaders and the media in Chile. These women interact largely with traditional rather than digital media, motivated by the need to challenge the image of them proposed by those media, and promote their demands. We argue that the study of audience participation in a neoliberal society like Chile must recognize promotional strategies as not exclusive of certain social groups, but as increasingly widespread throughout society.

Keywords: Active audiences; participation; promotionalism; poverty; neoliberalism, news, Chile.

RESUMEN
El debate en torno al carácter activo de las audiencias contemporáneas tiende a centrarse en las nuevas tecnologías de comunicación y en las posibilidades de producción de contenido que ellas ofrecen. Este artículo propone, en cambio, atender al carácter político de ciertas actividades mediáticas y a factores no-tecnológicos. Específicamente, identificamos la llamada cultura promocional como un impulso importante para influir —y no directamente producir— los contenidos en los medios. Ilustramos este enfoque a través de un caso de estudio sobre la relación entre dirigentas de campamentos y los medios de comunicación en Chile. Estas mujeres interactúan con los medios tradicionales, no digitales, motivadas por la necesidad de reivindicar su imagen y promocionar sus demandas. Argumentamos que el estudio de las actividades de las audiencias en una sociedad neoliberal como la chilena debe considerar que las estrategias promocionales no son el privilegio de ciertos grupos sociales, sino que están presentes de un modo cada vez más generalizado en la sociedad.

Palabras clave: *audiencias activas, participación, promocionalismo, pobreza, neoliberalismo, noticias, Chile.*

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions about audiences' active character have (re)acquired a central role in communication studies. Much of the contemporary literature on this subject acknowledges that there has been at least some degree of audience activity throughout history. With few exceptions, however, this literature describes new technologies –particularly Web 2.0– as the key to understand the unprecedented increase in audiences' participation in recent years. The call to this special issue of *Cuadernos.info* reflects this view. It argues that Web 2.0 has generated a radical change in audiences, "from passive to active." *Activity*, in this context, refers to practices that defy a traditionally hierarchical model of media production, in which messages flow unidirectionally –from top to down, from media to audiences. Audiences have become more active in the sense that "they not only receive information, but at the same time produce it and, in some cases, constitute themselves as a communication medium," stated the call for this special issue.

This paper responds to this call and questions whether new technologies are necessary and sufficient to understand the new relationships between audiences and the media. We argue that analyzing media audiences' activities exclusively in relationship to Web 2.0 is not wrong, but it is an incomplete effort. It ignores other important socio-cultural factors, which also contribute to the multiplicity of relationships that currently exist between citizens and the media. Specifically, our analysis considers how the activities of contemporary audiences are being affected by promotionalism or promotional culture (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010; Corner, 2007; Davis, 2013; Wernick, 1991). We argue that the need for individuals to control their (personal or group) image in order to promote their interests stimulates an increasing variety and intensity of media activities.

The first part of the paper reviews the literature on the intensification of audiences' activities. It explains that the literature on this topic focuses almost exclusively on the content generation possibilities provided by new technologies. Thus, our discussion also makes reference to other research areas –specifically related to the media use of protest and social movements– to explore alternative ways of media interaction and other factors that may influence audiences' levels and types of media activities.

The case study presented in the second part of the paper illustrates our theoretical discussion and demonstrates its importance for understanding the relationship between citizens and the media nowadays. We examined the relationship between a group of slum community leaders and the media in Chile. By focusing on the media activities of segments of the population that are particularly poor –not only economically, but also in terms of access to new technologies–, we observe motivations and ways to interact with the media different from those commonly discussed in the literature. Furthermore, given the neoliberal character of Chilean society (Harvey, 2005; Posner, 2008; Taylor, 2006) and the close relationship between neoliberalism and promotional culture (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010; Davis, 2013), Chile provides an ideal context for understanding the influence of promotionalism in audiences' media activities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AUDIENCES, PARTICIPATION, AND POWER

The emergence of the so-called Web 2.0 is commonly seen as the fundamental factor in the transformation of audiences' behavior (e.g. Bruns, 2007; Deuze, 2006a; Uricchio, 2004). New technologies are arguably restructuring our socio-cultural paradigms, from education and political participation (Bruns, 2007) to the dynamics of production and consumption (Deuze, 2006a; Jenkins Deuze, 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). The interactive potential of 2.0 platforms is seen as key to this phenomenon (O'Reilly, 2005; Harrison & Barthel, 2009). By eliminating, or at least attenuating, the distinction between producers and consumers, interactivity arguably leads to a hybrid type of user: The *prosumer* or *produser* (Bruns, 2007). This is a subject who is particularly active in relation to the media (Bruns, 2007), who is not satisfied with simply receiving content, but seeks to meet his or her own needs to inform, entertain, and create (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

