The stories never printed

A case study of alternative journalism online

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Abstract

Internet and new communication technologies have drastically changed the way we send and receive messages, changing also the professions engaged in the gathering and diffusion of information. The Internet is by many presumed to have had a democratising effect on journalism, as it can be used to spread counter-hegemonic information and dismantle false objectivity (Castells, 2009, Rodriguez 2012). In this thesis, I examine this assumption by targeting one example of alternative journalism practice online. Through a case study of Paraguayan independent news site E’a, the thesis investigates how digital media affects newsroom structures and organisation as well as the role and objectives of the journalists. Previous theories and research on old and new alternative media, offered by scholars such as Susan Forde, Chris Atton, Leah A. Lievrouw, Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier, are set against the voices of the practitioners producing E’a in this qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. The thesis comes to the conclusion, that the Internet brings both benefits and drawbacks in the case of E’a. As a cheap way of publishing news, the digital platform serves as a lifebuoy for a project with a very limited commercial base. But the low Internet access in the country (and therefore presumed low impact of the project) and the change in organizational structure (web journalism resulting in a less collaborative form of working) leave the majority of the practitioners with network pessimism and a growing desire offline. Potential future research could look closer at alternative news content online, how it is perceived by the readers, as well as group dynamics and gendered participation in the digital era.

Key words

Web journalism, alternative media, citizen media, Internet studies, Paraguay, Latin America
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1. Introduction

In the year 2007, a group of people started gathering at the office of the Paraguayan union of journalists in the capital Asunción. They were media workers – journalists, writers, illustrators and editors – with a shared idea. One year later, on the 7th of August 2008, their project saw the light of day, as the first issue of the independent newspaper E’a was released.

The group that started E’a felt the need to create an alternative to the newspapers that already existed in Paraguay. They wanted to publish other stories, show realities that were hidden or omitted by the hegemonic media (E’a, 2015). That is why they formed the workers cooperative of Atycom and that is why they struggled to produce, publish and distribute the printed version of E’a for a number of years. Unfortunately, the economic reality caught up with them. In 2012, where this text begins, E’a is no longer a printed newspaper and exists only as an online news site, but with the same counter-hegemonic agenda as before.¹

In this thesis, I aim to do a case study of E’a as an alternative media project in the digital age. I will listen to the practitioners, who dedicate their spare time to keeping the site alive, and analyse what incentivises them to do what they do. I will also analyse their relationship to the platform and how digital media helps and/or limits them in their project. And I will study previous writings on alternative media and the Internet, to understand E’a as a small fish in a big ocean of information and technology.

There is no doubt that the electronic communication network we know as the World Wide Web has changed how we interact, work and build relations. The way we send and receive information has been altered, something which is drastically affecting those professions engaged in the gathering and distribution of knowledge and discourse. Case studies such as this one can help us to comprehend these new journalistic practices and to envision a future for journalism, in this highly technological and communicative era. This has to a large extent already been done in the western hemisphere, but there is a gap in the understanding of communication power and the Internet in parts of the world that are less privileged by globalization and technological advance. It is in this gap that I wish to position my thesis.

¹ The site can be accessed at: http://ea.com.py but will hereby be referred to only as E’a.
1.1 Objective and research questions

By doing a case study of the Paraguayan news site E’a, this thesis aims to investigate how the Internet and digital technology can affect the creation of an alternative journalistic space. I seek to describe and analyse the objectives of the site, and the significance of the medium. I also wish to investigate the newsroom structures and journalistic role in this alternative media venture, and how these are related to the digital platform as well as to the counter-hegemonic ambition of the project.

The research questions are:

1 Which aims do the producers of E’a express and how does the medium affect their aims?

2 In which way are the structures in the newsroom and the role of the journalist affected by the use of digital technology?

3 How do the practitioners talk about the Internet?

1.2 Demarcation

E’a was selected because of its position as a one in a kind project in Paraguay, as it is an alternative news outlet founded by a group of mainly professional journalists who were unsatisfied with mainstream media (according to Segovia, 2010, 69). With this said, the limitations of this investigation are those of all case studies – the problem of generalization. The experiences expressed by the respondents are in a way unique and their relevance in other contexts could be questioned. However, theory and previous research will help me put the study in a broader perspective, and hopefully make it useful to the academic understanding of journalistic practices in the digital age.

There is also another demarcation as far as methodology. In the framework of this thesis, I will not be doing text analysis, something that could have been an interesting supplement. I will not investigate in which way the texts published on E’a represent a counter-hegemonic discourse nor will I compare the material in the printed version with that of the digital ditto. This is not an investigation about E’a as a collection of texts, published on a webpage, but rather a study about how alternative media practitioners relate to their work and platform.
1.3 The context

There is much to be said about the history and contemporary society of Paraguay, but that would go beyond the framework of this thesis. In the following, I will only just briefly mention some notes about the situation for journalists in Paraguay, to offer you a context to the study that will follow.

With seven big companies dominating the media sector, the concentration of ownership is amongst the highest in South America. These companies do in many cases possess newspapers and sites as well as radio and televisions stations, and integrate large corporations with inversions in other sectors of the economy (Segovia, 2010 and Rodríguez, 2012). According to Paraguayan sociologist Diego Segovia, the mass media channels tend to serve as political instruments to ensure the wealth of the other companies in the holding (Segovia, 2010, 36, affirmed by Rodríguez, 2012). The same author reminds us that these corporations, controlling the information flow, made their fortunes and powerful positions during the 35-year long dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (Segovia, 2010, s.43).

That dictatorship was one the longest and most repressive of South America. The transition to a democratic regime has not changed much when looking at aspects such as the control over natural resources and land, the division of riches, or the possibility of getting your voice heard and listened to (Utrikespolitiska institutet, 2012).

According to international organizations, Paraguay is a very corrupt society, something that greatly affects journalism. The national union of journalists, SPP, states that one third of media workers earn less than the minimum salary of USD 250 a month and less than 10 per cent are covered by social security. According to a survey made by the union in 2011, 58 per cent of the respondents expressed that they had been censored, 29 per cent had been threatened and 39 per cent had self-censored themselves of fear of dismissal (SPP, 2011). Reporters Without Borders rank Paraguay 105 out of 180 countries on the 2014 Press Freedom Index and informs us that at least three journalists have been killed in Paraguay during 2014 (Reporters Without Borders, 2014).

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2 Paraguay ranked 150 out of 175 countries in Transparency Internationals 2014 corruption index, and has a low level of governmental control of corruption according to the World Bank (Transparency International, 2015).
Important to note is also that Paraguay is one of the South American countries with the lowest rate of Internet penetration, far below figures for neighbouring countries (GISwatch, 2009). In 2012, when this study was made, less than 30 per cent of the Paraguayan population accessed Internet. The figure is to be compared to 45 per cent in Brazil, 56 per cent in Argentina and around 80 per cent in countries such as the United States and Sweden at the same time (Statista, 2015). Despite this, Paraguayan journalism has found a home in the digital sphere, with online presence of large newspapers such as ABC Color and Última Hora since the late 1990th (ABC Color, 2015, Última Hora, 2015).
2. Literature review

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at previous writings on alternative media, as well as theoretical perspectives on the Internet, digitalization and the power of communication. The first section serves to build a conceptual framework on the notion of alternative journalism, understanding the definitions and approaches offered by academia. I will then move on to discuss the power of communication in the digitalized and globalized era, examining the assumption about the democratic influence of the Internet on journalism. Later, our two theoretical frameworks will meet in the section about alternative media online, where I will look at previous case studies, similar to this one, and the conclusions they propose. I have chosen studies that take place in contexts where democracy and Internet access is a privilege, as that is the field of research where I place my own work.

2.1 Theorizing alternative media

A precise and universal definition of alternative media is hard to find as the term can be used to describe a variety of practices, creations and reasoning. Media scholars such as Chris Atton and Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier, have proposed a multi-theoretical approach in the understanding of the concept; alternative media are those journalistic products that are autonomous from the state and market influences, offer counter-hegemonic discourses (to the mainstream) and aspire to serve the community (Atton, 2004, 10, Bailey et al., 2008, 5-33). British scholar Tony Harcup adds, based on exploratory empirical studies, that there is agreement on one thing; scholars and practitioners alike consider such media an important part of what can be identified as active citizenship (Harcup, 2011, 15). According to the mentioned literature, alternative media can be anything from pirate radio stations, community television, fanzines and blogs, to participatory journalism projects and all newspapers with content that differ from the majority.

