Extractivism and Resistance: Media, Protest and Power in Ecuador

Diana M. Coryat

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EXTRACTIVISM AND RESISTANCE: MEDIA, PROTEST AND POWER IN ECUADOR

A Dissertation Presented

by

DIANA CORYAT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2017

Communication
EXTRACTIVISM AND RESISTANCE: MEDIA, PROTEST AND POWER IN ECUADOR

A Dissertation Presented
By
DIANA CORYAT

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Department of Communication
DEDICATION

Every step I take in life is dedicated to my mother, Ellen J. Coryat

This project is dedicated to all the brave, brilliant, visionary defensors of Nature,

*Nuestra Pachamamita!*
As I wrap up this dissertation project, and look back over the past several years, I realize how much I have to be grateful for, and how many individuals, collectives and organizations I would like to thank for supporting me, sustaining my espíritu during this long journey, and contributing in some way to this project. Apologies in advance if I have omitted any person or organization!

The University of Massachusetts Amherst has been one of my intellectual homes since I began a Masters Degree in 2000. Returning a decade later to pursue a doctoral degree served to deepen relationships that had been seeded, and to begin new ones. First and foremost, I would like to thank my dissertation committee. I have been extraordinarily fortunate to work with four gifted scholars. I took classes with each of them, and three of them guided me through my comprehensive exams. It has been an honor and pleasure to work closely with the co-Chairs of my committee: Martha Fuentes-Bautista, I am so appreciative of her deep knowledge of Latin American media and social movements. She has been a wonderful mentor since the day we met and chatted in the hallway for hours, always guiding and inspiring me to improve my work. Sonia Alvarez, my other co-Chair, has been a wise teacher and exciting interlocutor, helping me to think critically about Latin America’s left turn, and contemporary global dynamics of protest. During the comps process, Mari Castañeda worked with me on the publication of a paper in an academic journal. Millie Thayer, my fourth committee member, helped me navigate the critical development studies and always has given me incisive feedback. Other scholars who have helped me advance my thinking in areas related to my thesis at UMass
Amherst include: Angelica Bernal, Paula Chakravartty (now at NYU), Leda Cooks, and Henry Geddes.

The Department of Communication has generously provided me with financial support, starting with an attractive funding package for my doctoral studies, several travel grants to attend national and international conferences, and the Anca Romantan Scholarship. The administrative personnel in the Department are all top notch, and Kathy Ready, Graduate Program Secretary, deserves special thanks for warm support and keeping me on track. The Graduate School awarded me with two Dissertation Research Grants, which helped fund my field work, interview transcriptions and research assistance. My assistant, Maristher Guevara, now a graduate student at Yale University, has been an invaluable part of the research and writing process. She assisted me even as she transitioned to her own graduate work, vowing to see the project through. She also made me laugh in some of the most difficult moments of research!

Living in Quito, Ecuador, has not only provided fertile terrain for research, it has been a site for deepening my intellectual, artistic, political, personal, spiritual, and sensorial capacities. Entering into the world of ecological, indigenous and media activism has changed the way I see and live life, period. I especially am grateful to Yasunidos and Acción Ecológica. I learned so much from them during an incredibly intense, tumultuous few years. I thank them for allowing me to be present in more private meetings spaces. They have been generous, brilliant interlocutors, engaging in long interviews and conversations about that year. I am in awe of the work they do, and their commitment to a post-extractive future. I can only hope that this study is useful to them. Special thanks to Manu Bayón, Beto Bonilla, Omar Bonilla, Antonella Calle, Pato Chávez, Elena
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During my first two years in Quito, I was affiliated with FLACSO-Ecuador as a visiting researcher in the Facultad de Comunicación y Relaciones Internacionales. I thank Agustin Lao-Montes for introducing me to Ecuador and FLACSO. Both FLACSO and the Universidad Andina Simon Bolívar, excellent have been rich sites of intellectual engagement for me, given their high-caliber faculty and constant stream of international scholars and activists, conferences, book presentations, and particularly the spaces that
have been provided to ecologist, feminist and indigenous movements and scholars, that I have been so privileged to learn so much from.

In 2014, I began to work with the Universidad de las Américas in the Facultad de Comunicación, which has provided me with work that has allowed me to remain in Quito. Thanks to José Velásquez (former dean) and Cheryl Martens for helping me to shape my work here, Ana Chavez for our friendship and lunches, and Alvaro Muriel and La Escuela de Cine’s professors and students for making this work creative and fun.

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Last but not least, is my incredible family and most intimate bests with whom I travel this path of life, and that have been there for me in uncountable ways: my mother Ellen Coryat, siblings David, Brian, Annie and Ellen, my daughters Aiyana and Emma, nieces and nephews David, Lauren, Lisanne, Lucy, Erin, and Monet. Kelley Crittenden, Ashok Khosla, Liz Miller, Sabrina Parker, Susan Siegel, Saundra Thomas (and her mom Marianne deVargas for a serendipitous conversation that helped me make my decision to go back for the Ph.D.).
ABSTRACT

EXTRACTIVISM AND RESISTANCE: MEDIA, PROTEST AND POWER IN ECUADOR

MAY 2017

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This dissertation examines the symbolic and material dimensions of media power and social movement cultural production in a Latin American post-neoliberal context, through the case study of Yasunidos – an anti-extractivist, youth social movement – and its fight to stop the Ecuadorian government’s plans to drill for oil in the Yasuní region of the Amazon. The project is located within two bodies of literature: cultural analysis of social movement media and cultural production within new waves of global protest, and studies of extractivism and post-development in Latin America. It advances the concept of mediated cultural politics to tell the story of a movement that, through creative media practices, protest and direct democracy, mobilized society over these issues. At the same time, the study analyzes how a so-called progressive Latin American government uses different forms of statist media power to halt the movement. The research design includes a qualitative, mixed-methods ethnography of the movement, as well as archival work, analysis of media texts on the struggle, and visual analysis of movement-based cultural production. The analysis reveals the contradictions of 21st century socialist states, and the implications that extractivism and statist media power have on processes of democratization in Latin America. It offers some reflections on the post-development imaginaries emerging from contemporary anti-extractivist movements.

Keywords: Amazon, Ecuador, extractivism, Latin American social movements, media power, mediated cultural politics, post-development, Yasunidos, Yasuní ITT
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<tr>
<td>AGIP</td>
<td>Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMARC</td>
<td>Asociación Mundial de Radios Comunitarios (Worldwide Association of Community Radio)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANDES</td>
<td>Agencia Publica de Noticias del Ecuador y Suramerica (News Agency of Ecuador and South America)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDES</td>
<td>Centro de Derechos Económicos y Sociales (Center of Economic and Social Rights)</td>
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<td>CDS</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Studies</td>
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<td>CIDH</td>
<td>Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNE</td>
<td>Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Elections Council)</td>
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<td>COIP</td>
<td>Código Orgánico Integral Penal (Organic Integral Penal Code)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONAIE</td>
<td>Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONFENAIE</td>
<td>Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CORDICOM</td>
<td>Consejo de Regulación y Desarrollo de la Información y Comunicación (Board of Regulation and Development of Information and Communication)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPJ</td>
<td>Committee for the Protection of Journalists</td>
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<td>EC</td>
<td>Enlace Ciudadano</td>
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<td>ECUARUNARI</td>
<td>Confederación de Pueblos de la Nacionalidad Kichwa del Ecuador (Confederated of the Peoples of Kichwa Nationality in Ecuador)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<td>IACHR</td>
<td>Inter American Commission on Human Rights</td>
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<td>INREDH</td>
<td>Fundación Regional de Asesoría en Derechos Humanos (Regional Foundation of Human Rights Counseling)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITT</td>
<td>Ishpingo Tambocha Tiputini (Yasuní)</td>
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<td>LOC</td>
<td>Ley Organica de Comunicacion (Organic Communication Law)</td>
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<td>MAE</td>
<td>Ministerio del Ambiente del Ecuador (Ministry of the</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>MPD</td>
<td>Movimiento Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Movement)</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>OPIP</td>
<td>Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza (Organization of the Indigenous People’s of Pastaza)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PIA</td>
<td>Pueblos Indígenas Aislados (Isolated Indigenous groups)</td>
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<td>SECOM</td>
<td>Secretaría Nacional de Comunicación (National Secretary of Communication)</td>
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<td>Secretaría Nacional de Inteligencia (National Secretary of Intelligence)</td>
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<td>Superintendencia de la Información y Comunicación (Superintendent of Information and Communication)</td>
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<td>SUPERTEL</td>
<td>Superintendencia de Telecomunicaciones (Superintendent of Telecommunications)</td>
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<td>UNAE</td>
<td>Unión de Nativos de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (Natives’ Union of the Ecuadorian Amazon)</td>
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<td>UP</td>
<td>Unidad Popular (Popular Unity)</td>
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<td>WSF</td>
<td>World Social Forum</td>
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<td>YNP</td>
<td>Yasuní National Park</td>
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CHAPTER 1

NEW WAVES OF PROTEST IN ECUADOR’S CITIZEN REVOLUTION

1.1 Introduction: The end of the Yasuní ITT initiative gives rise to a new movement

On August 15, 2013, Ecuadorian President Correa announced the suspension of one of his signature projects, Yasuní ITT.¹ This project, conceived by Ecuadorian ecologists, was adopted by President Correa in June 2007 shortly after he assumed office. The goal was to raise sufficient funds from the global North to leave 920 million barrels of oil in the ground in the Yasuní National Park. In addition to being one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, the Yasuní is home to several indigenous pueblos and nacionalidades (peoples and nationalities), including nomadic groups that have avoided contact and colonization since European contact.² Claiming that the initiative had not raised sufficient funds, President Correa announced that the government would proceed with “Plan B,” oil extraction of this beloved national treasure.

The evening that the announcement was delivered, thousands of citizens gathered peacefully in the Quito’s historic center and plazas around the country to hold candlelight vigils for the Yasuní. Vigils had begun even before the announcement, as rumors spread about the government’s change of direction. Two days later, on August 17, 2013, nationwide protests erupted across the nation. Collective disillusionment about the abandonment of the Yasuní ITT project spread rapidly across Ecuador through word-of-mouth, traditional media and social networks. Public forums, marches and protests were quickly organized in cities and towns across Ecuador, similar to the way word spread

¹ ITT refers to oil blocks Ishpingo, Tambococha and Tiputini, named after rivers in the Yasuní.
² The presence of the Taromenare and Tagaeri had been acknowledged in the government’s Yasuní ITT documents, but once plans changed, maps were adjusted and their presence was subsequently denied.
during Occupy Wall Street and other recent waves of protest across the globe. The following day, on August 18, 2013, the Yasunidos collective was founded by urban young people in Quito. Yasunidos would go on to build an unprecedented, enduring, mediated field of protest that would challenge the Correa government on its extractive politics in the Amazon and elsewhere.

The strong reaction by citizens to the government’s decision to exploit the Yasuní was due, in part, to the success that Ecuadorian social movements had in the late 1990s and early 2000s in rejecting the neoliberal order that had become the law of the land. Later, those movements participated in crafting the path-breaking, progressive 2008 Constitution, which include the rights of Nature (the first Constitution in the world to declare Nature a subject of rights); territorial rights for indigenous peoples; and obligatory previous consultation in territories where extractive activities were proposed. All of these rights were at stake in the Yasunidos case.

Ironically, national and global indignation was also fueled by the resounding success of the government’s Yasuní ITT media campaign, which, since 2007, had passionately communicated the irreplaceable value of the Yasuní for Ecuador and the global community. The radical, post-neoliberal proposal to “keep the oil in the ground”\(^3\) fostered pride and ecological consciousness in many Ecuadorians, and brought positive international attention to President Correa. Now, in an apparent reversal\(^4\), the government would launch another multi-million dollar media campaign designed to build public

---

\(^3\) The first campaign to “keep the oil in the ground” was in Nigeria.

\(^4\) Those who closely followed the management of the Yasuní National Park and Yasuní ITT initiative had valid reasons to doubt the government’s commitment to leaving the oil in the ground, including documented extractive activities in neighboring Block 31 by Petroamazonas (the state oil company) and China’s growing presence in Ecuador as a lender, investor, and purchaser of Ecuadorian oil. See Los Taladros Petroleros (2013); Martinez (2009); Ross (2014).
consent for its plans to move ahead with oil drilling. This time it would not be an easy sell, given the popularity of the Yasuní ITT initiative. In fact, the mediated battle between Yasunidos and the Correa government, and the events that would take place during the following year, would mark a point of inflection in Ecuadorian politics. It would influence how people viewed the government, its use of media, and its undemocratic treatment of social movements and citizens.

Correa’s “Plan B” was consistent with the overall trend of the Latin American progressive governments\(^5\): a combination of intensifying resource extraction and criminalizing protest. Gudynas (2014), a leading scholar on issues related to resource extraction and post-extractivist approaches, defines extractivism as activities in which natural resources (oil, mining, agriculture, and monoculture such as cultivation of shrimp and soy) are extracted in large volumes, and/or high intensity, and that are mainly oriented toward exportation as *materia prima*, or with minimal processing (p. 80). Svampa (2013) proposes that such extractivist politics are part of a new economic and political-ideological order, “the Commodities Consensus”, indicating a phase that follows “the Washington Consensus” (p. 117). This “boom” in state-led resource extraction had been driven and sustained by the rise in international prices for raw materials.\(^6\) Yet, while these practices fueled economic growth and public investment, they also led to greater inequality and a new cycle of protests across the Americas, which focused on the defense of territories targeted for exploitation (Gudynas, 2012). In this “eco-territorial turn” new

\(^5\) Governments often included in the list of progressive governments are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela.

\(^6\) These prices declined dramatically in the global market in 2014.
languages of valoration traverse socio-environmental struggles across the continent” (Svampa, 2011, p. 185).

Yasunidos is part of the new wave of resistance to these governments’ neo-extractivist practices. Gudynas (2012) differentiates between “classic” extractivism (heavily dependent on foreign investors, who take most of the profits), and “neo” extractivism, in that it is structured and defended differently, with greater state protagonism, and profits directed towards social investment (I use both terms interchangeably). However, Gudynas points out that, despite nationalist rhetoric, states continue to depend on investment by transnational actors. Also, governments defending their extractivist practices argue that the social and ecological costs are minimal, and that profits will be directed toward Amazonian communities, unlike in previous governments.

One of the contributions of this study are that it brings together social movement scholarship, post-development literature, and media studies, which have not always been in dialogue.

1.2 Overview of dissertation project

My dissertation is a case study of Yasunidos, an anti-extractivist social movement that emerged in Ecuador on August 18, 2013. This movement, over the course of nine intense months, sought to halt the Ecuadorian government’s plan to drill for oil in the Yasuní, one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. It accomplished this through creative protest and direct democratic mechanisms. The case study is also about how the Ecuadorian government responded to this movement in the most undemocratic way through its statist power and expanded media power. It calls attention to the contradictions that have arisen, as the government has abandoned a key ecological
project, to keep the oil in the soil in the Yasuní. The case study examines the highly mediated, cultural battle between them, in which the issues of extractivism and the meaning of development are central. As the study details, Yasunidos is a new, horizontally-organized, ecological social movement that broadly incorporates students, feminists, eco-feminists, indigenous, mestizo, urban, rural and Amazonian individuals and communities. Many of the young people who quickly adhered to the movement did not have previous experience with social movements or organizing (I examine Yasunidos identity in more detail in Chapter 2). One of its key successes is that it was able to put society in movement. At a time when protest was at a low point in Ecuador, this mediated battle got the entire country thinking and talking about the Yasuní.

I have chosen to examine the Yasunidos case for a number of reasons: 1) It brings to the foregound one very interesting, particular case about a movement that is part of a new wave of resistance to extractivism in the progressive states; 2) it calls attention to how processes of democratization from below can not only challenge state power but can enact and capture post-development imaginaries that are taking hold in the region; 3) it examines the repressive, undemocratic practices of the Ecuadorian government as it pursues resource extraction, with an emphasis on how statist media power is used to repress and criminalize social movements and protest actions; and 4) it sheds light on state-social movement conflict from a much-needed communications perspective.

I argue that a communication perspective is essential for several reasons: a) it highlights how state media practices violate the communication rights framework that was inscribed in the 2008 Constitution; b) it demonstrates how the government’s communication practices are intrinsically related to its political practices, given the
unprecedented expansion of the government’s material and symbolic media power,; and c) it underscores the mediated cultural politics of a new movement, which include using new technologies to circulate images of street protest, political art and embodied practices that contest the meaning of extractivism and development in Ecuador.

The broader context for this study is the increasing tensions between the so-called gobiernos progresistas (progressive governments) and the social movements that helped bring them to power, as they seek to make governments accountable to their pledges to privilege alternative development models.

This study provides a communications perspective in its analysis of state-social movement relations. This is particularly relevant in Ecuador, where the government has used its ever-expanding media power to justify its extractive politics, and question the legitimacy of citizens, journalists and social movements who oppose such practices. By media power I follow Couldry’s (2003) conceptualization, which encompasses media’s symbolic and material dimensions, and emphasizes its definitional power, which influences and shapes the whole of social space.

Applying a communication lens to this mediated conflict led me to analyze how Yasunidos has communicated dissent on an uneven playing field in which it has had to confront not only state power, but also the state’s media power. I conceptualize such movement practices as mediated cultural politics, by which I mean social movements’ mediated cultural expressions that interrupt hegemonic meanings. The Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics are centered on counter-hegemonic meanings of development, or what is also referred to as post-development (Escobar 2014) or post-extractivism (Gudynas 2012). In the Ecuadorian context, disputes about the nature of development
often entail the use of the concept *Buen Vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay* in the indigenous Kichwa language (literally, good living), an indigenous concept integrated into the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, which points to sustainable, non-capitalist models of development in which living beings and the natural environment take precedence over material wealth (Acosta, 2012). However, the government has deployed the concepts of development and *Buen Vivir* in the service of extractivist projects, with promises that extraction will bring material wealth to the Amazon. Hence, my focus on these dialogical concepts of media power and mediated cultural politics are lenses with which I analyze the battle over these contested meanings between the Ecuadorian government and Yasunidos. I am in dialogue with contemporary, critical left Latin American and Latin Americanist scholars, especially those who have been documenting, assessing and theorizing this era of the progressive left governments. These conceptual frameworks are discussed in Section 1.4 of this introduction.

My dissertation examines three related questions:

1) How has Yasunidos emerged as an important site of struggle against extractivist politics in Ecuador?
   a. How has the mediatization of the conflict become a constitutive part of the struggle?

2) How has the Correa government reconfigured media power in Ecuador?
   a. How has it used its media power to delegitimize and criminalize Yasunidos and other social actors that oppose oil drilling in the Yasuni?

3) How has Yasunidos confronted the government’s media power?
a. How has Yasunidos deployed a mediated cultural politics of post-development, thereby challenging the state’s extractivist discourses and practices?

Analyzing these questions reveals the cultural battle being waged over the meaning of extractivism and development in 21st century Latin America, in a context fraught with contradictions. They illuminate tensions between democratizing processes led by social movements, and the increasingly undemocratic practices of extractivist states. In referring to processes of democratization, I follow Latin American scholars that take distance from the analysis of democracy as a specific kind of regime, but rather view processes of democratization as “spaces of experience and experimentation that arise from specific historical, geographical and cultural conditions” (Ramirez, 2012, p. 107). Nor should democracy be understood as solely emanating from electoral politics or from political elites, but also from social movements and other sectors of civil society (Dagnino et al., 2008; Ramirez, 2012).

1.3 Regional contexts

1.3.1 Latin America’s “left turn”

In Latin America, a profound process of capitalist restructuring gained momentum through the implementation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s (Svampa, 2011; Ospina, 2013; Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo, 2013). The effects of these policies led to the de-nationalization and widespread privatization of public and natural resources, including the deregulation, privatization and concentration of media and telecommunication industries (Hintz, 2011;
In the 1990s and 2000’s, responding to the devastating effects of neoliberalism, social movements across the Americas organized massive mobilizations, including the Zapatista uprising in Mexico, civil society protests in Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela, and indigenous uprisings in Bolivia and Ecuador. These social movements were responsible, in part, for the subsequent wave of electoral victories of Left-leaning parties and movements in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

While there has not been a single route taken by the progressive governments, there has been a correlation among their rhetoric, legislative actions and foreign relations policies that reflect nationalist, anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist militancy. Zibechi (2010) suggests that the regional political reality has been reconfigured in several interrelated ways: the fight to overcome U.S. domination; the presence of anti-imperial tendencies and the inclusion of alternative visions of development. A fourth dimension, which is in tension with alternative visions of development, has been the national-popular projects that have prioritized industrialization. Notably, Lander (2013) argues that these projects and tendencies coexist to varying degrees in each state, and that none can be analyzed as if they were unitary, coherent, or free of tensions and contradictions.

In what is now widely referred to as the *retorno al Estado* (return of the state), a common goal among the progressive Latin American governments has been to strengthen the state as a strategic, regulatory body (DeMoraes, 2011). This has led to a measure of

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7 By 1983, approximately 85% of the media was under private ownership in Latin America (see Mastrini and Becerra 2011).
8 The Zapatista uprising notably took place on the same day that the Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Mexico went into effect, January 1, 1994.
growth in social spending in health, education, salaries and public works, and the
implementation of policies that seek to redistribute resources more equitably. Yet, while these governments take on ambitious modernization projects with public funds derived from natural resource extraction, and mediated rhetoric celebrates popular power, the question has been raised as to what democratic participation means in these contexts, especially when social movements and their demands have been routinely delegitimized (Daza et al., 2013; Lander, 2013; Martínez, 2009; Ospina et al., 2013). For this reason, many scholars and activists now refer to the progressive governments as the so-called progressive governments.

In this study, I use this term “so-called” when I wish to draw attention to the gap between the rhetoric and extractive practice of these governments. However, I continue to refer to them (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela) as progressive to acknowledge a rupture with the neoliberal governments of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the ushering in of a new era in Latin America which began with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. I also seek to distinguish between these governments and contemporary right-wing, neoliberal governments. At the same time, to varying degrees, they are all less anti-neoliberal, socialist and democratic than their rhetoric or practices. With regards to extractivism, they have deepened extractive practices, and in addition, have criminalized social movements, among other anti-democratic actions. Many scholars agree that the era of progressive governments has ended or is coming to an end due to increasing contradictions, or their replacement by

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10 However, as DeSouza Santos (2010) points out, while the main focus has been on lifting the most vulnerable sectors of society out of poverty, this does not necessarily mean that the interests of the wealthy and powerful have been negatively affected.
right-wing governments (At the time of writing, Argentina and Brazil now have right-wing governments).

**1.3.2 Restructuring symbolic and material power: media battles and reforms**

Another key piece involved in the return of the state has been the progressive governments’ undertaking of precedent-setting media reforms, and media battles with private media companies. These processes have been partial, uneven and conflictive, and have played out differently in each country. Generally speaking, these reforms have sought to curb the unchecked growth of private media groups that was enabled by neoliberal (de)regulatory frameworks established during the latter part of the 20th century. They have also been part of broader strategies to counter the negative campaigns that private media companies and other political opponents have waged against them. In the cases of Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela, these strategies have also included suing, taking over, shutting down, managing and controlling private media companies. Arguably, building a strong presence in the media is one of the principal ways in which a government can communicate with its citizens; publicize its worldview nationally and internationally, and contest oppositional factions. And, as private media companies have been critical of, and have taken oppositional positions to these governments, rolling back private media has been a key strategy to curtail their power. Private national media and international organisms such as Reporters Without Borders have framed the structural reforms as hindering freedom of expression and freedom of the press. However, while these institutions claim to stand on the value of freedom of expression, scholars and media reform advocates point out that private media are mostly defending freedom of
expression for a small group of corporations (Cerbino et al., 2014; DeMoraes, 2011; Ramos, 2010).

Scholars argue across a continuum both for and against government-led media reform. For example, Brazilian scholar DeMoraes (2011, p.17) has argued the need for government regulation of media concentration, given that “… the state is the only institution that can safeguard cultural diversity as a fundamental element of citizenship. … [and hence] the importance of legislation that takes into account freedom of expression as a constitutive part of communication rights.” DeMoraes proposes that state investment has been central to the development of most key industries, and that investment in the media industry is equally important. On the other hand, while Waisbord (2011, 2012) acknowledges that private media are at the forefront of the opposition to these governments, he argues that unregulated statism is also worrisome, particularly in a region with a legacy of government discretionalism, weak accountability and the concentration of presidential power.

Communication scholars have sought to theorize and characterize new configurations of media power in Latin America by extending the study of populism and populist practices to the study of media reform. Waisbord (2011) proposes five characteristics of populist media politics as practiced in “neo-populist” governments: 1) It divides media into those who support, and those who are against the government, while effacing the practice of independent journalism; 2) It targets specific media companies and journalists, but does not seek to completely eliminate private media; 3) It seeks to revamp rather than overturn private media, using Executive powers to punish and reward groups according to their stance toward and media treatment of the government; 4) It
seeks to strengthen and expand state-controlled media under the direction of the Executive; and 5) It supports legislation that strengthens the regulatory power of the Executive with respect to media content (often framed as social responsibility).

Moreover, Waisbord (2011) argues that the discrediting of, and retaliation against, specific media outlets and journalists have had a chilling effect on private media as they reinforce a climate of self-censorship. While I do not use the framework of populism or neo-populism in this study, all of the characteristics cited by Waisbord resonate in the case of Ecuador, and will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

For Hintz (2011), there are a range of factors that should be considered in analyzing whether and to what extent media policies are favorable to civil society. Among them are the extent of media concentration; how national laws are implemented; transnational influences; support for community media; and whether or not independent voices and cultural production are promoted (or repressed) by the state. Barriers to civil society-oriented policies includes a lack of: independence of legislative bodies to the Executive; transparency by government agencies; and comprehensive and consistent response to media concentration. These criteria are highly relevant to my analysis of statist media power in Ecuador. In the same way that the progressive governments cannot be analyzed as a whole, media practices and reforms have had dramatically different trajectories in each country. The contribution of this study to this body of literature is the examinination of not only Ecuador’s media reforms, but actual media practices, and how they were enacted in conjunction with extractive practicws. I also analyze how other legislation and state actions, not directly related to communication but to protest and criminalization of social actors, have enabled or constrained public and
political expression by media actors, social movements and citizens.

To conclude this section, while early literature about the so-called Latin American “pink tide” tended to either romanticize or demonize these processes, especially relating to the more “radical” administrations of Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa and Evo Morales (Garretón et al., 2003, Hershberg and Rosen, 2006; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011; Weyland, et al., 2010), recent literature has sought to critically take stock of the impacts of the first decade of state transformation and reform in the region (Stahler-Shock, Vanden and Becker, 2013). Though rarely discussed in the same study, my dissertation addresses two arenas of criticism of the “so-called” progressive governments, extractivist projects and media practices of the Ecuadorian government. These two practices must be put in conversation, especially in that the government has used its media power to legitimate its extractivist practices.

1.3.3 Contradictions and conflicts: from progressive constitutions to neo-extractive practices.

The governments of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela have sought to transform the state, in part, through the creation of progressive, conceptually innovative constitutions, which have purported to advance radical democratic agendas under the rubric “Socialism of the 21st Century (Ellner, 2014).11 Given the constituent assembly processes that ensued, characterized by democratic debate as well as polarizing political conflict, these constitutions (Bolivia 2009, Ecuador 2008, Venezuela 1999) incorporated the input of

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11 21st Century Socialism differs in several aspects from 20th century socialism, first and foremost, because the centralized state and complete control of the market is not a goal of these governments. 21st Century Socialism, a term first used by Chavez in Venezuela, is geopolitically specific and refers to a post-neoliberal era in which these governments have rejected the dominance of the U.S., Europe and transnational organisms such as the World Bank. Correa has defined Ecuador as a 21st century socialist state.
social movements and diverse sectors of society. Given the recent founding of these constitutions, and the participatory nature of their crafting, there has been a high level of investment in them by diverse social actors. As such, they are sites of permanent construction, interpretation, debate, and contention (Lander, 2013). This is particularly true in instances where there are large gaps between what was inscribed in these constitutions, and actual state practices.

One of the biggest sources of conflict between these states and indigenous, environmental, ecological and feminist social organizations and movements has been the expansion of extractivist practices. In fact, many scholars and activists argue that extractivism is the main threat to the environment, indigenous communities, rural women’s lives, and to territorial integrity of indigenous populations in Latin America (Lander, 2013; Seoane, 2013; Svampa, 2013). While extractive activities have increased in virtually all Latin American countries in the 21st century, the difference between right-wing and progressive government approaches to resource extraction has been that the latter have applied more state controls, have taken a greater share of the profits, and have reinvested some of the profits in social spending and public works. However, despite the investment, many activists argue that extractive activities contradict the spirit and letter of the new constitutions. The case of Yasunidos offers an example of how democracy has been eroded in Ecuador due to extractivist policies and practices. An analysis that makes such connection can contribute to the democratization studies, as it is one that is rarely made.

Factors that have driven the expansion of extractive frontiers have included the high prices of materia prima on the international market, which has provided
governments with funds for social services and infrastructure, which in turn has helped them to preserve their legitimacy and electoral support. Unfortunately, commitments to transform the economic and productive model, to honor territorial rights of indigenous groups and the rights of Nature, have not been fulfilled (Lander, 2013). Instead, extractivist activities have been framed by “so-called” progressive governments as essential for “progress,” “development” and “modernization,” and to eradicate poverty and attain Buen Vivir. The governments of Morales, Correa and Chavez pledged to deepen democracy, and to push representational democracy towards more participatory, radical forms. However, extractivist practices have eroded processes of democratization. They have led to the violation of rights and have generated diverse forms of violence, including: the forced eviction and militarization of communities; the contamination of ecosystems leading to severe health issues; the criminalization of protest and jailing of activists. In Ecuador, Uruguay and Bolivia, governments have ended up eliminating or compromising referendums, previous consultation, and other participatory mechanisms when faced with citizen resistance. In Bolivia and Ecuador, new restrictions have been put on the legal formation of social organizations, and some organizations have been closed or threatened with closure (Ecuador’s Decree 16, and the subsequent closure of Pachamama Foundation is discussed in Chapter Three) (Seone et al., 2013). Maristella Svampa’s assessment sums it up:

It is clear that the expansion of the border of rights (collective, territorial, environmental) met limits in the growing expansion of the borders of exploitation of capital, in search of goods (bienes), land and territories, and threw to the ground emancipatory narratives which had raised strong expectations, especially in countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador. (Svampa, 2015, p. 91).
To sum up this section, the continuation and deepening of extractive practices have revealed the contradictions between the rhetoric and practices of Left governments, and their violation of new constitutional mandates. However, these anti-democratic practices are being met with new waves of protest and other forms of resistance.

1.3.4 Latin American anti-extractivist protest and social movements

Opposition and resistance to resource extraction is as old as resource extraction itself. In the past and still today, many struggles are waged at the local level. But with the intensification of extractive projects across the Americas, and the subsequent growth of national, regional and international activist networks, recent conflicts have gained greater visibility. Some of the more notable cases have provoked massive citizen marches and international solidarity campaigns, including Faimatima (a town in Northern Argentina that successfully expelled four mining companies in a decade); Tipnis (construction of a highway through indigenous lands and national park in Bolivia); Yasuní (planned oil exploitation in indigenous lands and national park in Ecuador); and Cajamcarca and Tambogrande (mega-mining projects in Peru) (Gudynas, 2014).

Many of the movements involved in these struggles were also active in the anti-neoliberal protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s. So, what is the relationship between these different moments, and what are the characteristics of these new waves of protests and movements? Seone et al. (2013) argue that the current movement activity takes place

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12 Important anti-extractivist networks include AIDESEP (Peru); CLAES (Latin American region); CONACAMI (Peru); and Oil Watch (international), among others.
in a distinct political context in which there is a new configuration of forces in the region. Conflicts have grown in size and number as progressive governments at the helm not only break their pledges to dismantle the extractive model, but intensify it. Seone et al. further argue that in the current phase of a supposed rupture with neoliberal regimes, governments have repositioned extractivism as necessary. As such, “the myth of progress is reborn from progresismo.” (Gudynas, 2014a, p. 150).

Post-extractivism is a concept that points toward the development of strategies and alternatives to extractivist projects. Ecuador’s Yasuní ITT campaign to keep the oil in the ground was one of the most notable proposals, in that the Ecuadorian government took on this citizen-led campaign. In fact, Ecuador was one of the first countries to propose a post-petrol state. The campaign to “keep the oil in the soil” originally emerged from Amazonian communities that were against oil extraction in their territories, and was subsequently taken on by the ecologist movement. The idea became a more concrete proposal in Oil Watch’s position paper in June 2005, and became part of the Plan de Gobierno 2007-2011. The proposal was eventually proposed officially by the Ministry of Energy and Mines in 2007 (Acosta, et al., 2013). Such history makes clear that social movement protest and proposals have led to changes in the laws and constitutions. Unfortunately, the story also reveals that despite legal and constitutional mandates, the progressive governments have failed to provide substantive alternatives to development.

Hence, while governments continue to embrace their “progressive” label, they cling to older models of development and resource extraction. In response, resistance to these models are growing, and are gaining more visibility inside and outside of the region. While there is a great deal of literature about extractivism, few of these studies
frame the conflicts as cultural battles in which competing imaginaries about the meaning of development are at stake. Nor has the role of media and mediation on these conflicts been much studied. This dissertation makes a contribution to the study of this new wave of protest by analyzing how mediation and counter-hegemonic, post-development imaginaries have shaped these conflicts. Ecuador’s vibrant ecological movement and the Yasuní ITT initiative are discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

1.3.5 Ecuador: From a progressive constitution to extractivist practices

In 2007, Rafael Correa, a relatively unknown economics professor who had held one government position prior to becoming president, ushered in Ecuador’s so-called “left turn,” branding it the Citizens’ Revolution. At that conjecture, the project represented the collective construction of the majority of Ecuadorians that had recently deposed three presidents in less than a decade. (Vega, 2013, p. 103). Once elected, Correa called for a Constituent Assembly. Social movement actors and many other citizens were part of the process. While fraught with tensions and contradictions, the end product was a progressive, truly innovative (though far from perfect) Constitution.

The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution integrated the Indigenous concept of Buen Vivir or Sumak Kawsay, which points to an alternative, sustainable, non-capitalist model of development. For many, the inclusion of Buen Vivir means conceptualizing development as a way of life in which living beings and the natural environment take precedence over material wealth (Acosta, 2012; Gudynas, 2009; Lander, 2013). Instrinsically tied to the notion of Buen Vivir is the recognition that indigenous, afrodescendent and other pueblos’ have collective rights to maintain and develop their cultural identities and ancestral territories. These rights include the timely and obligatory
consulta previa (previous consultation) regarding any government or government-sanctioned plans to prospect, extract or commercialize non-renewable resources on collectively-owned lands. In Chapter Four, I argue that this constellation of concepts and rights has impacted the imaginaries of the citizenry, particularly a new generation that Yasunidos represents.

One of the most celebrated articles in the Ecuadorian 2008 Constitution is that Nature is a subject of rights. This is the first constitution in Latin America, and the world, to incorporate this right. Nature is defined in Article 71 of the constitution as “where life is reproduced and carried out.”¹⁴ Taken together, these concepts and corresponding rights open the door towards a conception of democracy that transcends tenets of liberal democracy. However, these were not new concepts in Ecuador. The founding documents of CONFENAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana), created in 1980, and documents of other indigenous organizations such as the UNAE (Unión de Nativos de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana, 1976) contained passages that expressed their rejection of oil drilling and other forms of resource extraction, and included the care for Nature as essential for life (Berrios & Cuevas, 2014).

Most of the ecological organizations initially supported Correa, especially given the Yasuní ITT pledge. However, this support would not last. Despite the path-breaking 2008 Constitution, extractivist projects increased in scale and intensity, causing conflicts between the government and ecological and territorial social movements. The contradictions between rhetoric and practice were glaringly evident: even as the government deployed their campaign *Yasuní Depende de Ti* (the Yasuní depends on You)

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¹⁴ All translations from Spanish to English in this thesis are mine, unless otherwise noted.
in October 2007, it granted an environmental license to Petrobras for Block 31, a territory inhabited by two indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation. The break between the government and ecologists was definitive when the Mining Law was approved in 2009, which opened the way towards mega-mining. This law permits transnational companies to develop the mining industry with opencast or mountain top mining. When Alberto Acosta resigned from his role as President of the Constituent Assembly in protest because of the way in which the government imposed its will in the decision-making processes, Correa began to attack the ecological sector much more openly. In 2009, on an Enlace Ciudadano (the president’s television and radio show), he directed three insults against ecologists that he would continue to use. He accused ecologists of being “infantiles” (childish); “aniñados” (privileged, spoiled), and of having “barrigas llenas” (full bellies) (LaTorre Tomás, 2009). These insults were meant to strip ecologists of legitimacy in the eyes of indigenous actors, Amazonian communities, and public opinion in general. The underlying message of these attacks is that the privileged, urban sector, who has never known hunger, could not understand the needs of Amazonian communities. For Correa, the ecological movement represented all that was contrary to his modernist project of “progress”.

