

Extractive Politics, Media Power, and New Waves of Resistance Against Oil Drilling in the Ecuadorian Amazon: The Case of Yasunidos

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This essay examines a highly mediated socioenvironmental conflict between the Ecuadoran government and a social movement called Yasunidos. The dispute focuses on the government's proposal to drill for oil in the Yasuní, one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet, located in the Ecuadoran Amazon. Whereas the government has argued that oil drilling is necessary to reduce poverty and develop the region, Yasunidos has argued that such policies lead to environmental damage, increased poverty, and the extinction of indigenous peoples. I chart the emergence of this movement, examining how Yasunidos has contested not only the decision to drill for oil but the notion of development deployed by the government. It has done so in the streets, plazas, political institutions, and diverse media platforms.

Keywords: Ecuador, batalla mediática (media battle), journalistic field, social movements, Yasunidos, extractivism, Amazon, socioenvironmental conflict, Yasuní ITT, media power, cultural politics

Introduction

This essay examines a highly mediated socioenvironmental conflict between the Ecuadoran government and a recent social movement called Yasunidos. The dispute focuses on the government's proposal to drill for oil in the Yasuní, one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet, located in the Ecuadoran Amazon. The broader context for this study is the increasing tensions between the so-called *gobiernos progresistas* (progressive Latin American 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 (Gudynas, 2013; Ospina, Lander, Arze, Gómez, & Alvarez, 2013; Stahler-Sholk, 2014; Svampa, 2011).

As a point of departure, I argue that a communications perspective is crucial in examining state-social movement relations. This is particularly relevant in Ecuador, where the government has used its media power to justify its extractive politics and question the legitimacy of citizens and social movements who oppose such practices. I address two related questions: (1) How has the Correa government used its

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media power to build consensus for its extractivist politics? (2) How has the Yasunidos social movement confronted the government's media power by deploying alternative conceptualizations of extractivism, development, and *Buen Vivir*? *Buen Vivir*, an indigenous concept integrated into the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, points to sustainable, noncapitalist models of development in which living beings and the natural environment take precedence over material wealth (Gudynas, 2012).

Analyzing these questions sheds light on the cultural battle being waged over the meaning of extractivism in 21st-century Latin America, the interplay of democratizing processes led by social movements, and increasingly undemocratic practices of extractivist states (Gudynas, 2013; Svampa, 2011, 2013, 2015). In referring to processes of democratization, I follow Latin American scholars who, rather than analyzing democracy as a specific kind of regime, view processes of democratization as "spaces of experience and experimentation that arise from specific historical, geographical and cultural conditions" (Ramirez, 2012, p. 115).

The study is situated at the intersection of social movement scholarship and media studies, and it seeks to contribute to an understanding of the effects of media power in state–social movement disputes about extractivism in Latin America. Although studies about antiextractivist social movements are increasing, few take into account the communicative dynamics between movements and governments. Similarly, those studies that address structural changes in Latin American media institutions often focus on the conflict between governments and private media but neglect social movements (De la Torre, 2013; Waisbord, 2013). There are, however, exceptions to what Downing (2008) has described as a "divorce" between the fields of communication and social movement scholarship. A growing body of transdisciplinary research that examines what I call "new activist cultures" has made important strides in analyzing media use by 21st-century social movements (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; Costanza-Chock, 2014; Cox, Mattoni, Berdnikovs, & Ardizzoni, 2010; Juris, 2012; Nanabhay & Farmanfarmanian, 2011). However, although they capture new media practices of social movements, few studies analyze how such practices interpellate government discourse. This essay contributes to this research by exploring how social movement mediation can interrupt state media power.

Theoretical-Methodological Frameworks

I have brought together two theoretical-methodological frameworks—media power and mediated cultural politics—to analyze the communicative politics of the government, on the one hand, and of Yasunidos on the other, as they engage in broader cultural struggles over meanings of extractivism, development, and *Buen Vivir*.