With respect to journalism, this argument is associated with increasingly flexible media structures that can accommodate users' contributions (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2007; Deuze, Bruns &

Neuberger, 2007; OECD, 2007). Progressive changes in design allow the media to receive, publish and, in many cases, edit articles, reviews, links and content produced by audience members (Bowman & Willis, 2003; 2005; Deuze et al., 2007; Domingo et al., 2008; Sambrook, 2005). Additionally, new technologies offer users much greater potential to generate alternative information platforms (Atton, 2002; Bowman Willis, 2003; Deuze, 2006b). This means that audiences' activities in relation to the news translate into the creation of original content published in professional or alternative media platforms.

In our view, this narrative about the transformation of audiences in the era of digital technologies has two problems. First, it risks falling into technological determinism, by assuming an almost automatic transformation from passive to active audiences thanks to the Internet. The second problem is that this narrative assumes that all interactions with the media –especially with digital media– are equally relevant in terms of media participation. The following sections consider each of these issues in greater depth and justify a more political approach to study media activities.

TECHNOLOGY AS ANOTHER (IMPORTANT) FACTOR

To reject deterministic perspectives on technology does not imply denying the potential of Web 2.0 to facilitate media activities. What is rejected is the assumption that the transition from audience passivity to activity is the natural or necessary result of these technologies. Such assumption underestimates the active role of audiences in the pre-Internet era. As Van Dijck (2009) explains, Web 2.0 users tend to be mistakenly defined in opposition to the arguably passive receivers of traditional media, mainly television. This opposition, argues Van Dijk, "is a historical fallacy" (p. 43). Although the contributions of today's audiences are mostly online, these contributions have important precedents in, for example, letters to the editor in newspapers and magazines, as well as telephone calls to radio and television programs and contests.

A critical stance towards technological determinism also rejects the premise that the activity of digital audiences is uniform: Not all users interact in the same way, to the same extent, or with the same purpose (Van Dijk, 2009). As a result, an increase in media activity cannot be simply attributed to the availability and access to digital technologies (Cover, 2006; Griffen-Foley, 2004; Rakow, 1999). We must also consider the influence of personal characteristics and social position, something well documented in the literature (Fish, 1980; Radway, 1991; Steiner, 1988), as well as the socio-political context in which the interactions between citizens and the media occur.

Apart from the ubiquity of digital technologies, there are other factors that define the current context. Particularly relevant for our discussion is promotionalism (Cottle, 2003), which is associated with the commodification of the public sphere (Fenton, 2008). This phenomenon refers to the progressive spread of the logic of advertising from the commercial to other social spheres (see Aronczyk & Powers, 2010; Davis, 2013; Wernick, 1991). The permanent exposure to marketing –not only from enterprises, but also from all kinds of individuals and organizations (e.g., related to government, education, health, and even charity and protest) (Davis, 2013)– involves changes in the relationship between the media and audiences and in audiences' level of familiarity with marketing techniques. To promote oneself, a group or a cause has become natural (see Awad, 2013). Furthermore, all social actors are forced to undertake promotional activities and to interact with the media in order to raise awareness, defend, and legitimate their interests (Cottle, 2003; Davis, 2013).

TO INFLUENCE AS A PARTICIPATORY MEDIA ACTIVITY

To treat all interactions with the media as equally active is also misleading, because it neglects the media's political dimension and the political weight that some media activities may have. As explained by Carpentier (2012), "participation" is regularly used in communication studies, but in very different ways: Sometimes participation refers to mundane activities, "like watching television, surfing on the web, visiting a museum, talking to a neighbor, pressing the red button to initiate the interactive functions of digital television" (p. 27). Carpentier proposes, instead, to recognize the ideological character of media representations and, thus, reserve the notion of participation for efforts aimed at challenging dominant regimes of representation.