On March 5, 2012, the government signed the first mega-mining agreement with Ecuacorrientes S.A. (a Canadian-Chinese enterprise) for 25 years. Three days later, over 20,000 indigenous, campesino and other social actors marched from Zamora to Quito. The amount of citizen support encountered along the route was substantial, perhaps surprising given the overwhelming popularity of the administration at that time. In addition to this being the first large mobilization since Correa came to power, Ospina
(2013) encountered a few notable items, including the “disproportionate” (p. 28) government publicity campaign which sought to discredit the marchers, and the deployment of a government-facilitated counter march. These practices have since characterized the way in which the government has dealt with protest.

As this brief section details, initial enthusiasm for Correa’s Citizen Revolution by social movements has increasingly given way to conflict and opposition. As Escobar (2010) argues, the so-called progressive governments have demonstrated that, despite pledges to transform the development model, there is still a lack of engagement with a post-capitalist, alternative forms of modernity that could potentially lead to significant changes in this model.

1.4 Theoretical Overview

1.4.1 Theoretical frameworks and perspectives

This dissertation seeks to make theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions to the fields of critical media theory and social movement studies, two bodies of literature that I bring into conversation in this study. Principally, I utilize two conceptual frameworks, statist media power and mediated cultural politics, to analyze the conflict between the Ecuadorian government and Yasunidos, as they engage in broader cultural struggles over meanings of extractivism, development, and Buen Vivir. In addition to analyzing the contours of statist media power, I explore its limitations, and how social movements interrupt it. I am also in dialogue with social movement scholarship that analyzes the media practices of social movements and the symbolic dimensions of struggle.
1.4.2 Statist media power

Within media studies, I am in conversation with scholarship relating to the concept of media power. This concept has mainly been used in the study of media institutions in Western liberal democracies, which tend to focus on the power of media corporations (Couldry, 2003; Freedman, 2014). On the contrary, my study focuses on the communicational dynamics at play in state-social movement relations in the context of a Latin American media system that is markedly different than liberal democratic media systems. In Ecuador (as in the other Left governments in the region), the typical Latin American configuration of media power, in which the state and private media are allies, has been transformed under Correa. By making explicit dimensions of statist media power, I emphasize both its symbolic and structural aspects, and ways in which they reinforce each other. I use the concept of statist media power to call attention to the Ecuadorian government as the main holder of media power. My study differs from scholars that study the changes underway in Latin American media institutions by focusing on state-private media relations (including those that use populism as an analytical framework). It is rare to find studies that analyze the impact that reconfigured media power has had on social movements in both media and social movement studies.

This study analyzes the reconfiguration of media power in Ecuador since 2007, when Rafael Correa assumed the presidency. While private media has historically been a dominant force in Ecuador, as in much of the world, I would argue that, during the time period under discussion, the government had unprecedented media power given the collusion of state and media meta-capital (which I refer to as statist media power). I trace the way in which Correa’s administration has dramatically reshaped media and
communication practices in Ecuador, and examine the significance that such practices have had for social movements. I extend Nick Couldry’s (2003) conceptual elaboration of media power, which emphasizes its symbolic dimensions and its definitional power, which influences and shapes the whole of social space. Drawing on Bourdieu (1989) but taking into account mediatization processes that were less pronounced at the time when Bourdieu wrote, Couldry argues that media power is generated in and across fields, particularly the journalistic and political fields. He extends Bourdieu’s concept of the meta-capital of the state, which refers to the state’s power over other fields, arguing that only the media’s meta-capital can compete with that of the state’s meta-capital. I apply this concept to the Ecuadorian context, in which media meta capital is an integral part of the state’s meta-capital. In Ecuador, the government’s media power potently traverses the journalistic and political fields, impacting all fields of power and social space. Hence, statist media power is a critical site at which I interrogate symbolic as well as materialist struggles between the government and social movements. I also draw on Des Freedman’s (2014) work on media power. While he also takes into account the symbolic aspects of media power, and how it can shape, modify, promote and reinforce particular ideologies, his analysis remains anchored in media power’s unequally distributed allocation of resources.

I chart the reconfiguration of statist media power, its symbolic and material dimensions, in several ways. In Chapter 3, I analyze how the Correa government has wrought substantive changes through its communication practices, media reforms,

\[15\] Without entering into the long-standing theoretical debate about mediatization, I am simply referring to media’s pervasive influence over social space. Mediatization assumes that media practices are constitutive of the social construction of reality (Couldry 2014).
legislative and judicial actions. I track the way the government has used its statist media power to seek consensus for its extractivist politics, as it simultaneously has sought to delegitimize dissenting voices. I also examine how the Enlace Ciudadano (Citizen’s Link, also referred to in this study as EC) has been the main platform for the government to communicate its agenda and ideological course.

My study also interrogates the limitations and excesses of statist media power. Des Freedman (2014) offers some useful thoughts about resistance to media power. Freedman’s theorization of media power is, as he states, mainly relevant to countries with “pluralist political arrangements and intensively marketized economic systems where the configuration of media power is formally separate from but intertwined with the state” (p. 3). However, he proposes that media power is not as impermeable as often thought. He also argues that readers actively interprete media texts (a common argument in cultural studies literature). As his own empirical studies have shown, including in the cases where dominant media strongly asserts certain editorial lines.

1.4.3 Mediated cultural politics

If we compare Yasunidos or any other social movement’s media power with that of the government’s, it is evident that these groups are at a disadvantage. So, theoretically, how can we account for the ways in which Yasunidos has been able to interrupt the government’s media power? I propose that the notion of mediated cultural politics is crucial for understanding how Yasunidos has mobilized counter-hegemonic meanings, proposed alternatives to the prevailing order, shaped collective imaginaries, and generated a common ground of struggle on a national level. They have done so in the
face of the government’s unprecedented power to represent its version of the Yasuní story.

The idea of mediated cultural politics fuses two distinct conceptualizations. The first is Alvarez et al.’s (1998) cultural politics framework. Despite important theoretical contributions about the constitutive role of culture in social movements, scholars who have studied contemporary Latin American social movements have rarely analyzed or linked cultural politics or cultural production to political action (Alvarez et. al. 1998; Escobar, 1992). Recent scholarship on Latin American anti-extractivist social movements bears witness to the lack of attention given to how movements deploy cultural politics in social struggles (Acosta et al, 2013; Gudynas 2013; Seone et al. 2013). On the contrary, Alvarez et al. (1998) have argued for the centrality of culture, pointing out that a focus on culture does not necessarily mean that historical context and structural inequalities are neglected. Dissatisfied with the disciplinary borders that framed the analysis of Latin American social movements, Alvarez et. al. (1998) drew attention to “how social movements operate at the interface of culture and politics.” (p. xi). By simultaneously examining “the cultural in the political and the political in the cultural” (p. xi) they propose that a cultural politics is enacted “when movements deploys alternative conceptions of ‘woman, nature, race, economy, democracy or citizenship’ that trouble and resignify dominant discourses and practices (199, p. 6). Methodologically, we can track such “deployment of alternative conceptions” and their impact on diverse publics by studying the texts, images, videos, rituals, etc. that movements produce and circulate. Similarly, Escobar contends that “social movements must be seen equally and
inseparably as struggles over meanings as well as material conditions, that is, as cultural struggles” (1992, p. 69). He argues that:

[S]ymbolic creativity in everyday life is vibrant, if somewhat invisible; it involves language, the body, performance rituals, work, and both individual and collective identities. It is essential for social movement research to tap into this level of popular practice….It is out of this reservoir of meanings … that people give shape to their struggle. (1998, p.71).

Escobar distinguishes this notion of culture from those that understand it as “something embedded in a set of canonical texts, beliefs and artifacts and characterized by a certain abstract universality” which in effect, renders invisible the daily lives and practices of people and movements (1998, p. 70). The cultural politics approach also departs from notions of culture as unified, fixed, or as either traditional practices, nation-based, or as high art. Following these scholars, this dissertation takes seriously the way in which Yasunidos mobilized culture to appeal to counter-hegemonic, post-development imaginaries about the intrinsic value of leaving the oil in the ground in the Yasuní.

Secondly, I draw on Jesus Martín-Barbero’s understanding of mediation as socio-cultural manifestations that traverse and give meaning to the process of communication (Gámez 2007, p. 208). In the past few years, scholars have veered away from technologist or romantic notions of activist media use. Rather they have theorized the complex processes that traverse social movements and their media practices. Lievrouw (2011) has called for a theoretical bridge between interpersonal interaction and media, proposing that mediation can indicate the use of technology to extend or enhance communication. It also can refer to “the interpersonal process of participation or intervention in the creation and sharing of meaning” (p. 4). These two dimensions are “complementary and mutually determining aspects of the whole phenomenon of
communication, rather than analytically separate and competing domains.” (p. 4). A focus on mediation displaces a restrictive focus on the media and rather focuses on social actors and processes that shape meanings and social imaginaries. A recent edited volume on social movements and mediation processes (Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy, 2013) contributes greatly to bringing these two bodies of literature together. In said volume, McCurdy (2013, p. 6) prefers to view media as an environment that activists “live with, live in and live through.” Other scholars extend social movement concepts: Mattoni (2013) shifts Tilly and Tarrow’s conceptualization of repertoires of contention to repertoires of communication, in order to examine mediated social practices. In another instance, Constanza-Chock (2013) coined the phrase transmedia mobilization to refer to the range and layering of media practices and communication platforms used by activists. Scholars such as John Downing (2000) have been emphasizing diverse forms of mediation for decades.

Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics have been deployed through an array of media, including social media, alternative media, and myriad artistic and cultural manifestations incorporated into protest actions. Beyond thinking about mediation as mere tools or strategies, I address the potent symbolic effect of mediation in the shaping of belief systems and social imaginaries. In the case of the meaning of Buen Vivir and development, the government and Yasunidos have engaged in a symbolic, mediated confrontation over their meaning. To grasp how power dynamics play out on a symbolic terrain requires perceptive theoretical tools. A mediated cultural politics framework allows for the articulation between creative and political expression, without diminishing one dimension in favor of the other. It allows us to see the practices of art and media-
making (including painting, murals, ritual performance or street theater, producing radio or video, etc.) as relevant to the everyday work of meaning-making and movement-building. And crucial for the study of social movements, it can shed light on processes that a sole focus on media power might not detect.

My analysis of Yasunidos protests and other actions through a mediated cultural politics framework has rendered visible the underside of media power. Even while the Ecuadorian government wields statist media power, and therefore a greater capacity to represent social reality, Yasunidos has constructed counter-hegemonic representations from below that resonated widely with diverse publics. Hence, as explored in Chapter 4, a mediated cultural politics framework theoretically, methodologically and empirically challenges the idea that statist media power always has the upper hand in shaping understandings of reality. I examine the multiple ways in which Yasunidos has confronted the government’s media power, and how it has mobilized alternative notions of development and *Buen Vivir* with symbols and images crafted from below and shared horizontally. Such mediated cultural politics directly confronts the government’s distinct use of the same concepts to justify opening the Yasuní to further intervention. Finally, by distinguishing between statist media power and mediated cultural politics I am seeking to identify and differentiate each actor’s weapons, so to speak. Working in tandem, the two conceptual lenses, media power and mediated cultural politics help make visible the contentious communication between the government and Yasunidos without solely relying on a media-centric notion of power.

My dissertation also draws from research that examines the symbolic practices of movements. Broadly speaking, the fields of social movement scholarship and media
studies have not always interacted. Social movement scholarship has not sufficiently taken into account the communicative practices of movements, or communicative dynamics between movements and governments (Cammaerts et al., 2013). Likewise, recent research about Latin American anti-extractivist social movements, where I situate my study, rarely touches on mediated power dynamics, with some notable exceptions (Vázquez, 2015). Fortunately, there are growing exceptions to what Downing (2008) has described as a “divorce” (p. 41) between the fields of media and social movement scholarship. A recent body of trans-disciplinary research that study what I call ‘new activist cultures’ has made important strides in analyzing media use by 21st century social movements (Cammaerts et al., 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2014; Cox et al., 2010; Juris, 2012; Mattoni & Trere, 2014; Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011; Postill 2014). Mattoni and Trere (2014) critique the one-medium bias in social movement literature that misses the multiple ways in which social actors, and new and old media technologies, come together.

Social movement scholars, notably those who are part of the current generation of scholar-activists, are turning their attention to the intersection of new technologies and creative expression that is generated in movement cultures. Many of these studies focus on social movement media as embedded in daily practices (Costanza-Chock, 2014; Fernandes, 2010; Juris, 2008; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; McNee, 2003), as a conduit toward collective identity formation and “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2007, p. 246). Cammaerts et al. (2013) employ the concept of mediation to address the shifting relationship between media practices of social movements, patterns of media power and counter-power, with attention to symbolic power. While this edited volume is a valuable
contribution to social movement media studies, they emphasize the media practices and environment of activists, though few chapters analyze the contentious communication between movements and other actors, such as governments. One exception is the chapter by Teune (2013), who analyzes the role that images play in the battle for visibility between the German government and social movement actors at the 2007 G8 meeting. However, most studies on movement mediation rarely analyze how such practices confront state discourse and practices, which is where I hope to make a contribution.

The study of movement-based cultural production entails a multi-layered, transdisciplinary investigation into the creation and circulation of diverse media and art, and the use of public space by movement actors. It involves an analysis of the way that photos, videos, graphics, performances and rituals, integrated into protest actions, can bear witness to historic injustices and struggles, and provide symbolic currency that is shared and borrowed among movements and diverse publics. It is attentive to ways in which cultural production mobilizes counter-hegemonic images, discourses and perspectives, and the way on-line and off-line interactions shape collective imaginaries. For example, Mattoni et al. (2014, p. 4) argue that recent trends in social media practices have facilitated a scenario in which widely shared icons, texts, and images become “ubiquitous alternative media, linked through different technological sites and platforms.” McCaughn (2012) turns his attention to the role of artists in movement-building, arguing that they help to create visualities and spaces through which citizens imagine new forms of meaningful citizenship. Tucker (2010) argues that “aesthetic politics” “…informs the understanding and practice of politics, the latter defined not only in terms of representatives, but also concerning a ‘broadly politicized’ public life.” (p. 5).
While such symbolic and performative manifestations have been widely used in protest movements, arguably since the rise of new social movements in the 1970s and 80s (Tucker, 2010, p. 43), in Ecuador, movements have typically enacted a more traditional format of militant-style marches. Feminist and ecological movement actors introduced more performative elements in the 1990s. Of course, all marches are performance to some degree, here I refer to the widespread use of images, icons as well as playful, ludic protest. In that sense, the way in which Yasunidos has deployed mediated cultural politics has been noted by older social movement actors, political analysts and journalists. Research presented in Chapter 4 indicates that the powerful images, symbols, and slogans regularly displayed by Yasunidos in protest actions, zapateadas, press conferences, plazas, and on their bodies was able to reach those citizens not necessarily tuned in to political debates or social media conversations. Alvarez et al. (2016, p. 26) remind us that political art can make visible “the very notion of alternatives.”

1.4.4 Post-Development Imaginaries

In Chapter 4, I examine how the mediated cultural politics of Yasunidos expresses a post-development imaginary. In this conceptualization, I follow Escobar (2014), who defines “post-development” as social practices and discourses that displace normative conceptions of development, in order to identify alternatives to development. This concept rejects the hierarchy of knowledge and power established by development “experts.” Rather, it valores territorial, indigenous and movement knowledges. He traces the advent of the term post-development to 1991, though arguably this concept began to emerge in the 1980s in Ecuador and elsewhere. Within the field of post-development, 

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16 Escobar distinguishes the concept of post-development from alternative development, a concept that remains within the development paradigm.
Escobar (2014) identifies five key theoretical and methodological tendencies, including 1) modernity/coloniality/decolonialy studies; 2) alternatives to development; 3) transitions to post-extractivism; 4) discourses on the civilizational model, and 5) concepts of community, relationality and the pluriverse. I believe that my exploration of post-development imaginaries makes a theoretical contribution to this field of study by analyzing how new, anti-extractivist movements are creating and circulating art and embodied practices (in addition to media practices) that signal a generational turn with regard to how resource extraction is regarded within a petrol state.

1.5 Research Methodologies

1.5.1 Reflexive, engaged, ethnographic, epistemologies of the South frameworks

This section discusses my methodological perspectives, what Saukko (2003) refers to as the array of “tools, philosophical and political commitments” that accompany a particular approach to research, and that bring forth a “partial and political perspective on reality” (p. 8). I situate my hybrid methodological framework as engaged, decolonial, feminist, ethnographic research that adopts an epistemology of the South approach. Such framework indicates that research is never neutral and is always traversed by power relations, inequality, conflict, capitalist modes of production, colonial legacies and divergent values and knowledges.

With respect to the question of engaged scholarship, I have been involved in activism related to media justice, and have participated in both U.S.-based and Latin American-based social movements. In fact, I have been an activist far longer than I have been inside the academy, and in this research project I have sought to strike a balance between the two. While Juris (2013, p. 344) warns that activist-researchers needs to take
Maristella Svampa (2008) critiques the expected fissure or false binary between the academic and the activist. She argues that:

...we believe it is possible to integrate both models that today are seen as opposites, that of the academic and that of the militant [activist], without denying the character of either one….we can establish the possibility of combining both into one paradigm, that of the intellectual researcher as amphibian, a figure capable of inhabiting and travelling through different worlds, and able to develop a better comprehension and reflexivity about the different social realities, and about oneself….with the possibility of generating multiple ties, solidarities and crossings between different realities. (Svampa, 2008, p. 30).

My interest in anti-extractivist conflicts grew rapidly since arriving in Ecuador in August 2012. While I had not been involved in ecological activism, several factors came into play in my new geopolitical location that lent itself to this focus: exposure to ecologists and indigenous individuals and movements active in resisting extractive projects; the fact that Nature is a subject of rights in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution; and my relatively close proximity to the Amazon. Even President Correa’s persuasive campaign about the value of the Yasuní ITT region, impacted me. They caused me to turn my attention to the relationship between political ecology, indigenous cosmovisions, and anti-extractive struggles. In August 2013, when Correa officially abandoned the Yasuní ITT project, I shared the anguish felt by thousands of Ecuadorian citizens. Additionally, my sense was that it was an important coyuntura (historical moment) in contemporary Ecuadorian politics. When Yasunidos came into being, not only was I present at the marches and witnessed the passion of these young activists, I realized it was the first highly-visible, nation-wide, anti-extractivist protest since I arrived a year prior. Though it was not the first wave of protests since Correa was President, it seemed quite significant, and I decided to track what was happening, though I had no idea how
Yasunidos might develop, or even if it would last. I continued to pursue my research on the communication law (my original thesis topic), and perhaps because of these two foci, I was acutely aware of how the communicational dynamics in Ecuador were affecting the state-social movement conflict.

Another methodological stance I assume is attention to reflexivity, which involves being critically aware of the way in which my commitments shape my research practice. While this is not a new concept in ethnography, Saukko (2003) points out that reflexivity should be used as a tool to enhance awareness of one’s own situatedness and limited nature of one’s worldview, which should hopefully aid the researcher in being more open to other perspectives. Such limitations need to be extended to being realistic about the impact my research might have, or not have. For example, while Juris (2013) calls attention to the “subversive and productive potential” of such research, he also acknowledges the constraints that might reduce the scholar’s role to a “supportive interlocutor.” (p. 367). In terms of my own process of reflexivity, I have had to face my own positionality vis-à-vis my research: being an outsider, a U.S. citizen who was relatively new to Ecuador and without any ties to the ecologist movement; and age, in that Yasunidos is largely a youth movement and I am at least a generation older than most of them; and perhaps the most critical, the political moment in which protest and protesters were being identified, delegitimized, and criminalized by the government. As such, at protests I situated myself more so as an observer, rather than an active participant. During my field work, many individuals, including foreigners, became part of the government’s campaign of mediated delegitimation and criminalization. Researchers and activists alike were targeted for their stance as allies to Yasunidos and indigenous
groups. In fact, one North American that was associated with the Amazon, Pachamama Foundation and Yasunidos, had his visa revoked and was forced to leave the country. Taking these events into consideration, I kept a decidedly low profile, representing myself more as a researcher than an activist, though I was openly an ally of the movement. However, with regard to gaining access to Yasunidos’ weekly assemblies, which were private, I was also there as an affiliate of El Churo Comunicación, an alternative media collective. On a few occasions I wrote short pieces for their website about Yasunidos. Yasunidos was aware that I was doing research, but at the same time I was making myself useful in a way that was consistent with my skills, interests and affiliations. Arturo Escobar (2015, p. 9) raises pertinent questions with regards to committed research:

With whom, how and from where do we think? With which objectives? What does it mean to think with others, with the movement activists that produce their own knowledges, with the subaltern, with social groups in resistance, instead of only thinking from, and with, the canons of social sciences.

Escobar argues that while we need to recognize that committed research traditions emerged in the Américas in the 1960s, there are many new formulations which have emerged from “dialogical methodologies” (p. 9) and their intersectionalities, such as decoloniality, feminism, indigenous and other epistemologies that reposition the South as a key space of production of knowledge. For Boaventura de Souza Santos (2010, p. 43) the global South is not a concept limited to geographical location, but rather is a “metaphor for human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on a global scale and the resistance to overcome or minimize it.” Such epistemology is based on the idea that research must not be limited to a western comprehension of the world, which is just a
small part of a vast array of knowledges, values, and ways to conceptually organize space, time, relationships, and life itself.

These methodological perspectives are pertinent to my own scholarly endeavors, and are consistent with the movement context within which I have been working.

1.6 Research design: Methods, questions, and summary

This dissertation is a qualitative case study of the mediated conflict between Yasunidos and the Ecuadorian government. It focuses on a time one-year time period, from August 15, 2013 (the day that Correa announced the suspension of the Yasuní ITT campaign to keep the oil in the ground) until August 15, 2014.

1.6.1 Dates of Field Work

I arrived in Ecuador on August 8, 2012, and conducted preliminary research on a range of topics while studying for my comprehensive exams and writing my prospectus. I was in Ecuador during the one-year time period of the case study, and have subsequently remained in Ecuador while writing the dissertation. For two years, I followed a multi-method research design which included ethnographic observation and participation at marches, public forums, artistic events, and university-based symposia. I attended over a dozen Yasunidos assemblies (closed strategy meetings which were held weekly) and was present at the key moments analyzed in this thesis. I also attended the Yasunidos national assembly in Cuenca in late 2014. At these events, I engaged in unstructured, on-site conversations with other participants.
1.6.2 Field site

My main field site was Quito, Ecuador’s capital city. This was both a strength and limitation of the study. On the one hand, the Quito-based Yasunidos collective was the most visible, due in part to its location in the capital and seat of government, and therefore site of national marches and well-known allies of the movement, such as Acción Ecológica. This also embued Yasunidos-Quito with a strong political character. However, the Yasunidos collectives that emerged in towns and cities across Ecuador had distinct characteristics, due to several factors, among them the local political context. For example, if the local governments did not support Correa’s movement, they were not harassed as badly as Yasunidos-Quito, where the city government was part of Alianza País (until they lost the mayoral elections in February 2014). While I had several opportunities to meet with Yasunidos members from other towns and cities, I was not able to focus on groups outside of Quito.

1.6.3 Methods

The case study is a useful methodological approach for studying social movements, as it permits the integration of various objects of research or phenomena in a spatially delimited time period. Case study research invites multi-perspectival reflection and allows for methodological flexibility (Snow & Trom, 2002). Its defining characteristics include research and analysis of a “bounded social phenomenon” that can generate “a richly detailed and ‘thick’ elaboration of the phenomena studied through the use and triangulation of multiple methods….” (Snow & Trom, 2002, p. 147). My case study fits neither the category of a “representative” nor “unique” case, but has elements of each. Following Ragin (1992), Snow & Trom suggest that the best way to proceed is to
first ask what is the object of the case study. Often times such object is “an instance of an important theoretical concept or process” (Ragin, 1992, p. 2, as cited in Snow & Trom, 2002, p. 147). In fact, the object of my case study is not limited to Yasunidos as an anti-extractivist, ecological youth movement; rather it is a study of a movement that is inscribed within a particular social, political and communicational context, that enters into direct conflict with the Ecuadorian government. In addition to empirical analysis, it seeks to theoretically explore processes of media power and cultural mediation in a situation of conflict. As such, this case examines a new way of constructing politics that is derived from movement strategies, as well as the use of direct democratic means that are inscribed in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution. And, as I will argue later in this study, while Yasunidos is not the first nor the only group to contest Correa on mediated terrain, the events that occur within the year under study mark a point of inflection, in which there is a “before” and “after” Yasunidos.

Within the case study, I draw from various methods including ethnographic inquiry, semi-structured interviews, institutional analysis and qualitative media analysis. Ethnography was my foundational methodology and method. One of the most basic definitions of ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 4) propose:

In its most characteristic form ethnography involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.

However, I prefer to situate my own “engaged” ethnography (Juris 2013, p. 4) in conversation with other movement scholars that seek to practice ethnography in a way
that is at once epistemological, methodological and as method. Transcending the view of ethnography as *just* a set of research methods, it involves a specific mode of “epistemological encounter” … involving an ethic of openness and flexibility and a willingness to allow oneself to become personally transformed through the research process.” (Juris, 2013, p. 9). In the best case scenario, it allows the ethnographer to “generate new concepts and analyses in the process of ethnographic engagement” that might not emerge from other methodologies (Juris 2013, p. 9). Juris points out, and I agree, that this is particularly true in the study of new(er) social movements that are overtly anti-capitalist and that do not take capitalist modernity as a given. These movements do not neatly fit into conventional social movement methods and categories such as resource mobilization, framing and political opportunities. I further theorize this new wave of social movements in Chapter 2.

As part of my ethnography, I attended closed, weekly Yasunidos assemblies; the early wave of street protests; the *zapateadas* (festive protest events with music and dancing); key marches held in Quito; university and movement-led conferences about the Yasuní; the “infantile ecologist” carnivals; the arrival of the indigenous women’s walk to Quito; Yasunidos weekend retreat following the first year of protest; and two ethical tribunes about the Yasuní that were held in Quito. I was able to travel to different Amazonian towns, including: Coca, Macas, Puyo, and an indigenous community located within the Yasuní. I participated in a “Toxic Tour” with movement actors in the northern, most contaminated region of the Amazon (Lago Agrio and surrounding áreas). During that weekend we met with and participated in workshops with affected communities, and
went on an inspection of a processing plant that received complaints by citizens of contamination.

A complementary method I used was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with movement leaders, political analysts and journalists. As part of my research design, I waited until after the one-year period of ethnographic observation and participation to personally conduct a small, purposive sample of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Yasunidos members that I considered to be key leaders. This included a group interview with 10 members of Yasunidos that were particularly focused on the communicative dimension of the movement. I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with journalists, academics, political analysts, and social movement actors that were present during that first year. By waiting, the interviewees had, as I did, the benefit of hindsight and analysis. The interviews allowed me to co-theorize with movement actors. In total, I conducted 30 in-depth interviews ranging from 1.5 to 2 hours.

My ethnographic approach also involved conducting qualitative media analysis of a few media sources. I call my media analysis “ethnographic” in that I understand the flow of media as embedded in people’s daily lives and contexts. Especially in a city like Quito, many politically-minded people tend to follow the same media sources. I closely followed, collected, and took “ethnographic” notes on television (morning politically-oriented talk shows), newspaper coverage of national dailies (mainly El Telegrafo, the so-called “public” newspaper, and El Comercio, a privately owned enterprise) and social media conversations on Yasunidos’ Facebook page) during that first year, particularly of the key moments (the emergence of Yasunidos; protest marches; the signature collection process; and the subsequent tearing down of this direct democratic process by the
government). I watched and conducted qualitative analysis of 15 of President Correa’s EC shows during that first year, particularly the key moments previously mentioned (I also attended one EC). In my study of the Enlaces, I sought to understand the mediated, discursive patterns related to the delegitimation and criminalization of Yasunidos and allies, as well as the government’s discourses about development, Buen Vivir, and the Amazon. A limitation of my media analysis is that I did not closely follow radio, which is still a widespread, highly popular means of receiving and exchanging information.

My theoretical and methodological engagement with media power led me to undertake an institutional analysis of the journalistic field. In Chapter Three, I map changes in media ownership since Correa came to power, in order to develop my idea of statist media power, and the media terrain in which the conflict between Correa and Yasunidos took place.

1.6.4 Research Questions

Building on my research design, I formulated the following questions:

1) How has Yasunidos emerged as an important site of struggle against extractivist politics in Ecuador?
   a. How was the mediatization of the conflict a constitutive part of the struggle?

2) How has the Correa government reconfigured media power in Ecuador?
   a. How has it used its media power to delegitimize and criminalize Yasunidos and other social actors that oppose oil drilling in the Yasuní?

3) How has Yasunidos confronted the government’s media power?
a. How has Yasunidos deployed mediated cultural politics of post-development, thereby challenging the state’s extractivist discourses and practices?

The following chapters examine these questions in the following manner:

Chapter 1: New Waves of Protest in Ecuador’s Citizen Revolution. The introductory chapter presents the project summary, relevant background contexts, a review of relevant literature, my theoretical and methodological frameworks, research design, methods, my research questions and chapter breakdown.

Chapter 2: The Emergence of Yasunidos. In this chapter, I address Question #1: How has Yasunidos emerged as an important site of struggle against extractivist politics in the Ecuadorian context? The chapter locates Yasunidos within social movement theory, as part of a new wave of social movements contesting extractivist practices of Latin American progressive governments. My methodological focus is that of the case study ethnography. I analyze the conditions that have given rise to the emergence of this movement, and provide a panoramic view of the first year of the movement, its practices, and its conflict with the Ecuadorian government. Methods of analysis used in this chapter include ethnography, and qualitative analyses of interviews and other documents, such as newspaper reports, blogs, and television programs.

Chapter 3: The reconfiguration of media power in Ecuador and its impact on state-social movement conflicts. In Chapter 3, I focus on addressing Question #2: How has the Correa government reconfigured media power in Ecuador? And, 2a: How has it used its media power to seek consensus for its extractivist politics, and to criminalize social movements that are against such politics? To answer these questions, I use the
concept of statist media power, which allows me to examine how the Ecuadorian government has reconfigured media symbolically and materially, through media ownership and production practices, and legislative-judicial-administrative actions. Once I have analyzed how media power has changed under Correa’s administration, I analyze how it has used its media power to seek consensus for its extractivist policies and practices. My methods include institutional analysis of the growth of government media, and qualitative analysis of the EC and pro-extractivist government publicity and propaganda.

Chapter 4: The mediated cultural politics of post-development. Chapter 4 focuses on my third question: How has Yasunidos confronted the government’s media power? The subquestion is: How has Yasunidos deployed a mediated cultural politics of post-development, thereby challenging the state’s extractivist discourses and practices? Here I present the conceptual framework of mediated cultural politics, and the notion of post-development imaginaries. To better illustrate the concept, I conduct a qualitative visual analysis of instances of creative expression, embodied practices and performative protest of Yasunidos, allied artists and indigenous women (including the zapateadas and the Indigenous Women’s March on Quito).

Chapter 5: Democracy in Extinction? Challenges to processes of democratization.

Chapter 5 provides some concluding thoughts about the case study. It seeks to account for the important gains of Yasunidos, while also examining its limitations. It also provides a final reflection on the power of statist media, as well as its limits. Finally, I outline the contributions of the study, and suggest directions for further research.
CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE OF YASUNIDOS

2.1 Introduction

Before I arrived in Ecuador, I had read much about the power of social movements, especially the indigenous movement. I also read and viewed audiovisual material about the various uprisings that occurred throughout the 1990s and 2000s. So, a few months after moving to Quito, I learned about an upcoming protest called by CONAIE, with respect to the auctioning of new oil blocks in the Amazon. I looked forward to witnessing this powerful movement in action. However, when I arrived at the Marriott Hotel, the site where the protest against the oil auction was to take place, I received a surprise. Rather than witnessing thousands of people in the streets like in the videos I had seen, I encountered a group of no more than 100 people. When I asked an activist friend why there had been so few people, she replied that people did not want to go to jail. This was my introduction to the criminalization of protest under the Correa government.

The next time I witnessed a protest was ten months later, when Correa announced the end of the Yasuní ITT initiative. It seemed that the spirited protests I had heard so much about had returned. I also witnessed the emergence of a new movement.

A member of Yasunidos theorizes about the new generation that largely conforms Yasunidos:

Yasunidos came into being, in part, because of the government’s putting Yasuní ITT in the limelight. [Here is] a new generation with an abstract sensibility, a new attitude towards Nature, a new ethical pact with Nature…. This is a generation that no longer comes from the traditional,
authoritarian family. They have a lot more information, which not only comes from the radio, television, and the priest….And it also might be that they come more from the middle class than popular classes…. Those who participate are not just organic, as those with the most visibility…the majority that participate represent new configurations of families, new subjectivities in the nation….that have more empathy with feminism. [They are] less tolerant of the justification of vertical, aggressive, extractivism that is violent with Nature. (SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

This chapter explores the emergence of this new movement, its characteristics and its differences with older movements. It examines the research question and subquestion: How has Yasunidos emerged as an important site of struggle against extractivist politics in Ecuador? And, as part of that question, I discuss how the mediatization of the Yasunidos-Ecuadorean government conflict been a constitutive part of such struggle (though I delve further into this question in the following chapter). This chapter first offers a conceptual focus, in conversation with scholars that are theorizing the new wave of protests, and the movements that are confronting the progressive governments. I propose that Yasunidos is part of a new wave of protests across the Americas. Like other movements in Latin America, the its emergence makes visible the continuation and intensification of resource extraction, also referred to as neo-extractivism when specifically discussing extractivism under the so-called progressive governments (Gudynas 2012). The case study of Yasunidos helps shed light on this new wave of protests, particularly how social movements and citizens are resisting such practices. I contend that Yasunidos has done so through mediated cultural politics, which I define as counterhegemonic cultural expressions enacted by social movements, in any form, that are then circulated and shared across multiple media platforms.
This chapter, divided into four sections, seeks to present a panoramic view of the case. The first section contains a theoretical discussion about the new wave of social movements and protest in 21st century Latin America. The second section analyzes the background context that made possible the emergence of Yasunidos. A key piece of the story was the Yasuní ITT initiative, how it emerged, and the roles played by social movements, NGOs, civil society and government. With respect to a communicational context, I also discuss the government media campaigns that brought the Yasuní ITT initiative national and international visibility and acclaim. After presenting these antecedents, Section 3 focuses on the emergence of Yasunidos, keeping in mind the theoretical arguments made in the first section. In the final section of the chapter, I describe and analyze key moments of the case, paying particular attention to the social, political and communicational context Yasunidos confronted in 2013-2014.

2.2 Theorizing new waves of protest and social movement formation in neo-extractivist Latin America.

Methodologically speaking, during the year of the study, I carried out ethnographic research, including first-hand observation and participation in key events. After that year, I sought to identify social movement theories that resonated with the Yasunidos case. Not surprisingly, my observations and experiences, and subsequent theorization, resonated most with theorists and activist-scholars that are applying decolonial and post-development lenses to the wave of anti-extractivist protests and movements that have emerged in the past decade in Latin America. The following discussion lays out intersecting perspectives among these theorists, with particular
attention to the question of alternative ontologies and epistemologies that are generated by anti-extractivist movements.

The work of Arturo Escobar (1995, 2014) has been central to this discussion. In a recent volume, Escobar (2014) argues that the proposals of Latin American social movements, particularly indigenous, afrodescendent, environmental, rural and feminist movements, are at the “vanguard” (p. 14) of imagining and enacting practices towards a post-development scenario. Further, he proposes a related concept of political ontology, which “underscores the political dimension of ontology and the ontological dimension of politics” (p. 13). This concept allows us to examine “what kind of worlds are enacted through which combination of practices, and with what kind of consequences for which particular group of humans and non-humans” (p. 13). This concept seeks to valorize the diverse cosmovisions that are generated by movements and territorial-based communities, which often provide the philosophical foundation for the enactment of what I call post-development imaginaries. This set of concepts resonated with my research findings: here was an urban movement whose foundational principles were based on indigenous cosmovisions. Their proposals tapped into emerging post-development imaginaries that were gaining strength in a new generation of Ecuadorians, of which Yasunidos was a part.