Media Power

Following Nick Couldry's (2003) conceptual elaboration, media power refers to media's symbolic and material dimensions, its definitional power, which influences and shapes the whole of social space. Drawing on Bourdieu (1989), Couldry asserts that media power is generated in and across fields, particularly the journalistic and political fields. Couldry extends Bourdieu's concept of the metacapital of the state, which refers to state power over other fields. Couldry notes that only the media's metacapital

can compete with the state's metacapital. In the Ecuadorian context, the government's media power potently traverses the journalistic and political fields, impacting all fields of power and social space. Hence, media power is a critical site where I interrogate symbolic struggles between the government and social movements.

The Reconfiguration of Statist and Media Power in Ecuador

Correa's "Citizen's Revolution" has stood for the refounding and strengthening of the state to take back control of national development from the grips of neoliberal governance and to redistribute social wealth toward a new political, social, and economic order. However, despite its name, such strengthening of the state has largely left citizens out of the picture. In fact, political power has become increasingly concentrated in the Executive power, with the National Assembly, the Constitutional Court, and other branches of government playing a subservient role (Ospina et al., 2013). At the same time, the government is a recent, powerful entrant in the journalistic field and, therefore, a defining actor in both the political and journalistic fields. The Ecuadorian government—particularly President Correa, who is the government's main spokesperson—generates metacapital from a dominant position in these fields. It has appropriated a public good, the media, and has used it to construct social reality.

The government has been able to reconfigure media power symbolically and materially in three main ways:

1. Through its role as a major actor in the journalistic field as owner and producer of print, TV, radio, and Internet. Public media, which did not exist before Correa came to power, largely reflects the government's perspectives. It has grown from 0% to occupy 17% of radio and television broadcasting. The government also spends millions of dollars on propaganda, exceeding \$71 million in 2012 (Ortiz, 2014). It also has made wide use of *cadena*s (the obligatory airing of government messages distributed across public and private media) to disseminate its perspectives, not only during emergencies. Finally, Correa has a weekly television and radio show.
2. Through threats, personal attacks, sanctions, judicial actions, and imprisonment against those who criticize and oppose its actions, particularly journalists and social movement actors. Most verbal attacks are personally delivered by Correa on his television and radio show. This has created a context in which journalists and media outlets are cautious about what they report.
3. Through legislation, including the passage of the Ley Orgánica de Comunicación (LOC, Organic Communication Law) on June 14, 2013. It contains several articles that can lead to sanctions for individuals and media organizations. For example, Article 26 discusses *linchamiento mediático* (media lynching), which prohibits the dissemination of information in the media that can impact an individual's public credibility. This is widely perceived as an effort to limit criticism of public officials and policies (Lavin, 2013, para 2). Other laws and decrees hamper citizens' and social organizations' ability to criticize government actions, engage in advocacy, and protest. Decree 16, passed on June 4, 2013, gives the government the power to close any social organization

considered a threat to national security. The Código Orgánico Integral Penal (Organic Integral Penal Code), which became law on August 10, 2014, includes several articles that are interpreted as repressing social protest. Article 345 deems many activities historically related to social protest as sabotage, such as paralyzing public services. These laws have created a context in which protest is discouraged, questioned, and criminalized.

Taken together, these strategies have resulted in a dramatic increase in the government's symbolic and material media power. The government has increased its ability to advance its own agenda at the same time that it has used such power to intimidate, attack, and criminalize citizens, journalists, and social movements. These strategies become apparent in the Yasunidos case study.

To make visible the intersection of media metacapital and state metacapital, I draw examples from the *Enlace Ciudadano* (Citizen's Link), a television show that is the main platform for the government to communicate its agenda and ideological course. Running three and a half hours, *Enlace* is a weekly program aired on Saturdays. It is transmitted from a different town or city in Ecuador each week, and is aired nationally on more than 400 radio stations and on national television. *Enlace* is viewed, heard, and written about by supporters and detractors alike (Cerbino et al., 2014; De la Torre, 2013). It exemplifies the government's metacapital. It is the site where the political and journalistic fields converge, where the government not only disseminates its perspectives with compelling arguments, images, and testimonials in the presence of a supportive audience but carries out a mediated battle against its perceived enemies.