From Carpentier's perspective, then, not all interactions with media are equally participatory. To participate, he argues, is to engage in activities aimed at

broadening the spectrum of participation in decision-making processes, such as the creation of a new law or the selection and treatment of topics in the media. It is this definition that interests us in this study. Thus, we look at efforts to influence the production of media representations by groups usually marginalized from the various spheres of power. The creation of new content –whether complementary or alternative to content published by the established media– may be interesting, but only to the extent that it also seeks to counteract prevailing ideological discourses.

In our view, efforts to influence the agenda and the dominant treatment of topics in the media should be part of the discussion about media activity in general, and about media participation, in particular. There is no theoretical justification to exclude them. On the contrary, such efforts are particularly "participative", according to the definition of participation presented above. To ignore them would be to ignore that "[T]he key defining element of participation is power" (Carpentier, 2012, p. 24).

MEDIA ACTIVITIES AS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Given the existing gap in the literature on active audiences with respect to the efforts of ordinary citizens to influence the media, our analysis relies on academic perspectives until now not explicitly related to audiences' activities and, yet, very important for understanding these activities. Especially useful is Cottle's (2008) analysis of the "changing media politics of dissent" in the 21st century. "What is unprecedented is the extent to which protests and demonstrations today have become reflexively conditioned by their pursuit of media attention, and need to be if they are to get their message across and mobilize wider support," explains Cottle (2008, p. 853). In other words, to get media attention in a highly competitive context, activists must know and take advantage of media logics. This is also evidenced in Clifford's analysis (2005) of recent protest movements, like the one of the Ogoni people in Nigeria and the Zapatistas in Mexico. According to Clifford (2005, p. 176), the worldwide success of these movements has to do with "organizational and material resources, knowledge of distant audiences' preferences, media savvy, and strategic skills" rather than with a "meritocracy of suffering."

The literature on social movements has given special attention to the communication strategies of activists aimed at influencing media content without necessarily producing it (see McCurdy, 2012). McCurdy (2012) refers to the efforts of activist groups to monitor the media and establish relationships with journalists in order to ensure some degree of news coverage. We agree with this approach's treatment of media activities. However, with Awad (2013), we argue that promotional media activities are even more widespread in neoliberal societies as the Chilean one. In her study about a group of urban residents' struggle for better living conditions in a poor Chilean neighborhood, Awad (2013) finds a high degree of media activity among community leaders. Her analysis shows how poor citizens, marginalized from large parts of the public sphere, are familiar with media logics and rely on this knowledge to draw journalists' attention and thus secure news coverage of their demands.

Cases like this point to the undeniable "centrality of mainstream news media for the wider communication of dissent and the pursuit of instrumental or expressive goals" (Cottle, 2008, p. 855). Promotional media activities are no longer the prerogative of powerful actors and spin-doctors. On the other contrary, they are increasingly part of the common sense of these times, something that McCurdy (2011, p. 619) describes as "lay theories of news media." The case study presented here shows deliberate efforts to recognize and strengthen this common sense among vulnerable citizens (and, therefore, audiences), precisely in order to talk to power by using the same communication tools as the powerful (see also Ryan, Carragee & Schwerner, 1998).

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND CASE STUDY

Our empirical case focuses on a group of women who belong to one of the most vulnerable segments of Chilean society. We interviewed thirty women who lead or have led housing committees in *campamentos*, that is, informal housing settlements or slums, comparable with the favelas in Brazil and the *villas miseria* in Argentina. Usually the result of an illegal occupation of land, *campamentos* lack basic services such as water, electricity or a sewage system, and are marked by a high level of social vulnerability (Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo [Minvu], 2011).

Despite Chile's growth over the past three decades, official figures state that more than 27,000 families live in this type of settlements (Minvu, 2011). In the words of the Chilean Minister of Housing, "*campamentos* are the most cruel and evident face of the inequality of opportunities that persists for thousands of Chilean families" (Pérez Mackenna, 2011, p. 6). Thus, different sectors within the political spectrum agree on the need to eradicate them. This goal does not only involve state efforts and resources. On the one hand, people living in slums need to organize themselves in housing committees in order to obtain subsidies and, eventually, contribute to the development of the housing projects to which they will move. Slum community leaders lead these committees. For the most part, they are women (Pizarro, Atria & Undurraga, 2007).[1] On the other hand, some independent organizations also have a relevant role in the eradication of slums. The most important one is *Un Techo para Chile* (*A Roof for Chile*; hereinafter, *Techo*), an NGO linked to the network of Jesuit institutions in Chile and created in 1997 to support slum residents. In 2006 and under the auspices of *Techo*, the *Corporación de Dirigentes de Campamentos 'También Somos Chilenos'* (*Corporation of Slum Community Leaders 'We Are Also Chileans;'* hereinafter, the *Corporación*) was created. Through this organization, slum community leaders themselves aimed at strengthening the work of housing committees.