In their consideration of contemporary Latin American social movements, Daza, Hoetmer & Vargas (2012) suggest that movements fighting extractivism are confronting a reconfigured political landscape in the 21st century, which includes a new adversary, the “so-called” progressive governments. Another dimension of this terrain is that these governments have incorporated many aspects of the agendas of social movements, if only
at the discursive level, yet have not sufficiently changed structural relations of power as they had originally pledged to do. Instead, progressive governments have passed new laws that seek to repress, control and criminalize acts of dissent. Boaventura de Souza Santos (2010), Edgardo Lander (2013), Seone et al. (2013) and others have argued that these contradictions have been responsible, in part, for the diminished support these governments have faced. These arguments resonate with my case study of Yasunidos. They had to engage in a battle with a still-popular government (this would shift over the next few years) that had built its platform on social movement proposals, but whose practices sought to fragment, delegitimize and criminalize these same organizations.

Another feature that Daza et al. (2012) emphasize is that these governments, and the movements that confront them, have increasingly used the media as platforms of dispute. The mediatization of conflicts between the government and social movements has been a key feature in Ecuador. This chapter contributes to the discussion by providing evidence of this new scenario of mediated conflict in Ecuador, and how such terrain was essential to their activities.

Juliana Flores (2010), who situates her work within the Modernity/Coloniality Latin American research project, proposes that contemporary Latin American social movements expose the limits of capitalist modernity, despite scores of theorists that have ignored their contributions, due to a “eurocentric vision of modernity” (Flores, citing Escobar, 2003). Flores critiques theorists (among them, Laclau and Mouffe, Giddens, Mainwaring and Viola, Melucci, Touraine) for the distinction they make between movements in the global North and the “exceptional character of collective action” (p. 74) in the global South, a framework that reduces collective action to “subjugated
alterities” (p. 74). Flores also calls attention to these theorists’ “modern binaristic logic: autonomy-dependence, advanced-backward, development-underdevelopment, center-periphery, etc.” (p. 83):

…these theories conclude that in the regions where modernity has not completely been attained, these movements can do very little to question it. Their actions, if anything, are to reach it [modernity]. Therefore, we are faced with peripheral struggles, anchored in illustration; struggles that are limited to cover basic necessities, gain autonomy from the State, reach economic development, consolidate weak democracies, etc. (p. 72).

And while she values the important contributions of diverse theories born in the global North (including resource mobilization, political opportunity structure, and collective identity, etc.) she calls on social movement theorists to “develop a perspective of globalization much more multi-form and paradoxical” (p. 78) than has been proposed until now.

Following Flores’ argumentation, I propose that movements such as Yasunidos are privileged sites at which to analyze differing notions of modernity that are at play in the region. Daza et al. (2012, p. 47) propose that new social movement formations “dispute dominant models of living from specific subjectivities” (2012, p. 50), and rather look toward otros saberes (other knowing subjects and forms of knowledge), often subaltern and invisibilized. These movements “have generated new cognitive maps…[and are] confronting power from other spaces of enunciation, from epistemologies that position other forms of relations between humans and the rest of life.” (2012, p. 50). As Escobar (2014) has pointed out, Latin American social movements are often way ahead of academic theorizing. This is relevant to the Yasunidos
case, particularly the ways in which distinct visions of development have been deployed by Yasunidos.

But how have alternative ontologies taken shape, how have they shaped social movements, affected the national imaginary, and contributed to the emergence of Yasunidos in August 2013? I propose that alternative ontologies have emerged from various sources, events and geographic locations, generating a multilayered, cumulative effect on citizens and movements. They have manifested in a widespread ecological consciousness, particularly among young people. Such consciousness has confronted the dominant paradigm, hegemonic since the 1970s, that oil extraction is necessary for Ecuador’s well-being and prosperity, and is the mechanism to “develop” and “modernize” Ecuador. On the contrary, the alternative ontologies have been shaped by various factors listed here and described in the following paragraphs: 1) the centuries-old indigenous resistance to colonization; 2) the experience of contamination from oil-drilling, which began in the northern Amazon in the 1970s; 3) diverse movements in Ecuador (indigenous, ecologist, feminist, peasant, student), and the flows and exchanges between peoples and movements due to the Amazon’s proximity; 4) the influence of global social movements against climate change; and 5) the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution; and the government’s rhetoric and media campaigns about Buen Vivir and the rights of Nature.

A major contributor to contemporary alternative ontologies has been the ongoing indigenous resistance, and in contemporary times, the CONAIE-led uprisings in the 1990s and early 2000s (Becker, 2012). They have left an indelible imprint on the imaginaries of feminist, ecological, eco-feminist, student and peasant struggles and
movements (Martinez, 2009). The indigenous cosmovision that understands Nature as an intrinsic part of life has been adopted by ecological social movements, which together with the CONAIE, influenced the direction of the Constituent Assembly and the subsequent insertion of the rights of Nature into the 2008 Constitution. A related concept, also inscribed in the Constitution is that of *Buen Vivir*. Ecuadorians have taken pride in their new Constitution, and these groundbreaking articles, which have also been celebrated internationally.

Secondly, another important source of ecological consciousness has come from first-hand experience with the unprecedented contamination in the Ecuador’s northern Amazon, and the high visibility of the Chevron-Texaco case, which sought damages for the massive environmental destruction in that region (Joseph, 2012). Government discourse and publicity heavily circulated the message that this would not happen again on Ecuadorian soil.

A third factor, well worth mentioning, is the geographic proximity to the Amazon from different cities and towns. Ecuador is a relatively small country, with constant flows and exchanges between people from different regions. From Quito, one can reach the towns bordering the Amazon by bus in four to eight hours. While many Ecuadorians have not visited the Amazon, its territories and peoples are present in the national imaginary (even if that imaginary has not always been positive or accurate; as the Amazon region has also been the most misunderstood, exploited and forgotten of Ecuador’s regions). Geographical proximity has also meant that diverse movements have walked shoulder to shoulder in marches, and have shared roundtables in public forums and universities.
Fourth, globalized environmental and indigenous movements have called attention to issue of climate change, to indigenous peoples’ role as guardian of the most biodiverse places on earth, and their territorial struggles. One of the World Social Forums took place in Quito in 2005, which brought global actors to a local stage.

The fifth factor has been the 2008 Constitution, particularly paradigm-shifting articles about the rights of Nature, *Buen Vivir* and the promise to transform the development model. The government’s ecological discourses and media campaigns that widely circulated them, have also played an important role in shifting imaginaries. To conclude, I propose that the reasons cited here have helped lead to the emergence of alternative ontologies that shape conceptions of development and that have engendered post-development imaginaries.

In order to understand how Yasunidos emerged as a key site in the most recent conflict, a fundamental antecedent is the Yasuní ITT initiative. This has been the most recent and perhaps singularly most important precedent leading up to contemporary events, presented in the following section.

2.3 The Yasuní ITT Initiative

2.3.1. A groundbreaking proposal

This section provides important background details, necessary for understanding how the Yasuní ITT initiative became so important to the Ecuadorian people and the international community. The story of the Yasuní ITT initiative spans over two decades, and has had a multifaceted, sinuous path, from indigenous and ecological movement-based beginnings in the late 1980s, to becoming a capstone government initiative in 2007, and finally, to its termination on August 15, 2013 by the same government that
initially supported it. As such, this project had many complex, contradictory facets, and although innovative and groundbreaking in many ways, its management has also been widely criticized (Martínez, 2009; Martin, 2011; Acosta, 2016). This section presents a brief introduction that paints a picture of its importance to Ecuadorian citizens, social movements and the international community.

The story of the Yasuní ITT initiative is a pivotal element to understanding the emergence of Yasunidos. Alberto Acosta (2016), one of its main proponents, has laid out the key reasons why it was a groundbreaking proposal. In the first place, it represented a rupture with Ecuador’s history of policies and practices around resource extraction. Since the first barrel of oil was exported from the Amazon region, in August 17th 1972, all governments and many Ecuadorians have considered the primary export model as essential to the functioning of the nation. Indeed, even with the promise to keep the oil in the ground in the Yasuní ITT initiative, oil extraction and revenue from extractive activities have continued, and even increased during Correa’s government (Acosta 2016).

The Yasuní ITT initiative was a bold step towards changing Ecuador’s dependence on oil extraction, and pointed the way toward a model in which Ecuadorian citizens and the biodiversity of its territories would be privileged over capitalist accumulation. Secondly, with respect to indigenous rights, the Yasuní ITT initiative represented a significant measure designed to protect Amazonian groups made vulnerable by the rapidly expanding oil frontier. Thirdly, it was a move toward global redistributive justice with the global North providing 50% of the estimated 700 million dollars of oil revenue to “keep the oil in the soil” (Martin, 2011, p. 2). The vision of Acción Ecológica, an ecological social organization founded in 1986 as a women’s collective, and still a key
social movement actor nationally and internationally, was key to the Initiative. The idea was not just about compensation, rather it focused on receiving contributions from countries that have played a greater role in ecological destruction. Martin (2011) argued that the Initiative “represents the struggles of all peoples around the globe who seek better, cleaner environments not just for themselves, but for their grandchildren” and that it represented “the largest global environmental trust fund of its kind.” (p. 3).

2.3.2. The Yasuní, indigenous territories in need of protection

The Yasuní is the ancestral home of the Waorani indigenous nationality, and of the Taromenare and Tagaeri clans, two nomadic groups related to the Waorani that live in voluntary isolation. Other indigenous groups living there include the Kichwa. There are also colonos (mestizo settlers) who live there. Given the diverse peoples and cultures, the region should be considered first and foremost a territory, not only a park, or a group of oil blocks, as it is often framed. As Esperanza Martinez (2009, p. 66) points out, the designation of national park, like the creation of Yosemite Park in the 19th century in the United States, often serves to erase the histories of these sites as ancestral indigenous territories. It also obscures the fact that the Yasuní, unlike the vision of a pristine “park” has been an area profoundly marked by rubber barons, illegal wood traffickers, oil companies, missionaries, the military, and settlers that came to work in these industries. Oil prospection began in the 1930s in territories that were inhabited by nomadic indigenous groups. Shell perforated Tiputini 1, part of the Yasuní, in 1948. Two access roads were subsequently opened up, and several state and private oil corporations have
wanted to exploit the region, even though the estimated reserves of 950,000 barrels is heavy crude, which is much more difficult and resource-intensive to extract.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2a.png}
\caption{Map of the Yasuní National Park by Susana Crespo and Pablo Cabrera. Retrieved from http://www.terraecuador.net/revista_83/83_acoso_mapa.html}
\end{figure}

2.3.3. National and international designations

The Yasuní has several kinds of designations, and national and international protections:

- In 1979, Ecuador’s Ministry of the Environment (MAE) declared 1,022,736 hectares (one hectare is approximately 2.5 miles) as the Yasuní National Park (YNP) (MAE, Agreement No. 332).

- The YNP, the Intangible Zone, and the adjacent Waorani territory span 2.7 million hectares. In 1989, the entirety of the 2.7 million hectares were designated by

\textsuperscript{17}The history of the Yasuní ITT is well covered in Martinez (2009).
UNESCO a World Biosphere Reserve, due to its status as the region with the greatest biodiversity on the planet.

- The “ITT’s” (the Ishpingo, Tambococha and Tiputini oil fields located in oil block 43, named after rivers that traverse the region) 189,889 hectares are located within the Intangible Zone (758,051 hectares), considered as such because of the nomadic groups that inhabit this territory.

- In 2006, 982,000 hectares of the YNP were delimited by the Ecuadorian government. Moreover, the Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), asked for protective measures in order to safeguard indigenous rights, particularly those populations that have been made vulnerable because of their exposure to oil activities, illegal wood trafficking, population expansion, and other activities related to resource extraction (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2014).

The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution underscores the importance of the Initiative, in that it forbids oil extraction in areas where uncontacted indigenous groups live (Ecuador Const. art. 57). Though the government does not admit it, certainly one of the major incentives to exploit the oil in the Yasuní, is to pay toward the massive debt Ecuador has amassed to China (Villavicencio, 2013).

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18 Executive Decree No. 552, published on February 2, 1999, declared the Intangible Zone should be free of all extractive activity. Ecuador, along with Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru, ratified the ILO’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989, No. 169. See www.ilo.org.
2.3.4 Keep the oil in the soil: indigenous and ecological movement histories in Ecuador

This brief section sets the groundwork for understanding the current context for current anti-extractivist social movements. In 1990, the Indigenous Uprising on *Inti Raymi*, and subsequent mobilizations throughout the 90s, marked a turning point in Ecuador’s political history, as the indigenous movement, led by the CONAIE, became a central social and political actor (Becker, 2012; Ortiz Lemos, 2013). This powerful movement came of age during neoliberal times, and it fought against structural adjustments with a multiplicity of organizations and movements, including student, feminist, environmental and worker movements. While the CONAIE’s broad agenda incorporates many kinds of demands, socio-environmental and territorial conflicts have been priorities. During the historical Uprising in 1990, OPIP (Organización de Pueblos
Indígenas de Pastaza) proposed legalizing and delimiting ethnic Amazonian territories (this claim was rejected by the Borja government) (Varea et al., 1996). In 1998, in one of the first resistance struggles, the Cofanes (indigenous group in the northern part of the Amazon) were successful in closing an oil well, and in keeping Texaco off their territory. Further south, the Kichwa People of Sarayaku waged an unprecedented fight against unauthorized incursion and oil prospection in their territories. In 1996, part of their territory was concessioned to an oil company, and in 2002, Sarayaku declared a state of emergency for six months, and engaged in protests, in order to stop the prospection and dynamiting of their lands. They took their claim to the IACHR in 2003, and won an historic victory which included monetary reparations. For Alberto Acosta (personal communication, April 10, 2015), the Kichwa Sarayaku struggle concretely showed how to resist government and corporate incursion into their territory.

The success of the indigenous movement’s mobilizations led to the incorporation of several of their demands in the 1998 Constitution, which stated that indigenous groups must be consulted on matters concerning their territories. The political arm of the movement, Pachakutik, was created in 1995. The cooptation that ensued in both Pachakutik and the CONAIE resulted in a dramatic decrease in their legitimacy (Becker, 2012). By the time Correa became president in 2007, the indigenous movement had already lost a great deal of political power.

While Ecuador’s Indigenous movement has gained recognition internationally, what is less known is the history and impact that ecological social organizations and movements have had on the political history of Ecuador. In fact, socio-environmental

19 Acción Ecológica’s website details resistance against extractivism. See http://www.accionecologica.org
movements have been structured around the protagonistic role of the CONAIE, Acción Ecológica and the Amazonia Por la Vida (Amazon for Life) campaign, along with hundreds of local and regional movements. Writing in 1992, Varea & Ortiz claimed that there were over 200 organizations in Ecuador that worked for the protection of the environment. A broad, but useful categorization is proposed by Latorre (2009), who distinguishes between “technocratic” and “radical” organizations (p. 11). Organizations that are technocratic tend to seek solutions to environmental problems through technological innovation, and through the market. “Radical” organizations are those that seek to change the development model. I would also add that the radical organizations are those that have actively confronted the government’s extractivist policies and actions.

One of the key organizations of the past decades has been Acción Ecológica (AE). AE was founded in 1986 as women’s collective, and has consistently supported popular ecological movements, the defense of territories, and communities affected by extractive activities. Members of Acción Ecológica have also widely published on these matters, and are founders of the international network, Oil Watch. In 1996, at an Oil Watch meeting held in Quito, 15 international organizations initiated the Keep the Oil in the Soil campaign. Acción Ecológica, and other ecological and indigenous organizations and the Amazonia Por la Vida campaign, founded in 1989, have been important predecessors, and indeed, incubators, of Yasunidos and the ideas they brought forward in their movement. In 2005, Oil Watch presented a position paper that proposed that the Yasuní should not be exploited (Martinez, 2009).

The story of the Yasuní ITT also helps to tell the story of Ecuador’s ecological movement, which I would argue has been an organized, innovative force from its very
beginnings in the 1980s. In fact, Ecuador and Nigeria were the first nations to propose a transition from the extractive model by leaving oil underground. The first explicit, written references to a post-petrol transition can be found in Larrea (2000). However, environmental and anti-extractivist activism, and a search for alternatives, began much earlier. The campaign Amazonia Por la Vida, which grew out of Oil Watch, was established in 1989 as a national network that connected human rights organizations, indigenous organizations, ecologist initiatives, social movements, affected citizens and allies across Ecuador, in their common goal to defend the Ecuadorian Amazon from further oil exploitation (Vasquez 2015; Oilwatch, 2005; Fontaine, 2009). Its motto, “El Yasuní depende de ti” (the Yasuní depends on you) later used by Yasunidos. Amazonia Por la Vida went on to become a key movement actor in one of the most visible, prolonged and difficult battles, the Chevron-Texaco case.

In the late 1980s, women, campesinos, and workers in the northern region of the Ecuadorian Amazon formed dozens of organizations that began to organize around a multitude of issues, including the massive contamination caused by Texaco’s (subsequently bought by Chevron) extractive activities. The movement histories of this region have been elocuently documented in Yanza (2014). Luis Angel Saavedra of INREDH argues that the Chevron-Texaco story has been told by different actors. The Ecuadorian government has told the story through government campaigns that have appropriated the discourses of the affected but have not successfully communicated the experiences of the affected. The aggressor, Chevron-Texaco, has tried to displace the blame and erase the story. Finally, movements and individuals have sought to tell the real

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20 Significantly, several members of Yasunidos were active members of this campaign.
stories that contain “the magic, the hope, the cruelty, the pain…” as well as the contradictions lived in this region (Yanza, 2014, p. 9).

On November, 3, 1993, more than 30,000 affected citizens filed a lawsuit against Texaco (later Chevron-Texaco) in the Federal Court of New York State demanding that they pay compensation for the huge costs of reparations for environmental damages (Joseph, 2012; Fundación Regional de Asesoría en Derechos Humanos, n.d.). Six months later, on May 15, 1994, approximately 25 organizations and rural communities, indigenous nationalities, and representatives of some public and non-governmental entities, ratified the constitution of Frente de Defensa de la Amazonia (Defense Front of the Amazon) in order to integrate the organized and non-organized social actors. This organization went on to facilitate a process that would continue for almost two decades. Finally, on February 14, 2011, after 17 years of fighting, the Court ordered Chevron to pay more than 18 billion dollars in reparations. This first important victory (the struggle to get Chevron to comply with the sentence continues) “was the result not only of the strength, unity and resistance of the affected, but also because the fight was taken on as a collective struggle with collective goals” by movement actors (Yanza, 2014).

In a separate but related action, On June 5, 2003, the Pachamama Foundation21, Acción Ecológica and CDES presented a proposal to the MAE for a moratorium on the expansion of the oil and mining frontier for three years. At that meeting, they presented a technical, economic and ecological report that provided evidence that it was not worth continuing to extract natural resources at the expense of the destruction those activities...

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21 The Pachamama Foundation was the first social organization closed by the Ecuadorian government on December 5th, 2013. It was able to do this through Decree 16, which gives the state the power to dissolve any social organization that it considers dangerous to the internal or external interests of the nation, or that affects “public peace.”
caused, and harm to those people that inhabited these territories.\textsuperscript{22} From 2005-2007, there were numerous conflicts in the Yasuní between the oil companies and indigenous groups (Fontaine, 2009). On January 3, 2007, before leaving office, President Alfredo Palacio responded to mounting pressure from civil society, and signed the decree to establish the Intangible Zone within the World Biosphere Reserve.

\textbf{2.3.5 Government appropriation of the Yasuní ITT initiative.}

On June 5, 2007, the Yasuní ITT initiative was launched. President Correa presented a petition signed by over 1,000 persons (crafted by Alberto Acosta, who at the time was Minister of Energy), to the international community. The petition demanded a moratorium on the exploitation of the ITT. The 2008 Constitution further built expectations that it was a viable plan. It was in line with the concept of \textit{Buen Vivir}, the Rights of Nature (Ecuador Const. art. 14, 71, 414), of respecting Indigenous territories (Ecuador Const. art. 2, 57, 60, 171, 257), and of working to change the \textit{matriz productiva} (productive model) (Ecuador Const. art. 276). Ecologists decided to support the government-led initiative, even though there were well-founded suspicions about the government’s commitment to it. There was also criticism that the initiative was limited to Blocks 31 and 43, and that it presented an idealized image of the Yasuní. Regarding the government’s appropriation of the Initiative from a citizen-led effort, Eduardo Pichilingue reflected that “civil society’s error was that it did not totally appropriate the initiative. It came about as a result of civil society, but we left it to the government to administer.” (Eduardo Pichilingue, personal communication, Abril 30, 2015).

\textsuperscript{22} La Hora (2003), see http://lahora.com.ec/index.php/noticias/show/1000165802/-I/home/goRegional/Loja#.V2NaN6ODGkp.
The Yasuní ITT initiative went on to become the poster child of the Citizen Revolution. Ecuador’s government was presented as a leader that was seeking alternatives to resource extraction. Suddenly, Ecuadorian social movement actors and government ministers became international actors because of this innovative project. They were frequently invited to speak at international symposiums, UN forums and meetings of the European Union. Indigenous activists, particularly those from Sarayaku, whose territory is located within the Amazon, actively promoted their philosophical concept of *Sacha Kawsay*, or the “living forest”. Ecuador’s efforts were celebrated, as it seemed to truly take seriously the rights of Nature inscribed in the 2008 Constitution. Within Ecuador, young people, including many who later identified as or supported Yasunidos, learned about the Initiative in their schools and through government-led publicity campaigns.

### 2.3.6 Continuation of extractive activity

Though the initiative received broad support nationally and internationally, it was apparent that the so-called “Plan B,” oil extraction in this mega-diverse territory, was never entirely taken off the table. In fact, it became increasingly clear that resource extraction was still a priority. The government continued to concession oil blocks that were within Amazonian indigenous territories. For example, in November 2010, the Ecuadorian government renegotiated its contract with AGIP Oil, which included a portion of Block 23, even though the Kichwa Sarayaku and other groups living there were firmly against oil extraction on their lands. Another clear example is the case of

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23 In 2007, when Correa assumed the Presidency, oil concessions in the Amazon region totaled 5 million hectares, with 4.3 million of these concessioned to foreign companies. In 2011, 22 additional oil blocks in the Central-South region of the Amazon were made available to bidders in the XI Oil Auction (Acosta 2016, p.).
licensing Armadillo Block, even though there was clear evidence of the presence of indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation. After a fatal spear attack by a Taromenare of wood merchant Luis Castellanos inside Armadillo Block, there were an additional 34 reported events that evidenced the presence of uncontacted indigenous groups in that zone (Informe Ejecutivo sobre la situación de los Pueblos Indígenas Aislados (PIA) 2009). While such evidence was able to momentarily halt oil exploration, the government gave a license to Montex-Gosanti the following year, in June 2011 (El Universo, 2013).24

Just a few months before the Yasuní ITT Initiative was terminated, on March 25, 2013, the Ecuadorian government finalized its Ronda Sur Oriente del Ecuador (auction of oil blocks in the southeast of Ecuador) in Beijing, Bogotá, Houston, Paris, and Singapore. This auction potentially affected 2,600,000 hectares, divided into 13 oil blocks. Oil exploration and extraction here would impact seven indigenous nations (the Kichwa, Waorani, Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, Andoa and Sápara). In their report, Acción Ecológica states that “the intention to exploit the Southern Amazon should be seen as the necessity to take control of territories, where there are also mining concessions and various hydroelectric projects.” According to this report, the indigenous communities have not been consulted (Acción Ecológica, 2013).

The above-mentioned examples are just a few instances of the continuation of extractive activities. Additionally, there were also threats to disband the Yasuní ITT initiative if enough funds weren’t received. Roque Sevilla, who headed the initiative until January 2010, told BBC World that, in addition to the economic crisis, potential

24 The Via Maxus oil road, which runs 180km through the Yasuní National Park, was built in 1993.
European donors were influenced by the contradictions shown by the government, especially having Plan B “up their sleeves.” Correa also insulted governments with whom Ecuador was in negotiation. In one infamous, frequently cited instance, Correa told German donors that they could “stick their money in their ears” when he was unhappy with the terms of an agreement that outlined how international funds would be channeled (El Universo, 2010).

2.3.7 The unraveling of the Yasuní ITT initiative

Given the messages communicated by the Correa government, funders saw the writing on the wall, and international monetary support dwindled. Germany, under Angela Merkel, was originally one of the largest contributors to the initiative, but in her second administration, Germany decided not to continue to provide financing (La República, 2011). This affected the willingness of other countries to contribute. Correa did not take a clear enough stand that would have helped donors feel confident that he was serious about keeping the oil in the soil. For example, he could have promised that while he is President, the Yasuní ITT would not be exploited. Also, clear policies were never set. In fact, “the concepts, measures and instruments to make it concrete were not sufficiently clarified nor agreed upon.” (Acosta, 2016, p. 11). Of course, there were external factors that worked against its success: it is likely that it was just too dangerous a precedent for governments of the global North to pay a form of reparations to keep the oil in the ground. German Minister Niebel, responsible for denying funds during the second Merkel administration, stated “I don’t pay for something that won’t happen. If we take part in [the initiative], we will create a precedent of unpredictable consequences.” (La
Another important factor to take into account was the financial crisis that shifted the global scenario in 2008 and over the next several years.

On August 15, 2013, when Correa announced that the Yasuní ITT initiative failed because of lack of international financial backing, many supporters found this reason unacceptable. Many people believed that Ecuador should carry out its pledge even without international support. Subsequently, the abandonment of the Yasuní ITT initiative became, for many citizens, a point of rupture with the government. With the demise of this innovative initiative, the idea of transforming from a primary export model to a post-petrol one, seemed that much more out of reach.

2.3.8 The mediatization of the Yasuní ITT initiative

To comprehend the reaction to Ecuadorian President Correa’s announcement on August 15, 2013 that the government would terminate the Yasuní ITT initiative, it is crucial to understand that this flagship initiative was heavily promoted by the government and NGOs for six years, both nationally and internationally, though a sophisticated advertising campaign. In a search for Yasuní ITT videos uploaded to Youtube in June 2015, we encountered 45 spots that are or appear to have been created by SECOM. These spots mainly target an Ecuadorian audience, and were uploaded between August 2008 and March 2013, a mere five months before the initiative was abandoned. The videos include short animations directed toward young children, spots that feature famous Ecuadorian actors and singers, and even a promotional video for a reality TV show in which 12 Ecuadorians seek the “Spirit of the Yasuní”.  

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25 See Espíritu Yasuní.mov. accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GkEZ-6rvys&t=2s

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One of the many commercials produced by the Ecuadorian government’s SECOM (Secretary of Communication) for the Yasuní ITT initiative (for national television audiences) opens in a dense forest setting. A 3D black bubble emerges from the soil and floats during the length of the commercial. Amidst lush foliage, a young indigenous man dressed in a tee shirt and jeans rises to speak directly to the camera in Spanish: “Yasuní ITT is a huge commitment to the planet. Ecuador will contribute 50% of the value that it could have obtained by extracting petroleum. The camera cuts to an indigenous woman of Kichwa descent (apparent by her clothing) in a similar setting and says to the camera, “the world should contribute the other 50%. We will be the example. There is still time.” The camera now cuts to a young indigenous girl who tell us “because a country is also big by the grandeur of its actions.” Two German tourists emerge from a jungle path and say “Support Yasuní ITT because the Yasuní is not only for Ecuador,” and their sentence is completed by an indigenous woman of Shuar nationality paddling a canoe in a small river, “it is for the whole world”. An Indigenous young man emphatically states in his native language, “leave the petroleum underground.” An Indigenous elder, also in native dress, and in his language, says, “It is in our hands, you decide.” The black bubble falls back into the soil, and the announcer emphasizes, “Get informed, be a part of the initiative, and create a new world.” The spot ends with two logos: Yasuní-ITT: Create a New World, and Ecuador loves life. 26 This spot is just an example of dozens of ads that were created and circulated on television, radio, social media, in plazas, and even at massive music concerts.

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As several of my interviewees pointed out, many youth that went on to identify as Yasunidos were adolescents at the time that these spots came out. So it was not surprising that the government, in its attempt to convince people of Plan B, had a difficult time because of its own successful publicity campaign. A generation of Ecuadorians watched the commercials, heard the government discourse, and sat through many presentations of the initiative in their schools. I would argue that this is an important antecedent to the emergence of a movement to protect the Yasuni from oil exploitation in 2013-2014.

Next section grounds earlier theorizations about a new wave of Latin American social movements that seek to hold progressive governments accountable to their promises. I propose that Yasunidos is part of the vanguard that Escobar (2014) refers to when discussing a new wave of Latin American movements that call for a post-development scenario. I mainly relied on ethnographic and interview-based methods to describe and analyze the emergence of Yasunidos. I discuss the early protests, and demonstrate how Yasunidos, while standing on the shoulders of other contemporary ecological movements, presents new identities and practices that locate them in such vanguard.

2.4 Candlelight vigils, protests and mediated maneuvers

Even before President Correa declared, on August 15, 2013 that his government would terminate the Yasuní ITT initiative, opting instead for “Plan B,” there had been rumors that the announcement was imminent. Ecuadorian citizens, many of them young people, began gathering in plazas across Ecuador to hold vigils for the Yasuní. While many of them were not associated with any social or political organizations, there were also many ecologist, feminist, animal rights and human rights collectives present.
Amazonia Por la Vida (affiliated with Acción Ecológica and the international group Oil Watch) and the La Red de Guardianes del Yasuní (Network of Yasuní Guardians, a national network of diverse collectives that defended the proposal to keep the oil in the soil) were among the groups that organized the vigils in various cities across Ecuador.

One of the members of the collective Amazonia Por la Vida described early protests:

I remember that days before [the announcement] were were already anticipating the moment, and we decided to hold zapateadas and candlelight vigils in front of the Government Palace…we began to organize people and chanted slogans in defense of the Yasuní, letting the government know that we were vigilant.” (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The zapateadas became a hallmark of Yasunidos protests and other Yasuní-related events, which almost always included artistic and performative expressions, including singing, dancing, chanting, artistic displays, and performance. The enactment of what I call mediated cultural politics became common movement practices. They were key vehicles that interrupted hegemonic meanings of development, and communicated post-development imaginaries to diverse publics. These mediated cultural politics were at once contestatory and propositive acts against the developmentalist paradigm deployed through statist media power.

2.4.1 The televised announcement

Correa’s government has reshaped media and communication practices in Ecuador. I conceptualize the government’s increasing appropriation of media (both in material and symbolic terms) as statist media power, and argue that it is a potent site to

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27 A zapateada is an Indigenous collective dance, accompanied by musicians. It is done in a circle, and is associated with important days for indigenous peoples, including Inti Raymi. Yasunidos’ zapateadas mixed both traditional and more contemporary rhythms.
interrogate symbolic conflicts between the government and social movements. The Yasunidos case provides an important example of how the government has sought to wield its media power to try to convince Ecuadorians that the Yasuni must be opened up to exploration and extraction of oil.

Correa’s live national broadcast, held before an audience of carefully selected ministers and political allies, including a teary-eyed Ivonne Baki, who had led the Initiative since 2010 (many say to its downfall) lasted 22 minutes. With Decree No. 74, Correa brought an end to the initiative. Surely anticipating the collective indignation by the generation that grew up with the Yasuní ITT initiative and the Rights of Nature, Correa invoked young people 14 times. Seeking to appeal to this demographic, Correa said “beloved young people, you have the security of knowing that no one defends the Yasuní, and no-one feels the pain of this decision, more than your own compañero President.” He made a special pledge: “My work will always be at the service of young people and the Ecuadorian people.” He added: “The worst crime against human rights is misery. The greatest error is to subordinate these human rights against the supposed rights of Nature.” He appealed to the pockets of the provincial governments by pledging $1, 568 million dollars to each, which would be profits derived from oil exploitation. (El Comercio, 2013). Correa framed the decision in a way that would become commonplace over the next few months: justifying resource extraction as necessary to lift the Amazon out of poverty, and promising that the profits would be directed toward Amazonian local governments.
2.4.2 The Great Vigil for the Yasuní

That same evening, hundreds of people gathered on the Plaza Grande, just outside of Carondelet (the government palace). There were two main factions: on one side of the plaza, protesters denounced the end of the initiative. They called the gathering the *Gran Velada por el Yasuní* (the Great Vigil for the Yasuní). On the other end, those for exploitation held a counter-demonstration. Pro-government events like this one have been a common response to protest in Correa’s administration. The demonstration included members of Alianza País (Correa’s movement), employees of the government (often ordered to attend), supporters, and a large contingent of the national police that protected them. While government supporters were permitted to occupy the plaza, the protesters’ access to the same space was blocked by the police.

The pro-Yasuní protesters held handwritten signs and banners about the Yasuní, depicting the animals that lived there. They played music, danced and chanted. These became emblematic practices of the movement. That evening, there were a few squirmishes between the two groups, with the police trying to separate them, but there were no violent confrontations.

One of the young people on the *Plaza Grande* that day would go on to become a member of Yasunidos, and a dynamic spokesperson on a national and international level:

> When Correa declared the exploitation, for me it was a very emotional moment because of the indignation I felt, but also because of my feminist reflections, like who has the right to decide… And this is a president who comes forward with a very paternalistic discourse, saying “beloved young people, I have decided…”.…But I was also excited about the response, that there was protest, because it had been a long time since there was a strong mobilization in this country. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).
The indignation felt by this young person was shared by thousands of people across Ecuador, many who had never visited the Amazon. This was due, in part, to the deep identification that they felt with the Yasuní ITT Initiative, the knowledge that the Yasuní is the most bio-diverse region in the world, and because the government made a commitment to safeguard it. The indignation expressed by so many evidenced that the Rights of Nature and territorial rights for indigenous not only had widespread acceptance, it was actually part of the identity of a whole generation of Ecuadorians.

In a letter written to the President and members of Alianza Pais on May 1, 2014, a member of Yasunidos reflected back to that day:

A few years ago I heard a President speak of equity, of a change of era, of progress for the poorest, and that capital is not above human beings, of the right of Nature, of this small piece of land called the Yasuní (until that moment I had no idea what it was). Hearing him speak, I fell in love: to maintain the most biodiverse place on the planet, territory of other human civilizations from which we have so much to learn; showing voracious capitalism and the world that human beings could live more lovingly with nature….On August 15, 2013, while you, Mr. President gave your discourse about cancelling the Yasuní ITT initiative … I had the hope that you would say that although the funds had not been raised, there would be no exploitation. Without a doubt this was one of the most difficult moments of my life. I did not understand how my president could turn his back on this dream.28

These emotions and subsequent rupture with the government was shared by many young people and others who had believed that it would fulfill its promise to care for the Yasuní. Even though there was suspicion all along, especially by those that followed the ongoing auction of oil blocks, the final death knell of the initiative brought forth an explosion of sadness, frustration and anger.

2.4.3 Indignation spreads across plazas and multiple media platforms

Public outcry erupted across the nation. Radio and TV programs could speak of nothing else. Indignation, disillusionment, and also acquiescence, support and justification for the decision, were shared and debated across social media, often accompanied by photos, videos, and memes. The majority of texts and images against exploitation referenced the rights of Nature, the biodiversity of the region and displayed photos of animals that live in the Yasuní. Some referred to the indigenous communities that would surely be affected by the contamination that would ensue. On August 16, independent filmmaker and journalist Carlos Andrés Vera published an entry in his blog, Polificción, entitled “Reasons to not exploit the ITT.”29 This blog entry generated heated debate, in that within 24 hours there were hundreds of responses.

Reading the responses, I noticed few comments about the indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation, as this was still not an issue on many people’s radar.30 In fact, one of the comments on the blog encapsulates the pro-“development” rationale heard on radio and television programs in the following days and weeks:

My question is the following: for four nomadic tribes that live in the Neolithic era, and that, according to you, need 1 million [hectares] to live (when in the city of Guayaquil, where 2.5 million persons live … we occupy 3.45% of what 4 tribes need), the country should suffer? (Commentary by YogaGYE, Polificcion Blog, August 16, 2013).

The person went on to quoting Rafael Correa’s sentiments enunciated many times on the EC, (and before him, the 19th century explorer Humbolt), “we cannot continue

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29 https://polificcion.wordpress.com/2013/08/16/motivos-para-no-explotar-el-itt/
30 Opinion polls showed that the general public responded more to photos or drawings of animals than to indigenous peoples.
being the fools of the world, sitting on top of gold but poor…” On the other hand, CDES, a small nonprofit founded in 1997, sought to raise awareness about the indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation. On August 17, two days after Correa’s announcement, CDES sent out a mass e-mail denouncing the government’s sudden denial that these nomadic groups lived in the Yasuní. They pointed out that “paradoxically, this is the same government that promoted their existence internationally. Now that the plan is to exploit oil reserves, conveniently they no longer exist.” (CDES, 2013). CDES also pointed out that the Minister of Justice, mandated to protect the lives of isolated indigenous groups, now claimed that these groups were 70 kilometers away (see Map 1 and Map 2 below). This new narrative did not make sense because semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers regularly move about wide swaths of territory.\(^\text{31}\) Finally, in the e-mail, CDES reminded readers that oil exploitation in the area was not only against the constitutionally-declared rights of Nature, but that it would affect the lives of human beings whose ways of life were already in danger. For many, the indigenous cosmovision that has penetrated some of society understands human rights and the rights of Nature as inextricably intertwined.