Alternative media includes by nature a critic of the dominant but may nonetheless share many similarities with the mainstream, such as the adaption of ethos, values and practices of professional journalism (Lievrouw, 2011, 145). Projects such as E’a, the focal point of this study, might therefore be seen as hybrids of radical content and news values, and mainstream production values and professionalized reporting. In the book *Understanding alternative*
media, by Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier, a metaphor is borrowed from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari when describing alternative media as rhizome; a non-linear, anarchic and nomadic structure, characterised by heterogeneity, multiplicity and signifying rupture (Bailey et al., 2008, 26-27). The rhizome is very different from the tree or root, says Deleuze and Guattari, as it does not position or fixe an order – any point of the rhizome can be connected to anything other and changes in nature as it expands its connections or ruptures (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, 7-10). According to Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier, this thinking helps us to analyse alternative media not as isolated from the rest of society, but in interaction with other social and political spheres, not alternative to every mainstream but in transhegemonic alliances with the dominant (Bailey et al., 2008, 44). Although I believe their understanding of the rhizome to be a bit simplified and abridged, I do consider the thinking behind it to be relevant in my study. To examine what does not want to be captured by the dominant, we should not try to fit it into the models of the dominant. We need not to make tracings but alterable maps with multiple entryways as Deleuze and Guattari put it: “A map does not reproduce an unconscious closed upon itself; it constructs the unconscious” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, 13).

Although alternative journalism is constantly changing and diverse in its nature, Susan Forde argues in her book Challenging the news that there is a value in looking for the constants. Are there ideals and practices that alternative journalists have always had? How have they responded to changing social and historical contexts? (Forde, 2011, 22). This, I believe, may help us escape form the essentialist notion of technology and complicate the analysis of contemporary alternative news culture (and any analysis of the democratization by the Internet for that matter). Some of the features credited to the Internet, says Forde, have been part of community and alternative journalism experiences for some time (ibid, 49). And even though E’a and many other independent media projects dwell online, their objectives and practices might just well have more in common with radical press of the nineteenth century than any commercial news site of the twenty-first.

Forde offers us a valuable account – however Anglocentric – of the history of alternative journalism, defining four enduring characteristics; resonating with the unrepresented, working outside established societal power structures, being overwhelmingly dedicated to the role of journalism in democracy and perpetually fulfilling a place in the mediascape as an endangered species (Forde, 2011, 53). Even though the Latin-American context surely has its
own peculiarities, it is easy to recognise the mentioned features in the digital 21st century project of E’a and this is something I will return to later on.

2.2 Internet and the power of communication

This thesis is too short to thoroughly discuss the change brought on by the World Wide Web and digital media on inter-human communication and I do not presume to cover this evolution. But as a framework of this study I consider it important to mention some of the recent alterations in the sending and receiving of messages in modern day society. This part of the literature review will be fragmentary and necessarily incomplete, as the transformation is constant, but will hopefully say something about the space in which projects of alternative and digital media operates.

Let me take off from the work of influential scholar Manuel Castells, advocate of the term network society to describe the modern world we live in. Castells gives great importance to the technological development of digital media, as he considers power to be based on the control of communication and information (Castells, 2009, 3). The core strategy for movements (or individuals) promoting social change must therefore be the reprogramming of the multimedia communication networks, according to Castells, facilitated by the emergence of what he describes as a system of mass self-communication (ibid, 302). In his book Communication power, Castells illustrates this by a series of case studies, showing how Internet and mobile phones can be used to mobilize, spread counter-information and construct new meanings – forcing the central nodes of the communication networks (such as mainstream media) to broaden the range of their messages (Castells, 2009).

Manuel Castells might contribute to the understanding of how power is withheld (and may be challenged) through communication networks, but I consider his understanding of power, as well as change, to be limited. In a simplified version of discourse theory, Castells argues that we can rewire our minds by creating new content in the networks. Feeling and thinking differently, we will act differently and thus end up transforming social realities (Castells, 2009, 412). In this, he fails to take in account the possible incorporation of these new meanings in the discourse of the powerful, using them to reproduce existing power relations.
Even though the evolution Castells speaks of is more advanced in industrialized western societies, this development is to be found in countries such as Paraguay as well. Even though the Internet access is still low in the country, the newspaper on a screen is gaining strength and leaves the print version behind, in terms of mass communication, states Juan Crichigno, author of the book *Diarios del Paraguay* (Newspapers in Paraguay). This means a new, faster type of journalism, according to Crichigno, with active interventions by the readers (Crichigno, 2010, 422). In the west, this has brought new concepts to the vocabulary of journalism, such as *prosumer* – a mix of producer and consumer (Tunney & Monaghan, 2010, 6).

But there are also many who have questioned the assumption that online participation will democratise and challenge the role of traditional media. Media scholar Tim Markham is one of those who seem to believe that the central nodes of the communication systems will keep the control of the flow of information for a long time to come. Studying the blogosphere as a narcissistic culture, he finds several arguments to why this culture might be less democratic than presumed. Expressing an opinion or commenting on a blog is not democratising in itself, Markham argues, if it does not lead to some kind of action or deliberation outside the arena of cultural production. Neither does it challenge the power of traditional media, as the new deprofessionalised production feeds into the existing platforms and leaves the gatekeeping role of journalism intact (Markham, 2010, 89-91).

Important to remember is also that the content does not automatically change within the new platforms. Even though women use social media to a higher extent than men, for example, the news content shared is still male dominated, according to a North American study. The authors reach the conclusion that digital media mirror the gendered hierarchies and disparities of traditional newsrooms (Armstrong & Gao, 2010). Media and gender scholar Linda Steiner compares this to when the radio was a new media, and women’s voices were assumed to irritate audiences and therefore not heard (Steiner, 2008, 119). The technological advances do not automatically signify new possibilities for underrepresented groups, as I will discuss in chapter 7. Steiner deplores this, as she believes that “(n)ew kinds of newsrooms and new forms of print, broadcast, and online journalism require a new political sensibility and feminist epistemology” (Steiner, 2008, 127). She calls for a feminist experimenting in newsroom structures, content and policy, that could serve people who are particularly disadvantaged by gender, class and race (ibid).
Democratising the media or not, the technological development has brought an interesting discussion to life about the journalistic profession. The system of mass self-communication, borrowing the vocabulary of Castells, seems to somewhat question journalism's raison d'etre. This questioning is not unchallenged, scholars such as Gary Hudson and Mick Temple defends with tooth and nails the authoritative gatekeeping role of journalists, asserting that they have become “(...) the arbiters, ethical guides and role models for many amateurs using the new technology” (Hudson & Temple, 2010, 74). I am not going to dwell too long in this discussion, but I do believe it is important as a conceptual framework of my study.

2.3 Alternative media online

In the last decade, several studies have aimed at describing how the Internet is used in alternative media production. In his article “Blogging down a dictatorship: Human rights, citizen journalists and the right to communicate in Zimbabwe”, Last Moyo at the University of Witwatersrand gives an interesting contribution. Acknowledging that bloggers were able to mediate radically different experiences than the mainstream media during a violent election in Zimbabwe, Moyo is also conscious that this space is embedded in a neoliberal discourse and lacks the capacity to envision alternative political orders. Moyo argues that digitization has enabled new counter-hegemonic spaces and deinstitutionalized forms of journalism, but only to a limited extent: “(...) because of access disparities on the one hand, and its appropriation by liberal social movements whose configuration is elitist, on the other” (Moyo, 2011, 745).

Chinese communication scholar Xin Xin criticizes the fact that many studies investigate the impact of online citizen media in Western democratic societies, while we still know little about the political impact of citizen journalism in nondemocratic societies. Studying four Chinese cases, she comes to the conclusion that even though online activities also are subjected to governmental control, citizen journalism has been used as an alternative channel for distributing information and as a news source for mainstream media (Xin, 2010, 341-342). But Xin Xin also sees how citizen journalism in China in many cases has become a vehicle for nationalist discourse and hate speech and somewhat confirms the findings of Tim Markham and Last Moyo. It is not the medium that is in itself democratizing, or the expression of opinion as such; the emancipatory potential depends on the discourse that is being communicated.
Journalist and scholar Fátima E. Rodríguez is the author of a rare text on alternative use of communication technology produced within Paraguay. Studying a process of politicization and visualization of Paraguayan migrants, Rodríguez affirms that the partiality of mainstream journalism forced the migrants to create their own media to represent them. Through digital platforms such as e-mail lists, web pages and online meetings they could deconstruct and oppose the persistent discourse on migration and start constructing a vision in accordance with their own identity (Rodríguez, 2012, 338). In 2011, great diffusion in social networks also motivated the national radio to run an analytic radio show produced by these volunteer community communicators (Rodríguez, 2012, 350).