As part of their efforts to support slum community leaders, in 2007 *Techo* and the *Corporación* joined the School of Journalism of Universidad Alberto Hurtado (UAH) and created a diploma in Media, Politics and Society. This was a politics and media literacy program, taught by UAH in Chile's capital city, Santiago. The overall objective of the eight-month program was to "deliver tools that allow slum community leaders to understand the media industry and achieve a better relationship with it" (Escuela de Periodismo, UAH, 2007, p. 1). The diploma offered basic knowledge about the media, the social role of journalism, the criteria and processes of news production, and the functioning of the state and political parties. Initially it was organized in three sections, focused on: (1) the state and the economy, (2) the media, and (3) a leadership training, which also emphasized media competences, by exercising presentational skills in front of the camera and/or in interviews.

The program was grounded on the conviction that the media can be important allies in the fight against poverty and lack of opportunities. The main problem, according to the directors of the three institutions involved, was not that poverty was absent from the news. On the contrary –and in contrast to the situation reported in U.S. studies on this subject (e.g., Bullock, Wyche & Williams, 2001; Entman, 1995; Iyengar, 1990)–, poverty was already a recurrent theme in Chilean newscasts when the diploma was created in 2007 (Hogar de Cristo et al., 2005; 2009). Since then, the issue has acquired even more news value, given Chileans' growing concern with the country's high levels of social inequality, the worst among all OECD members (Mayol, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2012).

Thus, the diploma was not meant to increase the news coverage of poverty as much as to influence it. According to the program's initiators, the main problems were that the media rarely recognized the poor as sources with legitimate requirements (personal communication with F. Berríos, April 25, 2013; and C. Castro, May 24, 2013) and that the predominant motives in news about poverty were to generate pity or to talk about crime (A. Vial, personal communication, April 16, 2013).

In this way, the diploma underscores the importance that parts of Chilean society—including some of its most vulnerable members—attribute to the media's capacity to generate social change. Of particular interest is the role that the *Corporación*, that is, slum community leaders themselves, played in the creation of this program. In the words of its president,

> The diploma did not come out of the blue. It was created because we wanted to give an extremely important turn in the development, in how tools were given to the people. They would go to the university, why not? Why can't the old woman be part of the university, why can't she have a diploma? Why should she be taught by some city council guy who barely knows about the subject, for example? Why not a university professor? Why not give her dignity? (C. Castro)

The *Corporación* continued playing a central role during the seven years that the diploma was offered. It was in charge of selecting the students, monitoring their progress, and suggesting curricular changes according to the needs of community leaders in the field.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand how slum community leaders conceive their media use and the type of media activities that derive from this conception, we interviewed 30 graduates of the diploma. We draw a convenient sample from the 78 people who graduated between 2007 and 2012.[2] Not by chance, all of them are women. Women constitute the vast majority of community leaders in Chilean *campamentos* (76.4% in 2007, according to Pizarro et al., 2007) and 85% of the graduates. Respondents' ages range from 35 to 65. They are single, married, or separated. All of them have at least one child. Schooling levels vary significantly, with one interviewee who never went to school, three who partially completed their primary education and four who finished 8th grade; seven interviewees who also attended some years of high school and fifteen who graduated from 12th grade. At the time when they enrolled in the diploma, all respondents were leading various housing organizations in slums in Santiago and surroundings (n=27) or in the region of Viña del Mar and Valparaíso (n=3). With some exceptions, the interviewees are still active in their communities and, in many cases, they still live in the same slum.

Interviews were conducted by one of the authors between May and August 2013 and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Most of them were on the telephone; while five interviews were face to face and at least one of the authors visited the houses of six interviewees to learn more about their living conditions and their community. In all cases, respondents gave their explicit consent to be interviewed. We explained them the goals of the study and asked them permission to record the conversation. All interviewees agreed willingly to participate and, in general, responded with interest and enthusiasm. We still decided to protect their identity, by identifying them only by the year of graduation from the program and the municipality where their slum is located. The exception is Cecilia Castro; as the president of the *Corporación*, she is a public figure.