\(^{31}\) On August 23, the Ministry of Justice published a new map in which the uncontacted groups were indicated as living and roaming completely outside of the perimeter of Block 31 and the Yasuní ITT. The new map contradicted the previous map that was sent to the IACHR in April 2013. See http://www.claveverde.org/index.php/noticias/343-ecuador-ministerio-de-justicia-cambia-mapa-de-poblacion-en-aislamiento
Figure 2c. Created in 2010 by the Ministry of Environment as part of the negotiations with the *Equipo de Medidas Cautelares* (Team of Preventive Measures). It is consistent with the one sent to the IACHR in April 2013.

Figure 2d. Map showing presence of clans of isolated groups in the ancestral territory Tagaeri-Taromenare. This map was sent as part of the report from the Minister of to the IAHCR in April 2013.
2.5 Yasunidos emerges in the midst of a national mobilization

Collectives began organizing toward a national mobilization set for August 17, 2013. News of the upcoming event, less than 48 hours after the announcement, circulated by word-of-mouth, radio, television, print media and social media. Similar to Occupy Wall Street, 15M, and uprisings of the “Arab Spring”, the call to participate, and the logistics of the events, spread rapidly across cities and towns through social media.

During the mobilization, the confrontation was much more intense than it had been during previous protests. The national police sought to limit the use of public space by the protesters, and prevented them from occupying the Plaza Grande. The reason given was that a cultural event was in process. The event they were referring to

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32 The mobilizations on August 17, 2013 took place in many cities and towns across Ecuador.  

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Figure 2e. Map of distribution of indigenous groups living in isolation. This map was sent by the Minister of Justice to the National Assembly on August 23, 2013.
was that of the counter-demonstration, mostly members of Alianza País. This group insulted the protesters, using Correa’s own phrases such as “tirapiédras” (stone throwers) often invoked when referring to students that were associated with the Movimiento Popular Democrático (MPD). The government had also set up huge speakers that drowned out the protesters music and chants (see Vázquez, 2015; La Hora, 2013). A member of Yasunidos later recalled what we were all conscious of at the time:

It was the first major mobilization against the regime. (SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

While citizen and social movement protests continued, there is general agreement among scholars, activists and political analysts that the repression and criminalization of movement leaders had a chilling effect since Correa came to power in 2007. Another member provided more analysis about that particular historical moment in Ecuador:

Yasunidos is somewhat exceptional; it is something that transcends all that has transpired in environmental matters. Amazonia por la Vida was a small group that served as a base for Yasunidos. There is a moment in which the Ecuadorian society rises up against certain forms of governance. There is political effervescence with the fall of the presidents, and that is when civil society organizations are strengthened. There is a breaking point with Gutierrez, who realizes that the indigenous movement had much to do with the fall of his predecessors. So he set out to weaken the indigenous movement to the point where it almost disappears…Correa is then able to

33 The MPD was a communist party founded in 1978 that had played a key role in some elections. However, in the general elections of 2013 the CNE rescinded its legal status as it did not receive popular support (another way in which the government has eliminated minority parties). In 2015, the party reinvented itself as the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, UP).
34 See http://www.lahora.com.ec/index.php/noticias/show/1101550611/-/Po...e_la_Marcha_por_el_Yasun%C3%AD_hacia_Carondelet.html#.UhE-L-uhAukZY)
35 Ospina (2013) has pointed out that the number of conflicts increased from 2010-2012. Some related to environmental conflicts, such as the march that CONAIE and the Frente Popular initiated between March 8-22, 2012, against mining, and against a pro-privatization water law.
bring together the Forajidos,36 he seeks to bring in the ecologists, indigenous, LGBT…all of these movements supported his candidacy which sought great changes. In 2007, this works, but things begin to change with the years, to the point where counter-marches began. And just at that moment the Yasuní ITT initiative is terminated. Important figures in social movements return, and they are consolidated at the societal level. (PE, personal communication, Abril 30, 2015).

The pro-Yasuní wave of protests across the nation marked a turning point in social movement mobilization, as the issue resonated with a wide range of Ecuadorians. The Yasuní conflict would remain in the public eye for over a year; and it would have long-lasting political effects beyond that year.

2.5.1 Yasunidos is founded

The following day, August 18, 2013, the Yasunidos collective was founded. This section introduces elements of their movement identity, in particular how Yasunidos differs from previous Ecuadorian social movements. I include interviews I conducted approximately one year after ethnographic field work. I did this so, like me, they would have the benefit of reflection. For this reason, I consider the process to be one of co-theorization with movement activists.

According to a core member that was present the evening that Yasunidos was founded:

The collective was born of two primordial energies. The first is indignation, and the second is the opposite of that, the desire to create and to propose. In other words, indignation because many people, Ecuadorians and foreigners, really believed in the sincerity of such a revolutionary proposal. Then, to see that hope fall precipitously and be crushed… (BB, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

36 The Rebelión de los Forajidos (the Rebellion of the Forajidos) was the mostly urban movement that brought down the government of President Gutierrez through democratic protest during April 13-20, 2005. The name forajido was the way Gutierrez referred to those who protested against him, and citizens proudly reappropriated the name.
A dynamic tension between indignation and propositive action, connected to a post-development imaginary, was one of the characteristics of this new generation of activists.

Although there has been ecological activism in Ecuador for decades by the indigenous movement and other social organizations, the emergence of Yasunidos as a new social actor representing distinct subjectivities differs from other movements in that it is heterogenous, youth-led, horizontally structured, and maintains its independence from political parties. Omar Bonilla, a member of the collective, suggests that the majority of Yasunidos are young people who simply do not want to accept the world that is being offered to them. “What detonates in them is what sociologists call a ‘moral economy’” (Yasunidos: el nuevo activismo urbano, 2014). Bonilla adds that many members were neither for nor against the government, as they had not been previously involved in politics. On their website, Yasunidos self-describes as:

Non-partisan, autonomous and self-organized … we are vegans, cyclists, Buddhists, feminists, ecologists, indigenous, housewives, those who fight for gender equality and sexual liberation, farmers, workers, artists, intellectuals … who have found it necessary to defend life over money… We reject extractivism as the only way to produce wealth. We practice resistance but are not violent. We are pacifists but not passive. We want a different world, but are not naïve. We base our ideals on the reality of climate change, the water crisis, the irreversible extinction of biodiversity and ethnocide of Indigenous peoples.  

Another member of Yasunidos theorizes its place in movement history.

I feel part of an historic moment. Obviously, there is a legacy, I would not deny all that has been achieved by those whom we have inherited these struggles: the compañeras of Acción Ecológica, the indigenous movement, and other organizations and movements. But this moment of youth mobilization about the Yasuní has a different political tone in its forms of

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protest, its discourses, and even its ways of expressing itself. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

As demonstrated here, the ecological consciousness in a new generation of Ecuadorians has been gestating in for decades, but has its own identity. Its “political tone” prefers festive, performative protest actions over more militant forms. Not only is anti-capitalist it re-imagines development as a future free of extractivisms.

To conclude, I return to the earlier theoretical section of this chapter to affirm that indeed, Yasunidos fits into the new wave of social movements in Latin America. As Daza et al. (2012) argue, these movements face a reconfigured landscape in that they are confronting the broken promises of the progressive governments. In the Ecuadorian case, Yasunidos emerged at a moment when many Ecuadorians, after five years of the Correa administration, had grown weary of failed promises to transition from resource extraction. Some members ceased supporting the policies and actions of the government long before the Yasuní ITT announcement; others were still somewhat hopeful but on the verge of disillusionment. The abandonment of the Yasuní ITT initiative became a flash point for many citizens due to its innovative, progressive mandate that was a source of national pride. This was particularly true for a younger generation that had feminist and ecologist sensibilities. Like many progressive movements in the 21st century, Yasunidos rejects political party affiliation, and rather cultivates democratic assemblies that seek consensus. Daza et al. also argue that the new movements are disputing dominant models of living from specific subjectivities. In the case of Yasunidos, adherents have grown up with the concept of Buen Vivir, and deeply question the paradigm that extractivism brings prosperity. The post-development imaginary, emerging from alternative ontologies, is
part of the identity of Yasunidos. In the Ecuadorian case, Yasunidos has been shaped by groundbreaking initiatives and constitutional mandates (and their promotion across media platforms): the Yasuní ITT initiative, the constitutionally-sanctioned rights of Nature and recognition of cultural and territorial rights of indigenous peoples. As I analyze in the next few chapters, the mediatization of the Yasuní ITT initiative by the government began with praise and ended with justifying its exploitation. The conflict that ensued makes visible the government’s extractivist plans, and major push-back from citizens.

**2.6 Yasunidos coming into play**

The Yasunidos case also tells the story of tensions involving, on the one hand, processes of democratization from below, and on the other, the lack of democratic processes in political institutions. This final section focuses on this theme. As discussed in Chapter One, I understand democratization not as a path towards a specific type of democracy or processes limited to electoral politics, but rather as “spaces of experience and experimentation that arise from specific historical, geographical and cultural conditions” (Ramirez, 2012, p. 115). The analysis of the distinct forms of power at play, whether government media power or mediated cultural politics of Yasunidos, can shed light on cultural battles being waged in Ecuador. An examination of the six month-long signature-gathering process brings into focus contradictions at play in governmental discourses and practices. Following Ranciere (2011), substantive democracy cannot be reduced to a form of government; rather it is an expression of popular power, “the power of those who have no special entitlement to exercise power.” (p. 79). The very act of calling for a referendum facilitated a process in which Ecuadorian citizens, led by Yasunidos, sought to reclaim popular power that had been taken away during the Citizens
Revolution. As discussed in Chapter One, during the Correa administration, citizen participation has been conceived as a consultative process at best, in which citizens have been largely called on to agree with the government.

Ramiro Avila Santamaria, a scholar and one of Yasunidos’ attorneys, emphasizes three kinds of democracy inscribed in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution: representative democracy, direct democracy and communitarian democracy. He proposes that since representative democracy had failed Ecuadorians in the case of Yasuní ITT, Yasunidos had no other choice but to turn to the other two forms of democracy, communitarian democracy, which took place in the streets, and direct democracy, which was waged through the referendum process.38

To analyze Yasunidos´ bid for a referendum on the Yasuní, I have identified three key phases around which the story of Yasunidos and processes of democratization can be told: 1) the emergence of the movement and first wave of protests, which Avila has referred to as communitarian democracy; 2) the signature-gathering process that Yasunidos waged during six months, which was the legally-sanctioned period of time they had to collect 583,324 signatures of Ecuadorian citizens in order to have the constitutional right to call for a popular referendum, a direct democratic process. Part of the second phase, I include the joyous victory march in which Yasunidos and key allies delivered 55 boxes containing 757,623 signatures to the CNE (an elevated moment in which popular power was reclaimed). and 3) the series of events that followed the

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38 Avila’s intervention took place on January 12, 2015, during the launching of the Yasunidos report by Vázquez (2015). Direct democratic mechanisms are constitutionally sanctioned in the 2008 Constitution, articles 103-107. Article 104 stated that Ecuadorian citizens may call for a popular referendum on an issue. After this conflict, the government amended the article.
delivery of signatures, in which the CNE invalidated 230,000 signatures. Yasunidos has coined this moment “democracy in extinction.”

The referendum process is a privileged site at which to understand the state-social movement conflict in a dispute over development and extractivism. It illuminates how each side sought to convince Ecuadorian citizens of their perspective. On the one hand, the government deployed its media power in order to shape public opinion, mainly through the delegitimization and criminalization of the movement; on the other hand, Yasunidos, visibilizing new subjectivities and forms of protest in Ecuador, enacted a mediated cultural politics that garnered approval and visibility both nationally and internationally.

2.6.1 Consulta Popular! Yasunidos calls for a national referendum

The decision to call for a national referendum was made by Yasunidos on August 22, 2013, just days after the collective was formed. To do so, they needed to gather signatures totaling 5% of the electorate, which was 583,324 signatures at that time. The question they posed, later legally approved, was: Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should indefinitely leave the crude oil in the ground in the ITT, known as block 43?

Although there were those who disagreed, a member of Yasunidos justified the decision to go this route:

This decision was another big moment. Even though I am very critical of the state and of power I do believe that it is necessary to be strategic, to have a vision beyond the moment. For me this was an important action, to have proposed the national referendum, because it helped to sustain the mobilization for the Yasuní. We all know that street protests can die out quickly, they last for a time and then they end. And that is what occurred, although they did last a good amount of time. I remember that we went out
to protest almost every day, and we had sit-ins in the streets near Carondelet (Presidential palace) … but the call for a consulta sustained mobilization, and more people joined. It was an activity that people could feel part of, after the protests. It was also very difficult, it required a lot of work….the signature-gathering process was super important….What it allowed us was to fight for participation. And precisely what we did was to construct ways to do things wherein the greatest amount of people could participate. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Indeed, the signature-gathering process, a direct-democracy mechanism, would captivate the nation over the next six months.

2.6.2 The signature-gathering process as mediated cultural politics

The right to gather signatures towards a national referendum was eventually granted to Yasunidos by the CNE on October 1, 2013. The six-month process of signature-gathering, from October 14, 2013 to April 12, 2014, became a potent movement building mechanism.

In a study about the Egyptian protests of 2011, Nanabhay et al. (2011) argue that an “amplified public sphere” is created at the intersection of three interrelated spaces: physical, analog and digital. They propose that each space informs the other, leading to a context in which real world protests function in tandem with social media and mainstream media. However, they clearly assert that change does not occur without the occupation of public space. This was indeed the case with the signature-gathering process.

The signature-gathering process was an act of mediated cultural politics. As Alvarez et al. (1996) remind us, culture is not static, rather it is “a process that produces meanings that shape and configure social relations (p. 3). By extension, cultural politics should be analyzed by “its effects on political culture (what counts as “political” in a
given society), how they challenge and unsettle it. A similar meaning is given by Juris (2015) who proposes that it is through cultural performance that “alternative meanings, values and identities are produced, embodied, and publicly communicated by social movements.” (p. 82). He also argues that these performances bridge the mind-body divide. In other words, when a movement enacts cultural politics in these ways, their appeal can be broader. Hence, in a similar vein, Yasunidos enacted a mediated cultural politics that resignified what direct democratic participation and development could look like.

The act of occupying public space, not just with a table and signature forms, but with large posters depicting healthy people, forests, and animals (a post-development environment free of extractive activities that contaminate and kill), as well as music and dance, dynamized and visibilized dissent as perhaps no other action could. In the first place, it was not as easy for the government to delegitimize or criminalize this process, given it was constitutionally sanctioned and legally approved by CNE. In the second place, its effect was amplified in other mediated platforms. Everyone I interviewed believed that the signature gathering process was one of the most successful components of Yasunidos’ campaign. It mobilized members of Yasunidos and volunteers across the country, including citizens who had not yet been involved. As real, substantive citizen participation dwindled during the Citizens Revolution, here was a constitutionally consecrated way to take action on an issue that was important to so many:

I believe that the moment in which we were on the offensive was the best moment for Yasunidos. Networks grew on a national level. When we visited the various provinces where there were Yasunidos, about 18 to 20 provinces, and we missed a few, it was extraordinary because groups grew
even where we hadn’t facilitated them. (SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

This member of Yasunidos further describes the scenarios that took place across Ecuador, and proposes why this phenomenon attracted attention:

I witnessed young people of 23 years of age work 16, 17 hours a day in the collection of signatures. They were absolutely obsessed with the task. A whole generation of young people went out to the streets with an impressive amount of joy…The fact that young people, unaligned, dove into the task with passion and heart…with other groups it might have been impossible to achieve. It was at once the great virtue and great limitation of Yasunidos. (SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

At the same time, the process of occupying public spaces such as plazas, outside schools, churches, shopping malls and other places crowds gather, was an excellent way to meet and dialogue with people across race, class, gender, age, and neighborhoods. Unlike Correa’s unilateral decision, this process fostered a citizen-led, national debate on the Yasuní, extractivism, and democracy (regarding who has the right to make a decision about the Yasuní). During this process, the public had a first-hand opportunity to get to know Yasunidos and debate the issues with them (rather than a soley mediated experience).

As one member of Yasunidos described, she sometimes felt that she was winning people over one person at a time. She even ran after a few people when they simply walked away to ask “why?” These personal encounters led to some of the richest exchanges. Yasunidos was committed not just to gathering signatures, but to engaging in dialogue and debate with fellow citizens. The process allowed Yasunidos to reach broad
sectors of society, and further, to appeal to their imaginaries about the kind of Ecuador they want, and to take action towards that future:

We made a tremendous effort to reach all sectors of society, above all perhaps those that had never been connected to social struggles. We appealed to people’s artistic sensibilities as well. And Yasunidos was able to amplify its discourse in light of a theme that was super concrete: You disagree with what is happening? Well, here is a concrete tool, sign here…(SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

The process also brought Yasunidos into direct contact with the obstacles, such as people’s fears of signing the petition. Signature collectors, who would share their stories at the Yasunidos weekly assemblies, recounted that many individuals confessed that they were afraid to sign the form because they didn’t want to lose their government job. They would often bring family members or friends to sign on their behalf, admitting those feelings, but proudly having their children or parents provide a signature.

Other difficulties and tensions with other social movements and with political figures arose during the process of signature collection. These frictions were due, in part, to Yasunidos’ rejection of the help (or protagonism, one might say) of parties. They were also due, in part, to reactions to urban youth taking a lead in themes that had been the domain of others. For example, CONAIE, led during this process by Humberto Cholango, did not participate, although ECUARUNARI, the highlands chapter of CONAIE, led by Carlos Perez Guambartel, played a key role. Alberto Acosta commented on this:

First, no flags; second, no old figures that lead political movements, which is very interesting, and many of them understand this and put themselves on the margin (like myself). Other political figures feel marginalized and did not commit as they should have. CONAIE did not commit, ECUARUNARI did as they have other leaders. There was also a kind of jealousy, not just from the indigenous movement, but also from others. There was uneasiness
on the part of certain political figures who wanted to help but felt mistreated by the youth. Yasunidos rejected all of them without distinction. (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, April 10, 2015).

A member of Yasunidos shared his perspective on this issue:

I think what occurred was about protagonisms and personalisms….it is very difficult to accept that a young woman that is 19 or 20 years old relegates a political leader like Humberto Cholango (then president of the CONAIE) to the sidelines. I think that these were the kinds of agendas that predominated. At some moment some of them came to see Yasunidos as their enemy, which is absolutely unreal. For example, there was a moment when some leaders asked who financed Yasunidos, adding “is it true you received money from Chevron? (an allegation of the government). Pretexts as absurd as these… they had their own interests, their own resentments and their own agendas. (BB, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

As these interview segments reveal, one could say that there was a cost to the way that Yasunidos did politics. Yet, I propose that the benefits outweighed the downside, as their position brought them a great deal of legitimacy in the eyes of many Ecuadorians. It also made it harder for the government to accuse them (as it tried to do) of being a movement made up of “los mismos tirapiedras de siempre,” a common lema of Rafael Correa when talking about political or social movement actors.

The possibility of a popular referendum brought international attention, including several globally-organized petition drives. International allies also posted on social media their photos with signs indicating their support of Yasunidos and the preservation of the Yasuní. This must have been very hard for the government to stomach, as it had mostly enjoyed being known as an ecologically-friendly nation. With the international spotlight on Yasunidos, this image began to be replaced by another, that of a government who would abandon the project of keeping the oil in the soil in the Yasuní.
2.6.3 Signature-gathering process as a site of conflict: government strategies

The signature-gathering process was marked by multiple efforts on the part of the government and its allies to confuse people and dissuade them from signing (Vazquez, 2015). The use of media platforms amplified that effort. The first irregularity was that, according to law, the Constitutional Court needed to approve the question. It never responded as to the validity of the question. This fostered mistrust, because at any point in the process the Court could simply decide the question was invalid. Extensive interviews with Yasunidos (Vázquez, 2015) revealed that Yasunidos members were regularly followed and harassed, their phones tapped, and their bank accounts investigated. Signature-gathering efforts were also impeded by the police and private guards. In one case in Quito, private guards destroyed and removed a tent that protected signature gatherers from the rain. There were also cases of infiltration, in which suspect individuals showed up at Yasunidos headquarters to allegedly volunteer to collect signatures. Another intimidating tactic used frequently was that police and other individuals (civil servants or allies of the government) took photos of the signature-gatherers and signers. Adding to the atmosphere of harassment and intimidation, on November 5th, 2013, a police intelligence report was leaked and circulated on social networks. It provided a detailed map with photographs of the members and allies of Yasunidos. A member of Yasunidos discusses some of the ways in which they dealt with these tactics:

One of the reasons that I am not afraid, or rather the way in which I have worked with my fear, is my belief in the collective process, and I think that working collectively one is more protected. We have also learned that it is better not to hide, rather, when they attack you, you need to become even more visible. That way you have more people that recognize you, that
identify you, and that will defend you…We Yasunidos have also learned that if they attack someone, it should be that person who is a spokesperson, who shows their face….For example, when the police put out the police report, framing us as if we were drug dealers, those people profiled became the spokespeople …. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Mediated strategies used by the government in the Enlaces during the early wave of protests and the signature gathering process included misframing of the protests and specific protesters as violent; insults and threats to sympathetic political and social actors, academics, members of political parties, and journalists; verbal attacks on social media, likely coming from government-hired “trolls” (people paid to intervene in social media). The mediated response to Yasunidos is dealt with in more detail in Chapter Three. Here I provide a few key examples as part of the overall context (the mediated response cannot be excised from the context given its constant presence and weight).

On EC No. 336 on August 23, 2013, Correa characterized Yasunidos as manipulated by politicians, “childish ecologists,” “the same stone-throwers as always,” or as middle-class urbanites with “full bellies” that had never been to the Amazon, nor knew what it meant to live without basic services. He sought to depict Yasunidos as out of touch with people in the Amazon. In a move that was highly intimidating, in this EC, and what became a common occurrence over the next few months, he showed photographs of the marches, often pointing out and discussing specific individuals at length.

On EC No. 331, on August 31, 2013, after the request to initiate a national referendum process, Correa stepped up the attacks. He dared Yasunidos “not to be lazy” (“no sean vagos”), and to collect signatures to prove they had support. Scenes from the protests were also shown. This segment sought to, on the one hand, minimize the numbers of protesters, and on the other, accuse them of acts of violence. Showing a video
of people writing on a wall, accompanied by ominous-sounding background music, he accused protesters of trying to “destabilize the government and create chaos.” This particular EC framed the riot police as victims of aggression. Correa also made it clear that his supporters were following Yasunidos’ social media communications. In addition to intimidation, accusations and criminalization of Yasunidos, Correa made fun of proposed alternatives to oil extraction, even displaying a chart with a table divided in two-halves, the “government’s” proposals and “irresponsible” proposals. In these ways, the government sought to interrupt the image of Yasunidos as nonviolent and also delegitimized their post-extractivist proposals.

2.6.4 Sowing confusion during signature-gathering

The incidents that created the most confusion were when two different groups also began referendum processes on the same theme. One of the groups, Amazonia Vive (Amazon Lives), initiated by the 30 mayors that were aligned with Alianza País, supported extractive activities in the Amazon. They used the slogan Yasuní Sí. Their leading question was:

Do you support the President’s proposal to exploit petroleum in an area no more than 1 per 1,000 in the Yasuní National Park, and that the oil that is extracted from blocks 43, in the ITT camp, is directed toward the fight against poverty, the financing of life plans of ancestral communities, and the provision of basic services?

There were several reports from citizens that some of the signature gatherers of these competing referendum processes sought to convince people that they were members of Yasunidos. In one of the most shocking acts that transpired during the six-month process, the forms designed by Yasunidos and disseminated in the daily newspaper, El Comercio, were plagiarized by the other two groups leading referendum
processes and disseminated the following week in El Comercio and other newspapers, the only notable difference being the questions (Vázquez, 2015). Many people became so confused by all the different forms and questions, they simply did not sign anything.

There were also government actions that targeted other environmental groups. One of the most disturbing was the sudden government-closure of the Pachamama Foundation. Pachamama was an ally of Yasunidos, and provided funds to Ecuadorian groups, such as Acción Ecológica, to underscore how the ECs were intertwined with government actions. Just days before the closure, on November 30, 2014, on EC No. 350, Correa presented a video that attacked Yasunidos, Acción Ecológica, Pachamama Foundation, and indigenous leaders. Following the closure of Pachamama, on EC No. 351, Correa framed NGOs as being against the progressive governments, and bankrolled by “foreign interests.” While this has occurred historically in certain cases, this particular claim, denied by Yasunidos and without evidence, was likely meant to damage their reputation. These and many other incidents, detailed more thoroughly in Chapter 3, led to a climate of fear, paranoia, distress about the way the government was using its statist power and statist media power to attack critical actors.

2.6.5 Yasunidos victory march to deliver the signatures

Despite the mediated, physical, and psychological obstacles placed in their path, Yasunidos exceed their own and everyone’s expectations, and gathered 757,623 signatures, which was 173,300 more than the 584,323 signatures required. On April 12, 2014, 55 boxes containing 107,088 signature pages were delivered to the CNE at the culmination of the most joyous march most people could recall. Indigenous youth and women travelled from the Amazon, Yasunidos collectives arrived from across the
country, Afro-Ecuadorians from the coast, Indigenous groups from the highlands, and thousands who had a stake in the process of the past few months took part in the march. A member of Yasunidos describes the emotional tone of the March:

The night before the delivery of the signatures…we camped out in *El Arbolito* (The Little Tree, a park in which many protest activities have take place), and the next day that great march moved me so much. It was so beautiful, diverse, and showed much of the expressions that had meant the defense of the Yasuní, and it was a momento of *poder del pueblo* (power of the people), saying, here are our signatures, they represent us, here they are, we deliver them, and then that collective joy when we reach the CNE…. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

As the boxes were delivered one by one, to the sound of unending applause, the march acted as a collective voice of citizens, making visible dissent, and breaking through silence and fear. The march was perhaps the most important and vibrant manifestation of Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics of post-development.
2.6.6 Democracy in Extinction

Once the boxes were delivered by Yasunidos to CNE, another series of irregularities took place. Three days after the signatures were delivered, on April 15, 2014, CNE released a video, aired nationally, that described reasons that could lead to the elimination of signatures. Sensing a fraud foretold, members of Yasunidos made a surprise visit to the CNE. When they demanded to see their boxes, they observed that the security belts were broken on several of them. Upon revision, they found that many of the copies of identification cards of signature gatherers were missing, which would lead to the disqualification of thousands of signatures. Two days later, the CNE accused Yasunidos of trying to deceive them, and the boxes were hauled away by the military to one of their installments. The signature verification process ultimately took place without
the consent or supervision of Yasunidos, as was originally stipulated. Moreover, these events occurred during Easter week, when many people leave Quito to spend time with their families. So there were far less protesters than there might have been during another time period.

Vázquez et al. (2015) carefully documented the process, noting fraudulent and suspicious activities that included: the breaking of the protective seals of the boxes; public media campaigns against Yasunidos, including false allegations against the signature gatherers; CNE press releases citing the reasons for the elimination of signatures; and the very serious accusation that Yasunidos had falsified signatures. In short, there were multiple irregularities leading up to CNE’s announcement that it had eliminated over 60% of the signatures. On April 29, 2014, President Correa declared that there would be no referendum, even before the signature verification process took place. It was very clear that the government was adamant about not allowing a referendum to go forward.

This was indeed the most difficult moment the movement had faced. Yasunidos initiated a campaign urging citizens to demand that their signatures be validated. However, this campaign, “Democracy in Extinction” did not gain traction. A member of Yasunidos discusses the impact that this series of events had on the movement:

We did not have a strategy prepared for the moment of fraud. I think we were somewhat naive in believing that with that number of signatures, the referendum would go forward. Psychologically we were more prepared to win, than for a mediated situation of fraud. I don’t think there was planning in the event of fraud…we decided on the theme of “democracy in extinction” as a way to attract more sectors. But I feel that the message wasn’t so clear, nor was it as emotionally appealing as in the previous phase….It caught us completely off guard politically as well as mediatically….Also, the type of activists and bodies that were very efficient for the phase of signature collection, and to convince the people that they had to sign, and vote in favor of the Yasuní, were not the same kinds of
activists needed for that next moment…like those with more political experience, in order to confront that situation. Precisely because we are young, we had not had experience with authoritarian regimes. We didn’t have experience in civil disobedience, or in actions of resistance nor direct action… (BM, personal communication, April 28, 2015).

On May 6, 2014, the CNE announced that they would only validate 359,761 signatures, which fell short of the amount they needed to call for a national referendum. Reasons given ranged from valid ones such as repeat signatures, to those that were unreasonable, including small stains or wrinkles on a form or undecipherable letters. No matter where Ecuadorians stood on the issue of drilling for oil in the Yasuní, the government’s frontal attack on the signature-gathering process, its effort to depict Yasunidos as dishonest, and the manner in which the CNE dealt with the process, was an affront to many people’s sense of democracy and justice. It appeared that every effort was made so that the referendum would fail.

A team of academics from several universities carried out an independent statistical analysis of the signatures presented by Yasunidos to the CNE to try to estimate the number of valid signatures (Vázquez, 2015). According to their report, Yasunidos delivered between 667,334 and 680,339 valid signatures. They concluded that the chance that the number of valid signatures presented by CNE was accurate was statistically less than “one millionth.” They also concluded that chances that the number of valid signatures were less than the minimum required by law was almost equal to zero. This report called into question the objectivity of the CNE, and recommended a formal, independent audit and access to CNE’s database. The report stated that an audit “is indispensable, as conditions for democratic institutionality, transparency, independence and credibility of the resolutions of electoral power.” (Tegantai, 2014, p. 2)
I would argue that the elimination of signatures and other irregularities provoked a sense of frustration and despair in many citizens, which lead to paralysis rather than mobilization. It was also an emotionally difficult moment for many members of Yasunidos, especially those who did not have political experience. Several were so frustrated and angry they simply stopped their protest activities. Others persevered, but without the forward momentum provided by the concrete goal of gathering signatures. Yasunidos has since struggled to gain that kind of massive public support. It seemed that the moment of hope and people-powered direct democracy was over, at least at this juncture.

Although a devastating moment in the life of the movement, and one that had far reaching implications for democracy in Ecuador, Yasunidos does not assume what occurred as a total loss. As one member argues:

The Yasunidos collective became a new political actor in the public sphere, and it was a fresh voice whose intervention was needed. When Yasunidos breaks into this sphere, I think the other political actors did not have an adequate response to what we were proposing, from the most traditional of the Right, to the center Left… and perhaps even social movements. And after the signature collection process, I don’t believe the state will permit another exercise of signature collection as Yasunidos did. (BB, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

A political actor I interviewed also discussed the outcome:

They (Yasunidos) aren’t necessarily a threat to the government. The possibility that people organize is a threat to the government, and that they claim the rights established in the Constitution, and that is why they wanted to eliminate them. And since then, there are many international meetings, not just academic meetings but political ones, and this case is always present. Members of Yasunidos have also travelled and presented at these and other meetings. (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, April 10, 2015).
Many analysts agree that the government’s decision to drill for oil in the Yasuní, and its treatment of Yasunidos, hurt Correa politically. For instance, when Correa’s movement, Alianza País, lost Ecuador’s three major cities (Quito, Guayaquil and Cuenca) and most of the Amazon in the mayoral races of February 2014, many considered it a vote against all that had happened in 2013 (Ospina, 2014). In Chapter 5, I discuss the longer-term political implications of this mediated battle, in particular for processes of democracy in Ecuador.

On October 28, 2014, Yasunidos presented a demand to the IACHR against the Ecuadorian government for violation of political rights of the citizens who signed the petitions for a popular referendum. Julio César Trujillo, one of Yasunidos’ lawyers, stated that they had little hope that the referendum would be approved, as governmental organizations “obeyed one will, that of the President of the Republic…and because of this we needed to appeal to international organisms.” (Cazorla, 2014, p. 4).

Ironically, on May 22, 2014, the International Day of Biodiversity, the Ministry of the Environment granted Petroamazonas (the state oil company), the license to exploit the Yasuní blocks 31 and 43. The complete coordination of supposed independent branches and institutions of government, and alignment of public media, was further proof that democratization processes had been eroded.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter, divided into four sections, has sought to present a largely interview and ethnographically-based, panoramic view of the case study of Yasunidos. The first section grounded the chapter in a theoretical discussion about the new wave of social movements in Latin America. Here I analyzed how Yasunidos fits patterns associated
with a new generation of movement actors that are contesting power in the progressive
governments. The second section focused on the story of the Yasuní ITT, including its
mediated treatment by the government, thereby contextualizing the emergence of
Yasunidos. Section Three focused on Yasunidos identity and movement practices. In the
final section of the chapter, I analyzed four key moments of the case, paying particular
attention to the social, political and communicational context they confronted in that first
year. I sought to tell the story of the year in a succinct manner. In what was a very
complicated year on many levels in Ecuador, I emphasized the tension between
movement-based processes of democratization, and government attempts to abort those
processes. I analyzed how the direct democratic process of collecting signatures across
the country was able to partially interrupt the government’s media power. As I discussed
in Chapter 1, media power has been theorized by several scholars, but the limits and
excesses of media power has rarely been analyzed. This chapter, particularly Section 4,
provides insight into how Yasunidos confronted the government’s media power with
direct democratic actions. These actions formed part of their practices of mediated
cultural politics. And, as I have proposed, a focus on mediated cultural politics sheds
light on processes that a sole focus on media power can overlook.
CHAPTER 3
THE RECONFIGURATION OF MEDIA POWER IN ECUADOR AND ITS IMPACT ON STATE-SOCIAL MOVEMENT CONFLICTS

3.1 Introduction

When I first travelled to Ecuador in August 2012, Julian Assange, the founder of Wikileaks, had recently been given safe harbor in the Ecuadorean Embassy in London. Internationally, President Correa was celebrated as a champion of freedom of expression given his support of this whistleblower. So, when I read Ecuadorean newspapers in the days following my arrival, I was puzzled to read numerous editorials and opinion columns that questioned the “intolerant government that seeks to wash its image using Assange” and pointed to the “contradictions” this act displayed with domestic communication, such as forbidding government functionaries to give interviews to the press and other such actions. I would later find that this disjuncture between international and national opinion about the Ecuadorean government was just one of many examples of communicative criticism. Others would be related to the government’s attitudes towards the media, social movements and the indigenous communities seeking to protect their territories from extractivism.

In this chapter, I address one of my main research questions: how has the Correa government reconfigured media power in Ecuador? A related sub-questions that I analyze


40 See Assange, Ecuador on Stage, August 20, 2012, El Comercio, and La Agenda Del Poder, June 29, 2012, El Comercio, for two examples of then-current opinion about the action.
in Part II of this chapter is: how has the Correa government used its media power, particularly the EC television program, to delegitimize and criminalize Yasunidos and other social actors that oppose oil drilling in the Yasuní.

In the following section, I return to the theorization of media power that I introduced in Chapter One. I then discuss Ecuador’s media field prior to, and after 2007, when Correa assumed office. I analyze different components of media power, including the symbolic, legislative, and production practices of the government, particularly in relation to journalists and private media companies. While most of the dissertation focuses on mediated government-social movement relations, in analyzing the reconfiguration of media power it is necessary to focus on the journalistic field, where such configurations have mostly played out. Part II of this chapter focuses on how the government has deployed its media power in its dealing with Yasunidos and other social movements, particular through the EC. I also analyze Yasunidos’ media practices: how they strategically used the governmental attacks to their advantage; how they leveraged private media; and how they characterized their own social media practices. An analytic thread that runs through the whole chapter is the limitations of statist media power, a theme that is underdeveloped in most accounts of media power.

The methodologies used in this chapter are diverse, and have included ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with members of Yasunidos, journalists, political analysts, and social movement actors who have expertise in communication practices. I use institutional analysis to examine laws and decrees that were passed during the year covered in this case study. In Part II, I use a critical discourse analysis framework to analyze presidential discourses in the EC, related to Yasunidos and other
anti-extractivist resistance. One of the aspirations of this chapter, both theoretically and empirically, is to widen our understanding about the reconfiguration of statist media power by examining the symbolic actions, legislative-judicial framework, and media ownership and production practices of the government. In this way, we can better grasp its implications for journalists, media organizations and social movements, as well as appreciate its limitations, and the ways social movements resist and fight back.