The Internet and digital invention has of course been crucial in experiences such as this, as it made a platform with world wide reach available to them who had none. Content can be spread and discussed without huge funds and the positions of consumer/producer are challenged. The digital technology has also been said to affect the organizational structures of alternative media. According to Leah A. Lievrouw, digital alternative media is often produced in a networked, leaderless form of organizing, supported by the infrastructure of the media (Lievrouw, 2011, 136). As Lievrouw has studied the type of participatory journalism of which Indymedia is the most famous example, her conclusions are not directly comparable to my results. The same would go for the studies made by Last Moyo, Xin Xin, Fátima E. Rodriguez and most research concerning alternative media online, which tend to focus on experiences of citizen journalism, that is; journalism produced by non-professionals in the digital networks. The case of E’a is somewhat different, as the practitioners are professional media workers, trying to elope from the mainstream. I still believe that mentioned studies contain important points but even more relatable to my work is the research presented by Susan Forde in Challenging the news (2011). She has studied alternative newspapers in the English speaking world, similar to the printed version of E’a, and how they have handled the digital transition. Many of the feelings expressed by her respondents have similarities in the narratives that I have collected, and I will return to this in chapter 13.

3 The discourse about migration was, according to Rodriguez, established during the Stroessner dictatorship, and positioned the migrant as the other, the traitor that left the country because they did not want progress or peace (Rodríguez, 2012, 338).

4 Indymedia, or Independent Media Center, is a network of radical media sites in different countries, established in 1999 to cover the protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, USA, from the grassroots (Indymedia 2015).
3. Methodology

This study is of an explorative character and the choice of a qualitative approach was simple. As I had chosen to look closer at one case of alternative media production online, I wanted to ask big and open questions, thereby gathering material that would in itself ask more questions and point the direction for future research. In this chapter, I will explain how I have designed my study, which choices I have made and why. I will try to explain the process in detail, to be transparent with how I gathered the material. This, I believe, is an important measure to ensure validity and reliability in a qualitative study.

3.1 A qualitative case study: Research design

The scientific strategy to study a singular case has some epistemological particularities. According to Robert K. Yin, the case study is an empirical inquiry in which you study a contemporary phenomenon in its context. This, according to Yin, is especially convenient when the boundaries between the phenomena and the context are blurry. In contrast to other qualitative approaches, you take advantage of previously developed theoretical hypotheses in the gathering and analysis of data (Yin, 2007, 31). This last statement helps us to understand one of the focal points in the scientific use of case studies: the possibilities to generalize. What has one singular experience to offer on a higher level of knowledge and theorizing? Yin reminds us of the important difference between statistical generalization and analytical generalization, the case study aiming at the later. This means; to actively utilize and relate the result of your study to already existing theory and research (Yin, 2007, 52-53), and this has been my intention throughout the process.

The object of this study, the digital journal E’a, does not pretend to be a unique or critical case, it could rather be described as a typical one – representing ordinary and everyday practices in the sphere of alternative journalism (Yin, 2007, 61 and onwards). But let us not forget the main theoretical approaches to alternative media, emphasizing the precarious and constantly changing nature of these organizations. The unique and changing must therefore be seen as the ordinary, and my claims to truth must be understood as a temporary and provisional explication of reality.
The main material of this thesis is the transcriptions of nine qualitative interviews with the E’a practitioners and how these were collected will be explained more thoroughly in short. But as the Paraguayan context was new to me, I could not settle with this. During my time in Paraguay, I also performed several expert interviews. I had the privilege to meet representatives from the Paraguayan union of journalists and a federation for community radios as well as journalists on mainstream news outlets and researcher Fátima E. Rodriguez. Those interviews are not part of the analysed material, as the sole purpose was to provide me with a context for the study.

I had also planned to do newsroom observations, to get another kind of insight in the daily routines and group dynamics of the E’a crew. The qualitative approach in its fundamental idea implies, according to Karin Widerberg, the use of all different kinds of methods and techniques, adapted to the purpose of ones study (Widerberg, 2002, 128). The same author considers observations as a supplement to interviews as something that should be developed and applied to a much greater extent in this kind of research (ibid, 130). But arriving Asunción, I realised that the observations would be difficult to do. At this point, the E’a crew did not meet on a regular basis and there was normally just one person working at their small office, updating the web page or doing administration a few hours a week. Thus, there were no daily routines to observe. I had the possibility to spend one morning at the E’a office, while doing one of the interviews, and to participate in one meeting with the crew. But I decided to no included these observations in the finally material to analyse, as it would be hard to draw any conclusions out of them. I still consider them of importance as a complement to the interviews, as they at least gave me an insight to what was not going on, to the silences and absences, within the E’a team.

3.2 Learning by listening: Qualitative interviews

The aim of this thesis is to study the use of new communication technology in an alternative media organization. My interest as a researcher is not on the material artefacts that enable the communication, or the social impact of that communication, but rather the activities
developed in the communicational use of technical devices.\textsuperscript{5} Semi-structured qualitative interviews seemed therefore as an appropriate method to collect data, bringing insight to the subjective experiences and interpretations of the practitioners.

The term semi-structured interviews can be criticized for it vagueness but I feel that the term is useful, as it clearly distinguish the method from that of fully structured interviews such as surveys, and indicates the influence of the respondents during the interview session. The interviews preformed in the frame of this thesis were structured, in the sense that they where evidently directed to a specific area (a specific part of the respondents pool of experience) and based on a detailed interview guide previously prepared (by the researcher). But the questions were open, and the interviews were preformed in a way very much concerned with giving the respondent space to express thoughts and ideas not accommodated within that guide. I therefore believe that semi-structured qualitative interviews is the most adequate description.

Whilst making the interview guide, I wanted to let every one of the respondents tell the story from their perspective and I therefore used the same questions in every interview.\textsuperscript{6} I asked everyone to define the project of E’a as well as their own participation in the project. I also asked them about the transition from print to web and which pros and cons they experienced with the digital platform. These questions, basic as they are, gave me a lot of interesting material in terms of linguistic expression as well as content. Asking everyone the same questions, I could see where the group had reached a consensus as well as where they differed. The interviews were between 60 to 120 minutes long, in average around 90 minutes, and I saved the least important question for the purpose of my research to the end of the interview, as there was not always time to complete the entire interview guide.\textsuperscript{7}

The qualitative research interview aspires to make use of the direct and unique meeting between researcher and respondent, demanding a continuous reflection and documentation of choices, interpretations and situations (Widerberg, 2002). In the following description of the

\textsuperscript{5} According to Leah A. Lievrouw’s definition of new media, the same can be broken down to three main components; the material artefacts, the activities and practices, and the social arrangements created around the artefacts and practices (Lievrouw, 2011, 7).

\textsuperscript{6} You will find the interview guide attached at the end of the study.

\textsuperscript{7} Those are the last three questions of the attached interview guide.
data collection process, I therefore attempt to make visible and assume my role as co-creator of the answers that I have received, and with that, the knowledge that I claim to produce.

3.2.1 Selecting the respondents

Arriving Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay, I did not yet have a clear idea of the composition of the E’a crew. The contact had so far been sparse and with only one of the co-workers – the journalist that served as coordinator of the site in that moment. He was my entrance to the group and at a first meeting I asked him to put together a list of the ten most active members of the team. The names of that list would be my respondents.

There are some risks involved when letting the selection of interviewees pass through a gatekeeper as I did. Even if not consciously trying to influence your study, they might attempt to help you by choosing persons with “strong opinions”, “a lot of knowledge” or something along those lines. You can also end up depending too much on one person, not being able to advance if that person for some reason lingers in their commitment (Trost, 2010, 139-140). Well aware of this, I sought to double-check the list provided by the coordinator with the other practitioners, using something similar to snowball sampling (ibid, 141). At the end of each interview I would request the respondent to refer me to other members of the group, asking something like: “Whom should I not miss to talk to?” Their answers always led me back to the original list and with time I learned that those persons where not just the most active members of the E’a crew but the only ones, and some of them were not even that active anymore. The dependence to one key person did not turn out to be a problem.