The concept of media power has mainly been applied to media systems and institutions in liberal democracies (Couldry, 2003; Freedman, 2014), where corporate media and governments often share common interests. However, although private media has historically been a dominant force in Ecuador, during the period under discussion, the government acquired unprecedented media power given the collusion of state and media metacapital. Moreover, the government and private media are political opponents (Cerbino et al., 2014). Public media, far from the ideal of pluralism, faithfully represents the government's version of reality.

Mediated Cultural Politics

This essay extends Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar's (1998) cultural politics framework. These authors use the concept to draw attention to "how social movements operate at the *interface* of culture and politics" (p. 8). By simultaneously examining "the cultural in the political and the political in the cultural" (p. 8), these scholars propose that cultural politics is enacted "when movements deploy alternative conceptions of 'woman, nature, race, economy, democracy or citizenship' that trouble and resignify dominant discourses and practices" (p. 6).

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. They do not possess large amounts of capital in the political, journalistic, or economic fields. So how can we account for different forms of capital (such as social or moral capital) that interrupt the government's media power? I propose that a mediated cultural politics framework can shed light on processes that a sole focus on media power might not detect.

I draw on Jesus Martín-Barbero's understanding of mediation as sociocultural manifestations that traverse and give meaning to the process of communication (Gámez, 2007). It displaces a restrictive focus on the media for one that focuses on social actors and processes that shape meanings and social imaginaries.

The notion of mediated cultural politics is crucial for understanding how Yasunidos has mobilized counterhegemonic meanings, proposed alternatives to the prevailing order, and shaped collective imaginaries. Mediated cultural politics includes different kinds of mediations, such as social media, alternative media, and myriad artistic and cultural manifestations incorporated into protest actions. Scholars such as John Downing (2000) have been emphasizing these forms of action for years.

Working in tandem, the two conceptual lenses—media power and mediated cultural politics—make visible not only the contentious communication between the government and Yasunidos but the types of capital available to each. I propose that mediated cultural politics is the underside of media power. If those with media power have greater economic and political capital, and therefore capacity to represent social reality, movements enacting mediated cultural politics construct counterhegemonic representations from below using available cultural and social resources. A mediated cultural politics framework theoretically challenges the idea that media power always has the upper hand in shaping understandings of reality. My research indicates that state media power can be perceived as excessive, at which point it is met with cynicism. On the other hand, mediated cultural politics, with symbols and images crafted from below and shared horizontally, acquires social and moral capital.

The remainder of this essay focuses on the case of Yasunidos during its first year, beginning with Correa's announcement on August 15, 2013, that he would abandon the project to keep the oil in the ground in the Yasuní National Park. This case study draws on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Quito; in-depth interviews with members of Yasunidos, journalists, and political analysts; monitoring and analysis of Correa's television show, social media sites, and two daily newspapers; and reports related to the case. It also analyzes ways in which Yasunidos has generated communicative capital despite a deficit of media power. One of the limitations of this study is that fieldwork mainly took place in Quito, although Yasunidos collectives emerged in towns and cities across Ecuador. However, the Quito-based collective has been the most visible, due in part to its location in the capital city, which is the seat of government and home to well-known allies of the movement. My own position is that of an engaged researcher. When I came to Ecuador in August 2012, I was impressed by the gains of the Citizens Revolution. However, over time, its contradictions became evident. Additionally, my own investment in alternative development models has only become stronger.

The Emergence of Yasunidos

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. 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

¹ ITT refers to oil blocks Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini, named after rivers in the Yasuní.

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.² Claiming that sufficient funds had not been raised, President Correa announced that the government would proceed with Plan B, oil extraction.