3.2 Theorizing statist media power in Ecuador

A conceptual framework of statist media power has evaded most theories of media power that focus on liberal democratic regimes, in which power and protagonism are assumed to be the domain of private media (albeit in alignment with government). This is not the case in Ecuador, nor in other states where governments have attained some measure of direct control over media’s symbolic and material resources. Therefore, I seek to further develop a concept of statist media power, theoretically, methodologically and empirically.

In Chapter One, I argued that it is essential to apply a communicational lens to the Yasunidos case, as it can illuminate contemporary state-social movement conflicts about extractivism in ways that are often overlooked (either media is left out of the analysis or there is a focus on government-media relations). I introduced a framework of statist media power that expands on Couldry’s (2003) notion of media power as symbolic and material resources that, taken together, have *definitional* power to shape the whole of social space. Couldry extends Bourdieu’s notion of the meta-capital of the state, which refers to the state’s power over other fields, and he applies it to the meta-capital that the media potently generate over other fields. In doing so, Couldry proposes that only media
meta-capital can compete with statist meta-capital, as each has the cross-cutting power to deeply impact other fields of power. In the context in which Couldry is theorizing media power, these two meta-capitals (of the state and of the media) are generated by distinct actors. Whereas I propose that in the Ecuadorian context, the meta-capital of the media (media power) has become, under Correa, a constituent, even dominant aspect of the state’s meta-capital.

Therefore, when I refer to statist media power, I understand it as the power to construct a version of reality using symbolic and material resources at the state’s disposal. Given the scope of resources available to the state, such power also affects the capacity of the state to circulate other kinds of state capital (political, economic, legislative, judicial, and communicational). As such, it is a multilevel, multi-modal, dynamic process that involves the mediation of symbols, images, rituals, and discursive constructions of state and non-state actors. Paired with material resources, such statist media power has enormous potential to benefit government agendas. Because statist media power is part of a “package” of various kinds of statist capital, and also able to leverage those other forms of capital, it can have strong implications, not just for media democratization, but for overall processes of democratization (in this case, the erosion of democratization).

One of the key arguments in this chapter, arrived at though careful analysis of the Ecuadorian government’s media practices and media holdings, is that it has amassed an unprecedented amount of media power, although that power is always partial, and permanently subject to contestation and resistance. I categorize the various forms of media power in three conceptually discrete but overlapping categories (in that all have
symbolic and material dimensions and implications): symbolic actions, legal-judicial-
administrative factors, and state media ownership and production practices. The first,
symbolic actions, include threats, delegitimization and criminalization of government
adversaries. The second, legal-judicial-administrative factors, include the passing of laws
and decrees that provide the government with legal means to penalize social movements
and the media. These factors have restricted freedom of expression and self-censorship. It
also includes taking over and closing private media; and establishing a new
communication infrastructure that oversees and sanctions media. The third factor is state
media ownership and production practices, which are the main vehicles for transmitting
the symbolic dimensions of the state. This includes the production of content that is
circulated widely across media platforms.

By making explicit the various dimensions of statist media power, it is my intent
to emphasize both its symbolic and structural, materialist aspects, and ways in which they
relate and overlap. The Enlace Ciudadano, for example, integrates all three categories, in
that it is a television and radio program produced by the government; it is aired on many
channels owned by and/or that have been taken over by the government, it is archived
online in government websites, and the content - its discourses, visuals and rituals - have
symbolic power.

There is another aspect to media power that has been underexplored in scholarly
literature: the limitations of media power. Couldry (2003) argues that some
concentrations of symbolic power are so great that they “dominate the whole landscape”
and amount to the power of constructing reality (p. 4). While I agree with Couldry that
such concentration, given the uneven distribution of symbolic power, can dominate and
therefore distort representations of reality, such media hegemony always encounters
counter-hegemonic challenges that seek to interrupt its discourses and representations.
Des Freedman (2014) has explored the limitations of media power through empirical
cases (both Couldry and Freedman conceptualize mainstream media as the holder of
media power, a key difference with my study). While Freedman concurs with Couldry as
to the troubling effects of the unequal allocation of symbolic and material media
resources, his research findings have lead him to conclude that “[m]edia institutions do
not exert an exorable power over society…They are open to challenge, particularly when
their frames don’t match experiences or aspirations, especially in times of social
struggles…when existing narratives are under stress (2014, p. 119-120)\textsuperscript{41}. As such, media
power is not as “predictable, solid, or immoveable” as advocates of the propaganda
model argue (p. 117). However, when it comes to interrogating how media power can be
challenged, his proposals lack specificity; for example, he proposes that it is important to
take advantage of the contradictions inherent in capitalism, without providing further
detail.

Freedman’s assertions are key to understanding the limitations of media power in
the Yasunidos case, particularly his argument that challenges to media power can arise
when frames (in this case, the government’s) don’t match “the experiences or
aspirations” (2014, p. 119) of citizens. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, such
mismatch between Correa’s assertions that oil-drilling brings wealth to the Amazon
region did not match Ecuador’s decades-long experience as a petrol state, in which the
financial resources did not benefit the Amazon region. Even more dissonant, the

\textsuperscript{41} One of Freedman’s (2014) studies focused on how readers question editorial frames of the Iraq pro-war
media.
government’s vision of development did not match its own stated vision, just months before it abandoned the project to keep the oil in the soil. Additionally, young people’s post-development imaginaries did not match the traditional, petrol state logic, in which extractivism is believed to bring development, modernity and much-needed cash for the economy. Post-development imaginaries are further examined in Chapter 4.

I propose, too, that challenges to media power also arise when social movements powerfully deploy alternative conceptualizations that resonate with citizens. Yasunidos was able to trouble the government’s depiction of their movement as violent, as manipulated youth backed by “los mismos de siempre” (a common Correa statement, referring to the same political actors as always,). They were also able to interpellate statist media power by strategically leveraging it for their own benefit, as analyzed in Part II of this chapter.

3.3 The journalistic field in Ecuador prior to 2007

In Ecuador, as in most of the world, the journalistic field has been characterized by the dominance and concentration of private media, which has grown disproportionately compared to other kinds of media, historically holding approximately 95% of radio and television licenses. In 2006, four national business groups (that are also families) owned more than 70% of national dailies (Ramos, 2010). The Commision for the Audit of the Concession of Frequencies of Radio and Television (hereafter referred to as the Audit) found that at least four concessionaries controlled VHF stations in practically the whole of Ecuador. (Ramos, 2010, p. 27). A social movement actor involved in the drafting of the communication rights agenda in the 2008 Constituent
Assembly discussed the Audit that was conducted about the situation of media ownership:

We presented the Audit to Rafael Correa on May 18, 2009. In this audit, we discovered all of the dealings of frequencies that we suspected. The study covered from 1995 to 2008. But beforehand, the Controlaria also conducted an audit. We came to the same conclusion that frequencies had been purchased. (Jose Ignacio López Vigil, personal communication, January 22, 2016).

Even though episodic ruptures in government-media relations have arisen from time to time, historically these media actors have enjoyed a close alliance with dominant political and economic actors (the state, elites and business sectors). The private media in Ecuador, owned to this day mainly by families rather than by transnational corporations, have benefitted from these ties. Their close relationship with the state has meant that laws, regulations and state practices have enabled private media to occupy a privileged position in relation to other kinds of media. Cerbino et al. (2014) have spelled out the multiple ways in which a succession of Ecuadorian governments have subsidized private media. For example, until recently, the state did not set limits on the number of frequencies that could be associated with one owner. It also permitted, with little or no oversight, the rent, sale, and transference of radio and television channels. Regarding the provision of news and information of public interest, it was merely left up to the discretion of private media to do so. Since the 1960s, private media companies received tax exemptions, and other economic incentives. Taxes were waived on the importation of equipment, and they did not have to pay taxes on investments. Additionally, the military regime that was in power from 1963-1966 passed two decrees that waived private radio and television companies from taxation on their sales and earned profits. In the 1970s,
they were granted steep reductions in postage rates. However, none of these kinds of incentives were available to community media. In fact, community media were forbidden from selling advertising during the dictatorship (Cerbino et al., 2014). By 2007, 19 families controlled 287 of the 348 television licenses. In radio, 45 families controlled 60% of the concessions. Until 2008, the Ecuadorian state only had one official media: The National Radio of Ecuador, an AM station that transmitted from Quito for four decades. The growth of public media began in 2008, under Correa.

On the other hand, in interviews that I conducted with journalists\textsuperscript{42} that work for the two leading dailies, \textit{El Comercio} and \textit{El Universo}, they have argued that within this schema, there was more pluralism and debate in these media, and generally in society, than since Correa came to power in 2007, given the threats and suits against journalists and media companies. These actions, spearheaded by Correa himself, ushered in an era of self-censorship in the journalistic field, unlike in any other era in Ecuador. However, while it might be true that there was more diversity of opinion in Ecuador’s dailies and journals in terms of reporting and opinion, I would argue that the scenario was far from one of media democracy, as very few social actors had access to the media, and generally speaking, private ownership by families meant that elite actors, mainly aligned with the state, held media power.

There is another important context that needs to be considered, which was the record-low popularity of Ecuadorian media at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Prior to Correa taking the political stage in 2007, the journalistic field had reached a crisis of credibility with Ecuadorian citizens. Such crisis coincided with

\textsuperscript{42} These journalists are left-leaning; I mention this to break with the idea that all those that work in private media are necessarily aligned with commercial or right-wing interests.
citizens’ rejection of party politics, politicians and neoliberal practices in general. This was due, in part, to the complicity between the journalistic and political fields. Just prior to Correa’s election, three presidents had been overthrown by popular protest (rather than military coups) in a period of eight years, evidence of the growing discontent with neoliberal politics and the politicians that promoted them. An analysis of the events surrounding the fall of president Lucio Gutierrez, on April 20, 2005, help bring into focus the interconnected political and journalistic crisis of credibility. Abad (2011) recounts a dramatic example of such collusion: citizen uprisings in April 2005, which would soon push Gutierrez out of power, were “timidly” (p. 17) covered by Ecuador’s mass media, even as protests increased dramatically. While there were over 100,000 people protesting in the streets of Quito on April 19, 2005, (a day in which a Chilean journalist died due to asphyxiation by tear gas that was used by the police to repress protesters), El Universo’s cover page on the following day featured a half-page photo of Pope Benedict XVI, and only provided a few lines about the protests in official discourse (p. 18-19). This brought on not just a political rebellion but also an “audience rebellion” by outraged citizens.

Aligned with a discourse of stability and social order promoted by power, the impossibility of understanding other forms of political expression outside of proselytism and the rhetoric of political parties, these media turned their back on the protesters, and, not seeing themselves represented, [citizens] stopped believing them….. (Abad, 2011, p. 17)

In the face of the media’s refusal to cover what was happening, news of protests circulated by word-of-mouth, cell phones, e-mail and Radio La Luna, a small private radio station that provided citizens with live tribunas ciudadanas (citizen tribunals) in order to share information, events and opinion (Navas, 2012, p. 233). There were many
dissonant moments in the tumultuous neoliberal era, this being merely a “point of reference” (p. 19), which involved the delegitimation of both political power and media power. In fact, this particular context was instrumental to Correa winning the presidency on an anti-neoliberal platform, and to his ability to wage a guerra mediatica against journalists and media companies.

3.4 Changes in Ecuador’s journalistic field since 2007

3.4.1 Overview of changes

The government is a recent, powerful entrant in the journalistic field, and therefore, a defining actor in both the political and journalistic fields. As the most powerful actor in the political field, the state has the power to redefine other fields through legislation and other means (Bourdieu, 1999). In Ecuador, the typical Latin American configuration of media power, in which the state and private media are allies, has been transformed under Correa. As I previously pointed out, much has been written about the reconfiguration of media power with a focus on government-media relations. However, this chapter, while taking into account the effect such changes have had on journalists and private media, privileges an analysis of how social movements have been affected.

Waisbord (2011) has characterized media practices of the progressive Latin American governments as populist media. Although I do not use, nor enter into the long, complex debate about populism, I concur with Waisbord’s analysis of media practices in that they represent trends that are distinct from liberal democratic media systems.\footnote{Although many scholars use the concept of populism or neo-populism in their discussions of the 21st century wave of Latin American leftist governments, it is not useful in my study, given that it focuses on}
include the mediated polarization of those who are “for” or “against” the government; the strengthening of state control over the media; and the disciplining of media outlets and journalists by the Executive through rewards for acquiescence and punishment for criticism. All of these characteristics fit government actions since 2007.

I propose a broad categorization that characterizes distinct but overlapping ways in which the reconfiguration of media power has been utilized by the government against journalists, private media and social movements:

1) *Symbolic actions*: These include threats, campaigns of delegitimization and criminalization of government adversaries (journalists, social movements, academics, and anyone who publicly confronts the government). Strategies of delegitimation also include questioning the veracity of opponents’ claims and invalidation of demands, suggesting that they have other interests.

2) These symbolic actions are enacted and widely circulated through a variety of media; the media platform *par excellence* is the Enlace Ciudadano (EC).

3) *Legal-judicial-administrative actions*: The passage of laws and decrees that provide the government with legal means to sanction journalists, media companies and social movements, which curtail freedom of expression and encourage self-censorship (and therefore the erosion of media democracy). This category includes the confiscation and closing of private media. It also includes the new communication law which stipulated the construction of a new
administrative communication infrastructure that oversees and sanctions journalists and media outlets.

4) **Statist media ownership and media production practices**: This category encompasses several factors: how the government has increased its role as a media owner; how it manages the media under its control; the production of radio, television and internet-based content; and the creation and circulation of government publicity in public and private media. Such content production and circulation on a multiplicity of platforms is one of the main vehicles for transmitting the symbolic dimensions of the state.

The following sections briefly introduce each category.

### 3.4.2 Symbolic actions

Soon after he was elected President in 2007, fully taking advantage of the credibility crisis of the media, Correa began to disrupt the historic state-private media alliance (Cerbino et al., 2014; Ramos, 2010). While the private media was originally supportive of Correa, in a matter of a few months, relations quickly turned sour when the media began to criticize the government. The private media anticipated the *guerra mediatica* even during Correa’s presidential campaign, when on November 11, 2006, Correa announced that the media would have the freedom to exercise its profession, but that he would promote laws and sanctions in case of deliberate disinformation. But even before the government could exercise sanctions through the new Communication Law that was passed in 2013, Correa applied symbolic tactics, often through threats, delegitimation, name calling and making fun of journalists and media outlets.
Correa also increasingly demonstrated intolerance for journalists that asked him questions he did not want to answer. For example, on January 11, 2007, he ordered the removal of several journalists during a press conference. (El Universo, 2007, March 12). One of the events that has remained engraved in the memories of Ecuadorians, is when, on June 27, 2007, during a press conference, Sandra Ochoa, a journalist with El Universo asked Correa about his petrol politics, even though he had warned he did not want to talk about this issue until he had made concrete decisions. When she insisted, he became exasperated and exclaimed, “Esta gordita horrorosa!” (“This horrible fatso.”). Over the next few days, journalists and citizens publicly expressed their disapproval of this action. This kind of insult came to be representative of the way that Correa would treat journalists, and also women (especially feminists, who have been called malcriadas, badly-raised or misbehaved), and social movements. These actions would continue and increase over the next several years.

This and other egregious actions spearheaded by Correa sent shockwaves through media institutions, and continue to affect what they publish or say till the present time. Journalists and media outlets have had good reason to fear reprisals for publishing investigative journalism that targets government officials. Since 2007, the Correa government and the private media have had a highly conflictive relationship. In fact, Correa has portrayed private media as a political opponent in its own right, with more power than fragmented political parties (Cerbino et al., 2014). Correa has systematically and publicly criticized journalists and private media as corrupt and dishonest, especially when they have been critical of the government’s actions. Some of the names he uses to insult them include: la prensa corrupta (the corrupt media); asesinos de tinta (ink assasins,
etc.). In fact, he dedicates up to half-hour of his Saturday show to insult the media and journalists. There are special segments of the EC, such as La Libertad de Expresión es para Todos (Freedom of Expression is for Everyone,) and the Caretuca de la Semana (Mugshot of the Week). These regular segments are dedicated to refuting news articles by journalists (and politicians), insulting them for their biases and errors in reporting, and mocking them. Initially, such criticism was embraced by many citizens, or at the very least seemed funny, given their direct experiences with the media’s alignment with power during citizen uprisings against several presidents. But eventually, the public’s heightened awareness of media half-truths and lies (pointed out by Correa in special segments of the EC) were applied to government media. Hence, the years-long avalanche of criticism of the media has also greatly affected how government communication is viewed. By making the public more aware of how the media distorts facts, has only called more attention to government media does the same. Again, this brings to the fore the limitations of media power, in that the public has become as untrusting, if not more so, of government media.

The table below provides a small sample of symbolic actions enacted by the government against journalists and media companies. While many of these actions can also can be situated within the legal-administrative category, they are indeed symbolic acts in terms of the disruption of the government-media alliance, and because of the long-lasting impacts they had on the journalistic field, in terms of the self-censorship and fear it provoked.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Attacks</td>
<td>Emilio Palacios is thrown out of President’s Palace for asking a question that Correa did not like (May 20th). During a press conference, Sandra Ochoa, insisted about Correa’s petrol politics, he became exasperated and exclaimed, “Esta gordita horrorosa!” (“This horrible fatso.”) (June 27).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>Governmental organizations are ordered by Correa to either reduce or eliminate media buying in the most important private dailies (<em>El Universo</em> and <em>El Comercio</em>). This practice continues until 2012.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Punishment</td>
<td>Government prohibits its ministries from giving interviews to private media. These sources were the most utilized sources prior to the prohibition. This prohibition was in effect until 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Resignations and closures</td>
<td>Carlos Vera’s TV program, which criticized and questioned the government, was closed due to the government’s complaints about its breach of law (Vera refused to give airtime to one of the government’s bureaucrats).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Resignations</td>
<td>On March 30, 26 columnists quit ‘El Telegrafo’ (state newspaper) because it was censoring their opinion columns about the internal situation of the newspaper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Resignations and attacks</td>
<td>Jorge Ortiz, who strongly criticized the government, had to resign from Teleamazonas stating that he was leaving because of the constant and insistent attacks from the government to the channel and himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Resignations and attacks</td>
<td>Janet Hinostroza left her interview and opinion television program. She stated that she had suffered &quot;threats to her integrity&quot;, so she chose to withdraw temporarily from the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Threats, attacks, dismissals</td>
<td>Gonzalo Rosero, director of Radio Democracia, complaint about threats and attacks: Rosero: &quot;Please stop bothering and chasing me&quot;. He implored President Correa to guarantee his free exercise of journalism. Martin Pallares, an investigative journalist who worked at El Comercio for 13 years, was fired for critical comments he made about the government on his personal twitter account.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Rejection of international norms</td>
<td>The Ecuadorian government rejects the report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on Freedom of Expression and calls for change in the Special Rapporteur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Punishment and closures</td>
<td>Closing of the opposition magazine “Vanguardia” (July 17th). The government explains that the closing of the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another way in which media corporations are encouraged not to criticize the government is by the implicit or explicit threat to withhold advertising (and the funds they bring in). Since approximately 70% of advertising are still derived from the government, this age-old practice remains a powerful mechanism of silencing criticism.

The symbolic actions mentioned in this section and in the above table are only some of the most representative. The scale of journalist and media delegitimization is immense, as many of these actions take place on a weekly, if not daily basis.

### 3.4.3 Legal-judicial-administrative factors.

Conaghan (2015) argues that policies directed toward civil society organizations and the media have expanded the scope of societal regulation, and with it, the powers of the Executive, referred to as “ politicized legalism”\(^{44}\). She further argues that “new government bureaucracies have been endowed with substantial powers” and “constitute a sweeping new regimen of executive-directed social control. . . .” (p. 9). She also argues that “no enemy loomed as large in the dark societal landscape envisioned by Correa than the mainstream media” (Conaghan, 2015, p. 11). This section discusses the institutions charged with regulating media and society under the Correa government, and some of more contentious new regulations. The objective here is to provide an overall picture of

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\(^{44}\) Conaghan’s assessment is derived from Daniel Brinks’ (2012) notion of analyzing the ‘state-as-law’.
ways in which the government is reconfiguring media power in its favor through legal-administrative means.

Correa’s refoundational discourse and anti-neoliberal platform included, at least initially, a communication rights framework that was conceived during the Constituent Assembly with strong participation of community media advocates. As such, the 2008 Constitution advances a broad and progressive vision of communication rights, guaranteeing citizens not only access to information and communication technologies, but also to the broadcast spectrum. This constitutional mandate potentially creates an opening for the democratization of the media, understood as “the necessity to maximize democracy with citizen participation in decision making, and … to maximize diversity and pluralism in the mediated world.” (Leon, 2013). It also implies confronting the concentration of media and privileging the interests of elite economic groups. Returning to the concept of media power, Article 18 guarantees the right to freedom of expression: the right of all peoples to “seek out, receive, exchange, produce and circulate information.” Hence, it has potential implications for the power of representation of minority voices and the exclusions of “voice” (Couldry, 2010). Initially, there was excitement among progressive communication activists about possible impacts of this framework for the democratization of the media. However, the symbolic actions of the government sent powerful messages that a rights-based approach would not be the focus of this administration. Rather, the application would be punitive and would privilege the government’s right to communication above others.

45 Several of the progressive Latin American governments including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Uruguay, have enacted media reforms that seek to democratize the broadcast spectrum, as discussed in Chapter One. Each case is different in terms of the actual reforms, and execution of them.
On multiple occasions, Correa’s response to the media’s critique of, or opposition to his policies, has been to take legal actions against journalists and media outlets. One of the most renowned cases involving the judicialization of the media, among many, is simply referred to as Caso El Universo. Emilio Palacio, a journalist who was already under fire for his heated exchanges with Correa, published an opinion column (“No to lies”, 2011) with respect to the events surrounding the national drama that was unleashed with a police revolt on September 30, 2011 (referred to as “30-S”). Palacios stated that the government opened fire inside a hospital full of innocent citizens. In response, President Correa sued Palacio and his newspaper, El Universo, for US$ 80 million and also sought prison sentences for the journalist and directors of the national daily. The sentence was ratified by the Ecuadorian courts (which have been subordinated to the Executive). One of the judges in the case, Monica Encalada, went into exile in Colombia after revealing alleged corruption in the case, as she feared for her life. After receiving the most severe international criticism from the international community, Correa issued an official pardon to the journalist and newspaper. Such pardon led to the CPJ’s (Committee for the Protection of Journalists) staff member, Carlos Lauria, to comment that “to listen to the president, it as if I were listening to someone who acts as a King rather than an elected President.” (Human Rights Ecuador, 2011). He also pointed out that the use of criminal procedures to punish comments about public officials is a violation of Article 13 of the Human Rights convention that guarantees freedom of expression. But the damage had already been done; media outlets and journalists would now think twice before publishing a critical piece. Self-censorship became widespread, as

reported by Reporters without Borders and other media watchdog organizations. For example, Martin Pallares, an investigative journalist who worked at El Comercio for 13 years, was fired for critical comments he made about the government on his personal twitter account. In this interview, he addresses the context for media outlets and journalists:

I believe there is an awful atmosphere of self-censorship, I believe that neither journalists nor the media escape that terror, my dismissal occurred within that context.
Before going into the details of my departure, I believe it is necessary to understand that it happened in the context of a terribly hostile environment for the press, with a Communications Law that forces the media and journalists to live in a state of permanent distress. The fear of being prosecuted either by the Communications Superintendency on the side of law or by any judge in this country. I believe there is an awful atmosphere of self-censorship, I believe that neither journalists nor the media escape that terror; my dismissal occurred within that context.\(^47\)

Given the situation described above, on March 12, 2013, a group of journalists and media organizations of different political orientations testified before members of the Comisión Interamericana de los Derechos Humanos (CIDH, The Interamerican Commission of Human Rights) and the Relatoria Especial para la Libertad de Expresión (Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression) about the frequent violation of rights. They cited: the judicialization of opinion; the closing of media; the increase in stigmatizing discourses against the media; and the use of national cadenas (government broadcasts that all stations are required to air) to attack journalists. They even cited a suspicious assassination of a journalist. In 2012 alone, there were 172 reported threats and aggressions against journalists and media. Journalist Christian Zurita

reported that three different media had to retract their comments on several occasions because of official pressures. Moreover, he mentioned that 1,365 obligatory *cadenas*, totaling 11,793 minutes, had been ordered by the government between 2007-2012 (El Universo, March 13, 2013). By 2011, four prominent journalists that had television interview programs had resigned. Janeth Hinostroza of Teleamazonas, the fourth to resign, stated that she did so because she had suffered repeated threats.

3.4.3.1 Creation of a communication law and institutions that sanction and regulate

The communication rights platform inscribed in the Constitution was to be implemented through the passage of the *Ley Organica de Comunicacion* (LOC), which was signed into law on June 14, 2013. Like the 2008 Constitution, the LOC is a progressive document that includes provisions for communication rights, intercultural communication by *pueblos* and *nacionalidades* (Indigenous and Afro communities), workers’ rights, affirmative action, freedom of expression, and articles that foment national and regional production and diffusion. Yet, I agree with the communication rights scholars, activists and watchdog organizations that I have interviewed, spoken with, and read, that the LOC has not promoted the democratization of the media. In fact, contrary to the rhetoric, it has actually contributed to the erosion of media democracy and processes of democratization in Ecuador.

One of the more significant aspects of this legislation has been its pledge to redistribute the broadcast spectrum in thirds: 33% to private media; 33% to public media; and 34% to community media.\(^{48}\) To date, however, while public media has grown to

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\(^{48}\) The proposal to divide the spectrum in thirds originally came from AMARC, according to José Ignacio López Vigil, a long-time communication rights advocate and key actor in Ecuador’s Constituent Assembly.
occupy over 17% of the airwaves, community media has barely grown (Acosta, 2016). Aside from the 14 radio frequencies that were temporarily granted to indigenous and afro communities, there have been few changes with regard to license reversions (that would free up airwaves for community media), and not one community radio or television frequency has been granted.

With respect to private media, the same eight families continue to hold most of the frequencies. Even though an audit was conducted about media ownership, none of those media have been reverted. And while Ecuador was the first Latin American nation to establish that shareholders of financial institutions cannot hold stocks in media outlets (Article 312 in the 2008 Constitution), the Eljuri family (Banco de Austro), an ally of the Correa government, owns the television station Telerama. In the case of the Ecuadorian media holdings of Angel González, the Mexican media mogul and friend of the Correa government, owns 16 media companies in Ecuador, 10 of which are national: three television stations, 11 radio stations and two newspapers, including El Comercio, a national daily). Such holdings are prohibited through two articles. Firstly, Article 6, stipulates that national media cannot be owned by foreign interests, and secondly, Article 113, prohibits a person or organization from owning more than 2 radio or television channels. González controls 10 of 61 national media, a figure that is only superseded by the government, which owns 12 national media. According to one communication rights activist:

We are living in a time in which it does not depend on the strength of a law or the impact of a law, or of the organizations that have demanded it, but simply the discretionary application by the Executive….I do not believe that this government governs with the law in hand. (JLV)

While private media has taken a blow, more so do to judicial threats and sanctions, and community media is stagnant, public media has become a powerful communication apparatus of the government. But rather than adopting a pluralistic model, it is directly under state control and ownership.

In 2009, SECOM (the National Secretary of Communication) was created by presidential decree. This organization institutionalizes government discourse and the production of information, establishing the scripts, editorial lines, rules, and procedures. A long-time media activist spoke of the kind of power held by SECOM:

It holds symbolic power but it is also very material. There are the public media stations that broadcast the sabatinas, the cadenas, (Correa’s Enlace Ciudadano) etc. But there are also private media that, if they don’t broadcast the sabatina, SECOM calls them. They call them and say “remember that the frequencies are owned by the state.” For example, Radio Latacunga, a community radio station that is technically private, receives these calls. Private and community radio stations are bribed through publicity funds, or a call from SECOM. Correa has generated an espionage apparatus, including SENAIN\(^{50}\) and SECOM, which even controls social media. (Jose Ignacio López Vigil, personal communication, January 22, 2016).

Another media activist argues:

SECOM has played a fundamental role in the government – the government would be nothing without SECOM. The communication strategy of the government has been a strategy of publicists of propaganda. It isn’t a secretary of communication; rather it is a secretary of propaganda. In other words, there are official media that have a direct connection to propaganda.

The Superintendencia de la Información y Comunicación (SUPERCOM, Superintendent of Information and Communication) is an institution that was created through the LOC. It is charged with ensuring compliance with the LOC. It has the ability

\(^{50}\) La Secretaria Nacional de Inteligencia (SENAIN, the National Secretary of Intelligence) was created by presidential decree No. 1768 on June 8, 2009.
to demand steep fines of media institutions that have transgressed the LOC. Its decisions are binding and do not include an appeal process. It is a very polemic institution, especially given that its director is selected from a short list of three candidates hand-picked by the President of the Republic. SUPERCOM has broad powers to interpret the LOC, which in many parts have vague language and are therefore open to broad. In the first year of its operation, it reviewed and processed 93 cases.

SUPERCOM has pursued journalists, politicians and media organizations through one of the more controversial articles of the LOC, Article 26, *linchamiento mediático* (media lynching). Media lynching is broadly defined in this article as the diffusion of information, reproduced publicly and repeatedly, which seeks to diminish the public credibility or prestige of a natural or juridical person. Offenses are punishable by fines, as well as an order to provide a public apology. This article has yielded multiple sanctions or threats of sanctions in cases where the Correa government has been criticized. However, when citizens and organizations have sought to use the media lynching article when Correa has defamed them, they have been denied a hearing. In one case, a pollster requested the right to reply to insults directed at him by Correa. SUPERCOM replied that Correa is not subject to such provision because his broadcasts are part of his presidential duties. Cite.

Additionally, as part of a package of constitutional amendments passed on December 3, 2015, the media in Ecuador legally became a public service, which signifies that it is owned by the state, not the people.\(^5\) One of the consequences of this is that if a

media fails to inform the public about themes and events of public interest, such media can be fined by SUPERCOM. According to one communication activist I interviewed:

That communication is considered a public good is terrible, because it means that the state retains the ownership. I have a right to be informed and to inform, and I have the right to own media. It is my right, not because the state allows it. So, if it is considered a public service that is dangerous because for me to be able to access this right, I need state authorization. Moreover, the Constitution states that public services need to be uniform – imagine if communication were uniform – one line of thought only! (Jose Ignacio López Vigil, personal communication, January 22, 2016).

Another institution created through the LOC is Consejo de Regulación y Desarrollo de la Información y Comunicación (CORDICOM, the Board of Regulation and Development of Information and Communication). Among many responsibilities, one of its roles is to regulate media content and time slots. On the one hand, the agency is vigilant about cases of racial and gender discrimination in the media. On the other hand, it is important to note here that many of these articles and institutions were not part of what was fought for by media activists. Rather, several of these articles were inserted the night before the LOC was passed in the Assembly, before anyone, even most members of the Assembly, had time to review or comment on them.

Hence, as potentially transformative as the LOC might have been, it has been widely criticized as a measure of control, especially by sectors that are already at odds with the government, namely social movements and journalists. Private media was always against the LOC and waged coordinated campaigns against its passing (Ramos, 2012). But social movements (except for communication rights advocates who fought for the law, though have since been disappointed) never got behind the LOC. Their lack of enthusiasm was clearly due to the government’s campaigns of delegitimization and
criminalization of social movements, which began early on in Correa’s presidency. As such, there was little hope that the LOC would benefit social movements that were at odds with the government’s policies.

Table 3b. Legislative-Judicial-Administrative Actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Confiscation</td>
<td>Confiscation of more than 15 mass media: TC Televisión, GamaTV, CN3 y Cablevisión, Compañía y Televisión del Pacífico, Editorial Uminasa, Radiodifusora del Pacífico, Radio Bolívar, Radio Súper K, Radio Carrusel, Organización Radial, América Visión, Radio La Prensa, Editores e Impresores Edimpres y Movidad C.A. que imprime las revistas La Otra, La Onda, La Onda Infantil, Más, El Agro and Samborondón</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Creation of regulatory institution</td>
<td>SECOM (the National Secretary of Communication) was created by presidential decree in December 2009.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Judicial</td>
<td>President Rafael Correa sued for US $ 10 million to journalists Juan Carlos Calderón and Christian Zurita for moral damage to publish the book “El Gran Hermano” (The Big Brother).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Judicial</td>
<td>“El Universo” case: The National Court of Justice confirmed the sentence for a fine of 40 million dollars and three years in prison for each of the damned: Emilio Palacio and Carlos, Cesar and Nicolas Perez brothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Legislative</td>
<td>Ley Organica de Comunicacion (LOC) was signed into law on June 14, 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Regulatory institutions created by the LOC</td>
<td>CORDICOM (The Consejo de Regulación de la Comunicación y Desarrollo de la Información) was created in November. It regulates media content, time slots, and charges of discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SUPERCOM, the Superintendency of Information and Communication, was created through the LOC. It has the ability to fine journalists and media institutions that have transgressed the LOC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Regulatory institutions</td>
<td>The Agencia de Regulación y Control de las Telecomunicaciones (ARCOTEL, Agency of Regulation and Control of Telecommunications), was created and charged with the administration, regulation and control of telecommunications and the broadcast spectrum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.3.3 Confiscation of media outlets

Another way in which the Correa government has increased its media holdings has been through the confiscation of private media. According to Kitzberger (2015) these actions have been “part of a broader transformation of the social power matrix in a process of realignment of institutional, political, and communication resources that allowed for the wholesale reconfiguration of power relationships” (p. 10). In 2007, the government embargoed *El Telegrafo*, a national daily. In 2008, it was refounded as public media. In 2008, 12 media (radio, television and newspapers) were confiscated (see table below for details). One of the television stations, Gama TV, was then utilized as the main broadcast station to transmit the EC. In 2011, the number of confiscated holdings abruptly grew to over 20 media properties. In 2012, another 16 private media were shut down. According to Supertel (the Superintendent of Telecommunications) these media transgressed the Radio and Television Law. It was also true that most of these media held critical stances toward the government. In 2014, *Diario Hoy*, a national newspaper critical of the government, was shut down.

3.4.3.4 Non-communication legislation that impacts social movements.

It is important to take into account legislation that is not directly related to communication, when it affects the free expression and practices of citizens and social movements. One law and one decree, created in 2013, have been viewed by critical scholars, social movements, social organizations and journalists as negatively affecting public expression of civil society organizations. These include *Decreto 16* and the Penal Code. Together with the LOC, the three new pieces of legislation that passed in 2013 and early 2014 have been referred to as a trilogy of state control mechanisms.
Published in the Official Register on June 16, 2013, Decreto 16 gives the state the power to dissolve any social organization that it considers dangerous to the internal or external interests of the nation, or that affects “public peace.” Moreover, social organizations (which include several kinds of organizations, including collectives, social movements, and NGOs) have been forbidden from engaging in political activities, which are supposed to be reserved for parties and political movements that are registered with the CNE. This Decree has been a cause of concern for many organizations that are autonomous, especially those that are critical of the government, and has precipitated self-censorship on the part of social organizations.

According to Decreto 16’s wide parameters, indigenous social movement organizations such as the CONAIE could be shut down by the government. In fact, the Confederación de Pueblos de la Nacionalidad Kichwa del Ecuador (ECUARUNARI), along with several other organizations, has challenged its constitutionality, on the grounds that prohibition of political activity could limit their freedom of expression. ECUARUNARI also claims that Decreto 16 contradicts Article 57 of the 2008 Constitution, which endows indigenous peoples and their organizations with legal status. Social organizations need to be share their information with a government registry that details the name of their members, funding sources and activities. Such registry has caused consternation among many social organizations.\footnote{52 Yasunidos decided to remain a non-legalized collective due to many reasons, with Decreto 16 being one of the considerations.} The first casualty of Decree 16 was the Pachamama Foundation, an Ecuadorian non-governmental organization founded in 1997. The Pachamama Foundation had historically played an active role in ecological matters, and had an anti-extractivist posture. It had provided some support for Yasunidos.
The Código Orgánico Integral Penal (COIP, Organic Integral Penal Code), which became law on August 10, 2014, has without doubt, legally expanded the punitive power of the state. It contains 29 articles that refer to crimes against “public security” (an increase from 13 articles that characterized certain conduct as sabotage and terrorism. One of the new crimes is called “rebellion”. Some legal experts have noted that many of these articles are vaguely worded, which is worrisome, as the government has already widely interpreted articles from the previous penal code in order to process social movement actors, including 200+ indigenous leaders that had been arrested while protesting (Pásara, 2014). Legal expert Pásara has been especially worried about Articles 345 and 346, as they can be used to repress social protest. For example, Article 345 deems many activities historically related to social protest as “sabotage.” Article 346 prescribes 1 to 3 years of prison for those that “paralyze a public service”. In sum, the new penal code and Decreto 16 have contributed to the creation of a context in which protest is discouraged, questioned, and criminalized.