Of the eleven names (including the coordinator), I was able to interview nine. No one declined to participate but I was unable to reach two of them. They were among the least active at the moment of my study, and I do not believe that their absence affected the results of this study in any crucial way. When starting the gathering of data, I perceived it to be of importance to be able to detect variation (as alleged by Jan Trost, 2010) and I wanted to make a strategic sample concerned with some specific variables. Gender, age, previous experience and time in the group seemed like relevant factors. As mentioned, I did not have a big pool of respondents to choose from, but I did prioritize to arrange meetings with the only two women on my list, to make sure that their experiences would not be lost. The respondents were divers in age, the youngest in their 20th and the oldest in his 60th.
In the presentation of my findings, each interview has been given a number between 1 and 9. This is to preserve their anonymity but at the same time allow the reader to identify which quotes belong to the same respondent. The numbers are not chronological.

3.2.2 Staging the interviews

The interviews in this study were made in a variety of locations and contexts. I had to adapt my work to the everyday life of the respondents, finding moments and places that would work with their other engagements. This meant taking advantage of lunch breaks, meeting up after office hours, finding my way to distant neighbourhoods and, in one case, interviewing with small children present. One of the interviews was made at the small E’a office and another at the respondent’s workplace; the others were made in the respondents home or in public settings such as restaurants, bars or coffee shops. Interviewing in public settings could have been a problem if the respondents would limit themselves, afraid of someone overhearing. Luckily, I do not believe that this was the case. Even though many parts of the democracy in Paraguay are unstable and projects such as E’a are a thorn in the side on the authorities, the situation is not that bad that you cannot speak freely in the streets. The respondents did not seem to think so at least. They spoke openly about their project, why it is needed and how they wanted it to continue. My adopting to the respondents choice of location also gave me an insight to their lifestyles and environments. This will not be further explored in the study and is not part of the empirical material, but I do believe that all of the impressions I got during my stay in Paraguay are part of the final analysis and that they bring more depth to the discussion. The usage of multiple methods that contributes with different kinds of knowledge and understanding of the study object is also typical of the case study (Merriam, 1994, 20-29).

Before the interview, the respondents knew that I was writing a thesis in journalism and that my interest was the use of digital technology in an alternative media project. With this very brief introduction, I tried to avoid that the respondents would get too aware of their words or look for answers they thought would suit me. In some cases, the respondent asked me for more details about my thesis and then I would tell them, but preferably after the interview. In several cases we also kept talking about journalism in our different countries and the impact of new technology, as a kind of exchange between colleagues. This became a way for me to give back knowledge and make the relationship between researcher and respondent more equal.
The interviews were made in Spanish and they were all recorded to facilitate the continuing work, more on that in the next section. Even though I recorded, I would also take notes during the interviews, for my own benefit but also to give the respondents more time to think about their answers. While I was writing they would often reflect and keep responding, before I had a chance to ask a new question. I believe that those moments of silences and reflection turned out to be a very important part of the interviews. Spanish is not my mother tongue but I speak the language fluently, as I have lived in the Spanish speaking country Uruguay. During the interviews, there were still times when I had to ask for the meaning of locally used words that I had not heard before. That linguistic precision, I believe, also worked to my advantage as a researcher, as it made the respondent look for synonyms and answer the question with different words, thus, giving me a larger material to analyse.

3.3 Analysing the material

To do a profound and systematic analysis, I needed to put the interviews in writing. The transliteration of the verbal information exchange is a necessity to be able to reflect on and intellectualize the findings, the texts constructed being the working material to code and analyse further on (Aspers, 2011, 155-156). As Patrik Aspers points out, the transliteration can be a creative process of its own, providing thoughts and ideas to the researcher (ibid, 159). In this study, I have written down the recorded interviews word by word, including plug-words, pauses, laughs etcetera when found meaningful (in accordance with Aspers, 2011, 156). Some exceptions can be noted, as when the respondent goes way of topic in an eager to contextualize her words. I sense that the eagerness may have to do with me being a foreigner, this causing the respondents to feel a special responsibility to make me understand the historical process and social reality in which they operate. This has, of course, been of great help in my work but not of direct interest for the analysis. When transliterating the interviews, I therefore decided only to summarize the main points of these digressions.

Also to be noted is the language issue. The interviews have been performed in Spanish and the transliterations likewise. I did not translate anything until I had reached a stage of the analysis, were I could begin to single out some key quotations that I would use. The trilingualism has sometimes been a challenge in the construction of this text, but can also be seen as a resource. One advantage is obviously the access to the experiences of the Spanish speaking E’a staff as well as relevant academic literature, but it also gave me access to a
deeper understanding of the phenomena that I studied. Some concepts are easier to grasp in your mother tongue (mine being Swedish), some are used academically in English all over the world, and some might only exist in Spanish. Still, there is no way to completely rule out that the trilingulism has not affected the way I have gathered, understood and analysed the material, and by that, the results of this thesis.

While having produced several narratives and a theoretical homeland for my study, the great task remained – the making sense of it all. But in a way, the analysis was at this point already half done. According to Patrik Aspers, the analysis is done more or less parallel to the fieldwork. The empirical material is a creation of the researcher, not a gathering of material, later to be interpreted (Aspers, 2011, 165). This means a *studying sideways*, to talk with researcher Barbara Czarniawska. Czarniawska describes her research as a constructed conversation, a conversation that would never have taken place if it were not for her, the researcher. "(…) I force the texts to talk to one another, and they do it to my chords, so to speak. I draw conclusions, I have the last word" (Czarniawska, 2005, 28). I believe that this is a very useful way of understanding the research process, as a constructed conversation between the narratives of the interviews, previous research, theory and my own conclusions.

During the process, I became more and more interested in language and expression. It was not so much what the E’a practitioners did but how they talked about it that interested me. To analyse this, I have used the simplified version of discourse analyse presented by sociologist Karin Widerberg, were she sees the discourse analyse as a perspective rather than a method (Widerberg, 2002, 158). According to Widerberg, analysing linguistic expressions can put the light on themes and discourses, the meta-speech, what is said and how in a certain context or community. The focus in the search of central expressions depends on the theoretical perspective and interest, but also what the material allows and how the results should be presented (ibid, 136).

Therefore, I have sorted my material in themes, related to my research interest and theoretical framework. Each one of them has been coded with a different colour in the transcriptions, for easier handling of the material. The themes were: *Aim/objective, Independence/alternative, Audience, Role of the journalist, Organisational structure, Internet* and *Gender*. I have then looked for patterns in each theme, and marked those quotes and expressions of special interest. In this election, I have both look for the typical and the discrepant, as suggested by
Widerberg (ibid, 159-160). In the later writing I have tried to be transparent with this, using words as several, the majority or all of the respondents when presenting typical quotes, and some, few or one of the respondents when presenting quotes the departs from the typical answers.

3.7 Self-reflection and ethical considerations

When I begun to think about the work that lay ahead, I did not see ethical dilemmas as a very big issue. After all, I was to interview journalists, well educated colleagues, about their work and opinions. I felt this would make it easier to establish an equal relation between us, compared to other scientific and journalistic interview situations that I had been in. Neither was I supposed to dig too deep in to what is normally considered personal or intimate areas of a persons thought. At this early stage, my ethical reflections mainly concerned the importance of returning the knowledge that I would produce to the E’a community, to avoid a colonial relationship of those who study and those who are studied.

In one way, I might have been right in these assumptions. During the interview sessions, I do not think that I exposed the respondents for an unpleasant or unequal situation. As Spanish is not my mother tongue and Paraguay was a new country to my, I think that several of the respondents rather felt an advantage and an age to explain things to me. But my biggest enemy in the writing of this thesis has been time. Due to personal circumstances, it has taken me three years to finish the text, which means that I have not been able to return the results to the respondents within a reasonable timeframe. It can always be hurtful to have your sayings analysed by another, and I do not think that a large time lapse helps in that regard. I can only hope for understanding from them who generously gave me their time, words and opinions. As they are writers themselves, maybe the concept of writers block and over ambition are not foreign to them.

There is also an ethical reflection to be made about the adjustment of research proposal and perspectives, as I decided to aggregate a gender perspective at a late stage of the research. In this, I have had to trust my instincts as a researcher and my assignment to bring an elaborated and relevant contribution to the table, and hope that the respondents find the points made interesting even thought it is not exactly what they expected.
4. E’a – communicate, understand, participate

In this first chapter on my findings, I will discuss the desires and aims expressed by the E’a staff, the forces that drive them to do what they do. I will in this try to narrow down what makes E’a an alternative media project, and then dig deeper in to the concept of independency. To what and who do the practitioners position themselves as independent and where is the limit of that independency?