We opted for semi-structured interviews to combine a basic topic list with the flexibility necessary to pursue other topics of interest that emerged during the interviews (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). According to this method, we favored open-ended questions to avoid directing or influencing responses (Flick, 1998). The topic list included: (1) demographic and contact information, (2) current housing situation, (3) leadership experiences and current leadership tasks, (4) motivation to participate in the diploma program, (5) experience in the program, (6) contributions and criticisms of the program, (7) opinion about the media, (8) relationship and personal interactions with the media, (9) assessment of their interaction with the media, and (10) media consumption.

RESULTS

The thirty interviews were transcribed. A theme or interpretive content analysis was conducted to detect patterns and common themes across interviews (Gaskel, 2000). The results presented below are organized in three sections. The first focuses on the value leaders assign to the diploma as an effort to acquire tools to gain effectiveness in relation to the media and the authorities. The second section deals with leaders' critical view of the media treatment of poverty and slums. The third section refers to respondents' media experiences as participatory efforts aimed at changing regimes of representation. In this way, the discussion does not only focus on activities related to the media, but also addresses the political nature of such activities.

THE DIPLOMA: MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Our aim in asking respondents about the program was to understand why women who already have to divide their time between their families (in almost half of cases, single-parent households), more or less stable jobs and a heavy burden of community responsibilities decide to also commit themselves to go to the university once a week (traveling up to six hours round trip) to learn about media and politics. We know that it was difficult for them. In fact, 58 of the 136 people who initially enrolled in the program did not complete it. According to those who worked with the students at the university, the main obstacle was the requirement of an 80% attendance (F. Lira, personal communication, May 23, 2013).

Participating in the program clearly involved important levels of motivation and dedication from the community leaders. A 2011 graduate from Valparaiso, for example, simply skipped work to go to the university every Thursday. Although this sometimes

implied a discount on her salary, she never regretted going to classes. A graduate from 2007 says that initially she was afraid. This community leader from a slum in San José de Maipo was newly separated, had four children, the youngest of which was only four, and had only finished 10th grade. She worked selling salads outside a supermarket when she decided to apply to the program. As soon as she started attending it, she realized that the effort would be worthwhile. "It was enriching, too enriching, because I started not knowing anything."

Like her, other alumni interviewed remember their passing through the program as significant. They highlight three major contributions. The first is greater confidence in themselves: The mere fact of participating in a university program, according to the interviewees, strengthened their position within the family and the community. For example, the first answer of a community leader from San José de Maipo graduated in 2009, when asked about the diploma, is the high "personal" value that it had on her life: "I never went out before, I was a little submissive. (…) After the program I already felt like… like I grew up inside." A more extreme case, but equally revealing is the one from another graduate from San José de Maipo from 2012. The program was her first experience of formal education. She says that she used to be ashamed when speaking, that she was afraid of being laughed at, but in the course she learned to express herself, to walk, and even to interact with her own children.

A second contribution of the diploma for the community leaders was to facilitate the administrative tasks of their housing committees. Understanding better the functioning of public institutions, including municipalities and the Ministry of Housing, was key in this respect. Respondents valued learning which institution to go to for different issues and about their rights as citizens in general and community leaders in particular. An alumna from 2008 from Puente Alto says that the program taught her who to contact in the municipality and how to ask for an appointment with the mayor. A 2007 graduate from Viña del Mar says that she learned:

> How to speak with a little more basis when facing the authorities… Because I had much ignorance about the mayor, the council members, the authorities (...). We are citizens, we have rights as individuals, as citizens. I had no idea, before the program, that politicians' salaries were paid with the taxes we pay; that if we moved, we were paying a tax, and that tax was for the salaries of all civil servants. That was nice of my experience.

Thirdly, students developed communication skills that empowered them vis-à-vis all types of social actors. The diploma, in the words of a 2008 graduate living in Pudahuel, "refines" key leadership skills.

> [In the program] we learn to develop ourselves, we learn to speak, to behave, how to stand, how to ask questions, how to find our own solutions and approach authorities properly. Because going to ask the mayor something saying "I need..." and "You have to give it to me because you have resources," if you don't know where the resources come from, how many resources the municipality has, and [if] you can't express yourself… Then you cannot accomplish anything. One learns a lot that way.

Specifically regarding the media, this community leader says that with the program she lost her "fear of the microphone." This has enabled her to participate in numerous interviews about the housing project that she negotiated for her community.