These sections, and the table above, underscore some of the ways in which the communication rights framework has been given short shrift, while the government pursues critical media outlets and journalists through a combination of symbolic actions and legislative-judicial-administrative means. The following section examines how the government’s media ownership and production practices add yet another layer to the reconfiguration of media power in Ecuador.
3.4.4 State media ownership and production practices

3.4.4.1 Media ownership

As part of the reconfiguration of media power, in 2008, the government established the country’s first public media (radio, television, print media and internet), mainly through the creation of public media, and confiscation of private media channels owned by economic groups that owed taxes. Though referred to as public media, it does not adhere to international norms of public media, which are characterized by independence from the government, pluralism, and mechanisms for participation and autonomously created content. Whereas “state media” would refer to those media under the control of the Executive, “which act as communicational appendages” of the state (Waisbord, 2014, p. 86). In Ecuador, there is no real editorial or administrative independence of these media, rather they are directly under SECOM (Secretary of Communication), and largely represent government perspectives, rarely criticizing its officials or policies.

Prior to 2007, the government only had one official media, Radio Nacional de Ecuador (Ecuador National Radio), an AM radio station. By 2012, the public media system consisted of 22 different media. Newly created government media have included Ecuador TV (2007), and Radio Pública on FM Radio, administered by SECOM. In 2009, the internet-based ANDES (Agencia Publica de Noticias del Ecuador y Suramerica) was created by SECOM, and has been administered by Ecuador TV. In 2010, the government launched the newspaper PP: El Verdadero. In 2011, a multimedia platform consisting of television, radio, printed press, and a website, El Ciudadano, is created. In 2012, Habla Ecuador (Ecuador Speaks) was launched as part of El Ciudadano. With 231 radio
stations, it became the most important radio network, with the greatest national coverage in Ecuador. Synopses of many of its programs are translated into several indigenous languages.

Public media has grown to occupy 17% of radio and television diffusion from under 1%. (Acosta, 2016). And even though public media is still dwarfed by private media in terms of percentage owned, it has come to occupy a dominant position in the journalistic field, given the collusion of the meta capital of the state, and meta capital of media, as discussed previously. Additionally, the Correa government has utilized its statist power like no prior government, to produce media content for its obligatory cadenas (that all media must air). Journalist Christian Zurita reported that 1,365 obligatory cadenas, totaling 11,793 minutes, had been ordered by the government between 2007-2012 (El Universo, March 13, 2013). Most recently, in 2016, by way of Executive Decree 1158, the government has created a new organization that brings all of its various media (TV, radio, print media and internet) under one umbrella company, Empresa Pública Medios Públicos de Comunicación del Ecuador (Medios Públicos EP).

Table 3c. State media ownership and production practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Producer</td>
<td>“The President talks with the people” (January): first steps towards the creation of “El Enlace Cuidadano”. Radio program broadcasted by more than 150 radio stations around the country and aired every Saturday morning for two hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>EDITOGRAN, a private company, passed into public domain because the government equipped the printing press in March.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>In March 17th El Telegrafo is reborn as a state newspaper.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creator</td>
<td>Ecuador TV: new TV channel created in November for the transmission of the Constituent Assembly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confiscation</td>
<td>GamaTV, a private TV channel, was confiscated in July and used as headquarters for the transmission of the “Sabatina”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## 3.4.4.2 State media production practices

As a media producer of print, TV, radio, and Internet; as well as through the production of non-broadcast content that publicizes public works and government initiatives (not just commercials, but media created for the various government ministries, television series, documentaries, etc.), the government has appropriated a public good, the media, and has used it to construct social reality according to its perspective. Correa has used public media as a platform upon which to wage a “permanent campaign” (Conaghan and De La Torre, 2008) about the successful administration of the government.
The government increasingly receives criticism for the amount of public funds spent on media production. Visión 360, an investigative reporting television program, aired an episode entitled *Luces, cameras, derroche? (Lights, Cameras, Waste?)*. This episode questions the exorbitant use of funds spent, by many different government ministries, on high-cost productions, many of which have never been broadcast or distributed. While no total budget figure has been made available, one can piece together public works contracts to arrive at general estimates. Additionally, there are indicators of the scale of national production activity it produces. For example, a media production company executive interviewed for *Vision 360* estimated that in the past five years approximately 80% of all production company jobs have originated from the government. Much of the production costs go to the filming of public works (for dissemination on the EC, and in institutional videos uploaded to YouTube), by dozens of government ministries and agencies. These include promotion of the extractive industries. For example, a single search on YouTube for *Refinería del Pacífico* (the Pacific Refinery, which is a refinery under construction since 2008 with a projected capacity of processing 300,000 barrels of oil a day) yields dozens of videos created by diverse government agencies. The *Refinería del Pacífico* channel displays 49 different videos. Additionally, hundreds of videos about public works have been uploaded to other government agencies channels on YouTube, including Archivo Ciudadano, El Ciudadano, Agencia Andes, Ecuador Estratégico, Presidencia de la República de Ecuador, TeleCiudadana, and Vice Ecuador, among them. Ecuador Estratégico, a government agency that “constructs

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53 *Luces, cameras, derroche? (Program 16, Bloque 1, Season 3)* Parts I and II were retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykAzFrjmlDE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykAzFrjmlDE) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvMsaEk-cqk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvMsaEk-cqk).
happiness” and “generates Buen Vivir and integral development in communities that are close to strategic projects” (oil drilling, mining, etc.) has 195 videos uploaded to its channel. They include pedagogical animations and videos in indigenous languages.

Yet, interestingly, the question of media power is brought to the foreground, as part of the main argument of the Visión 360 program. It maintains that, despite the exorbitant expenditures of public funds on media production, many government-produced programs never make it to broadcast, and those that are aired do not have large audiences, many out of the radar of most citizens, despite placement in multiple media platforms. For example, in 2011, the government produced a 12-episode Reality TV series called Espiritú del Yasuní (Spirit of the Yasuní). SECOM said it never aired because of policy changes (referring to Correa’s Plan B). However, the show was produced in 2011, and Correa did not announce the end of the Yasuní ITT initiative until 2013. Yet, it never aired. Another mini-series, Ciudad Quinde (City of Hummingbirds) cost $700,000 but had a small number of viewers. Tierra de Serpientes (Land of Serpents) a fictionalized mini-series produced by the Ministry of Interior, and that emphasizes the work of the national police, made full use of public goods such as helicopters, police facilities, etc. The cost of production was $678,000. Martin Pallares, a renowned Ecuadorian independent journalist (fired by El Comercio because of his resolute, critical stance of the government) argues in this show that this use of public funds is unjustified. Visión 360 focused mainly on the promotion of public works, government initiatives and tourism projects. It didn’t even mention the enormous amount of the time government uses to criticize its opponents and detractors. In the following

section, we can see how the government used publicity dollars to mount a campaign to justify the termination of the Yasuní ITT initiative.

3.4.4.3. Other media campaigns justifying the termination of the Yasuní ITT initiative.

The delegitimation and criminalization of Yasunidos was intertwined with other kinds of media campaigns. This brief section presents how the government used publicity to “sell” Plan B. Once Correa announced the end of the Yasuní ITT initiative, the governmental communication strategy included a large-scale, mediated justification. It produced and circulated a multiple-platform campaign that would seek to convince citizens of the need to extract the oil in the Yasuní. The publicity was shown on the EC but also aired as commercials during other television programs. The campaign also went beyond the media to physical spaces in cities and towns.

The basic arguments advanced by the media campaign were that 1) the money is needed to eradicate poverty; 2) A large percentage of the funds would be directed to the Amazon, and 3) oil drilling would only affect 1% of the Yasuní given use of ‘cutting-edge’ technology (these themes were also some of the main topics in the EC). Investigative reporters and scholars have disputed such claims, based on recent extractive activities in the Yasuní (Finer et al., 2014; Los Taladros Petroleros, 2013). This campaign included physical as well as mediated interventions. Large banners that were placed in the Plaza Grande announced that “99% of the Yasuní is intact.” In fact, the Plaza Grande, historically an important stage upon which protests and counterprotests are held was a key site for the government’s pro-drilling campaign. In addition to the presence of banners, and government-supported pro-drilling protestor presence, one particular EC,
held on the Plaza Grande, featured Amazonian mayors and indigenous groups that support drilling. In this way, the government symbolically and physically reappropriated the Plaza Grande.

With regard to televised campaigns, the Corporación Participación Ciudadana (Corporation for Citizen Participation) reported that from August 15, 2013 through the end of September, there were 126 government announcements on 9 national television stations. Media monitoring in September resulted in documenting the airing of pro-drilling commercials 555 times, 530 minutes of air time (Project Yasuní). Another series of spots entitled “Speaking about the Yasuní,” bearing the Secretary of Communication logo, were aired 140 times, for a total of 140 minutes. The “Yasuní Lives” campaign was aired 80 times, for a total of 104 minutes. “The President Said” campaign was aired 38 times for a total of 37 minutes of airtime (Vasquéz, 2015).55

Along with the pro-drilling Yasuní spots, the government also launched another high-profile campaign, “The Dirty Hands of Chevron”, which denounced the damage that Texaco-Chevron had caused in Ecuador (although the state oil company Petroamazonas also harms the environment). The public relations firm, McSquared, located in Brooklyn, NY, purportedly paid Hollywood actors large sums of money (Mia Farrow, $188,000 and Danny Glover, $330,000) to visit Ecuador and put a gloved hand into contaminated oil pools. The amount of public funds used for these campaigns has not been disclosed. However, McSquared received $6.4 million dollars from the Ecuadorean government for international public relations. Owned by Ecuadorians, it reported expenses of

55 Some of these spots can be seen on the blog Otra Educación Retrieved from http://otra-educacion.blogspot.com/2014/03/el-cuento-del-99-del-Yasuní-o-el-Yasuní.html.
$1,943,140.42 to the U.S. Department of Justice, per a legal mandate to report funds received from foreign governments (Los Pagos de McSquared, 2014).

This brief section has served to illustrate that the Enlace is not the only media strategy of the government; rather, it is part of a concerted effort that takes many forms, both material and symbolic.

In sum, the amount of media production activity, as well as the number of media outlets that serve as government platforms, has increased the ability of the Ecuadorian government to promote and justify its extractivist agenda. As evidenced in this section, the government has directed hundreds of thousands of dollars to a diverse array of media content to serve this purpose. Yet, as Visión 360 investigative reporting has revealed, the number of programs produced does not necessarily translate into a critical mass of viewers. While my study does not specifically focus on circulation and audience reception, this is an important area of future research on government media power. The picture painted here is one of a government who has allocated huge budgets for producing media content that promotes its works, in order to maintain legitimacy and diminish questions about its extractivist policies. Many agree with journalist Martin Pallares, who has commented that the government is “administered by publicists” (in an interview with Visión 360).

To conclude Part I of this chapter, I have argued that the Ecuadorian government was able to reconfigure the journalistic field, and build a media empire within five years (2007-2012). This has translated into statist media power, both symbolically and materially. In order to understand the media context in 2013, when Correa announced the
end of the Yasuní ITT initiative, I set out to reconstruct just how statist media power has grown to dominate the landscape.

The following section provides a detailed analysis of how media ownership, media production practices, and legislation have come together in the Yasunidos case study. I analyze how the Enlace Ciudadano became the cornerstone of the government campaign to promote a pro-extractivist agenda, extole the virtues of development in the Amazon, and attack Yasunidos.

3.5. The Enlace Ciudadano: the mediated delegitimization and criminalization of Yasunidos

This second part of this chapter focuses on the Enlace Ciudadano (EC), and how the Ecuadorian government has used it as a premier media platform upon which to attack, delegitimize and criminalize anti-extractivist, social movement protest. In particular, I analyze how Correa has sought to use the EC to turn public opinion against Yasunidos. This section corresponds to my research question: How has the Correa government used its media power to seek consensus for its extractivist politics and to criminalize social movements that are against such politics?

3.5.1. An overview of the Enlace Ciudadano: statist meta-capital meets media meta-capital.

The Enlace is the most important mediated platform for the government and for President Correa, who hosts the show, to disseminate its position on all themes. It is an exceptional space in which we can appreciate the concept of media power as symbolic and material resources that have definitional power to shape social space. As Couldry (2003) proposes, both media meta-capital and statist meta-capital can generate impact in
and across all fields of power. In my own conception of media power, I understand statist media power in Ecuador as a constituent, dominant aspect of the state’s meta-capital. Without a doubt, the EC is a privileged site where these two forms of capital potently merge. Running approximately 3.5 to 4 hours, the EC is a weekly program that has aired nearly every Saturday since 2007. Broadcast from a different town or city in Ecuador each week, it is aired nationally on national and regional television stations, and on over 400 radio stations. Even when President Correa is traveling, the EC is led by the Vice President of the Republic. There have also been ECs broadcast from New York City and Genoa, Italy, as part of Correa’s visits to those cities.

Since its inception, the EC has been widely viewed, heard, and commented on weekly by supporters and detractors alike (Cerbino et al., 2014; Conaghan and de la Torre, 2008; de la Torre, 2013). It is the mediated space in which the political and journalistic fields converge, in which the government not only disseminates its perspectives with compelling arguments, images and testimonials in the presence of a supportive audience, but also where it carries out a mediated battle against its perceived enemies. Prior to 2007, the private media had the power to shape the national agenda and public opinion. But with the introduction of the EC, Correa has appropriated the technologies, production values, and aesthetics of private media, in order to confront them on their own terms in a “hegemonic dispute.” (Cerbino et al., 2016, p. 9). Cerbino et al. (2016) argue that “Correa transcends and at the same time transgresses some aspects of the media logics” (Cerbino et al., 2016, p. 6). The EC, they argue, is the “most effective communicational tool utilized by President Correa to sustain his political discourse” (2016, p. 11). This is due to various factors, including: the wide ranging
themes of national interest that it tackles; and the timely announcements made by the President himself, which endows the program with an immediacy that makes journalists, ministers and social actors ever attentive. Its ritualized nature; its celebration of national popular culture, the diverse regions it features each week, its entertainment value, and the accompanying itinerant ministries, offers Ecuadorian citizens direct contact with government officials, with a chance to appear on television, in regions where most governments had never gone before.\footnote{These itinerant cabinets consist of government officials that travel with the show to meet with local authorities, deepening the political impact of the visits to towns and cities.} Much more critical of the EC, De la Torre (2013, p. 32) offers an analysis of the ritualistic, pedagogical performance that has taken place nearly 365 weeks a year since 2007:

The president sits in a high podium from which the professor of the nation gives a class to all Ecuadorians. He utilizes Powerpoint presentations to illustrate, with sources and technical data, his government’s policies. The master classes are interrupted by applause of the audience, or by Correa’s questions directed toward the audience, which are answered with either yes or no.” In this way, power is revealed: the president-professor of the nation is above a public that affirms him, but that has no possibility to enter into a critical dialogue with him…. These interventions demonstrate that he is the State and serves the nation with real faith and dedication.

Another aspect of the EC, certainly much less inspirational than the popular national music, poetic images of the nation, and shots of adoring constituents waving lime green flags (the color of Alianza Pais), is Correa’s lengthy attacks on his political opponents. Conaghan and de la Torre (2008, p. 278) propose that for Correa:

political opponents are not simply wrong-headed, misguided, or misinformed; they are corrupt and immoral representatives of the privileged, the oligarchy….In stark contrast to those on the dark side stand the forces allied with \textit{el pueblo} (the people), the morally superior common folk.
Private media is always presented in the Enlaces as the enemy not only of Correa, but of el pueblo ecuatoriano (the Ecuadorian people). The ‘us vs. them,’ and ‘friend or enemy’ construction is ever-present in the EC. There are several segments of the program that are reserved especially for this purpose. Whether scolding them, uncovering their half-truths, insulting them or making fun, private media has received the most virulent attacks in Ecuadorian history. Correa has referred to the media as “ink assassins,” “the corrupt press”, “liars,” “criminals,” etc. In this way, the private media has received a kind of scrutiny it has never faced before.

On the other hand, this kind of “media literacy” provided by Correa during the EC, along with the years-long debates about communication rights, freedom of expression and the communication law, have also facilitated a heightened awareness among the public about the media and its effects. As such, Ecuadorians can easily identify news sources, media actors and the political agendas they represent. The consequences of this is not insignificant; it means that government media is also critically read by the public. In other words, just because the EC commands attention, it by no means translates into acceptation by the public. In fact, as the years pass, what was once seen by some citizens as an unprecedented act of government transparency, is now viewed as a despised program whose grandiosity and accompanying high budgets, have been questioned by citizens, journalists and social movements (In Chapter 4, I analyze how Yasunidos has been able to leverage such negative sentiments to their advantage).

3.5.2 The mediated construction of political legitimacy and illegitimacy

Private media is not the only oppositional force according to the government: others include political parties, critical scholars, and social movements. As pointed out in
Cerbino et al. (2014), Correa discursively constructs democratic legitimacy as solely emanating from the electoral process. Hence, given that Correa had won a majority of votes during three presidential elections (2006, 2008, 2013), he proposes frequently that his government is the most legitimate actor. In the following quote, we see how he equates approval for the exploitation of the Yasuní with his approval rating:

The clamor of the people to leave the oil in the ground? As they (Diario Hoy) want that, they come up with impressive numbers. What is the reality? 56% of the country support, more than just exploiting the Yasuní, they support the decision of their President. (President Correa, Enlace 336, August 24, 2013).

When social movements or other social actors speak out against government polices, Correa often says (and has repeated frequently in the EC) that such actors should have no say, given that they were not duly elected. He further proposes that if they want to have a voice, they should run for office and win, as he did. Such argument disregards the idea that minority parties or those outside of party politics, like social movements, should be able to express dissent. Applying such logic, if winning at the polls is the democratic measure of who has the right to speak and who should remain silent, social movement actors lose to politicians. Correa also frames social movements (and other organized groups such as labor unions) as organizations that represent special interest groups, instead of the pueblo ecuatoriano as he does. Hence, discursively he is pitting movements and citizens against each other. He has reserved a special disdain for CONAIE’s indigenous leaders, and has sought to divide the social movement throughout the years (see Becker, 2012 and de la Torre, 2014 for discussions about processes of fragmentation and cooptation of movements).
The crucial point here, in terms of statist media power, is that President Correa, the political actor who hosts the EC, is constructed in that space as the most legitimate actor in Ecuadorian politics. Moreover, the EC is broadcast in a context of hyper-presidentialism, in which the legislative, judicial and statist media rarely if ever exhibit independence from the Executive. Consistent with Couldry’s (2003) and my theorization of statist media power, van Dijk (2001, p. 174) proposes that:

Mediated discourse, and especially, journalistic, whether by print media, radio, television or internet, has a relevant influence in the way in which we represent the world around us. While it is true that perhaps we don’t believe all that we read in the newspaper, nor do we necessarily feel influenced by the transmission of a discourse of our President, but, in spite of that, news will influence what we think (although critically), regarding what we think is important or irrelevant, in which people we consider important or irrelevant, and in which people are considered prominent or marginal, and which events are or are not interesting.57

This argument by van Dijk is important to keep in mind in the following pages, that describe and analyze not just how but also by whom Yasunidos has been depicted. It is not just the depiction; rather the enunciation emanated from the Ecuadorian President, frequently, over an extended period of time (approximately 7 months). In fact, in the LOC, this activity is referred to as media lynching. However, when individuals have sought to accuse Correa of such, Cordicom has rebuffed such charges on the grounds that Correa is not “media.” One could argue otherwise, by taking into account the implications of possessing statist media power.

This situation was a double-edged sword for Yasunidos. The highly mediated nature of the case provided excellent opportunities for national visibility, at the same time that it presented formidable challenges. This new movement of young people, most of

57 I have translated this from a Spanish text.
whom had little to no political or media experience, had to quickly learn how to respond to the ever-expanding level of delegitimization and criminalization they faced. This treatment of Yasunidos is explored in the next section.

### 3.5.3 The Construction of Yasunidos in the Enlace Ciudadano

In addition to a theoretical framework of media power that is transversal throughout this study, in this section I am also guided by a critical discourse studies (CDS) framework (van Dijk 2001, 2015). Critical discourse studies is neither a theory nor method, rather it is a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding how specific discourses are deployed in the reproduction of power and domination; the social and political representations of social actors, and the consequences of such discourses (van Dijk, 2015, p. 474). CDS categories useful for my analysis include: the communicative event (the EC), the themes (interpretation of social movement actions and notions of development deployed by the government), local coherence (how Correa explains social and political events to the audience), and social actor description (how Yasunidos and its allies are described by Correa on the Enlace).

My methodological framework used to study the EC has included ethnographic participant observation and media analysis with respect to the ways in which Yasunidos was depicted. During the span of time covered by this case study, I viewed 20 live broadcasts of the EC (approximately 60 hours of airtime) on television. I observed and took notes about the ways in which Yasunidos was framed and depicted. I then went back to the recorded programs and selected eight (two to three episodes for each phase of conflict between the government and Yasunidos) between August 24 and May 3, 2014, for a more in-depth analysis. The phases, as laid out in Chapter Two, are: 1) the
emergence of Yasunidos; 2) the signature collection phase (including the culminating march in which the signatures were delivered to the Elections Board); and 3) the “Democracy in Extinction” phase, when the Elections Board disrupted the process, and the Enlace was used as a key podium from which to damage Yasunidos’ positive reputation.

For the analysis of the EC, three broad questions were posed: 1) What were the strategies the government used to delegitimize and criminalize Yasunidos; 2) How were other oppositional actors depicted (private media, indigenous movements, ecologists, foreigners); and 3) How did the government frame development in the Amazon.

Additionally, I analyzed the events surrounding each EC, as Correa is always reacting to specific events that occur just before during the EC. The mediated delegitimization and criminalization of Yasunidos was not disconnected from the face-to-face, physical aspects that were also employed by the government. As such, I bring into the analysis the diverse ways in which statist power was used in conjunction with statist media power. A detailed study was conducted that enumerated the various mechanisms of “psychosocial” repression that were used on Yasunidos, their allies, and the general public (Vázquez, 2015). While the report does list mediated forms, it foregrounds other aspects of repression: control of public space; counter-marches; utilization of police to limit social participation; physical force (policy, army); generating a context of uncertainty among the public; following and obtaining information about Yasunidos; closure of Pachamama, an allied organization; forcefully removing signature-gatherers from public spaces; harassment and intimidation of activists; illegal detention of signature-gatherers; physical and verbal aggression against members of Yasunidos;
infiltration into Yasunidos’ headquarters; and finally, electoral fraud (Vázquez, 2015). Taken together, such use of statist power, amplified by the mediatization of events from the government’s perspective, generated a social and political context that truly shook Ecuadorians to the core. Given the highly visible nature of the signature-collection process, an element of continuous drama was added to actions – by the government and Yasunidos - that occurred on a weekly basis.

The following table details each phase, the dates, the number of ECs analyzed, and important events that took place within each phase.

**Table 3d. Analysis of Enlace Ciudadano programs during case study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase and Dates</th>
<th># of Enlaces analyzed</th>
<th>Summary of key events within this phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergence phase</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Correa announces the end of Yasuní ITT initiative, declaring interest in its exploitation; government media blitz; candlelight vigils; Yasunidos collective is formed; first wave of protests; zapateadas and other performative acts by Yasunidos; Yasunidos formally solicits the Constitutional Court for permission to collect signatures toward a national referendum on the Yasuní.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 15-October 14, 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The signature collection phase</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>From start of national signature collection to delivery of signatures; the National Assembly votes in favor of exploitation; two other groups begin signature-collection processes; Yasundos members are harassed, illegally detained, and surveilled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 15 – April 12, 2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Democracy in Extinction” phase</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>CNE annulation of signatures; criminalization of Yasunidos; drilling license awarded to Petroecuador; Yasunidos appeals to international courts; Ethical Tribunal on Yasuní.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13 – August 15, 2013</td>
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</table>

The following sections highlight the ways in which Yasunidos and its allies were delegitimized and criminalized, and how the concept of development was deployed. For each phase of the conflict between the government and Yasunidos, as played out on the
EC, Table 3e contains many more details about each phase, including quotes (my translation from the Spanish) and the events just prior to the EC.

3.5.3.1 Phase One: The emergence of Yasunidos (August 15-October 14, 2013)

The first phase of the conflict between the government and Yasunidos was marked by widespread vigils and protests, which quickly spread across Ecuadorian towns and cities. The mediated strategy on the EC was first and foremost to delegitimize dissenters. Correa used that opportunity to place blame on his opponents (rather than young people, who were initially framed as manipulated), the press, other political parties, and legendary contestatory social actors. A typical strategy used on the EC is to call attention to and insult specific individuals. This was meant to convince young people and the general public that the protests had reduced numbers, and were led by the “los mismos de siempre” (the same folks as always, a common refrain used by Correa.). For example, on EC 336, Correa said

About 26 people get together at events against the exploitation of the Yasuní. And who are they? Youth? It is a strategy, to pit the youth against us. And there is the “youth” Julio César Trujillo (an activist-lawyer in his 70s). Don’t be deceived, these are the same stone-throwers from the MPD (left-party made up of many students). Young people, don’t be manipulated by these broken politiqueros! (EC 336, August 24, 2013).

While protesters are depicted as violent, there is a direct warning to citizens that if they get involved there will be repercussions:

What they are looking for is for someone to be killed or injured, that the police lose their patience or calm. For four hours they attacked the police. … Parents, watch out. Kids that go out (to protest) will lose their spot (at school). Be very careful as those irresponsible ones from the MPD are hoping for a youth death, generating violence. And as no one pays them any attention, they protest for any reason. (EC 337, August 31, 2013).
In this EC, Correa’s also mocks Diario Hoy:

The opinion polls put us in a good mood; they are so ridiculous they make us laugh. *Diario Hoy* is an insult to statistics, to ethics. They have a preselected sample….they only call groups who are against the government….they are politicizing the theme….Everyone is an ecologist.

Correa also sought to demonstrate that he had support from the Amazon. During EC 337, a video was shown in which Amazonian mayors declare their support for the exploitation of the *Yasuní* (these mayors would go on to lose electoral races six months later). The video also insists on the low impact that exploitation will have on the *Yasuní*, and attacks the urban middle class for not understanding the importance of resource extraction for the Amazon. This statement, made by President Correa on EC 341, on September 28, while discussing the benefits of a hydroelectric project, is representative of the way in which *Yasunidos* and other ecologists were depicted:

If we condemn everyone to live like Tarzan, we wouldn’t have roads, universities with grants in the exterior, hospitals. In other words, the real *buen vivir* (good living) increases options, but they would condemn us to slavery. Ask these neoecologists how many of them took cold showers this morning. When they want to condemn us to poverty they take our freedom. On the contrary, when one can live with basic services, those that want to, like these people, can live in the jungle. You shouldn’t pay any attention to these people. This is the real ecologism.

Repeatedly, Correa equates resource extraction to the concept of *Buen Vivir*, which is usually meant to denote harmony between humans, other beings, and ecosystems. Simultaneously, he depicts *Yasunidos* and their allies as being out of touch with the needs of Amazon dwellers. This both of these frames were wholeheartedly rejected when Amazonian women and their children marched from the Amazon to Quito to express their opposition to extractivism, and their agreement with *Yasunidos*. 

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Participant observation at protests, public forums and other related events, and social media monitoring from August 25, 2013 through September 30, 2013, indicates that there were at least three kinds of effects of the government’s media campaign: first, the government was successful in fostering fear in potential Yasunidos supporters. In Quito, the number of protesters visibly diminished (this could also be attributed to protest fatigue or the increasing perception that Yasunidos events were just for young people, but many people I spoke with expressed reluctance). Social media monitoring of Yasunidos evidenced a reduction in the number of conversations, shares and “likes” on their Facebook page. Many individuals admitted that they were hesitant to go to the marches for fear that they or their families would lose their jobs. Secondly, government communications about ‘cutting-edge technology’ that would lessen environmental damage in the Yasuní, and the financial benefits that would be directed to the Amazon region seemed to gain credibility. People began to repeat lines from the ECs, such as ‘we need the money’ and ‘the damages won’t be so bad.’ Sentiments on this issue would shift again, as Yasunidos continued to organize (See Table 3e at the end of the chapter).

3.5.3.2 Phase Two: The signature-collection process (October 15, 2013 – April 12, 2014)

The second phase is delimited by the six-month period in which Yasunidos had the challenge to collect signatures equaling 5% of the electorate. And while protests had diminished by this stage, many artistic and cultural events were held. The Caravan for the Yasuní also began to travel through Ecuador. While the group faced constant harassment, surveillance, and physical aggression at signature-collection points, the EC depicted Yasunidos as hypocrites, and as against the good of the nation. Correa also sought to
prove that resource extraction was an absolute necessity if Ecuador were to advance its goals, among many other topics (the typical EC broaches dozens of themes each week). For example, in the following quote, there are many different ideas that Correa is expressing:

There is a radical change in the manner of development in the Amazon. Don’t be deceived, gringos with full bellies come here saying that ‘nothing should be touched, no cutting of trees, don’t exploit, die of hunger but I will have where to go as a tourist. You have always been poor, its part of your environment.’ Let them live in conditions that our Amazonian peoples face. What racism. They come to defend using the name of Amazonian peoples. Don’t be deceived, we have the right to live well. They are hypocrites. They come to complain because I had to make the difficult decision to exploit the Yasuní. How many people are here [at the EC], 800-1000? Exploiting the Yasuní is like affecting one person here. That is the compromise….These hypocrites come and say ‘don’t touch the Yasuní’ these gringos! And I ask, how much jungle do they have in the U.S.? How many uncontacted tribes do they have?….No government has done more for the uncontacted indigenous groups! (EC 357, January 18, 2014).

In the signature-collection phase, Correa increased attacks on foreigners – international media, NGOs such as Pachamama Foundation (which was subsequently shut down by the government on December 4, 2013), and scholars and activists that had originally been with the government, but had since changed their positions due to extractive and other policies. Criticisms of Pachamama Foundation were launched on the EC prior to and just after they were shut down. In EC 351 on December 9, 2013, a video shown alleged that members of the Pachamama Foundation (who denied that people in this video were part of their organization) being acted aggressively to foreign miners. The video characterizes the foundation as inciting violence and financing protest, and argues that anti-extractivist groups do not have support in areas where there is planned extraction. It calls foundations like Human Rights Watch, Pachamama, Acción Ecológica liars. It also mentions that Yasunidos is part of these foundations. Correa argued:
All is planned, they have manuals for these things, lets see the manual made by a foreigner living in Intag (a region threatened by mining. The “foreigner” is a Cuban American who has lived in Intag for 30 years). (EC 351, December 9, 2013).

And in reference to the Inter American Commission on Human Rights, he stoked anti-imperialist sentiments:

When I took the sovereign decision to exploit the Yasuní…. the Inter American Commision on Human Rights sends a letter asking for an explanation as to why we have made this decision. Hahaha. Check yourself! First let them tell me how many countries they ask that, and then they put a deadline. … Mind your own business, not that of a sovereign country like Ecuador.

As time advanced, and Yasunidos collected more signatures, the attacks became more vicious. 191 television and radio spots were released by SECOM in March, and several actions by other social actors provoked a great deal of confusion. Two other groups that were also engaged in signature collection for different referendums plagiarized the Yasunidos form, which served to confuse many citizens, who became reluctant to sign anything. Additionally, there were many reports from Yasunidos signature collectors that the other groups would try to convince citizens that they were part of Yasunidos, to secure their signatures.

Despite all of these formidable challenges, Yasunidos held a vibrant march to deliver 757,623 signatures to the CNE on April 12, 2014. (See Table 3f at the end of the chapter).

3.5.3.3 Phase Three: “Democracy in Extinction.” (April 13 – August 15, 2014)

During this third phase, in which the CNE would reject thousands of signatures, and President Correa would announce that a national referendum on the Yasuní would not be put to citizen vote, the EC featured many videos, produced by SECOM that
depicted Yasunidos as a violent group that has committed fraudulent activities. The EC and other media content released by CNE, SECOM and other government entities worked together to try to destroy Yasunidos’ reputation, and bring an end to the hope that the Yasuní could be saved through popular vote. The attacks were so virulent, Yasunidos denominated this as “democracy in extinction.”

Three days after the April 12 delivery of signatures, CNE released a video that explained just how signatures might be eliminated. Sensing a death foretold, members of Yasunidos showed up unannounced at the CNE, and found that their boxes of signatures had been tampered with. In fact, the identity cards of the individuals who had collected most signatures, were missing (thereby eliminating those forms). On April 26, in EC 371, Correa sought to delegitimize Yasunidos and the process:

They have lied to us, but not only that. If it is a collective with 100 members, maybe there are 10 are authentically concerned about the Yasuní. Moreover, they go in their 4x4 cars, or take hot water showers. They are not coherent. But if those 10 without coherence are authentic, that’s a lot. 90 of them are the same stone-throwers as always. The MPD is there trying to damage the government, Carlos Pérez Guambatel (President of ECUARUNARI), Patchakutik, they are against everything. Don’t be deceived. There is nothing about this that is a youth collective, it’s the same pack as always. These are the ones that lose all of the elections….

On May 3, during EC 372, Correa continued the campaign of delegitimation:

What do mines and oil have to do with salaries, but certain ecologists just don’t get it. Because I also consider myself an ecologist. The Yasunidos Collective is creating a scandal about fraud, international observers…. Because they know that they didn’t collect enough signatures and want to start a political scandal… The most ecological thing Yasunidos has done is to have recycled the MPD.

At the same time, Correa continued to insist that there would be very little damage done in the Yasuní, and that resource extraction was necessary and positive:
(speaking of schools) there is so much to do and that is why we need billions of dollars. That is why we should take advantage of our natural resources… I would never let the Yasuní be destroyed…it is in exchange for millions of dollars for Millennial schools for our children, hospitals for our families, for roads, for our communities, for services that are urgently needed. (EC 371, April 26, 2014).

This phase constituted a long and painful period for Yasunidos and for hundreds of thousands of citizens. Yasunidos attempted various campaigns such as “Democracy in Extinction” and “What happened to my signature.” Unfortunately, many agree that the attacks and campaigns of delegitimation were partially successful. However, many others were critical of these campaigns, but nonetheless were discouraged by the overwhelming forces against a popular vote on the Yasuní. I argue that, at that moment, statist power and statist media power, were able to interrupt democratic processes from below.

However, this is also a story that contained many successful mediated practices that Yasunidos enacted that served them well for most of the process, actually until CNE would not let the practice continue on its democratic path. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to exploring how Yasunidos was able to visibilize their movement through a range of communicational strategies. (See Table 3G at the end of the chapter).

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I focused on the reconfiguration of media power in Ecuador since Correa came to power in 2007. I extended Couldry’s (2003) and Freedman’s (2014) theoretical constructs to consider a scenario in which media power is a constituent aspect of statist power, and therefore a dominant part of the journalistic field. I found this necessary, given that media power is largely theorized from contexts of western liberal democracies, with a focus on corporate media power. My conceptualization of statist media power emerges from another context, one in which Ecuador, a Latin American
progressive government has broken the century-old alliance between the government and private media. While originally lauded as a measure of transparency never offered by previous governments, Conaghan and de la Torre (2008, p. 281) realized early on that the media practices of the Correa government created an “uneven play field” for those who oppose government policies and actions. By virtue of their high office and their newsworthiness, incumbent presidents or prime ministers always enjoy an inherent advantage in getting their messages out to the public. But that advantage can turn highly disproportionate when incumbents use the resources at the disposal of their government to saturate the public with marketing campaigns.

In a context of hyperpresidentialism, and concentration of powers in the Executive branch, unprecedented funds for media budgets, and a Secretary of Communication that views communication as propaganda, the Ecuadorian government has extended the depth and breadth of its reach enormously.

As access to media is a powerful resource, I also sought to analyze statist media power empirically, and gain an understanding the properties of the government’s discourse about Yasunidos and about development in the Amazon. I examined the various mechanisms through which it is deployed: symbolic, legislative, media ownership and media production practices. Each dimension was analyzed separately, with concrete examples. Another way in which I sought to understand media power was to move beyond the analysis of the relationship between the government and private media, which dominates the scholarship on media reforms in Latin America, to look at the implications that media power has had in the case of Yasunidos. To carry out the analysis, I worked with the EC, which is Correa’s main discursive platform. I contextualized the mediated
discourse with an analysis of the events surrounding each EC analyzed, and the various other ways in which statist power was deployed off-line.