4.1 The aims of an alternative media project

Of course there are many disparities in the narratives of the interviewed practitioners, but what calls to attention concerning their aims is the assent. It seems like the four years of working together, and some time before that when the project was discussed and disputed, has lead to a consensus in the articulation of their objectives. The aim was never to be alternative for the sake of being alternative, the practitioners rather wanted to create a news outlet with massive reach. “I don’t want to be alternative. I don’t like being alternative, it’s not important to me”, one of the respondents tell me (interview 2). E’a was founded by information workers, critical of mainstream journalism and the Paraguayan media system, in an urge to construct a different story about the occurrences in society. This critique springs out of shared experience and knowledge, and works as a founding-stone and the raison d’être of E’a. The main aim is, as expressed by one of the participants, to be an informative counterweight (interview 1). This is done by producing and presenting “(…) information that you don’t read in the other papers, at least not in the same form”, another respondent states. “The way we treat the information is different. (…) (We cover) things that do not appear or are covered badly by the commercial press” (interview 8). And even though the E’a practitioners do not want to be alternative, I believe that their aims echo well with the persistent features of alternative journalism. According to Susan Forde, ever since the first generation of alternative media, the nineteenth century radical and working class press, this type of journalism has covered news not carried in other papers and has been “(…) resonating with the unrepresented” (Forde, 2011, 53).

Susan Forde also argues that all alternative journalism is political, as it marks out the limitations of the dominant forces in society (Forde, 2011, 45). One could aggregate that all
journalism is political, as it carries hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discourse in society, but of course it is relevant to recognise the highly ideological desires and motivations behind projects such as E’a. There is surely an active decision behind the participation in such a group, a decision to not just reproduce the status quo but to be part of a change. But among the respondents in this study, there seems to be discordance in the how and why their participation is political. Their critique of mainstream media leads them to the same conclusion; an alternative news source is necessary. But as will be discussed later, the identification as professional journalist and/or activist is not always unambiguous. This shows when asking about the personal aims with the project, where some emphasizes E’a as a political tool and others stress the professional space to do fair and independent journalism (the later being the more common). Some of the respondents also state that one of the aims is to serve as a source of employment. Much of the literature on alternative media and the Internet discusses the phenomena as relational to political groups and activism, whereas the historical description offered by Susan Forde notes that many of the so called media activist have been professional journalists. These professionals often move in between mainstream and alternative channels, as they perceive the agenda of the mainstream far to limited but must work within in to survive (Forde, 2011, 54). This is the case for many on the E’a staff, and explains their explicit desire to make a living from the project. At the moment of my study, this was only a desire, as the cooperative at that point had no money to pay employees or contributors.

4.2 Independent – to what and who?

“Independency is a necessity more than an idea” (interview 8). In this quote, one of the respondents put into words one of the dominant themes in the shared discourse of the E’a community; that concerning economic independency. The respondents speak of economic interests as the greatest problem of mainstream media, resulting in information tinted to serve other parts of the owners’ business operations. One of the prominent organizational challenges is therefore to create a structure and financial model that prevents any similar ties, something pushing them in to another kind of economic tyranny illustrated with this typical quote: “Without money, you can’t do it” (interview 4). The respondents repeatedly state that economic factors prevent them from doing what they want. Let us take a closer look on these different forms of economic (in)dependency, and try to distinguish desires from reality.
The E’a staff does not express an aversion to commercial ties and publicity as such. On the contrary, both a couple of ads and offers to buy publicity are to be found on the site (E’a, 2015). “We do not respond to anyone, not financially nor politically. The fact that we are trying to raise money form the state, organizations or even private funds does not mean that we are tied to them. If they do not like what we write then they can just stop giving us money and that’s it. We will go on, in what ever way we can”, a respondent says (interview 8). But alternative media outlets are not commercial-friendly (Forde, 2011, 42) which the narratives gathered in this study show many examples of. Neither do the participants of the project accept any kind of publicity: a proposal from a NGO was for example turned down as their founding came from the North American office of international cooperation, US Aid (according to interview 8). The E’a crew is therefore trying to gain (economical) support in the form of advertisement from organizations and businesses with an activity aligned with their own. One of the respondents tells us about the difficulties: “Considering who could be our allies, we talked about other cooperatives. A couple of us went to talk to the central organization (of cooperative businesses) and brought a copy of the first number. It was about the concentration (of ownership) and exploitation of land. When the vice president saw the cover he threw it at the table and said: what is this? He was from a cooperative that worked with livestock and the president was a soy producer. Those were two industries that we discussed in the paper, that we reported about” (interview 2).

With such a limited commercial base, the practitioners need to be creative in order to fund their project. The use of digital space instead of paper and ink to minimize the costs is one of the strategies to survive and stay independent. Other financial models, such as crowd founding and events, are also used. But it is clear that the alternative position and economical reality creates a contingency and hinders financial and organizational stability, as predicted by Olga Guedes Bailey, Bart Cammaerts and Nico Carpentier. This happens especially, according to the three scholars, when competitive public or commercial media denies the need for an alternative, as mainstream is deemed to cover all functions relevant to society (Bailey et al., 2008, 19). The rhizomatic approach that they offer, suggests the need for alternative media outlets to construct transhegemonic alliances with the mainstream to ensure their survival (ibid, 44). This statement would almost be a platitude within the E’a community – those transhegemonic connections are seen as inevitable to realize the aims of the project. The problem is rather the absence of possible allies within the mainstream. As seen in the example
above, not even other cooperative businesses are interested in cooperating with E’a because of the news they publish.

In terms of the state, the practitioners envisioned their medium as oppositional. “Some of the persons in the group support the government, others don’t. But E’a as a medium is independent. (...) We have to stay critical, always, otherwise we’ll be spokesmen (of the state), the ‘friendly press’ as we say here” (interview 8), as one of the respondents explained. At that point, E’a was open to receiving governmental funding, according to an editorial policy. In this policy, publicity in the form of governmental health campaigns as well as contributions from sovereign funds was named as acceptable, but promotion of the president or the government as such was not. The discussion was not closed, according to one respondent who said: “From my perspective, we lose independency (when accepting money from the state). We would have to analyse that more. (...) I feel that we lose a bit of force by doing that” (interview 4).

Fighting to not fall in the trap of being the friendly press in relation to the state, and to create bonds to the commercial sector, the respondents also talk about a third type of dependency. “As we’ve been gaining a certain space, the organizations and movements call us or send us information by e-mail” (interview 3), a respondent say when talking about the possible dependency to political groups, social movements and other non-profit organizations. The practitioners of E’a seem to have reached a consensus on the need to create alliances to these types of organizations, not at least because they portray potential sources of news. But there is certainly discordance in the group as on how this relationship should be. Several of the respondents express dissatisfaction with how the matter has been handled: “Some wants to publish everything e-mailed by the organizations but it would look like we are there spokesperson” (interview 1), “we want E’a to be more independent” (interview 4), “we don’t want to marry a specific organization or movement” (interview 1).

The position as an alternative news outlet (desirable or not) thus seems to bring both advantages and disadvantages to the project. Gaining confidence from social movements and

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8 The study was made in the first months of 2012, when left-wing president Fernando Lugo was still in power. A right-wing president would later that year replace him, in what has been called a parliamentary coup d’état (Romero, 2012).
like-minded gives E’a an audience, news tips and allies, but the position limits the financial models and creates tensions in the group, specially in relation to organisations that could want to influence the news agenda. In the following quote one of the respondents describes how he handles the dilemma: “The information (from organizations) is charged with subjectivity (...) my obligation as a journalist is to explain the context and give the other side of the story. (...) We want the reader to have all of the information to be able to draw her own conclusions” (interview 8). This respondent has worked as a mainstream journalist for decades, and relies on the professional values and practices that he has brought with him in to the alternative media project of E’a. In the next chapter, those values and practices will be discussed further.
5. The role of the journalist

In this chapter I will discuss the role of the journalist, according to the narratives collected from my respondents. Many of the respondents express a strong professional identity, but this identity is challenged both by the media and by their position as alternative. What stops them from fulfilling and developing their professional ideal? And in which ways might they want the ideals to be challenged? To answer these questions, I will start by giving you an insight to how this alternative production is structured.