The evening the announcement was delivered, thousands of citizens gathered peacefully in Quito's historic center and plazas around the country to hold candlelight vigils for the Yasuní. These 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 by word of mouth, in traditional media, and on social networks, similar to the way in which word spread in Occupy Wall Street and other recent waves of protest across the globe. Public forums, marches, and protests were organized in cities and towns across Ecuador. One day later, on August 18, the Yasunidos collective was founded by urban young people.

The strong reaction by citizens to the government's decision to exploit the Yasuní was due, in part, to the success of social movements in the late 1990s and early 2000s in rejecting the neoliberal order and, later, advocating for insertion of a set of rights in the 2008 Constitution: the rights of Nature (the first constitution in the world to declare nature a subject of rights) and territorial rights for indigenous peoples and obligatory previous consultation in territories where extractive activities were proposed.

Ironically, indignation was also fueled by the resounding success of the government's Yasuní ITT media campaign, which communicated the irreplaceable value of the Yasuní for Ecuador and the global community. This radical, post-neoliberal proposal fostered pride and ecological consciousness in many Ecuadorians and brought positive international attention to President Correa. Now, in an apparent reversal, the government would launch another multimillion-dollar media campaign designed to build public consent for its plans to move ahead with oil drilling. This time it would not be an easy sell, given the popularity of the initiative. However, those closely following the management of the Yasuní National Park and the Yasuní ITT initiative had reasons to seriously doubt the government's commitment to it, 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 ("Los Taladros Petroleros," 2013; Martinez, 2009; Ross, 2014).

Correa's Plan B was consistent with the overall trends of the *gobiernos progresistas* (progressive governments): a combination of intensifying resource extraction and criminalization of protest. Svampa (2013) proposes that extractivist politics are part of a new economic and political-ideological order, which she refers to as "the commodities consensus" (p. 117), indicating a phase that followed the Washington consensus. This boom in state-led resource extraction has been sustained by the rise in international prices for raw materials.³ Yet, while these practices have fueled economic growth and public investment,

² The presence of the Taramenare 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.

³ These prices declined dramatically in 2014.

they have also led to greater inequality and a new cycle of protests across the Americas focused on the defense of the environment and territories targeted for exploitation (Gudynas, 2012). Svampa (2011) refers to this moment as the "eco-territorial turn, in which new languages of valoration traverse socio-environmental struggles across the continent" (p. 185). Yasunidos is part of a new wave of resistance to these governments' neoextractivist practices.

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," 2014). Bonilla added that many individuals were neither for nor against the government, and had not been previously involved in politics. On its website (<http://sitio.yasunidos.org>), 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.

Although "eco-territorial" (Svampa, 2011) activism has existed in Ecuador for decades with the indigenous movement and other social organizations, the emergence of Yasunidos as a key social actor differs from other movements in that it is a heterogeneous, youth-led collective, independent from political parties and the indigenous movement.

Government Reaction to the Wave of Protests

From the very first night, police in riot gear sought to restrict protestors' access to public spaces—particularly sites imbued with symbolic power, such as the Plaza Grande, a site of protest actions since colonial times. The night of August 17, 2013, the police and members of Alianza País (Correa's political movement) engaged in verbal and physical aggressions against protestors. Photographs and videos of injured protestors and evidence of rubber bullets were shared across social media sites. Protest actions were mainly peaceful, though marchers and police confronted each other at sites where access to streets and plazas was blocked. Protests continued for several days. On August 22, 2013, in a move to return to citizens the right to decide about such a precious resource, Yasunidos filed a formal request in the Constitutional Court to carry out a *consulta popular* (national referendum).

In addition to the use of physical force by the police, one of the particularities of this case has been the intensity of mediated verbal attacks on Yasunidos made personally by President Correa on *Enlace Ciudadano*. Although it is frustrating for a social movement to be misframed by any politician or media outlet, negative constructions and frontal attacks reach another level of symbolic power when a nation's president personally denigrates a movement on national media.

The day following the announcement of the end of Yasuní ITT, during *Enlace Ciudadano* No. 335, Correa mentioned the vigils but was measured in his comments, saying that, thanks to the Revolución Ciudadana (Citizens Revolution), Ecuadorian youth have an ecological consciousness. A week later, after the first wave of demonstrations, Correa initiated a mediated assault against the protests, particularly against Yasunidos.