According to respondents, being interviewed and appearing in the media can be crucial to achieve a definitive housing solution or to overcome other community problems. As Cecilia Castro explains:

> If you are in the media, you exist. For us, it is not the same to complain about a slum in which we are working, directly with the Minister or by sending the message through the TV. In any case the reaction is faster, the commitment is much more real [if it is through the TV]. I think that one becomes an opinion leader when one is in the media.

Learning how to search and take advantage of opportunities to appear in the media is important for the community leaders largely because this allows them to draw attention to their struggle and to the need for concrete answers from authorities, companies or other institutions. This goal, recurrent among respondents, was an important motivation to participate in the diploma.

THE REALITY THAT SELLS VS. THE REALITY OF COMMUNITY LEADERS

Although being visible in the media is important for the majority of interviewees, many stress that appearing in the media is not enough. The way in which the media treat their living conditions and the problems that affect them remains to be a problem. Both the community leaders who participated

in the program and the people who organized it use two recurring images when they talk about this: The "crying old woman" and the "snotty child." The media prioritize these stereotypes, according to interviewees, to attract audiences rather than to comply with the journalistic responsibility of reflecting the reality of the slums. Among community leaders, it is common to hear stories about journalists who seem disappointed when they see a clean slum and who specifically seek images of children with dirty noses or without shoes. A San José de Maipo graduate from 2010 says that some journalists even say:

> 'Hey, take his shoes off, run him by the bath and by some mud.' I don't like these journalists, because they are not talking about how I live my reality, but rather about a reality from elsewhere.

This community leader likes, instead, when journalists listen to her when she talks about the real problems of her slum.

This and other respondents underscore an important difference between the stereotype of poverty that appears in the media –and which some journalists look for– and how respondents see themselves and their communities. Poverty is sad in many ways, but it also has other important dimensions, explains a community leader of Lampa who completed the diploma in 2011:

> I know that images speak a thousand words, but if one wants to show the two realities, how we work and how we live, there is no need to always show the shortcomings or the little snotty boy or the crying lady.

What the interviewees would like to see represented is the dignity of the people living in the slums, even if this implies an economic cost for the media. According to a community leader from Valparaiso graduated in 2009:

> Filth sells, dirt sells. And we, because we work with *campamentos*, are interested in showing that inside the *campamentos* also good things are being made, that within the *campamentos* there are also dignified people, that inside the *campamentos* there are people who seek opportunities. Not that there are only drug addicts, not that there are only shameless people; not that there are only fraudsters and only shameless people hiding reality. There are also other things. Also within *campamentos* people bild community.

Interviewees recognize that sorrowful stories serve to attract the press and usually trigger immediate help from people who pity their situation. The problem, however, is that these stories also misrepresent the core objective of their work as community leaders, that is, their demands for public policy and long-term solutions. These are stories that "denigrate," says Cecilia Castro, because they lead people to think: "Ah, but they [people who live in slums] are terribly lazy, they are used to receiving everything."

In sum, slum community leaders have an ambivalent relationship with the media. They are aware of the media's importance in order to be heard and in order to provoke reactions from authorities and the rest of society. However, interviewees are also critical. They know that appearing in the news is insufficient, and may even be counterproductive to achieve some level of control over their own image and the image of their slums. Thus, they aim at influencing news coverage. The diploma seems to be a helpful step in this direction. Nonetheless, as explained below, graduates are still faced with a tension between coverage and dignity.

TOWARDS A MORE PARTICIPATORY RELATIONSHIP

Community leaders engage in a wide range of media activities including a critical reading of media representations, a deliberate effort to learn about the media, and the use of interactive technologies to get in touch with their communities and with other leaders. They have also learned to take advantage of opportunities to become sources of information, to maintain contacts with journalists, and to rely on other strategies to influence news coverage and put pressure on authorities. The analysis of how interviewees experience and evaluate such activities suggests a significant participatory orientation, even when the results –in terms of participation– are not always what they expect.

When respondents speak about the media, they refer to radio, newspapers and, above all, television. Digital media, in turn, have only been gaining importance in recent years and are not yet as relevant for the dissemination of community leaders' claims.[3] Digital media are used mostly for organizational purposes. Facebook, for instance, is a useful tool for coordination within the communities and among community leaders. This is the case of a 2007 graduate who explains that she created a special Facebook page, which she uses together

with the telephone, to announce meetings. Since her housing committee comprises people from different areas of Cajón del Maipo, contacting them otherwise would be impossible.