5.1 On-going discussion: structuring alternative production

As previously mentioned, E’a is published by a cooperative of communication workers. This horizontal structure was a very conscious decision, according to my respondents. They did not only want to democratize the media but also the way of working. Rather than traditional editorial structures, the practitioners of E’a wanted their shared values and objective, and respect for each other, to be the guideline of their working together. A constant and on-going discussion, in which every voice is equally listened to, was supposed to be the basis of this way of working. This would be somewhat in line with Leah A. Lievrouws findings, as she characterizes the new alternative media projects as networked and leaderless (Lievrouw, 2011, 136). The difference between E’a and the kind of groups that she has investigated is that the practitioners of E’a aspired to work professionally with the project and therefore choose the more tangible structure of a cooperative.

Researcher Susan Forde also observes that alternative newsrooms often have an informal structure (Forde, 2011, 68). But in the case of E’a, the consensus on how to function seemed to exist more in theory then in practice, as several of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the arrangements. Some of them for professional reasons; they had started to believe that the project would not advance without a more traditional, hierarchical structure, and with a clearer commercial focus. “We were editors, vendors, distributors, trying to get advertisement... But we can’t do everything. Without getting paid,” (interview 1) one respondent said, in a supplied tone. The lack of a long-range business strategy and inefficiency caused by horizontal structure is by some researchers seen as typical of alternative media (Steiner, 2008, 119). But interesting enough, several of the respondents in
this study seemed to believe that it was the transition from print to online that had made the structure less efficient as well as less democratic. It had, for example, brought with it a switch from physical meetings to digital ones. Big and small decisions were now made on the cooperatives e-mail list, and the discussions could be long. During my visit to Paraguay, the team only managed to have one physical meeting, a meeting that was dedicated to financial and administrative matters and not containing editorial discussions. A desire to have more physical encounters was expressed by the large majority of the respondents. “We kept having work meetings while doing the print version”, says one of the respondents (interview 2). The lack of meetings had not only to do with the publishing on a digital platform, but was also in itself a question about money and time, something I will now discuss further.

5.2 Activist or professional? Money, time and passion

As already mentioned, the respondents expressed a strong professional identity. As one of them puts it: “(w)hit in E’a, we’re all journalists” (interview 8). This professional identity was based in education and previous work experience, but not less in a shared set of professional values. These values seemed to identify the key concept of objectivity as a practice, more than an ideal. The respondent who states that all on the E’a team are journalists also says: “The journalist is of course subjective, she has a way of seeing things and write in accordance of that, of course. But we try to maintain the greatest independency and openness as to how we present the information” (interview 8). This statement contains traditional journalistic values as well as values from the alternative sphere. The practitioners of E’a clearly want to differentiate information from opinion; they want to make the facts fall by their own weight. “If we are criticizing (the mainstream media for being biased), and created this medium to give an alternative to the population, we can’t do the same thing only from another perspective. We have to be very aware about the way we present the information” (interview 8). The respondents show at the same time scepticism towards the possibility of full objectivity and a strong feeling of responsibility towards the society, features recognisable from other alternative media ventures (Forde, 2011). This questioning of objectivity, and upgrading of subjectivity, is also part of the digital experience. As Paraguayan scholar Fátima E. Rodriguez puts it: “If the digital platforms for alternative communication as some particularities, it is the dismantling of false objectivity and the construction of new subjectivities” (Rodriguez, 2012, 341).
In the moment of time, when this study was made, the project had reached a crisis. “At this point we are a couple of persons trying to raise funds, to keep the page alive and to be able to live of it” (interview 6). Assignments that could bring in money were prioritized and the journalistic aims had somewhat been set aside. This caused dissatisfaction among some. “As there is no money, there is no professionalization of the people that do E’a. (...) It’s very much about activism, it doesn’t reach professionalization” (interview 4) one respondent states and another completes the image: “It’s difficult because one does it at the margin of the time that’s left after your salaried employment” (interview 1). The kind of practical objectivity desired by the respondents, was therefore hard to make reality, as recourses lacked and the respondents expressed that necessary phone calls and trips to verify facts could not always be made. “It’s a bit subjective. How should I say... How to balance serious journalism with being a social activist” (interview 1). This respondent expresses confusion between the two roles and as I discussed in chapter 4, the alliances with other parts of the civil society are not always easily handled. But it is clear that however identified, the respondents exercise an active citizenship through their participation in the E’a team (according to the definition made by Harcup, 2011).

As already stated, I believe that the medium in itself also hindered the values of the practitioners. Two of the respondents express it like this: “We have shared visions about what to publish but it’s harder online. Before we had meetings to thoroughly discuss the articles, now: everything goes and if it’s wrong we edit afterwards” (interview 1). “The print helped us to plan themes and discuss approaches” (interview 2). The (invented) nature of digital news seemed to push the limits of the groups shared visions, as the eager to get the news out there gained over their professional values. The pressure to be first often threatens the pressure to be right, as Susan Forde puts it (Forde, 2011, 102). Doing a print version of E’a also implied a different working process, in which the team and everyone’s input was perceived as more important. This feeling seemed stronger among the female practitioners, who did not feel that they could keep up with the speed of online news, more on this in chapter 7. The scepticism towards the digital platform was however shared by many of the respondents, as I will discuss in the next chapter.
6. Exiled online: Thinking the medium

As I have already established, E’a did not begin as an online project. The journalists got together to start a conventional newspaper; the webpage was nothing more than a side dish until economic reality forced it onto the main plate. The fact that it is not net-native surely affects the way that the practitioners perceive the medium. Earlier research on alternative media online has mainly focused on net-native experiences and to better understand the process of a project like E’a, this chapter will be dedicated to an analysis on how the respondents think and talk about the Internet.

6.1 Network pessimism

To claim that the earlier (mainly western) utopian dreams about the emancipatory power of the Internet (Atton, 2004, Tunney & Monaghan, 2008, Castells, 2009) are hard to find in the narratives of the E’a practitioners is not to say too much. “I don’t like it, I do not particularly like. But it has its advantages” (interview 9), as one of the respondents express his feelings towards the World Wide Web. Another feel that the e-presence do not fulfil the objectives of the project: “I do not think that the webpage is enough... it hasn’t got that massive reach that a printed newspaper can get” (interview 4), whereas others crassly state that the Internet is an “useful tool” (interview 7).

The frustration about the limited impact caused by the low level of Internet access is recognizable from other empirical studies on alternative web communication in the third world (see for example Mayo, 2011, 755). At the time of the interviews, it seems like the respondents in general perceived the digital platform as a lifebuoy more than a triggering tool. “We had not been able to continue subsisting, had it not been for Internet,” as a respondent puts it (interview 8). In contrast to net-native journalistic projects such as thoroughly researched Indymedia, E’a had to migrate online due to a harsh political and economic reality. This is not an uncommon scenario, according to Susan Forde, who notes that the possibility to continue publishing when struggling financially to fund hard-copy print is one of the most important functions of the web for alternative news publications (Forde, 2011, 96). The web then serves as a backup to not totally lose position. But it is not what the practitioners of E’a

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9 Net-native is a concept borrowed from Mark Deuze by Cris Atton (Atton, 2004, 54).
set out to do; it is not what they wanted. They are exiled online and there are dual views on whether return home when possibility is given. Whereas some of the staff members talk about going back to print as the overall aim, as soon as there is resources to do it, others (mainly younger practitioners) seems better settled in the digital diaspora. The fight is rather to generalize the Internet access, according to one respondent (interview 7).

The longing home is noticeable in the narratives by statements such as this one: “The result (when producing a print newspaper) is more rewarding. You see it, feel it, you can take it home. It’s something more tangible” (interview 2). The respondent expresses an abstract sensation rather than a concrete advantage; he wants to be able to touch the fruit of his efforts, to feel it between his hands. Might this be a matter of generations? Susan Forde seems to think so, at least partially, when coming across similar statements when talking to alternative journalists in the USA (Forde, 2011, 99). But there is more to it. The journalists of E’a do not talk so much about a difference in quality, which seem to be an issue for some of their North American colleagues (ibid, 99-100), but they seem to share their frustration of the ephemeral nature and the speed of the net (ibid, 102). “(I)n the hard-copy newspapers you can present much more in depth information, you can delve deeper”, says one of the respondents and continues: “The digital is much faster, it is very difficult” (interview 5). For him, this is a problem, as he believes that elite groups in society will be the only ones to read the hard-copy newspapers in a near future. The rest of the population would then, according to this prophecy, have to settle for fast but shallow web journalism.