For the next nine months, the accusations, trivialization, intimidation, and criminalization of Yasunidos and its allies were so numerous that it is beyond the scope of this article to detail (Vásquez, 2015).⁴ Here, I offer examples transmitted during the first few weeks of protest, which highlight the mediated strategies used by Correa to inhibit the movement and its growing number of adherents.

Mediated tactics used by Correa to delegitimize and criminalize Yasunidos included misframing of the protests and specific protesters as violent and insults and threats to sympathetic political and social actors, academics, members of political parties, and journalists. In a parallel move, Correa intensified efforts to justify the decision by providing pro-drilling analyses of the situation. The main arguments employed were that the funds generated were necessary to develop the Amazon. He highlighted the support he had from several mayors in the Amazon region (most of them subsequently lost local elections a few months later).

On *Enlace* No. 336 on August 23, 2013, Correa characterized Yasunidos as manipulated by politicians, "childish ecologists," "the same stone-throwers as always," and 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 *Enlace* 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.

By the next *Enlace*, No. 337, 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 *Enlace* 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 addition to the *Enlaces*, a huge government publicity campaign was deployed. The basic arguments made by the campaign were that (1) the money is needed to eradicate poverty; (2) a large

⁴ See Vásquez (2015) for a detailed account of aggressions against Yasunidos from August 14, 2013, through July 19, 2014.

percentage of the funds would be directed to the Amazon, and (3) extraction would only affect 1% of the Yasuní given the use of "cutting-edge" technology. Investigative reporters and scholars have disputed such claims based on recent extractive activities in the Yasuní (Finer, Pappalardo, Ferrarese, & De Marchi, 2014; "Los Taladros Petroleros," 2013). Large banners that were placed in the Plaza Grande announced that "99% of the Yasuní is intact." In the coming months, several *Enlaces*, including one 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. Public television, newspapers, and radio followed the government's lead, providing positive coverage of government plans and mainly negative editorials about protesters and others who oppose the plans.

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 nine national television stations. Media monitoring in September resulted in documenting the airing of pro-drilling commercials 555 times, with 530 minutes of air time ("Project Yasuni"). 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 air time (Vásquez, 2015).⁵ 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, New York, 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 from the Ecuadorian government for international public relations. Owned by Ecuadorians, it reported expenses of \$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).

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: 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). Social media monitoring of Yasunidos evidenced a reduction in the number of conversations, shares, and likes on its Facebook page. Many public servants admitted that they were hesitant to go to the marches for fear that they or their families would lose their jobs. Second, 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 *Enlaces*, 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.

⁵ Some of these spots can be seen on the blog Otra Educación at <http://otra-educacion.blogspot.com/2014/03/el-cuento-del-99-del-yasuni-o-el-yasuni.html>.

Third, cynicism about the government's media campaign increased, especially the massive expenditure of funds on publicity and the negative framing of Yasunidos on the *Enlaces*. The growing cynicism points to the limits and excesses of media power. In fact, each Saturday that Yasunidos was the target of criticism in the *Enlace*, the following Monday it would receive dozens of phone calls from individuals asking where they could sign the referendum. Yasunidos quickly understood that there were positive effects of having President Correa as their main interlocutor. They often planned actions on Thursdays so that Correa could respond to them on Saturdays.

Movement Mediations

After a few weeks of demonstrations, fatigue coupled with government efforts to criminalize protest gave way to diverse movement practices that brought heightened visibility and helped Yasunidos to build a stronger base of support. Protest actions increasingly integrated artistic and cultural interventions such as weekly *zapateadas* (public, celebratory protest events rooted in Andean culture in which people play music, dance, and sing), art exhibits, carnivals, theater, and street performances. Most of the symbols and images used by Yasunidos did not depict oil contamination. Rather, very much in the spirit of prefigurative politics, they often chose to highlight healthy indigenous communities, diverse wildlife, and clean rivers. These images were created and circulated by artists, citizens, children, and people of all ages. In their literature, press conferences, public appearances, and on the street, they symbolically deployed words and images that expressed nonmaterial wealth, development, and *Buen Vivir*. As much as the government sought to criminalize Yasunidos, these cultural mediations helped to counteract negative representations of the collective. Artistic and cultural expressions in protest were not yet common in Ecuadorian social movements of indigenous, worker, agrarian, and student organizations (although they were in feminist and ecological manifestations).