Through such empirical study, we have learned of the unprecedented nature in which media power has been reconfigured, and concrete ways in which it is used to push an extractivist agenda. We have also seen how statist media power has been used in an undemocratic fashion, when it has sought to stifle protest, criminalize individuals and equate democracy with elections.

For a thorough analysis of state-social movement relations, and its mediated dimensions, it is necessary to understand the nature of the government’s communicational arsenal. Such understanding also facilitates an understanding of its limitations, particularly the innovative ways in which Yasunidos interrupted that power and deployed their own conceptions of democracy from below. As such, I also examined how Yasunidos has confronted the government’s media power.

Table 3e: Phase One: The emergence of Yasunidos (August 15-October 14, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase One</th>
<th>Events prior to the EC</th>
<th>Government Strategies</th>
<th>What Correa says on the EC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 24, 2013 EC 336</td>
<td>8/15 - Declaration of plans to exploit the Yasuní, and candelight vigil by protesters</td>
<td>Delegitimization of leading ecologist group, connected to Yasunidos.</td>
<td>2:03:31. I have not lied … but Action pathological (a play on Acción Ecológica) says there is no technology that would reduce the impact…they are saying such foolish things…they don’t know what they are talking about…they are irresponsible…</td>
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<td>8/17 – Nationwide protests begin</td>
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<td>8/18 – Yasunidos Collective is born</td>
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<td>8/22 – Yasunidos solicits the Constitutional Court to gather signatures of the electorate</td>
<td>Delegitimization of national newspaper Diario Hoy.</td>
<td>2:11:55. The opinion polls (stating that people don’t want to exploit the Yasuní) put us in a good mood; they are so ridiculous they make us laugh. Diario Hoy is an insult to statistics…to ethics. They have a preselected sample….they only call groups who</td>
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<td>Time</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 31, 2013</td>
<td>Dismisses the notion that youth are protesting against the government. They are against the government for other points, not others...</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/27</td>
<td>about 26 people get together at an event against the exploitation of the Yasuní. Who are they? They are 'youth'. It is a strategy to pit the youth against us.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8/27</td>
<td>Julio César Trujillo (an activist-lawyer in his 70s) appeals to young people to not be manipulated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>00:28:30</td>
<td>prohibited to forget, so you can see their double-moral, the lack of ethics... these same champions of democracy now want a popular referendum on the Yasuní. Don't be lazy, go out and collect signatures and we will see you at the polls.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:17:38</td>
<td>about 26 people get together at events against the exploitation of the Yasuní. And who are they? They are 'youth'. And there is the 'youth' Julio César Trujillo (an activist-lawyer in his 70s). Don't be deceived, these are the same stone throwers from the MPD (left party made up of many students). Young people, don't be manipulated by these broken politiqueros!</td>
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</table>

**August 31, 2013**

- Ministry of Interior threatens private media
- Police force used (paint ball and tear gas) to prevent protesters from accessing the Plaza Grande.
- Government publicity in favor of exploitation cover the Plaza Grande.
- Regulations on social media are announced.
- EC 337.

**8/27 – Gran Manifestación del Pueblo**

- About 26 people get together at events against the exploitation of the Yasuní. And who are they? They are 'youth'. It is a strategy to pit the youth against us. And there is the 'youth' Julio César Trujillo (an activist-lawyer in his 70s). Don't be deceived, these are the same stone throwers from the MPD (left party made up of many students). Young people, don't be manipulated by these broken politiqueros!
generating violence. And as no one pays them any attention, they protest for any reason.

Showing support from the Amazon

2:56:27. A video is shown, in which Amazonian mayors declare their support for the exploitation of the Yasuní (these mayors would lose electoral races six months later). The video also insists on the low impact that exploitation will have on the Yasuní, and attacks the urban middle class for not understanding.

Sept. 28, 2013. EC 341

Protest actions continue. Sept. 27 Yasunízarte event.

Reporters now have restricted access to the Yasuní.

The pro-drilling Amazonian mayors begin their own referendem process called Amazonia Vive. Another group begins a counter-referendum that would ban all extractive activities (Frente de Defensa Total de la Amazonia).

All of the above strategies are used. In addition, there is a marked increase in discourses that celebrate development by resource extraction

1:39:50. Extols the virtues of a hydroelectric project, followed by the comment, “If we condemn everyone to live like Tarzan, we wouldn’t have roads, universities with grants in the exterior, hospitals. In other words, the real Buen Vivir (good living) increases options, but they (opposition to extractivism) would condemn us to slavery. Ask these neoecologists how many of them took cold showers this morning. When they want to condemn us to poverty they take our freedom. On the contrary, when one can live with basic services, those that want to, like these people, can live in the jungle. You shouldn’t pay any attention to these people. This is the real ecologism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase Two</th>
<th>Events prior to the EC</th>
<th>Government Strategies</th>
<th>What Correa says on the EC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 9, 2013 EC 351</td>
<td>12/4 – The Ministry of the Environment shuts down Pachamama Foundation via Decree 16. Yasunidos has received referéndum signature forms on 10/1 and have begun collecting signatures</td>
<td>Position foreign NGOs and non-Ecuadorean nationals as threats to the nation.</td>
<td>2:53:10. A video is shown that alleges that members of the Pachamama Foundation (who denied that people in this video were part of their organization) being acted aggressively to foreign miners. The video characterizes the Foundation as inciting violence and financing protest. It calls foundations like Human Rights Watch, Pachamama, Acción Ecológica liars. Correa proposes</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 4, 2014</td>
<td>The National Assembly votes in favor of “national interest” to exploit Yasuní</td>
<td>“All is planned, they have manuals for these things, let’s see the manual made by a foreigner living in Intag (a region threatened by mining. The “foreigner” is a Cuban American who has lived in Intag for 30 years). It argues that the opposition does not have support in areas where there is planned extractive activities. Correa mentions that Yasunidos is part of these foundations. “Broken political parties in the polls go to the foundations.””</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 18, 2014</td>
<td>Yasunidos collection site in a public park is forcefully removed by the police.</td>
<td>1:43:00. Please lets not waste our time in stupid discussions [about natural gas] and those that don’t want things to change. Those that are doing well while others live in misery, lets not pay attention. Our country needs those natural resources to get out of poverty….our country needs the natural resources, those that say otherwise are lying.</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 18, 2014</td>
<td>President Correa criticizes the international media</td>
<td>11:40 – Correa discusses how the Amazon has changed, that the government has brought (government-run) millenium schools to the region, how the cities are being organized.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 18, 2014</td>
<td>The definition of ethnicide is modified in the Penal Code by the National Assembly</td>
<td>1:51:10 – (In saying that children need a decent place to study) certain people oppose this….let people die of hunger, but we are environmentalists. They need to understand that the most important of the Pachamama are human beings, are children, that people live in a dignified way to overcome poverty so that our children have more opportunities than we did.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 18, 2014</td>
<td>The Caravan for the Yasuní begins its route through coastal Ecuador</td>
<td>1:54:20 – I believe the Waorani will be the first [indigenous group] to overcome poverty because they live in the Yasuní.</td>
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</table>
1:56:20 – (showing a thatched roof hut) was Panacocha before. Now thanks that it is part of a strategic oil project, oil is no longer a curse; these natural resources are a blessing. (now the image is switched to that of cement homes).

1:57:10 – If we have to cut down a tree so that people have better lives, we have to do it. Let’s be clear, compatriots, we will do it with environmental care, but with social responsibility. People have the right to live well. We should all be ecologists.

1:58:20 – My dream is that the first region to conquer poverty is the Amazon, because that is where the natural resources are.

2:48:54 – Only a demented person could say how great it is that oil reserves will run out, while the more oil we have, that is good news. Thank God we have discovered new sources, that is why it is important to explore the Southeast (region area of the Amazon).

Delegitimizing anti-extractivist activists and foreign support 1:39:40 Correa discusses the inauguration of a (government-run) millennium community in Sucumbios. “There is a radical change in the manner of development in the Amazon. Don’t be deceived, gringos with full bellies come here saying that ‘nothing should be touched, no cutting of trees, don’t exploit, die of hunger but I will have where to go as a tourist. You have always been poor, it is part of your environment.’ Let them live in conditions that our Amazonian peoples face. What racism. They come to defend using the name of Amazonian peoples. Don’t be deceived, we have the right to live well. They are hypocrites. They come to complain because I had to make the difficult decision to exploit the Yasuní. How many people are here [at the EC], 800-1000? Exploiting the Yasuní is like
affecting one person here. That is the compromise….These hypocrites come and say ‘don’t touch the Yasuní’ these gringos! And I ask, how much jungle do they have in the U.S.? How many uncontacted tribes do they have?….No government has done more for the uncontacted indigenous groups!

2:23:00 – (Speaking of bad roads in the Amazon) This is what the stone throwers want to conserve. That we live in the past.

Appealing to anti-imperial sentiments.

When I took the sovereign decision to exploit the Yasuní…. the Inter American Commission on Human Rights sends a letter asking for an explanation as to why we have made this decision. Hahaha. Check yourself! First let them tell me how many countries they ask that, and then they put a deadline…. Mind your own business, not that of a sovereign country like Ecuador.

Table 3g. Phase Three: “Democracy in Extinction.” (April 13 – August 15, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase Three</th>
<th>Events prior to the EC</th>
<th>Government Strategies</th>
<th>What Correa says on the EC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy in Extinction</td>
<td>.</td>
<td>Delegitimization, Criminalization of Yasunidos.</td>
<td>Overview: In the third phase, Correa sought to justify the terrible treatment the government gave Yasunidos. The delegitimization and criminalization increased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13 – August 15, 2014</td>
<td></td>
<td>Development ideals of the government</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC 371, 372</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 26, 2014 (from Italy). EC 371</td>
<td>Points of signature collection are openly surveilled. Other groups begin to collect signatures near Yasunidos sites, creating widespread</td>
<td>Delegitimization, Criminalization of Yasunidos</td>
<td>2:47:40 – Lets go to another video, there is that youth collective gathering signatures for the Yasuní. They are trying to make us believe that it is oil or the Yasuní. That’s a lie.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
confusión. Yasunidos forms are plagiarized by these groups, so they look almost identical to Yasunidos forms.

Yasunidos members receive threats.

Month of March – 191 spots in favor of exploitation of the Yasuní are broadcast by SECOM.

4/12 – National march to delivery 757,623 signatures.

4/15 – A national *cadena* is broadcast that explains how signatures might be eliminated. Yasunidos detects *un muerte anunciado* (a death foretold), arrives at CNE and finds the security bands on some of the boxes have been broken.

4/15 – Identity cards of individuals that have collected the most signatures are mysteriously missing from the boxes (thereby annulling the signatures they have collected).

They have lied to us, but not only that. If it is a collective with 100 members, maybe there are 10 who are authentically concerned about the Yasuní. Moreover they go in their 4x4 cars, or take hot water showers. They are not coherent. But if those 10 without coherence are authentic, that’s a lot. 90 of them are the same stone-throwers as always. The MPD is there trying to damage the government, Carlos Pérez Guambatel, Patchakutik, they are against everything. Don’t be deceived. There is nothing about this that is a youth collective, it’s the same pack as always. These are the ones that lose all of the elections....

[This is followed by a video that depicts Yasunidos as violent].

2:56:01 - They wait until the police come, that there are deaths so they can become victims at the international level. Did you see the shot where pregnant women are creating the disturbances? They want to be victims. They can’t win at the polls, so want to do it with blood, with violence. But they won’t topple us, this revolution won’t be stopped by nothing or nobody. (2:56:09).

Benefits of Development

43:50 – (speaking of schools) there is so much to do and that is why we need billions of dollars. That is why we should take advantage of our natural resources….I would never let the Yasuní be destroyed….its in exchange for millions of dollars for Millennial schools for our children, hospitals for our families, for roads, for our communities, for services that are urgently needed.

Criminalization

2:23:05 – What do mines and oil have to do with salaries, but certain ecologists just don’t get it. Because I also consider myself an ecologist. The Yasunidos Collective is creating a scandal about fraud, international observers….Because they know that they didn’t collect enough signatures and want to start a political...
| Development | scandal….The most ecological thing Yasunidos has done is to have recycled the MPD.

2:23:05 – This is the great opportunity that Latin America has to achieve development without exploiting our labor force, our natural resources….But because we can raise salaries, because thanks to our natural resources we have cheap energy, we have roads, we have ports, airports …That is what they don’t understand, that if we wouldn’t have had natural resources, the capacity to generate cheap energy, we wouldn’t have the highest salaries in the region. |
CHAPTER 4
MEDIATED CULTURAL POLITICS OF POST DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter Two, I presented a panoramic view of the first year of Yasunidos, as well as the historical context of ecological activism; the Yasuní ITT conflict; and the movement’s emergence, identity and practices. This present chapter goes into more depth on Yasunidos’ visual, embodied and mediated practices, and the post-development imaginaries their creative expression evoked. It investigates my research questions: How has Yasunidos confronted the government’s media power, and the subquestion: how has Yasunidos deployed mediated cultural politics of post-development, thereby challenging the state’s extractivist discourses and practices? To address these questions, I revisit my theoretical framework of mediated cultural politics, and deepen it by analyzing how Yasunidos’ movement practices express post-development imaginaries. To do so, I visually analyze the kind of art that Yasunidos has chosen to represent these imaginaries. I also contrast these imaginaries, and the values they represent, with the government’s extractivist discourses and values. In the second part of the chapter, I examine Yasunidos’ media practices, both in terms of how they leveraged the attention they received from private media, and also how they strategically made use of the enormous visibility they got on the EC. Methodologically speaking, this chapter mainly relies on in-depth interviews with Yasunidos and allies, and ethnographic participation in the marches, performances, zapateadas, artistic events, and press conferences. I argue here that the role of performance, ritual, art making, and the use of other visuals such as posters, have been a key element in movement-building, by making visible the cultural
battle being waged between the government’s extractivist agenda and Yasunidos’ invitation to consider a post-extractivist future. Their movement practices have also served to communicate a set of values and imaginaries that envision another way forward.

Mattoni and Teune (2014) contend that social movements are nothing less than visual phenomena, and that transdisciplinary attention to the visual (and I would add, embodied practices) is an important, evolving field of research. They also argue that such expressions must be seen as situated within a web of social practices. Following their cue, in the following sections I articulate the context and content of the art that Yasunidos has chosen to utilize in its campaigns.

4.2 Yasunidos, mediated cultural politics and post-development imaginaries

In Chapter One, I introduced the concept of mediated cultural politics, a theoretical rendering that brings together Alvarez et al.’s (1998) cultural politics framework and Jesus Martin-Barbero’s (1987) notion of mediation. Mediated cultural politics refers to movement practices that interrupt dominant meanings, values and discourses, which are then amplified by circulation across multiple media platforms. I propose that this concept can elucidate how Yasunidos, with no substantive media power of its own, was able to interrupt hegemonic meanings of development that were powerfully deployed through statist media. I contend that Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics has been able to resignify not just development, but also democracy and citizen participation. They have done so, in part, through creative, performative expressions and visual arts, what I have come to conceptualize as post-development imaginaries. Such
concept brings together Escobar’s concept of post-development, with Gaonkar’s (2002) and Taylor’s (2002) re-elaboration of the concept ‘the social imaginary.’

With respect to the term “post-development,” this is a concept that Arturo Escobar coined in 1991. In a recent text, Escobar (2014) explains that from the outset the concept has sought to displace “development” from its centrality, both discursively and in practice. Along with a critique of capitalist models of development and related ideas of growth, progress and modernity, the concept suggests that “it is possible to imagine the end of development” (Escobar, 2014, p. 31). Such discourses and practices, according to Escobar, emerge from ontologies and epistemologies generated by social movements and ancestral communities. I agree with this proposal and in Chapter Two, I established that Yasunidos is a new social movement actor that is part of the “vanguard” (Escobar, 2014, p. 14) of imagining and enacting practices that point toward a post-development scenario.

In tandem with the concept of post-development, for the concept ‘imaginary’, I draw from Gaonkar (2002) and Taylor (2002), who have conceptually reworked Castoriadis’ (1987) theorization of the social imaginary. Though these authors are analyzing shifting social imaginaries of Western modernity, their conceptualization is relevant to my work on post-development imaginaries. For these scholars, social imaginaries “refer broadly to the way a given people imagine their collective social life” (Gaonkar, 2002, p. 10). They are “the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world” (p. 4). They are manifested in images and

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58 Escobar acknowledges the claim that the concept emerged at around the same time at an international gathering in Geneva in 1991.

59 Many scholars and ecologists also use the concept of alternatives to development or post-extractivism (Acosta, Gudynas, Martinez). Like Escobar, I see these as complementary concepts.
symbols, and are spread by mass media. Importantly, transitions from one social imaginary to another necessarily take place over long periods of time. For Taylor (2002, p. 106):

[It] is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. In addition, we should note that what start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary…. 

Using these authors’ characterizations as a point of departure, I propose that the concept of post development imaginary involves a diverse range of cosmovisions, discourses, practices and resistances enacted by social movements and ordinary citizens, that visibly manifest the world they seek to actively create, one in which relations between human beings and other living beings are more harmonious and respectful, and one in which human beings are guardians, not owners, of other life forms. As such, I propose that Yasunidos’ movement practices embody a post-development imaginary.

I further argue that such imaginary has recently taken root in Ecuador, particularly in young people. This relatively new imaginary has come about, in part, because of indigenous, ecological and feminist social movements’ strong critique of hegemonic notions and practices of development, as well as their ability to bring forward ontologies and epistemologies that generate alternatives. This shift is taking place transnationally, but I suggest that Ecuadorian social movements are at the forefront of this imaginary, given the contexts I described earlier (Chapter Two). Key to the shift has been the institutionalization of these movement’s proposals in the 2008 Constitution (and rights that it purports to safeguard: the Rights of Nature, the right to previous consultation on issues of extraction in one’s territory, cultural rights, territorial rights, etc.). The Yasuní
ITT initiative, and the government’s earlier promotion of it, has also played a part in this shift in social imaginary.

Eduardo Gudynas, in a recent conference about the Rights of Nature (July 12, 2016, FLACSO-Ecuador) suggested that there is perhaps no other country in which so much has been learned from indigenous communities, although he still considers the rights of Nature to be a minority ethos. He argued that in terms of rights and protections of Nature, no other Constitution is so advanced, and Ecuador is often invoked as an important reference. The problem, he added, is in the application of the Constitution.

I also do not propose that a complete shift in the social imaginary has taken place. Rather, the post-development imaginary is in conflict with, and still dominated by the more entrenched, extractivist imaginary. Gudynas (2012, p. 256) speaks to such entrenchment across the whole region:

In South American social imaginaries, the idea that it is necessary to exploit Nature is strongly rooted…. From this point of view, the problem is not to avoid extractivism, rather it is to see how to strengthen it, to make it more efficient and obtain more profits. It is also common that this position is strengthened by invoking supposed scientific-technological advances and the promise of economic growth.

In the cultural battle being waged between Correa and Yasunidos, these are precisely the two imaginaries that are in dispute. The following section examines the differences between them.

4.3 Dominant and alternative conceptions of development

Since June 26, 1972, when oil began to flow out of the Ecuadorian Amazon through a 312-mile pipeline, the rentist state embraced the promise of economic development, financial prosperity and capitalist western modernity. While, indeed, many
Ecuadorians and transnational corporations have profited from oil, extractive activities have left the majority of affected areas in the Amazon with massive contamination that has negatively impacted the lives and health of indigenous communities, animals, flora, fauna, and all living beings (Acosta et al., 2013). Many areas in the northern part of the Amazon, the first to be exploited, are company towns commonly identified as oil blocks, with pipelines running along side most roads, and the prosperity of the inhabitants is nowhere to be seen. There have been virtually no Ecuadorian governments that have been opposed to oil drilling, including the Correa government. Once celebrated as an exception to such extractivist perspective of the region, its practices have increasingly contradicted its own 2008 Constitution and Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2009-2013 (National Good Living Plan), in which it pledged to change the extractive model to one of alternative development models.

The focus of Buen Vivir rejects the developmentalist conception that has ruled for the past 60 years, and that was based on an extractivist vision of natural resources, the expansion of agricultural soils, and the massive, intensive exploitation of mining and fishing resources. The new constitutional mandate, prevention and precaution are institutionalized, and the way of seeing the natural patrimony beyond the so-called resources to exploit. (Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2009-2013, p. 217).

The underlying values and ideals that are behind the extractive model and its accompanying discourses are rooted in various sources. They represent a combination of ideals of western capitalist modernity; economic theories of growth and modernization; advances in science and technology, and the continuation of colonial practices that were set in place in the Amazon in the 19th century (Espinoza Mora Bowen, 2010; Gudynas, 2013). Extractivist discourses and practices also emerge from post-neoliberal discourses.

\footnote{As part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I visited the northern Amazon and affected communities.}
of governments that identify as 21st century socialist projects, in which an emphasis is placed on the ‘return of the state’, and with it, state-led development that allegedly brings profits to citizens rather than transnational corporations. Another source of these values comes from dominant conceptions of sustainable development in which there is an assumption that new technologies can lessen the harmful impacts of development.

As analyzed in Chapter Three, many of the extractivist perspectives are regularly voiced on the EC by President Correa and his ministers. They include: an anthropocentric approach to Buen Vivir in which people supposedly come first, even if detrimental to other living beings and ecosystems. This discourse contradicts how Buen Vivir, or Sumak Kawsay, is understood by indigenous cosmovisions, in which it refers to harmonious co-existence between humans and other beings. A related discourse about drilling in the Yasuní is that the profits will benefit Amazonian communities. One of Correa’s main arguments relates to the hegemonic notion of sustainable development, that “cutting edge technology” will lessen the impact on the Yasuní. Moreover, officialist discourse proposes that natural resources are strategic resources over which the state has exclusive rights. This is why, in part, the government was opposed to a national referendum (in addition to fearing that Yasunidos would win). Discourses of capitalist modernity, progress and growth; decades of government promises; and an elite that has profited from oil revenues; have all greatly contributed to the continued hegemony of extractivism.

However, such hegemony is eroding. I propose that when Yasunidos came along in 2013, a partial shift in the social imaginary had taken place in the national consciousness (especially among young people) with regard to ecological matters. Values that undergird this imaginary include a non-capitalist, biocentric concept of Buen Vivir
that emphasizes harmonious co-existence between humans and other beings; viewing the role of human beings as guardians, not masters, of the rest of the species; a belief that resource extraction ultimately does not benefit the majorities, and it is not the answer to Ecuador’s economic development; the belief in the need to overcome oil dependency; an emphasis on biodiversity and territorial rights, and therefore the non-commercial value of the Yasuní. Another key value is that of democratization: which includes public control over resources and solutions from below (Acosta et al., 2013). The table below contrasts the extractivist perspective with post-development values.

**Table 4.3. Extractivist Perspective vs. Post Development Values**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecuadorian government development ideals, values, discourses</th>
<th>Yasunidos post-development ideals, values, discourses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on a combination of ideals of western, capitalist modernity; economic theories of growth and modernization; normalization of colonial practices; post-neoliberal thought (strong state leads and reaps profits from resources); dominant conceptions of sustainable development which believe that new technologies lessen the harmful impacts of development; rational appropriation of nature.</td>
<td>Based on Indigenous cosmovisions; transnational feminist, ecologist, territorial rights social movements; Latin American post-development and post-extractivist approaches; Ecuador’s institutionally-backed discourses of Indigenous rights to their ancestral lands, territorial rights, and rights of Nature; the protection of non-contacted Indigenous groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notion of <em>Buen Vivir</em> that is anthropocentric-put people first, they need to live well (even though, in reality, few people live well in communities where there is oil extraction).</td>
<td>Closer to indigenous cosmovisions -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay</em> – biocentric, harmonious co-existence bet human beings, other beings, nature to maintain biodiversity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kichwa principle of relacionality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Selva Viviente</em> or <em>Kawsay Sacha</em> (living forest) philosophy of the Kichwa Sarayaku. There is no “centric” rather there are no divisions; the space of life of all beings, all are in all parts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracting natural resources will bring prosperity to the Amazon and to Ecuador</td>
<td>Resource extraction is not the answer. We need to transition from oil dependence to viable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador gains profit, not transnational corporations</td>
<td>Non-commercial value of keeping the oil underground.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural resources are strategic resources over which the state has exclusive rights</td>
<td>We have an ethical responsibility to indigenous communities and the rest of the species to safeguard nature for future generations,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecologists want to keep Amazonians living in the past. They are unrealistic about ending extractivism.</td>
<td>Respect for cultural diversity, territorial rights, cultural survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The government has the approval of the Ecuadorian people as it voted in this government.</td>
<td>Questions who has power, who makes decisions. The “Democracy in Extinction” campaign proposes that Ecuadorian people have the right to decide the fate of the Yasuní. Democratization from below also involves public control over resources, and citizen involvement in the transition away from oil dependence. It should not be the state that has this role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New, cutting-edge technologies lessen the harm done to human beings and the ecosystem.</td>
<td>No technology can prevent the enormous loss of biodiversity; resource extraction endangers the very survival of indigenous communities (contacted and non-contacted), their cultures, and milenary practices that have cultivated, not destroyed, diversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Scientific evidence” and pro-extractive experts propose that the cutting-edge technologies will only damage one in a thousand.</td>
<td>Interculturality as valorization of traditional practices and knowledges that have taken care of the biodiversity of the Amazon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This government is the most ecologically friendly ever.</td>
<td>The government is engaging in ethnoicide and destruction of fragile ecosystems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In line with transnational hegemonic discourses of benign sustainable development; overlooks environmental concerns and destruction of cultures; ignores connection between extraction and inequality.</td>
<td>In line with transnational discourses of alternatives to development; post-development; post-extractivism; the interdependence of rights; indigenous rights, climate change, cultural diversity, biodiversity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next section, I analyze how the post-development ideals, values and discourses translate into the creative expression of post-development imaginaries.

**4.4. Yasunízarte! Movement-based post-development imaginaries**

After the first wave of protests that followed President Correa’s decision to commence extractive activities in the Yasuní, protest fatigue coupled with government
efforts to argue its pro-drilling stance and delegitimize protest, increasingly gave way to more sustained, diverse movement practices that integrated artistic and cultural interventions. These practices included weekly *zapateadas*[^61], concerts, art exhibits, carnivals, flash mobs, theater and street performances. The greatest, prolonged and most effective practice was the occupation of streets and plazas to gather signatures for a national referendum. These creative expressions, which came to characterize Yasunidos, communicated their values directly to citizens, brought heightened visibility to the movement, and helped them build a stronger base of support. Public calls to attend these events, and the sharing of images and videos after they took place, were circulated across media platforms, mainly Facebook, nationally and internationally. In addition to the protests and and spontaneous happenings that involved art, there were countless planned artistic events throughout that first year. Many of them took place simultaneously with signature collection. They included: the *Yasunizárte*, a concert benefit, in which some of the most popular performers entertained a sold out venue (September 27, 2013); A day of artistic protest outside of the National Assembly (October 3, 2013); a Yasuní caravan that travelled coastal towns and cities; and dozens of *zapateadas*.

The majority of the images, videos, graphics, events, and actions that were disseminated on multiple media platforms by Yasunidos and others did not depict oil contamination. Rather, very much in the spirit of prefigurative politics, they often chose to highlight healthy indigenous communities, diverse wildlife, clean rivers, the cultural survival of the isolated indigenous groups, and other positive images of the Amazon.

[^61]: Joyous protest events in which people bring instruments and *zapatear*, dance in a circular motion. This Andean dance is practiced in community, often during *Inti Raymi*. Another meaning of the *zapateada* is that it helps participants push through difficulties and gather strength for the struggles ahead.
Created and circulated by artists, citizens, children, and people of all ages, diverse artistic and cultural expressions resonated widely with Ecuadorian citizens. On their website and Facebook page, in their press conferences, public appearances, and on the street, Yasunidos always literally and symbolically set a stage imbued with images that presented alternatives to the kind of development now being proposed by the government. And, try as the government would to criminalize Yasunidos, these cultural mediations helped to counteract negative representations of the collective. And, it was difficult to criminalize that which the government once promoted.

Other social movements, with a few exceptions, have mainly utilized the more traditional confrontational protest strategies such as militant-style marches and alignment with specific political parties; also road closings and the occupation of institutions. Regarding the last two, this is far less common now, after the Correa administration revised the Penal Code. Such formerly common movement practices as occupation of public buildings and road blocks are now considered to be terrorist acts and carry stiff prison sentences (for example, in the last Indigenous national uprising in August 2015, hundreds of indigenous activists were detained and jailed).

However, Yasunidos was not the first social movement in Ecuador to utilize creative expression. Before Yasunidos, indigenous, ecologist, and feminists movements also occasionally integrated performative actions into their repertoire. For example, in Vázquez (2015), ecologist Ana Maria Varea recalled a march led by Amazonia por la Vida (a direct precursor of Yasunidos) in which women dressed as petrol workers. One interviewee recalls:
Accion Ecologica, in a certain moment, released rats in the Congress, there are many of these kinds of symbolic acts. Yasunidos has been nurtured by this. Some of Yasunidos are children of the women of Accion Ecologica. (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, April 10, 2015).

A woman involved in both Amazonia Por la Vida and Yasunidos analyzes some of the key differences between older and newer movement practices:

Sure, we (feminists) used to go out a lot to do graffiti. I remember that we did graffiti actions. One time we put a sign on the Virgen del Panecillo (a prominent statue of a virgin in Quito’s historic center), announcing where to get safe abortions. In a march about three years ago we dressed as nuns and played drums….What I do see as a first are many people, many young people, mobilizing for a territory, for its biodiversity, for the defense of nature, and for the isolated indigenous groups…and these are mainly urban mestizos that don’t live in this territory. But they have been able to recognize the importance of this territory for the peoples that live there, and for their own lives. So, these characteristics seem new to me, of what I have seen of other mobilizations.

And also what is new is that there are various artistic expressions, including musicians, and a diversity of creative spaces … they have linked their art work to this struggle. Creativity flourishes. I remember that there were a group of young painters there, painting signs, and they called on people to do theater….These were people from diverse collectives, not just the campaign…Each one felt it important to express their rejection. And this was very different from the march that supported Correa’s declaration, who were there with their green flags…

The other [difference] is that we have said no to flags, no to martial marches, no to the typical slogans, no to the typical voices. We do things in a different way – with song, joyously giving this movement an identity with art, costumes, theater, music and also diversity…I believe these are new tendencies that we haven’t seen in other spaces….these are new tendencies that break with old structures…. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The above extended citation is important on a number of levels. The interviewee is analyzing the new, creative modalities that are enacted not only by Yasunidos, but by many groups of young people (many of whom had not been politically active, like many

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62 Far from there being a split between ecologists and feminists, Accion Ecológica, one of Ecuador’s most important ecologist organizations (now 30 years old in 2016), was founded by a group of feminists.
members of Yasunidos). When she discusses how urban youth mobilize for territories that are not their own, including for uncontacted indigenous groups, she is describing a shift in the social imaginary, in which such actions against Nature, against indigenous peoples, are viewed as unacceptable, as illegitimate.63

Regarding the creative movement practices, older generations of activists did not always understand these new forms of protest. One activist from an older generation said of the *zapateadas*:

We didn’t understand them, the old politicians didn’t understand…for me it was something strange…To me it didn’t have a meaning….It was for them, but not to join in. The *zapateadas* were never massive, but they did given an identity to Yasunidos. It gave them strength, but it didn’t give them the possibility of expanding…(Alberto Acosta, personal communication, April 10, 2015).

Unlike Acosta, I do believe the *zapateadas* helped them expand, in that it attracted other people of their generation, or others that share a post-development sensibility.

In Chapter Two, the discussion about movement identity and practices, I examined the candlelight vigils, *zapateadas*, initial wave of protests, the signature-gathering process, and the ebullient march in which Yasunidos delivered the signatures to CNE, as examples of mediated cultural politics of post-development. In this next section, I focus on a visual analysis of the art that Yasunidos used in its campaigns, to examine how they express post-development imaginaries.

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63 At the time of writing, there has been an ongoing, indigenous-led mobilization against the North Dakota Pipeline that is attracting support and solidarity by a wide range group of people (including indigenous Ecuadorians, who were some of the first to show up at the protest site). I see this as another example of the partial shift towards a post-development imaginary that is occurring transnationally.
4.5 Art and the post-development imaginary

Artistic expression has been a powerful way for Yasunidos to communicate what it stood for, and to disseminate post-development imaginaries. Arguably, it competed with statist media power, given the resonance that it had with so many people, particularly younger generations. Here, a member of Yasunidos underscores the importance of the artwork in gathering signatures:

The fight for the Yasuní, and the diffusion strategies that were used did not only subscribe to the impact that they could generate in public opinion, through the media or social media. No, the work of the artists was fundamental in all aspects. In the signature collection, the images that generated impact were the images of children collecting signatures with their families, and also those of animales. Artists donated many depictions of animals: dolphins, jaguars, etc. That we would take and put in the points of signature collection, and that would generate impact. (BB, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

While much of the mediated cultural politics of the movement rose up spontaneously, as described in the previous section, there was also a strategic element at play, in terms of the images that were used in Yasunidos campaigns. They made use of opinion polls to understand which kinds of images moved people. One member of Yasunidos analyzes how they sought to have a broad impact:

One of the tools that we used was the polls from different firms that were dedicated to analyzing Ecuadorian public opinion in relation to different themes … and with this we could read how we might build our strategies, something that I feel is fundamental for absolutely any national political actor in whichever theme that one wants to have incidence. For example, we would see that we had great acceptance with younger people of 18, 35, 40 years, those who had clarity about the defense of Nature. We also read that people did not like violence, even discursive violence. So on these readings we would elaborate our messages, in defense of Nature….

One thing that struck us, and that I find sad, was that a majority of Ecuadorian citizens were interested in biodiversity in the Yasuní, the flora, fauna, animals, etc, more so than the survival of the peoples in voluntary isolation….But it is
strategic to position a theme and then, the other is derived from it, meaning, if we are going to position the theme of the isolated peoples, first we are going to have to deal with the theme of biodiversity. People also preferred colors, proposals, and joyous, protest, full of music.

Here we see that Yasunidos sought to respond to what would generate positive impact in public opinion, but at the same time we can see that they had an agenda beyond success with public opinion. They used their increasing visibility to foreground the issues that were important to the collective, such as the danger of extraction to the survival of the uncontacted indigenous groups who live in the Yasuní. I also find it interesting that opinion polls revealed that people rejected even discursive violence. My reading on that (not just from these polls, but from ethnographic observation over several years) is that people were tired of the discursive violence enacted each week on the EC.

Polls also showed that people favored colorful, musical protest, and concrete proposals. I interpret that as a preference in younger generations for a different way of doing politics. Recall that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ecuadorian citizens had had their fill of “politics as usual” and democratically deposed three presidents in one decade. This sense of disillusionment with politics as usual is still prevalent today, which is another reason why the mediated cultural politics of Yasunidos was so refreshing to so many people. Additionally, the desire to see actual proposals, I believe, is partially a reaction to the campaign of delegitimation of Yasunidos and ecologists in general, in which they were depicted as ignorant or unrealistic about alternatives to development (they were often branded as “childish ecologists” on the EC). Citizens were hungry for actual information about how to transition out of resource extraction.
Returning to the question of the artwork, its strategic use in campaigns not only corresponded to a post-development imaginary deeply felt by Yasunidos (see Table 4.3), it also corresponded to the preferences of the public, in terms of the kinds of art and protest they appreciated. One of the most used images was this one below.\footnote{Most of this artwork has been created by a movement-allied artist, Angie “Vanessita” Cárdenas Roa. Her work with Yasunidos and on behalf of many other ecological and feminist struggles can be accessed at sakuritadesign.blogspot.com.}

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 4a.** *Yasunizando* the landscape

This image has many of the characteristics previously described: the presence of youth, the theme of the future; a utopic image of a young girl repainting, or transforming, the old, black and white image of the oil tank that is seen all over the Northern Amazon, with colorful images of nature (bird, butterflies, the print of a leopard).
Figure 4b. Poster for the Second Encounter of “infantile ecologists”

Image 2 is a poster that was used for the II Encuentro Nacional de Ecologistas Infantiles (II National Gathering of Infantile Ecologists). The very name is a reappropriation of the insulting way Correa refers to ecologists, “infantile.” Ecologists have used this denomination to celebrate ecological gatherings. This particular one advertised in the poster was organized during the early emergence of Yasunidos, two
months after the announcement of the declaration of national interest to exploit the Yasuní. This colorful poster depicts the tree of life, filled with animals. *Yasuní Vive* (Yasuní Lives) was also used by the government as a slogan in its campaign to convince citizens that the impact on the Yasuní would be minimal given the “cutting edge technology” that would be used.