It is evident from the interview transcripts that this discontent with producing just fast news is shared by a several of the writers in the E’a staff. The web as a platform is not fulfilling their urges as journalists and activists, or at least they have not found the way to do it: “I think the web is super important, to spread information, that's super necessary. But we also need the analytical bit, now it's like we half abandoned that. (...) But one could think about... about how to recover that space of analysis” (interview 4). The impact of the medium also depends on how it is perceived. Up until this day, it seems like the print newspaper or magazine still demonstrates quality in a way that a web page does not, according to Susan Forde, as the reader feel that the material has been subjected to a more harsh editorial process (Forde, 2011).
The experience of net-exile seems to have created a significant difference between E’a and other alternative media projects online, by Leah A. Lievrouw characterised by playfulness, ironic humour and bricolage (Lievrouw, 2011, 66-68). My respondents expressed hopelessness rather than playfulness, often related to the economic difficulties. The lack of money is what stops them from developing a more interactive and multimedia site, from going to other parts of the country and doing the socially and politically relevant journalism they want to do. “I think that we can not aspire anything more than this”, as one of them says with despair (interview 5). Tough the limitations in time and material recourses of cause is a fact, this resignation might also be related to our earlier findings on the changes in organizational structure that came with the change of medium; E’a became less of teamwork and more of individually producing or editing content. This is then hindering processes of brainstorming and internal development. Susan Forde also finds that the hard copy of a publication is perceived to bring something extra to the team as well as to broader community building among her respondents (Forde, 2011, 101-102). Feelings of passion and pride affect our commitment to tasks and projects, and thereby the time we will devote to them. Many of the E’a practitioners seemed to feel more pride and commitment towards the printed publication, but this might also be a question of time. As one respondent puts it: “Online journalism is something quite different, we come from a different school. (…) We are lacking in training in digital journalism” (interview 1).

6.2 Interacting online

It is evident that the relocation of journalism from paper to the World Wide Web has meant a changing relationship between sender and receiver and theorists have questioned the very concept of audience (Tunney and Monaghan, 2010, 6). In the narratives created in my meetings with the E’a practitioners, the word audience is used frequently and considering the traditionalist professional ideals of the E’a journalists, I do believe it to be a fruitful term in this study.

The negativity expressed by the E’a practitioners towards doing an online publication, finds its antithesis when talking about interaction with the audience. Through social networks and comments, the journalists get feedback and input for follow-ups. The possibility to reach new readers (through competitions on Facebook for example) in also mentioned as positive (interview 6). Respondents express that the Internet has opened up the discussion whereas
others seems to believe that the level of that online discussion is low in arguments and language: “It’s like a trash bin“ (interview 8). In this, there is a difference between the younger and older respondents, where increasing age also signifies increasing scepticism towards online interaction.

The biggest limitation of the online interaction with readers is of cause the limited Internet access of the population. “Initially, our idea was to reach the masses and with being a critical publication with left wing editorial – of course we wanted to reach the working part of the population. (…) It’s just that the working class do not have Internet” (interview 8). At the same time, other respondents admit that the audience of the printed version was also limited. “It was hard for us to reach the working class, our language was… different. People didn’t buy (the print version). And the people who did buy it were (…) the same people who could read online. It didn’t make any sense to keep publishing the print version. And we couldn’t afford it” (interview 1).

The limited Internet access is of course not only a problem for alternative media in Paraguay, but for mainstream news papers as well (Segovia, 2010, 45). Journalists also face another problem when communicating with the audience: the bilingualism. A big part of the population in Paraguay communicates in the indigenous language Guaraní in everyday life whilst Spanish is lingua franca in the public sphere. Guaraní spoken radio is therefore an important medium in the country, and different types of community based Internet radio is growing, according to Paraguayan scholar Fatima E. Rodriguez (2011, 348-352). Several of my respondents mentioned the bilingualism as a difficulty, as both the printed and digital version of E’a was written mainly in Spanish. They wanted to publish more texts in Guaraní but had not managed to find participants who were able to do that. “Very few people write in Guaraní”, one respondent told me, “it’s an oral culture. (…) We have had a few simple articles in Guaraní; we would like to do more. Guaraní is a very poetic language; it has a lot of strength to it. It is very metaphoric. A lot of things are not half as strong in Spanish” (interview 6).

Apart from the problem of reaching a larger audience, the practitioners of E’a also talked about the difficulties they have had in braking through the informative agenda of the mainstream media. “It feels like we are always reacting to the agenda set by the big media, answering to things they dictate” (interview 1). And even though the practitioners were
pleased to be able the spread counter-information, as they say, it was not enough. “The ideal would be to have five or six reporters (...) who could bring us the information that the people need. Not the information that the companies want to spread. That’s the ideal (...) to dispute the informative agenda and by that the political agenda” (interview 2). This is not a study on the impact of E’a, but according to the respondents they had not been able to affect the central nodes of the communication network in any significant way, to borrow the words of Manuel Castells (2009). Rather would these testimonies affirm the thesis of Tim Markham, that mainstream media will be in control of the news feed for quite some time to come (Markham, 2010).
7. Limits of the alternative: reproducing oppression

This case study is based on a very limited sample that does not easily lend itself to generalizations and structural analysis. Even so, I believe that some notes on gendered realities are in place. To analyse gendered participation was not one of the questions I set out to investigate when starting this project but during the process I could not help noticing certain patterns that I felt the need to mention. The theoretical perspective of this section is constructivist, which means an attempt to go beyond the discourse of women and men as fixed categories, this having been the case in many journalism studies, according to Linda Steiner, and rather focusing on gender as a performative relationship of femininity and masculinity (Steiner, 2008, 116).

7.1 Gendered participation online

Most news articles on http://ea.com.py are not signed by the author, but published in the name of E’a. Texts in the genres of analysis, opinion and investigation are the exceptions and one respondent explains the system: “Informative texts are taken on by the medium (that is, the editorial group of E’a) but texts of opinion, well, it’s the opinion of that writer. It’s a question about responsibility really (...) and also a way to distinguish the different genres” (interview 3). The system has its logic, but makes it slightly harder to identify editorial structures within the E’a crew. During the interviews, I was therefore surprised to find that the only two women on my list of active practitioners did not write anymore. “We collaborated much more for the printed version”, states one of them and continues, “(...) the web page has a different dynamic, a different logic. If you do not actualize constantly it will not be successful. Therefore it is a bit harder” (interview 1). The experience is shared by the other female staff member who explains her writing only for the print version of E’a with the different nature of the material; the articles were longer, more about investigation, analysis or depicting a social reality. There can of course be other reasons than gender to explain why these two practitioners had dropped out, but their statements stand out significantly from those of the male practitioners, when relating their own experiences and participation to the new media. As they were of median age and education within the group, I do believe that I at least can rule out those factors from the analysis. When analysing the interviews, I could not draw any conclusions concerning age, as the answers differed a lot between practitioners in the same
age span. That was not the case when looking at gender, and I therefore believe that it is relevant to further discuss what the practitioners of E’a have to say about gendered participation.

“Our society is very machista.10 Journalism is very machista. They demand a thousand times more from women; our texts are criticized much harder. That happens also in this cooperative” says one of the female respondents (interview 4). If digital journalism, then, is seen as a space mainly opted for rapid, informative news pieces (as stated in previous chapter), the kind of writing that would be resistant to a critical editorial (male) gaze would logically be given a low priority in the digital landscape. I understand this quote as another example of a feminine ambition, maybe rooted in the habit of being criticized: “With the printed paper I could take my time, go out and do interviews, use more sources. You can take your time to write it, edit and correct your text, do something... more elaborated” (interview 1). Journalism in Paraguay is a male-dominated field, and mentioned (over) ambition could then be a strategy to gain positions in that field. In this case, it seems as the Internet has not helped but rather hindered the female practitioners of E’a. They have not been able to move their positions forward, rather has there been an opposite process. This is of cause a highly contextual and situational hypothesis on the impact of the digital medium on gendered participation and it will have to be left behind for future investigation. But in the case of E’a the facts remain: “We started out three women and now we’re just two, and not one of us keep writing” (interview 4).