Traditional media have a different role for community leaders. Several interviewees have appeared on television as spokespersons for their community and as news sources in more general stories about slums. A Valparaíso graduate from 2009 has sent letters to newspapers, has been a panelist in local television programs, and has had a segment in a university radio station. She says that her aim has always been to ensure that the media serve her cause and not vice versa. "I use the media, I use them, I do not let them use me," she emphasizes. For this interviewee, to use the media means making the news appear "as I want to show it, not as they want to sell it." However, there are other uses that she also considers important and that do not necessarily imply that the news is covered one way or another. Sometimes, she says, the mere presence of journalists may be beneficial, as it happened in mid-2013, when she and other community leaders from Valparaíso got 25,000 million pesos (about 48 million dollars) approved for a slum eradication plan in the area. She thinks that the presence of journalists was crucial for the success of their negotiations with the authorities.

Sometimes community leaders themselves contact journalists to ask them to cover something. This is the case of a community leader from Valparaíso and Viña del Mar, who graduated in 2011. She has the names and contact information of several journalists from local and national media. "We have ended up friends; I even have their personal phone number," she explains. This community leader has been interviewed for several television stations, frequently talks to a local journalist, and is the spokeswoman for several slums. She says that all this started happening after completing the diploma. Before she would not have accepted an interview: "I die of shame, I start to cry, because what do I say? How could I have managed, if I didn't know?" She says that now journalists usually come searching for her because they know that she serves as spokeswoman. She does not only talk with them, but also shows them the slum and specific cases. Her interest, she says, is "obviously, that this becomes public and that they [journalists] take pictures; that they do not only interview me, but also the people who live here, so they [other residents] can demand what we actually need."

However, sometimes community leaders see their efforts to draw journalists' attention and to show them newsworthy cases in their communities frustrated, as when they call the media and the media do not respond. A 2007 graduate from San José de Maipo, for example, repeatedly and unsuccessfully asked journalists to cover certain problems affecting her community. She speaks of the "rage" she felt when the same media that told her that San José de Maipo was too far, had no problems going there to cover other things, like an authority's recreational visit to the area.

> I used to say, for example, "Well, there was a flood in San José," and the media practically did not arrive. Or, "people want this," but the media do not arrive. "But then a dude from Santiago comes," I used to say, "to do rafting on a Sunday with his family, and the media run [to cover him]." And that makes you mad.

A 2011 graduate from Peñalolén, who considers herself "the best investment made by the university," for what she learned in the program, had a different, but even more frustrating experience. She says that she has appeared on television several times, but once she was vetoed and asked to introduce the journalist to someone else. The journalist who was reporting in her slum told this woman that she did not sound like someone from a slum. She explains: "What happened is that I did not fit in the framework of what they needed. Supposedly, community leaders speak badly, they express themselves badly, and I did not fit in that categorization." Although it bothered her, this woman put the journalist in contact with other women, "sort of really poor," who did meet his requirements.

The case of the community leader who was "vetoed" for speaking well is the most extreme. However, she is not the only interviewee who recognizes to have introduced journalists to cases that did not seem the most representative or noteworthy, but that secured media attention. Thus, for many community leaders to influence the way in which the media represent poverty and slums is still a key challenge by no means solved. It is a process that requires negotiations and compromises between different objectives. Probably the most experienced of all respondents, Cecilia Castro –2007 graduate and nowadays an important opinion leader with respect to slums nationwide–, says that media coverage always has a cost. Her view illustrates how media participation, in the political sense outlined earlier, is a constant struggle, which is won sometimes, some-

times is lost, but in most cases leads to a more complex result: It is won and lost at the same time. More specifically, Castro suggests that a community leader relates well with the media when she minimizes the cost, so that "it is not extreme." Her strategy clearly reveals this complexity:

> One must show a bad guy to the press, a bad guy and stories, that's the thing (...) they will always want the 25 years old woman who just happens to have cancer or to be a single mom, or I don't know what. So, when they [journalists] come to a slum, the first thing we tell them is: "Look, today we have a serious problem: There is a housing project that is blocked because of a construction company profiting from the poor, because of the municipality that has not been capable of this and that. And on top of that, we have families like that of Mrs. Juanita,[4] who has five small kids and only one leg and walks with crutches. How do you think she lives in a slum?" Such things attract the journalist immediately.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that in order to understand some important contemporary dynamics of media activity, it is necessary to extend the discussion beyond digital technologies. Thus, we have proposed a conceptualization of media activity that is not tied to any technology in particular, but –at least in its stronger or "participative" version– is defined politically as an effort to challenge dominant regimes of representation. Our case study, focused on the experiences and perceptions of slum community leaders in Chile, has allowed us to illustrate the value of this conceptualization, as well as the limitations of perspectives centered on users' interactions with digital media.