![Figure 4c. Together for Utopia](image)

The above image depicts young people, as well as a diversity of generations, subjectivities, and ethno-racial groups from various regions of Ecuador (there are characters representing indigenous people from the Amazon and the highlands. There are mestizos, afro-descendent, white, animals, flora and fauna. The colorful imagery depicts diverse people coming together to support the Yasuní. It bears the logo of Yasunidos, and the signature of the artist is also visible in the bottom-right corner.

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The above image is the poster from one of the first large concerts held in defense of the Yasuní, and that featured popular local artists. The silhouetted landscape depicts a sunset in the Amazon, with flora, fauna, and musical performers and notes.
Figure 4e. Yasunidos Referendum Question

The image’s background shows a landscape which depicts inhabitants of the Yasuní. The humans in silhouette likely represent the uncontacted indigenous groups, although their contacted relatives, the Waorani, also use spears for hunting. Superimposed over the image is the question that was posed in the bid for the national referendum: Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government maintain the oil of the ITT, known as Block 43, indefinitely underground? We also can see the Yasunidos logo, the often-invoked slogans *Yo firmo por ti Yasuní* (I sign for you, Yasuní) which references the fact that the uncontacted groups as well as animals and other living beings cannot sign, but we can sign for them. The other slogan is *Resiste YAsuní* (Yasuní resists, with an emphasis on YA [now], translates as Resiste Now as well).

The image below, translated, is Climate Justice from underground. It depicts indigenous Waorani, or their uncontacted relatives, the Taromenare and Tagaeri groups, all of whom are inhabitants of the Yasuní.
Figure 4f. Climate Justice from under the soil

The use of the Yasunidos logo was very important in the art, to verify the origin of the images because the government had helped to create and promote parallel movements. These groups also sought to depict a healthy, vibrant Amazon. In the table below, I go into more detail as to how the post-development ideals, values and discourses correspond to Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics that express a post-development imaginary.

Table 4.4. Post-development ideas deployed by Yasunidos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yasunidos post-development ideals, values, discourses</th>
<th>Yasunidos mediated cultural politics themes deployed through images, texts, artistic actions, political actions that express post-development imaginary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on Indigenous cosmovisions; Ecuadorian feminist, ecologist, and indigenous social movements</td>
<td>The future – the future of peoples who live in the Yasuní and all our futures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In line with transnational discourses of alternatives to development; post-development; post-extractivism; Indigenous rights, climate change, cultural diversity, biodiversity.</td>
<td>“one of the arguments for the defense of the Yasuní is the theme of the future, the future of the people who inhabit this planet, and the future of the peoples who inhabit the Yasuní.” (RG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Buen Vivir</em> - harmonious co-existence between human beings, other beings, and nature to maintain biodiversity</td>
<td><em>Zapateadas</em> – symbol of protest and defense of the Yasuní.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters and art that depict harmonious relations between humans and other living beings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resource extraction is not the answer. We need to transition from oil dependence to viable alternatives.

One of the most ubiquitous images is that of the girl transforming the oil well. See Image 1.

Non-commercial value of keeping the oil underground.

Wealth is having clean water, and healthy lives.

Images that critique putting a monetary value on the Yasuní.

We have an ethical responsibility to the rest of the species, and to safeguard nature for future generations.

Images of animals that inhabit the forest and the rivers.

Respect for cultural diversity, territorial rights, cultural survival.

Images of cultural diversity, as seen in various posters (see images 2, 3 and 6).

The “Democracy in Extinction” campaign proposes that Ecuadorian people have the right to decide the fate of the Yasuní. Democratization from below also involves public control over resources, and citizen involvement in the transition away from oil dependence.

There are many versions of the Democracy in Extinction poster, most of which show the wildlife of the Yasuní.

No technology can prevent the enormous loss of biodiversity, and extraction endangers the very survival of forest dwellers (contacted and non-contacted), their cultures, and millenary practices that have fostered, not destroyed, diversity.

Although positive images are predominant, there are also images that show destruction of ecosystems.

Interculturality - valorization of traditional practices and knowledges that have safeguarded the biodiversity of the Amazon.

There is much art that depicts indigenous peoples that inhabit the Yasuní. See images 5 and 6.

The government is engaging in ethnocide and destruction of fragile ecosystems.

Las veladas (candelight vigils), peace and peaceful protest

Indigenous woman poster: Ethnocide.

Yasunidos was not the only group that was enacting mediated cultural politics. In the following section, I highlight an important action by Amazonian women, in a key event that took place in defense of the Yasuní. This event was important, in that it clearly communicated resistance from the Amazon.
4.6 Allies from the Amazon march on Quito

On October 3, 2013, the National Assembly, with 108 votes in favor, declare that it is in the national interest to exploit the Yasuní. The next day, a group of over 60 Amazonian women leaders set out for Quito, walking from various Amazonian communities, accompanied by their children and the Indigenous Guard. They walked in order to tell the government they were against exploitation in the Yasuní, as well as the licitations of oil blocks in their territories. This was a notable example in which mediated cultural politics of post-development were enacted, not in coordination with Yasunidos, but with a similar message. This walk was at once an act of resistance against the political figures in the communities that were giving their blessings to exploitation, and part of a post-development imaginary in that the women were assuming their power and putting forth their vision of the Amazon and their communities. The walk to Quito publicly expressed their rejection of government plans to drill for oil in the Yasuní, as well as other extractive activities in the Amazon. Their activism is rooted in La Selva Viva (the living forest), a philosophy in which the Amazon is considered an integral being, a complex, balanced system. Facebook and Twitter reports from Yasunidos and other allies tracked their progress every day of the walk towards Quito through photos and chronicles. Images of indigenous women leaders and the joyous welcome they received in each town offered powerful testimony and images of their resistance to extractivist policies. The march signaled that there was opposition coming from the Amazon, despite government attempts in the ECs and elsewhere to present a picture of solid support.
The indigenous women’s arrival to Quito was greeted by a well-attended march organized by a several collectives and organizations. While in Quito, the women met with diverse social actors, Yasunidos included. A drive for warm clothing and food to support their stay in Quito spread virally throughout social media. They came to meet with Correa personally, but the government barely acknowledged their presence. The women were finally granted permission to address the National Assembly, though their passionate statements were met with silence. Nevertheless, the photos, videos and narrative accounts were generated and shared by supporters, and picked up by private media. They disrupted government narratives that framed indigenous groups as grateful supporters of oil extraction. The words and images they circulated spoke of real wealth as living in harmony with La Selva Viva (the living forest). This kind of symbolic currency that was generated, exchanged and transformed into on-the ground action and material solidarity is an example of a way in which mediated cultural politics was collectively constructed. The visit brought needed legitimacy to Yasunidos; helped build relationships across ethnicity, class and region; and brought new energy to the movement. Direct contact with the indigenous Amazonian women, many of whom have been prominent leaders for decades, helped fill the need for articulation from below between Quito and the Amazon. I would argue that in this conjuncture, Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics trumped the government’s media power. In fact, I suggest it was a political error for the government to ignore these women and their claims. If they were so concerned about the Amazon, why did they dismiss the women that walked hundreds of kilometers to Quito.

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65 See Coryat (2015) for a previously-published account of this event.
In addition to the mediated cultural politics, Yasunidos also focused on media strategies. The rest of the chapter examined the multiple ways that they used media, from their own practices to leveraging private and public media.

4.7 Confronting statist media power: Yasunidos media practices

4.7.1. Representing the movement

Yasunidos emerged as a movement during the first wave of protests, and given that the national referendum process got underway nearly immediately, there was very little time to ponder a media strategy. They literally had to hit the ground running because of the enormous task ahead of them to collect signatures across the country, which also involved energizing other Yasunidos groups in other towns and cities. Given the enormous task of facing statist media power, various members of the collective dedicated time and energy to crafting the movement’s communicational strategy. They knew that they had to act swiftly and wisely to counter the mediated insults and attacks. Compared to the government, Yasunidos had few resources. One member of Yasunidos did have experience as editor of an ecologist website, Tegantai, (http://www.agenciaecologista.info/) that disseminated news about on the latest extractive activities that were taking place or planned across Ecuador, information for the press, and social movement activities. But most of the members of Yasunidos had little to no experience relating to the media.

To help craft their strategies, Yasunidos reached out to experienced, allied media analysts for advice and training. Public opinion polls also provided them with pertinent information about how the public perceived of them as a group, and whether or not they approved of their actions. Yasunidos launched a website and a Facebook page very
quickly, to explain who they are, what they stand for, to answer commonly-asked
questions, and to disseminate information about their upcoming events. The website also
published pertinent reports about extractivism and sustainable options. A member of
Yasunidos describes some of their practices:

We did not have a clear path for where we wanted to go. We did not have
previous experience in relation to spokespeople. Many of the people that acted as
spokespeople during the whole time period, started with the collective in the first
press conferences. Their first brush with the press was with a tape recorder, a
camera. I am talking about young women of 17 or 18 years old. Ten young people
of 17 or 18, that for the first time, faced a television camera as spokespeople for a
collective that didn’t even know where it was headed. I had worked for some
newspapers but I found myself in a much larger communicational scenario, in
which the link with private media turned out to be fundamental in terms of
proposing all that we would go on to propose. (BB, personal communication, May
7, 2015).

I recall the first Yasunidos press conference. They had set up a table in the
backyard of Acción Ecológica, which became their headquarters. During that first press
conference, some of the youngest members were the spokespeople. They received a little
bit of coaching and then, with about a dozen cameras and audio recorders focused on
them, they opened the microphones and began to address the press. While their lack of
experience was evident, their passion for and knowledge of what was going was
impactful. The excitement among those that attended this first press conference,
including the journalists that were present, was palpable. After all, many of the journalists
were also unhappy with the decision to exploit the Yasuni. Over the next few months, I
observed how these and other Yasunidos members sharpened their skills and relations
with the press. They also did not have just one or two spokespeople, rather they rotated
those responsibilities among at least ten people at a time. For Ecuadorian citizens, it was
refreshing to see many young people speaking out on the issues, instead of just one or
two seasoned political individuals. This practice differed greatly from that of the
government, in which Correa was the main spokesperson, and was also unlike vertically-
organized social movements and political parties. One member comments on this and
other media practices:

One of our main strengths was obviously Facebook. Many people were there, and
I think that was our principal communication channel that legitimated our posture,
because we did not have resources to pay for television. Well, also [important] was the print media. We gained the respect of the [private] media and they gave us a lot of space. They would attend our press conferences – they even applauded. And they interviewed us all the time. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Yasunidos’ communication remained singularly focused on the issues, without
personalizing the conflict by attacking President Correa or other members of the
government. Such practice was, in fact, opposite to the way in which the government
communicated, which did personalize issues and attack individuals and organizations
related to the movement. One Yasunidos member describes the conscious decision to
focus on issues, not attack the President:

Many political actors would have loved for Yasunidos to attack the President but
we wanted to criticize a development model that impoverishes, that contaminates
and that eliminates not only the forests but also the populations that depend on
them to exist. (PE, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

With respect to Correa and the EC, Yasunidos developed a strategy that one
member referred to as their “Jiujitsu strategy.”

The collective does not have economic resources; it can’t pay for campaigns in
social media, the collective can’t deploy cadenas nacionales (obligatory national
broadcasts produced by the government) to delegitimize other political actors in
the national political scenario, and we wouldn’t want to anyway. But we did use
other strategies.
There is a practice in Jiu-jitsu, the martial art, in which you use the power of your enemy. The first time that the President attacked Yasunidos (in the EC), it was totally unexpected, but it was impactful. He referred to Yasunidos as liars that are collecting signatures, and you know, he would see us at the polls…. and the moment that he did that, the next day we collected so many more signatures than we generally did, because people were mad. So, the President would attack us, and we would use all of that visceral energy in our favor, and get him to speak about themes that we wanted to position. Then we would use that strength to collect more signatures, and it was successful, as were a whole bunch of complementary strategies that served our objectives. I believe that it was a great success to provoke the agents of power, in social media, in interviews and other media. (BB, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

Another member of Yasunidos told me that when Correa would attack Yasunidos on the EC on Saturdays, their phones would ring off the hook on Monday with people wanting to know when and where they could sign. Another member commented:

At some point, Yasunidos´ great strength was that it was not reactive; the government was on the offensive. At some point, it was the government that had to answer to Yasunidos´ claims. (SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

Another member argued that Yasunidos´ communication strategies were not limited to media, in fact they could not have been successful without on-the-ground organizing, and leveraging the family, which is still a dominant feature of Ecuador´s social structure.

The work was much more that of worker ants, and I think it is more about the information that people received, and how people communicated that information to their closest circle. It is what I always said to people. They would ask where they could sign, and what could they do, and I would always say that the most important thing they could do would be to convince their whole family and friends, tell them what is happening, and convince them to talk to their friends and family….or as they say, radio bamba (word of mouth), and convincing people like that is the work of ants, and that is what made the signature campaign successful. We didn´t have television campaigns asking for people´s signatures. (PE, personal communication, April 30, 2015).
Instead of a televised signature campaign, Yasunidos did spread the word through posters that said *Yasuni, yo firmo por ti* (*Yasuni, I sign for you*). Many people took photos of themselves with those words, and circulated them in social media platforms.

![Image of people holding signs](image.png)

**Figure 4g.** I sign for the Yasuní.

The above photos represent the ongoing campaign in which people in Ecuador, and internationally, shared their support via Facebook and other social media, in support of the Yasuni and the signature gathering campaign. The upper left photo is that of Vandana Shiva. When she was in Ecuador, she met with Yasunidos and other anti-extractivist groups.

### 4.7.2 Yasunidos and the private media

Possessing their own website and Facebook page, Yasunidos used social media to post, aggregate and disseminate powerful photos, videos, images, graphics, music, combined with alternative proposals, environmental studies, personal testimonies and their positions, all of which helped to articulate a common ground of struggle among diverse sectors of society. However, given that Internet access is not universal in Ecuador, nor do all those who access the Internet use it to listen to on-line radio or read
political analysis, Yasunidos’ reach via the Internet was limited (INEC, 2013)\(^6\). So, while they made good use of their own media (Facebook pages and website), and other alternative media (mostly other people’s social media sites and blogs; online radio, digital magazines; posting video on YouTube), these did not constitute the most significant contributions to circulating their messages. In the first place, alternative media is still not very developed in Ecuador so while the efforts were helpful and done in solidarity with Yasunidos, it did not represent the way in which most people found out about what was happening. In terms of media, the most significant coverage happened through private media, mostly radio interviews and newspaper coverage (still very popular ways people receive their news). Yasunidos often did several interviews a day for a variety of different radio stations.

Private media attention was due, in part, to these media’s desire to highlight opposition to government policies. In the EC, Correa frequently chided private media and journalists, often asking since when are private media environmentalists? And public media, owned, and financed by the government, followed Correa’s cues. Members of Yasunidos member discuss media coverage:

"La prensa corrupta" (the corrupt press, Correa’s most utilized insult for private media) was a help, but even they had their limitations, and it isn’t as if they gave us publicity all the time…. And the space in the daily La Hora cannot compare to the efforts of the government media, there is no comparison. (PE, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

Yes, for the [private] media, it was also a way for them to express their bad feelings, I believe, and to support a struggle that is so legitimate, so morally strong a theme as Yasunidos, so they said, lets open this space….a space in which

\(^6\) In 2013, 40.4% of the Ecuadorian population used the Internet in the last 12 months, with 47.6% in urban populations and 25.3% in rural areas (INEC, 2013, p. 14).
a movement is so forcefully questioning Correa. (RG, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

In this section, I have examined some of Yasunidos´media practices. This analysis has shown that Yasunidos has relied on a great diversity of media that included a mix of private, public, independent, community allies and outlets. At the same time, we need to take into account that some of the most successful ways in which they gathered allies, fans and followers was through *radio bamba* (word of mouth) by using the strong social structure of the large, extended families. The Yasuní was part of the dinner conversations in many urban households throughout Ecuador, and that is a real triumph in movement standards. Many have agreed, too, that Yasunidos´ greatest source of visibilization was from the President´s nationally televised attacks on the EC. Yasunidos was able to perceive a direct connection between the attacks on Saturdays, and the growing citizen support that poured in on Mondays. Indeed, this is when we can really see the cracks in the edifice, when statist media power reaches some of its limitations. Such limitations will be further explored in the conclusion.

4.8 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter has been the role of movement-based art, media and embodied practices in the cultural battle between two competing imaginaries: the long-standing, hegemonic extractivist one, with a newer, emerging post-development imaginary that has been cultivated by ancestral communities and social movements. After theorizing the notion of a post-development imaginary, I identified some of the factors that have led to its emergence in Ecuador. In fact, I propose that Ecuadorian ecologist, feminist and indigenous social movements have been at the vanguard of imagining,
proposing and implementing alternatives to development in Ecuador, as well as beyond its borders. Certainly, Yasunidos has been able to tap into this rising imaginary, and is one of the reasons the movement received so much citizen support, especially among younger generations.

This chapter seeks to contribute to the growing attention being paid in social movement scholarship to the visual and cultural dimension of protest. McCaughn (2012) argues that the political importance of the images produced by movement artists become apparent when read against prevailing social structures, regimes of accumulation, and systems of representation. To undertake such a task, I made explicit the underlying values of each positon, and analyzed how the poster art used by Yasunidos proposed a different way forward than the dominant paradigm. I argued that Yasunidos’ mediated cultural politics of post-development, by engaging with a hoped-for future free of resource extraction, has been able to challenge and resignify dominant notions of development and extractivism.

Another contribution of the chapter is that it highlights Yasunidos’ movement practices within the context of statist media power. At the same time, I do not reduce movement practices to only being reactive. In fact, for most of the year, the government was on the defensive. By focusing on the multiple ways in which hegemonic notions of development have been interrupted, I suggest that the movement’s communication practices went beyond the use of social media and private media. Certainly, focusing on the use of social media alone, without taking into account the richness of Yasunidos’ diverse symbolic strategies, would not sufficiently capture their mediated cultural politics. The dissemination of the images, on the streets, in the plazas, and through
mediated platforms, worked together in a way that put the society in movement as no other ecological movement before it has achieved, argues Esperanza Martínez of Acción Ecológica. One of the most successful aspects of Yasunidos; mediated cultural politics was its ability to weave all these practices together. This interwoven mediated tapestry reached almost all citizens in Ecuador in 2013-2014, and still resonates several years later.
5.1 The aftermath: the Ethical Tribunal delivers a verdict

On August 15, 2014, exactly one year after President Correa announced that he was bringing to a close one of the most beloved programs of his presidency, the Yasuní ITT Initiative, Yasunidos and allied actors held an ethical tribunal for the rights of Nature. It was preceded by two other ethical tribunals held in Quito that same year; one on January 17, 2014, presided by Vandana Shiva, and the other on April 11, 2014, led by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Since the last tribunal, so much had happened, particularly the elimination of 60% of the signatures that had been delivered, with joy and hope. Yasunidos has called this and related actions, “democracy in extinction.” This Tribunal asked, “What happened with the Yasuní, and who are responsible for what has happened?” That day, with hundreds in attendance, the tribunal delivered its verdict from the following material and symbolic spaces:

… from the skin of the pink dolphins, of the howler monkeys, and the free peoples living in voluntary isolation; from the feet of Yasunidos, all, threatened by oil exploitation and the destruction of the life of the Yasuní, those who defend life and democracy pronounce … (Verdict of the Ethical Tribute for the Rights of Nature, the Yasuní Case, August 15, 2014, p. 2)

The judges of the tribunal went on to list the offenses of the Ecuadorian government, other governments, as well as private and state enterprises that finance the depredation of Nature: violation of: the rights of Nature; the rights of the peoples in
voluntary isolation; the duties of the Constitutional Court to exercise its obligations to uphold the Constitution; and the rights of political participation.

This tribunal, and others like it, have been held because at the government level there was and has been until today, complete impunity in terms of these violations. The signatures were never recounted; the direct democratic mechanism of the national referendum was severely curtailed in a constitutional amendment, and most egregiously, the exploitation of the Yasuní began in earnest on March 28, 2016 by Petroamazonas, Ecuador’s state oil company. Such tribunals are now held to formally register recriminations and demand accountability. The participation of high-profile activists and academics such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Vandana Shiva, among others, attests to the international importance and visibility of the case.

I have chosen to begin the concluding chapter of this dissertation with this verdict to underscore again what was at stake. Yasunidos, despite the social and political changes that were put in motion, and their fight against extractivism, was not able to stop the oil exploitation. This is the sobering reality. At the same time, it is important to account for the important gains, and also on the limitations - of statist media power, and of Yasunidos – for they speak to larger constraints in processes of democratization. This chapter brings into focus my own and others’ reflections about such gains, losses and limitations of statist media power, but also of Yasunidos as a new social movement in its first year. It also seeks to outline some of the contributions of this study, and to suggest directions for future research.
5.2 Statist media power, mediated cultural politics and implications for processes of democratization

The Yasunidos case makes visible the rising tensions between the “so-called” progressive Latin American governments and the social movements that are resisting large-scale extractivist projects across the Americas. In the Ecuadorian context, although the government used its full arsenal of statist power and statist media power to promote resource extraction while delegitimizing those in opposition, it was not able to stifle activism, dissent or the post-development imaginaries that continue to circulate. What I have argued throughout this thesis is that we cannot fully understand what transpired that year without taking into account processes of mediation, on the part of the government, and on the part of Yasunidos. Chapter 3 focused on the implications of statist media power. Chapter 4 examined ways in which Yasunidos deployed mediated cultural politics. I found it necessary to examine its movement practices beyond the media, as they were so rich, and actually helped to counteract statist media power more so than did their social media practices.

In addition to protests and other performative mediations, Yasunidos initiated a direct democracy mechanism, demanding a popular referendum so that citizens could decide the fate of the Yasuní. While their efforts were blocked at every turn, the process sparked a national dialogue. The mediated attacks, the many disruptions to the process, and ultimate annulment of over 60% of signatures evidenced the lack of democratization, and lack of independence of government bodies. And, while the government might have prevented a direct democratic process, it has not been without political cost, as these events continue to reverberate in the collective imaginary. In fact, citizens across Ecuador
now regularly hold unofficial popular referendums in areas where large-scale mining has been proposed so that their voices can be heard. The government is not interested in these processes; in fact, a constitutional amendment that eliminates most referendums was passed. Extractivist practices also involve the erosion of democratization, though they are seldom specified as such in the mainstream literature on the subject. Documenting these anti-democratic practices has also been a contribution of this dissertation.

With respect to statist media power, we have seen in this thesis how the government put in place a novel form of interaction with Ecuadorian citizens that removed the ‘middle man’ that has been prominent for over a century, the private media, once the principal source of diffusion of official and non-official news and information. After 2007, Correa used the EC to speak directly to the nation. We have seen how such mediated, but direct dialogue with the citizenry has sought to push extractivist agendas while delegitimizing its opposition. In Chapter 3, I empirically examined just how media power has been reconfigured, with the state gaining a great deal of symbolic and material mediated terrain in a short span of 5 years.

This thesis also suggests the power of the state to shape imaginaries through its laws, policies, practices and mediated communication. Here we have seen that the Ecuadorian government, for a brief period, played a progressive, generative role. Though the government subsequently broke its promises and laws, it undeniably helped to shape a new generation of ecologists through its support and promotion of the rights of Nature, the rights of uncontacted indigenous peoples, and the innovative proposal to ‘keep the oil in the soil.’ This had the effect to help pry open new propositive terrains for citizens to imagine other ways to understand fragile ecosystems and communities, and our
responsibility towards them. These spaces originated with indigenous and ecological movements, and then supposedly embraced by the new political culture. When the government sought to rescind its pledge regarding the Yasuní, its publicity campaigns turned out to be more durable. Repeatedly, members of Yasunidos told me that one of their best allies was the Yasuni ITT initiative’s campaigns produced by the government.

There is also the question of statist media power, and its effect on processes of democratization. Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated that statist power, combined with statist media power, eroded processes of democratization. De la Torre (2008, p. 281-282) very clearly perceived the grave implications that such media power carried:

In Latin America, the rise of an extreme form of the plebiscitary presidency in the Andean region has turned the permanent campaign into far more than just a package of techniques used to promote presidential popularity: it is a vital practice that presidents use to stay in power and to pursue political projects aimed at reconfiguring power relations. But while the permanent campaign is a tool that presidents wield in their quest to transform politics, its utility in enhancing presidential power comes at the cost of exacerbating a broader problem affecting the quality of democracy in Latin America: the relative absence of functioning mechanisms of accountability. As executive power increases during the course of plebiscitary presidencies, the temptation for presidents to abuse the communications apparatus is substantial. In countries where the struggle for democratic accountability is still ongoing, the need to wage the permanent campaign invites an unfair use of government resources and blurs the distinctions between government and partisan activity. Where civil liberties are not fully consolidated, the chronically confrontational tone of the permanent campaign readily turns the public sphere into a chilly environment for free expression. The polarizing rhetoric characteristic of the permanent campaign runs the risk of turning the president’s real or imagined opponents—in parties, civil society, and the media—into permanent enemies.

Ecuadorian citizens, like many others throughout Latin America, are indeed quite wary of the dangers of excessive executive power. Correa’s campaigns to tarnish the reputation, insult, and render illegitimate his opponents have made citizens deeply
uncomfortable. The talk is not just talk, it is enunciated by the President, and the bully pulpìt has often been followed by repressive judicial, legislative and other actions.

While we need to recognize the force of statist media power, I have also argued that we must attend to the limitations of such power. As Freedman (2014, p. 117) reminds us, media power is not as “predictable, solid or immoveable” as often thought. He suggests media power (and I will add, statist media power) is “open to challenge, particularly when their frames don’t match experiences or aspirations” of its consumers (2014, p. 119). The idea that oil-drilling is an enterprise that brings wealth to the Amazon region did not match Ecuadorian’s decades-long experience as a petrol state, in which the financial resources did not benefit the Amazon region. Even more dissonant, we saw in Chapter 3 that the government’s vision of development did not match its own previously stated vision. In the case of Yasunidos, cynicism only increased once the government introduced the changes, and with them, a media campaign that sought to convince about the positive aspects of drilling for oil. I would argue that the growing cynicism is a sign of the limits of media power.

There is also resistance to statist media power. It is not the passive resistance that is often referred to, as when people critically analyze the media, or just stop listening; rather it can translate into very concrete actions. In Chapter 4, we read about how, on Saturdays, when Yasunidos was the target of criticism, the following day they received even more support. Yasunidos quickly understood that there were positive effects of having President Correa as their main interlocutor. In fact, once they discovered the connection, they often planned actions on Thursdays, so that Correa could respond to them on Saturdays. In Chapter 4, I argued that challenges to media power also arise when
social movements powerfully deploy alternative conceptualizations that resonate with citizens. Yasunidos interrupted the government’s nefarious framing of them by deploying art, embodied actions and media that embraced, and even echoed, post-development imaginaries that were already in motion. One member of Yasunidos discusses his idea about statist media power:

I believe that from a cultural viewpoint, especially in the Sierra (highlands, Quito’s location), Correa’s media power starts to have many limits….Correa insults a lot, and that does not go with the Serrano culture (highland culture) which is respectful. Correa’s communication reaches its limits also because of the lies, like when he denies there is unemployment….The government promotes the defense of the Yasuní, and then decides to drill for oil. Denying the referendum also was a breaking point. 82% of the population wanted a referendum, even Correa followers. This eroded their political support. (PE, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

5.3 Accomplishments and limitations of Yasunidos

Yasunidos provided a powerful, fresh, and courageous stand against planned extractive practices in the Yasuní. Their movement practices helped reinvigorate practices of democracy and citizen participation, at a moment in which participatory democracy was at a very low point in Ecuador. The following citation from a Yasunidos member speaks to how their bid for direct democratic processes brought these issues to the foreground:

With the theme of the referendum, we gained so much support, a lot of affection, and in the imaginary of the people we were and still signify a space that has fought so that people could participate, that all people have the right to say what they want in relation to the Yasuni….Yasunidos generated one of the most important mobilizations we have had in these times, and there have been others called by the indigenous movement. We have generated questions about the attitude of the government with respect to citizen participation. The theme of the Yasuní has also caused many people to distance themselves from the politics of the government, because it has shown that it does not want to dialogue with the people, it doesn’t want to listen, and doesn’t invite participation. That was very
evident in this case. Also, the level of persecution that could be reached by this government, this and many other cases.... (RG, Personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Indeed, as I reflect back on my own sense of the potential importance of this study, I recall that witnessing Ecuadorian citizens reawaken to protest and dissent impacted me, as I had not seen much spirited protest since arriving a year earlier in August 2012. Alberto Acosta, an ecologist, scholar and former politician, and one of the original architects of Yasuní ITT, analyzes the contributions of Yasunidos:

The emergence of Yasunidos was very important for many reasons: in the first place because it gathers the experience and accumulated history of resistance and the construction of alternative proposals. Secondly, because it confronts power and uncovers the lies. And in the third place, and I find this really important, it is able to resonate widely with the Ecuadorian society. It isn’t just the people in rural areas, it isn’t just those who were affected by Chevron-Texaco, but also people who have not directly been affected by extractivism, and I find this significant. Moreover, it opens the door toward the creation of a strong movement using the arguments of the government and tools of the Constitution, in trying to build another form of democracy, another way to do politics, and this is the great legacy of Yasunidos. (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, April 10, 2015).

Another significant point is how Yasunidos not only captured, but helped to deepen a new ecological spirit, which has been gestating in Ecuador for decades. For an individual who has worked on the issue of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation for decades, Eduardo Pichilingue saw another contribution:

Before Yasunidos, to speak of the uncontacted indigenous groups was one thing, and after Yasunidos, it is another, because there are many people that are conscious about what is happening. This has been an effort of Yasunidos. Before 2013, no one had a clue. (Eduardo Pichilingue, personal communication, April 30, 2015).
There have been differences of opinions as to whether or not Yasunidos still constitutes a social movement, as the numbers of people actively involved declined dramatically after CNE eliminated 60% of the signatures. It is a valid dispute. On the one hand, there are those like Carlos Larrea, director of the Center for Environmental Research at the Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar, who proposes that Yasunidos is now much more than a platform for Ecuador’s youth who want to defend nature. Together with the country’s indigenous movement, he argues that Yasunidos has become one of the two strongest social movements in Ecuador (Coryat and Lavinas-Picq, 2016, p. 283).

After listening to many people talk about Yasunidos for several years, I can confidently argue that whether or not one sees them as a movement, or a collective that led a powerful “moment”, there is most definitely a before and after Yasunidos. It is also important to analyze some of the limitations of Yasunidos, their strategies and campaigns. Yasunidos continues to analyze their role that first year and beyond. There are various themes here, and given this is a conclusion, I will only foreground a few perspectives. One theme was Yasunidos’ rejecting the adherence to their movement of politicians. Alberto Acosta shares his perspective:

I do believe there were errors, because there was not sufficient capacity to negotiate with certain actors. It was “collect signatures, but you guys can’t present them…” Yes, there was not enough openness to receive the support they could have received. There were many people who collected signatures but were not integrated. (Alberto Acosta, personal communication, April 10, 2015).

Another limitation, which was not discussed in my thesis but is worth mentioning, is the connection between Yasunidos (and other urban ecologists) and the Amazon. This topic also points toward the need for further research. This interviewee, who has worked
for a decade in Amazonian territories, and also embraces an urban identity, shared his view:

One of Yasunidos’ weaknesses was its lack of connection to the Amazon. If you don’t have an initiative that is born in consensus with local populations, you will have difficulties in those territories. CONAIE and CONFENIAE were critical of the signature collection. For CONFENIAE, it was because Yasundos was entering into their domain – the complexity of the issue of the indigenous peoples in isolation. In general, they had a defensive attitude, as all organizations felt very hurt by the current government. They felt excluded. Also, these are not populations that have a black and white position regarding resource extraction. They have accepted it to a certain extent, and have been deceived. And in some measure they have accepted it because they haven’t had an actor with which they could contrast, and analyze the situation. The greatest risk for me is that ecologists risk divorcing themselves from the local populations because their agendas don’t necessarily coincide. (SD, personal communication, May 9, 2015).

There were Yasunidos chapters in the Amazon (Lago Agrio, Macas, Puyo, Tena) but the terrain is highly complex, given community divisions about the issue of resource extraction. After the CNE disregarded 60% of the signatures, many members of Yasunidos began to travel to the Yasuní and other parts of the Amazon to work with local populations. Members of Yasunidos from other regions have continued to work in their own localities in anti-extractivist initiatives.

Finally, I mention here what was perhaps the biggest blow dealt to Yasunidos, the way in which they were treated by the CNE and other government agencies after they delivered the signatures. Some Yasunidos members have seen this moment as its lowest point. They were so confident that they could collect the needed signatures, they did not plan for a loss. They didn’t foresee the dirty government campaign that would be launched against them. This translated into another limitation, not of Yasunidos, but of the citizenry, the lack of mobilization in the face of such deception. One member analyzes that moment:
At that moment I believe that everyone fell into apathy, I even felt apathetic. I had to fight against my own apathy. I mean, the power of the government seemed so immense, that we could not stop….we made such a huge effort, we succeeded, we had it, and it doesn’t function. When that happened, and people began to fall into apathy, there was a certain break up of some Yasunidos groups in some parts of the country, and that is the moment in which the government hits us with all their force, and begins saying that we are losers, that we couldn’t do it, we didn’t achieve it, and they begin communicating that we are liars… media power and apathy won. It was a bit of both. The shock of this forced defeat, the media power of the government, came together at the same point and our “democracy in extinction” campaign didn’t work. People no longer wanted to be involved. Well, this has changed over time. This past year (2015) has been important as people are mobilizing again, and they also mobilize for the Yasunidos. And this is important, a recognition that we were done an injustice….that we did collect the signatures but an authoritarian and corrupt government did not permit the referendum to go through….Yasunidos is far from gone…. (BB, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

Yasunidos suffered a huge loss; citizens suffered a huge loss; the lack of institutionalization of state agencies was exposed; and the Yasuní and its inhabitants are suffering the elimination of the initiative to keep the oil in the soil. Still, people continue to mobilize, and, what happened still lives in the memory of Ecuadorians. Since then dozens of local struggles against extractive projects have been waged by Yasunidos and other collectives. Now, other urban collectives ally with the Shuar communities to fight against mega-mining in their communities. I conclude this section with the words of a Esperanza Martínez, who has been waging anti-extractive struggles for 30 years:

There was this strike, and the core group remained together, though the theme is not currently on the national agenda, it is on territorial agendas. I continue to see Yasunidos as a social movement. They are a voice, people still want to know what they think about the issues. I heard one young guy say “we have a brand.” They have an identity. On May 1st (2016) we went out to march with our drums, and people felt that they could join in with us, it is a space where people who want change can be….The impact of Yasunidos has been important. More than anything I believe that the contribution of Yasunidos was having put the society in its totality in movement. (Esperanza Martínez, personal communication, July 22, 2016).
5.4 Contributions of the dissertation

To conclude, my dissertation argues that a communication perspective is necessary to grasp how the Yasuní mediated ecological conflict has played out. I examined how the Ecuadorian government has used its expanded media power to try to convince Ecuadorians that extractivism in the Yasuní brings wealth, development and *Buen Vivir*. I then examined how Yasunidos, lacking substantive media power, deployed mediated cultural politics that project alternative ways of thinking, being, and acting. Such symbolic power created and circulated by Yasunidos and many others has helped us understand some of the limitations of statist media power. We have seen how multi-million dollar campaigns can be received with deep cynicism, and countered by low-budget, horizontal citizen communication and cultural production.

This dissertation project hopes to make theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions, above all, to the growing literature that analyzes the intersection between social movements and media. It also contributes to a much needed discussion about the neo-extractivist politics of the wave of progressive government, and the social movements that struggle against them. Theoretically and methodologically, I also contribute to a body of scholarship about media power by mainly focusing on the statist media power, its excesses and limitations, in a Latin American progressive government. Certainly, the Ecuadorian media system, and the vast changes it has undergone, deserves attention due to the complexity of the issues at hand and implications for the democratization of the media in Ecuador and the region.

Regarding my other theoretical-methodological framework, that of mediated cultural politics, I have argued and demonstrated that attention to the mediated cultural
politics of post-development are movement practices that deserve close study. Moreover, beyond the importance of understanding this new wave of movements, there needs to be attention to the way in which culture, media and politics are interrelated in current disputes between governments and social movements. The mediated, embodied and cultural strategies of this growing continental movement need to be seen as an integral part of the struggle, and here there is rich material for further research.
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