The tendency to participate less or drop off completely can also be connected to the kind of semi-volunteer alternative media project that E’a is. But one could argue that assuring and encouraging equal gender participation would be even more prioritized in this kind of alternative space. According to scholar Linda Steiner, research have not been able to give an answer to claims on gender differences in reporting and editing, but the lack of consensus at least suggest that women can, and have, changed newsrooms and content in a more feminist direction (Steiner, 2008, 121-126). When asked, the E’a practitioners seems to fully agree on the importance of the participation of women, but the gender discourse expressed in the interviews is somewhat ambiguous. The vast majority use words such as machismo and patriarchal structure, as factors that restrain women, but few are eager to analyse their own

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10 The Spanish word machista can be translated as male chauvinist or sexist.
part in those structures. Jokes and essentialist notions on the nature of women are also repeated in the interviews, like this one: “Women have a different gaze (…) another sensibility. (…) Administratively they have always been better than men (laughter). (It’s important with female participation) just to be women and men (laughter). Imagine seeing only men around you” (interview 5). The assumption that women journalists write with a special female “touch” is by Steiner classified as “(…) ancient history of gender in the newsroom” (Steiner, 2008, 117) but seems to be alive and kicking within the E’a team, at least amongst some of its male practitioners.

This thesis does not include a content study but through a quick look at the start page of E’a, you can easily see that men dominate the news feed as well as the participation through blogs etcetera. On the 4 of January 2015, a man is the protagonist of 14 news photos meanwhile a woman is the protagonist of only one photo on the site and the three blogs and three opinion pieces featured on the start page are all were written by men (E’a, 2015). In the future, I believe that studies such as the one made by Cory L. Armstrong and Fangfang Gao could play an important part in the examination of gendered content online – in the mainstream as well as the alternative sphere. They came to the conclusion that male subjects were overrepresented in news content and tweets made by North American newsrooms (Armstrong & Go, 2010) and given the low participation of women in the production of E’a, it is not a surprise that the same results is to be found on the E’a webpage. This is of great importance, as previous studies have found that the potential of alternative media online lies in the messages communicated (Moyo, 2011 and Xin, 2010), the rewiring of the information networks (Castells, 2009). If those messages do not include women, neither as senders nor as subjects, the speech about the democratic potential of the Internet is nothing but empty words.
8. Final discussion

Just as researcher Chris Atton, I do believe that we have a lot to learn from examples such as E’a. Atton states, that alternative media projects offer a critique in action of the dominant practices of traditional journalism, which allow us to think epistemological about the development of journalism and the mediation of society of today (Atton, 2009, 284). In this final discussion, I will attempt to summarize some of the conclusions that I have drawn from my case study.

First of all, one has to smile about the fact that this study, concerning alternative media online, concerns a study object that do not want to be neither alternative nor online. It is evident that E’a has more in common with the kind of independent news papers that researcher Susan Forde (2011) has studied, traditional in form but counter-hegemonic in content, then the type of networked, bricolage online media that Leah A. Lievrouw talk about (2011). The newspaper E’a started as a critic of mainstream media, biased by economical and political interests of their owners, and a desire to tell other stories, to communicate the news from other perspectives. This is not a game for the practitioners; it is seen as a necessity for the community and an obligation for them as journalists. But it is not an easy mission. There is a contradiction in the narratives of the respondents as they, on one hand, do not want to be perceived as alternative, and on the other hand, strive to stay out of the mainstream. Borrowing the metaphor from philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I have seen how E’a relates to society as a rhizome, connecting to the its different spheres when fruitful or necessary (Bailey et al., 2008). The journalists of E’a keep working for mainstream news channels (because it is necessary) and have kept many of the professional ideals (because it is fruitful) without complications. But the difficulties to find a functional financial model and the relationship to social movements and organizations create tensions in the group. There is no absolute consensus in the group on what being an alternative media actually means, even though the majority of them agree that the term alternative is problematic. The rhizome both connects and raptures.

The strong dedication to journalism’s role in democracy is typical of alternative journalism, according to Forde, but has, in the case of E’a, of course also to do with the society in which my respondents operate. Paraguay is a country with a high level of corruption and where
journalists get killed reporting about it and this should not be forgotten when analyzing the aspirations of the E’a crew. When I visited Paraguay the project had reached a low point; the group had been forced to stop publishing the printed newspaper they had work so hard to start, and the commitment and participation wavered. The western optimism towards the Internet and its democratizing potential was hard to find among the respondents, as they felt it did not serve their purpose. This network pessimism can also be related to the generation and education of the practitioners, neither they nor their project is net-native, but I do believe that there is more to the story. Without advocating a deterministic approach to Internet and how it can be used, I think we have a lesson to learn from the resignation of the E’a crew. For them, the printed version meant a totally different way of working where the collaboration between the members and editorial discussions were given much more importance. I would even say that it is impossible not to cooperate when making a print newspaper, as there is a certain space that must be filled with words and images. On the web, on the other hand, there are no limitations as to how much or how little you can publish, and it does not have to involve more than one person at the time. I do believe that the fatigue and pessimism expressed by the respondents, was related to this absence of collaboration and community.

The respondents also expressed resignation concerning the impact of their media. They did not feel that they were successful in reprogramming the communication networks, to speak with Castells (2009). This might have changed since then. Some months after my study, in the end of July 2012, some dramatic events occurred in the country. After a police shooting that killed several in an indigenous community, left-wing president Fernando Lugo was removed from office (Simon Romero, 2012). During these events, journalists of Paraguay’s biggest newspaper ABC Color informs that the site of E’a is no longer accessible from the computers at their work place. When E’a has reported about this, the page is yet again reachable from the newsroom (E’a, 2012). In this dramatic moment in the history of the country, the counter-information spread by E’a apparently echoed to the central nodes of the Paraguayan communication network.

Two and a half years later, the page is still up and running. And if this last quoted practitioner is right, so will be the case for quite some time: “We wanted to create an alternative media, a mass media, that could compete with the informative agenda of the dominant media. That would have permanence and that could, we could, confront the dominant media. And we think, that sooner or later we’ll be able to make it work” (interview 3).
The counter-hegemonic stories and democratising journalism that the E’a team long for might never be printed on paper, but have at least the possibility of being published and spread, thanks to a little thing called the World Wide Web.

8.1 Future research

Whilst working with this thesis, I have found many entries for future research. As mentioned, I do believe it to be important to look at gender representation and participation in those new forms of journalism that flourish online and are so celebrated for their democratising potential. I also think it would be of interest to do more in-depth content analysis of these new genres. For the practitioners of E’a, the difference between a piece in the printed and the digital version of their newspaper seem to be immense. But in what way do they differ, and what does that mean? How does the readers perceive the two pieces? Which kinds or sources are used and how? In which way is the voice and subjectivity of the journalist heard in the different platforms? That is an interesting topic to study, in mainstream as well as alternative news production, but might have an extra value for journalist such as the E’a crew, who are unwholesomely dedicated to the role of journalism in democracy, to paraphrase Susan Forde. What does the medium mean for the intake and social impact of news? Do the link posted on Twitter make us act or react in a different way than the reading out loud from a magazine to a friend? Those are other questions that I hope will be investigated and discussed more in the future.

Finally, I believe that the research on alternative media should also focus more on the affect our digital lifestyles have on group dynamics, internal democracy and organizational structures. My respondents expressed a desire for a physical space and more meetings AFK as the discussions on the internal e-mail list were not satisfying to them. I think there is still a lot to investigate concerning behaviour online versus face to face, the consequences of communicating more and more in writing and the affects this might have on the participation and hierarchies in a group. Sometimes it seems that we have learned to believe that digital communication is making everything easier, when it might actually make a lot a things harder in the same time.
9. References


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Attachment: Interview guide

Which is your function within the cooperative?
When did you start working with E’a?
How did you get in to the cooperative?

How would you describe the journalism that E’a does?
Which name would you put on it?
What differentiate it from traditional journalism?
Why is it needed? / Which function does it fulfil?
Which are the aims of the project?

How do you define it, politically? (editorial)
To which groups are you related? Why?
(Do you see yourselves as part of a movement? How does this affect the journalism?)
How is the project financed?
How do those financial strings affect the journalism?

Which is your audience? Why?
How does the low Internet access affect the goals of the project?
Which pros and cons can you see with the use of Internet / new communication technologies?

Could you describe the process to generate news?
  - How do you generate ideas?
  - Which events/ processes are prioritized?
  - How do you value the news?
  - Which sources are used?
  - Which methods?
  - How do you present the material?
  - How do you spread the material?
  - How is the material discussed by the readers?

How do you use the social networks? Which function do they have?
How do you interact with the public?
Which methods do you use to increase the participation of the readers?
How does that change the role of the journalist?
Who can write for E’a?

How do you do to increase the participation of marginalized groups?

How does the global reach of the Internet affect your project?
How does the bilingual and oral culture of the country affect?