Access to and use of new technologies tell us little about how slum community leaders –and probably other vulnerable or oppressed social groups– actually relate to the media. If one takes a purely technological point of view, one even risks dealing with such groups as passive with respect to the media. In contrast, our study shows that for many of the community leaders we interviewed, interacting with the media is a relatively common and necessary task. Moreover, it is precisely due to the lack of resources –not only technological, but particularly social and cultural– that these leaders *participate*, in the sense that they strive to influence how the media represent them and their communities. The role of the *Corporación* in the creation of a university diploma in Media, Politics and Society, as well as the participation of slum community leaders in this program, their experiences as students, and their relationship with the media, show that these efforts are real and they are more systematic than it would be thought.

It is striking, then, that discussions about active audiences pay so little attention to the attempts of oppressed groups to restore their image through the media. We assume that this is due to the assumption that the capacity to affect media content is a privilege of powerful, prominent actors, who can attract and control media attention and pay for the services of communication experts or spin-doctors. To the extent that this ability is limited to an elite, it is understandably discussed in relation to the manipulation strategies of news sources; not to the media activities of audiences. However, in the current socio-cultural context, this distinction seems increasingly less sustainable (see McCurdy, 2011).

It is precisely to characterize this socio-cultural context that we rely on promotionalism. The literature on this topic highlights how various social actors are increasingly related to each other through marketing-based communications. Audiences are not only increasingly familiar with the tools of marketing, but also increasingly aware of the need to use these tools in their social relations. This is particularly true in a markedly neoliberal context like Chile. On the one hand, the predominantly commercial media logic in this country (Sunkel & Geoffroy, 2001) forces social actors to compete for attention with increasingly sophisticated or media-genic tools. On the other hand, there is an even more widespread cultural phenomenon, related to what Gershon (2011) describes as "neoliberal agency". The neoliberal self, explains this author, "is a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business" (p. 537) and thus engages in social relations that follow the logic of marketing.

Although our analysis points to the presence of some kind of neoliberal autonomy in the relationship between community leaders and the media, it is not our intention to suggest that slum community leaders or the rest of Chileans are monolithic subjects, purely dominated by a neoliberal logic. We share the vision of various authors who warn against this simplistic notion of neoliberalism and insist on the need to identify neoliberalism's contradictions and fissures (e.g., Clarke, 2008; Ferguson,

2009; Ong, 2006). In our view, an analysis of slum community leaders' relationship with the media points precisely in that direction. To a large extent, these leaders rely on neoliberal techniques, previously mostly reserved for the powerful (see Paley, 2001), but increasingly accessible to other segments of the population, including the most vulnerable. Particularly interesting in this regard is the use given to these techniques. To the extent that community leaders' actions seek some questioning of the established socio-cultural order and redistributive state interventions, their experiences are attuned with those of other citizens in similar contexts, who are also trying to appropriate neoliberals techniques for purposes that are non- an even anti-neoliberal (Ferguson, 2009).

FOOTNOTES

1. The fact that the majority of community leaders are women may have to do with the over-representation of the female population in *campamentos* (Minvu, 2011), as well as with the fact that women tend to suffer more directly the effects of living in overcrowded households (Paley, 2001, p. 46).

2. For our sample, we relied on the contact data available at the institutions involved in the program. Slum residents rarely have a landline phone and their addresses are not easy to find. The best way to reach them is through their cellphones. However, many alumni have changed their numbers since 2007. Thus, they were sometimes difficult to reach.

3. UAH's former Journalism director recalls that among the first cohorts of the diploma, no one had a mobile phone. "Today, they all have smartphones, that is, cell phones with camera, and some of them with 3G" (A. Vial, personal communication, April 16, 2013).

4. Juanita is a popular female name in Chile, commonly used to refer to an anonymous ordinary woman.

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