Unlike the government, Yasunidos lacked its own media outlets and large publicity budgets. However, local and national private media provided ample—mainly positive—coverage of Yasunidos. This was due, in part, to these media's desire to highlight opposition to government policies. In the *Enlaces*, Correa frequently chided private media and journalists, often asking: Since when are private media environmentalists? It was certain that private media made use of the opportunity to highlight dissent, but many individual journalists, as Ecuadorian citizens, were disappointed about the end of the Yasuní ITT initiative. Moreover, journalists who work in private media do not monolithically represent one set of interests, and some hold left-leaning and antiextractivist positions. This was evident in the Yasunidos press conferences, which were symbolically staged and politically charged events. The press table was surrounded by maps of the Yasuní and images of indigenous peoples and flora and fauna that inhabit the Yasuní. During these press conferences, approval of Yasunidos was palpable, with most journalists breaking into applause at the end.

Yasunidos received positive coverage from alternative, Internet-based media, such as online journals and radio. Possessing its own website and Facebook page, Yasunidos used social media to post, aggregate, and disseminate powerful photos, videos, images, graphics, and music combined with alternative proposals, environmental studies, personal testimonies, and its positions, all of which articulated a common ground of struggle among diverse sectors of society. However, given that Internet

access is not universal and that not everyone with access to the Internet uses it to listen to online radio or read political analysis, Yasunidos' reach was limited (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2013).⁶

A notable example in which mediated cultural politics were enacted was in October 2013, when the Huangara Collective, a group of more than 60 Amazonian women leaders, walked from the Amazon to Quito, accompanied by their children and the Indigenous Guard. This act 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 through photos and chronicles the Collective's progress every day of the walk toward Quito. 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 *Enlaces* and elsewhere to present a picture of solid support.

The indigenous women's arrival to Quito was met by a march organized by a diverse set of collectives and individuals. While in Quito, they met with various 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 provides an example of a way in which mediated cultural politics was constructed. The visit brought needed legitimacy to Yasunidos; built relationships across ethnicity, class, and region; and brought new energy to the movement. Direct contact with the indigenous Amazonian women helped fill the need for articulation from below, between Quito and the Amazon. 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.

Direct Democracy and Mediated Cultural Politics

Ramiro Avila, a scholar and one of Yasunidos' attorneys, emphasizes that there are three kinds of democracy inscribed in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution: representative democracy, direct democracy, and communitarian democracy. He argues 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:

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 (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2013, p. 14).

communitarian democracy, which took place in the streets, and direct democracy (Articles 103–107), which was waged through the referendum process.⁷

The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution states that citizens have the right to call for a national referendum on *any* issue they consider important. To do so, they need to gather signatures totaling 5% of the electorate (583,324 signatures at that time). The decision to move forward with the referendum was made by Yasunidos on August 22, 2013, just days after the collective was formed. The signature-gathering campaign, publicized nationally mainly in the streets and through social media, posed the question: Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should indefinitely leave the crude oil in the ground in the ITT, known as Block 43?

The right to gather signatures toward a popular referendum was eventually granted to Yasunidos by the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE, National Elections Board) on October 1, 2013. The six-month process of signature gathering, from October 14, 2013, to April 12, 2014, mobilized members of Yasunidos and volunteers across the country, including citizens who had not yet been involved. Tables were set up and signatures were collected in plazas and outside schools, churches, shopping malls, and other places people gather. Unlike Correa's unilateral decision, this process fostered a citizen-led, national debate on the Yasuní, extractivism, and democracy (asking who has the right to make this decision). During this process, the public had a firsthand opportunity to get to know Yasunidos and debate the issues. 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 to not just gathering signatures but engaging in dialogue with citizens. These face-to-face encounters were able to reach citizens who had not accessed social media campaigns. Also, people's fears were revealed. Signature collectors recounted that many individuals confessed that they were afraid to sign the form because they did not want to lose their government job. They would often bring family members or friends to sign on their behalf. The referendum also brought international attention, including several international petition drives. International allies also posted on social media photos with signs indicating their support of Yasunidos and the preservation of the Yasuní.

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 (Vásquez, 2015). The first irregularity was that 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 Constitutional Court could simply declare the question invalid. Mediated strategies included verbal attacks on social media, likely coming from government-hired "trolls" (people paid to intervene in social media). On November 5, 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. Though it added to a general sense of paranoia, it did not come as a surprise, as Yasunidos members were regularly followed and harassed and their phones tapped. In the *Enlaces*, Correa and other officials stepped up their verbal attacks. Yasunidos was framed

⁷ Avila's intervention took place on January 12, 2015, during the launching of the Yasunidos report by Vásquez (2015).

as a group that received funds from suspect foreign interests (it has maintained that it raised funds from individual donations, members' personal contributions, and the sale of Yasunidos T-shirts). In March, less than a month before the six-month signature-gathering process would end, spots in favor of the exploitation of the Yasuní were aired 191 times (Vásquez, 2015). These strategies, taken together, led to a widespread perception that the government's use of its statist capital and media power was excessive and undemocratic.

During the referendum process, on December 4, 2013, the government announced the closure of the Pachamama Foundation, a nonprofit Ecuadorian organization founded in 1997 that focused on socioenvironmental issues in the Amazon and was against extractive practices. An ally of Yasunidos, the closure of the Pachamama Foundation was legally made possible by Decree 16, which gives the government the power to close any social organization that it considers dangerous to the interests of the nation, or that affects "public peace." The Pachamama Foundation was the first organization to be dissolved under this decree. This act further exposed the lack of tolerance for and democratic treatment of dissenting opinions and undemocratic means for antiextractivist voices.

To underscore how the *Enlaces* were intertwined with government actions, just days before the closure, on November 30, 2014, on *Enlace* No. 350, Correa presented a video that attacked Yasunidos, Acción Ecológica, the Pachamama Foundation, and indigenous leaders. Following the closure of Pachamama, on *Enlace* No. 351, Correa framed nongovernmental organizations as being against the progressive governments and bankrolled by "foreign interests." Although this is undeniable historically in many cases, this particular claim, denied by Yasunidos and without evidence, was likely meant to damage its reputation. There were several attacks on individuals who were openly critical of the government, including two beloved individuals, the caricaturist Bonil and the musician Jaime Guevara. These and many other incidents, too numerous to detail here and occurring within the span of a few months, led to a climate of fear, paranoia, and distress about the way the government was using its state and media metacapital to attack critical actors. Many analysts agree that this series of events in 2013 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, including the attack on Yasunidos (Ospina, 2014).

Signature-gathering efforts were also impeded by the police and private guards. In one case in Quito, the police 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 volunteer to collect signatures. Another intimidating tactic was that police and other individuals took photos of the signature gatherers and signers. The incidents that created the most confusion were when two different groups began parallel referendum processes. One of the groups, Amazonia Vive (Amazon Lives), associated with 30 mayors that were aligned with Alianza País, 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 Block 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. Additionally, the forms designed by Yasunidos and disseminated in the daily newspaper, *El Comercio*, were copied by the other two groups and disseminated the following week in *El Comercio* and other newspapers, the only notable difference being the questions (Vásquez, 2015).

Despite the mediated, physical, and psychological obstacles placed in its path, Yasunidos exceed its own and everyone's expectations and gathered 757,623 signatures. On April 12, 2014, some 55 boxes containing 107,088 signature pages were delivered to the Consejo Nacional Electoral at the culmination of the most joyous march most people could recall. Indigenous youth and women traveled from the Amazon, Yasunidos collectives arrived from across the country, and Afro-Ecuadorans 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. 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 (see Figures 1 and 2). The march was perhaps the most important and vibrant manifestations of Yasunidos' mediated cultural politics.



Figure 1. Yasunidos and supporters deliver boxes of signatures to the Consejo Nacional Electoral. April 12, 2014. Photo by Diana Coryat.



Figure 2. Yasunidos displaying the 55 boxes containing 757,623 signatures to cheering crowds. April 12, 2014. Photo by Diana Coryat.

Democracy in Extinction

Once the boxes were delivered to the CNE, another series of irregularities took place. Three days after the signatures were delivered, on April 15, 2014, the National Elections Board released a video, aired nationally, describing reasons that could lead to the elimination of signatures. Sensing a fraud foretold, members of Yasunidos made a surprise visit to CNE. When they demanded to see the 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 the National Elections Board, and the boxes were hauled away by the military to one of its headquarters. The signature verification process ultimately took place without the consent or supervision of Yasunidos. These events occurred during Easter week, when many people leave Quito to spend time with their families.

The CNE eventually eliminated over 60% of the signatures (these ranged from valid reasons, such as repeated signatures, to those that were deemed unreasonable, including small stains or wrinkles on a form or undecipherable letters). The number of validated signatures finally stood at 496,943, short of the number needed for the referendum. On April 29, 2014, President Correa declared that there would be no referendum. The following day, Yasunidos withdrew from the process, given mounting evidence of fraud by the CNE. 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. This was a very difficult moment for the movement. Yasunidos initiated a campaign called "Democracy in Extinction" for citizens to reclaim their signatures, though this campaign did not achieve much visibility. The elimination of signatures and other irregularities leading up to the denial of the referendum provoked a sense of frustration and despair in many citizens, leading to inaction rather than mobilization. It seemed that the moment of hope and citizen voice was over, at least temporarily.

On October 28, 2014, Yasunidos presented a demand to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights 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 Yasunidos had little hope that the referendum would be approved, because governmental organizations "obeyed one will, that of the President of the Republic. . . . This assumption was confirmed by what happened, and because of this we needed to appeal to international organisms" (Cazorla, 2014, para. 4).

Ironically, on May 22, 2014, the International Day of Biodiversity, the Ministry of the Environment gave Petroamazonas, the state oil company, a license to exploit the Yasuní Blocks 31 and 43. But the story does not end there. Yasunidos and many others are still fighting against extractivism and the current economic model that reigns in Ecuador and across Latin America. They have pledged to *yasunizar* (as a movement, call attention to) other territories threatened by extractivism.

Conclusion

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. In the Ecuadorian context, although the government has used its full arsenal of statist and media capital to promote resource extraction while delegitimizing social movements, it has not been able to stifle such activism. The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution has continued to provide citizens with legal arguments with which to hold the government accountable.

This essay proposes that a communication perspective is necessary to grasp how the Yasuní socioenvironmental conflict has played out. 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*, but Yasunidos, lacking such cross-cutting metacapital, deployed mediated cultural politics that project alternative ways of thinking, being, and acting. We have seen how multimillion-dollar campaigns can be received with deep cynicism and countered by low-budget, horizontal citizen communication.

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. Although their efforts were blocked at every turn, the process sparked a national dialogue. The mediated attacks, the many disruptions to the process, and the ultimate annulment of over 60% of signatures evidenced the lack of democratization and lack of independence of government bodies. And, although 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, thanks in part to Yasunidos. In fact, citizens across Ecuador now regularly hold unofficial popular referenda in areas where large-scale mining has been proposed so that their voices can be heard. This is clearly an unwanted process, because a constitutional amendment that eliminates the referendum option has been proposed.

These communicative dynamics are complex, yet they reveal the limits of media power. I propose that further research is needed about the intersection of state media power and mediated cultural politics in state–social movement relations.

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