

## The Development of Community Media in Latin America

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**Vicente Brunetti**

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF ASUNCIÓN  
Paraguay

An analysis of community media reveals that communication is essential in any material and symbolic expression. At the same time, it is a commodity and a necessity as it is capable of enabling change and social transformation. Communication goes beyond media. Luis Ramiro Beltrán notes that communication is not necessarily democratic:

what happens under that label is often a monologue in which a powerful source dominates a passive receptor...To be democratic...[communication] needs to take place in conditions of equal access, dialogue and free participation.... It would seem that we still ignore that building a participating society requires democratising communication, the media and the demythologisation of communication professionals as well as the strengthening of the people's communication abilities.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein, Alejandro Alfonzo refers to the misunderstandings that may occur when relating education and communication. He says that one of the causes is a “limited vision of communication that relates it only to mass media (press, radio and television)”, adding that the media are an important part of the process but they do not provide a framework for it or define it. Communication comes before the media and it is inherent to the human condition; the media are instruments of communication. When speaking in favour of the democratisation of

knowledge and social access to information technology, he says “there are clear areas for democratisation, such as education, health and each citizen’s day-to-day life, when a person relates to the social environment and the immediate surroundings that affects him or her... [This] depends on the citizen’s real capacity to have access to and use communication-information services.”<sup>2</sup>

Communication is thus not just a tool for dissemination. It is a mechanism for life, an essential component for human rights and for building citizenship. These reasons contribute to turn communication into a social benefit. Thus, when the right importance is given to it, people can develop individual and social communication processes to prepare society for the challenges of national and regional integration.

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### **The Logic of Educational-Cultural and Socio-Community Profitability**

The activities of media are related to the principles of profitability. These principles help to identify differences in the media because the dominant logic rules their objectives and interests, their actions and their ends. Michel Senecal, for example, refers to a commercial logic, to a state logic and to a social and cultural movement logic.<sup>3</sup> Rafael Roncagliolo distinguishes a logic of economic profitability that characterises commercial mass media; a political profitability logic identifiable in state mass media or those media which belong to or are associated with political parties; and the logic of socio-cultural profitability that defines community media.<sup>4</sup>

There are media in certain countries (some are community media, others not) that adjust their functioning to education and cultural profitability. If a mass medium adds an educational element, it easily turns into an active agent whose educational function improves the conditions and abilities of the public. That logic stimulates and promotes hopes and expectations in people over the medium and long term. It is a long alliance between the media’s educational possibilities and society’s cultural horizons.

These media are sensitive to knowledge and learning, and they respect a scale of values. They tie creativity and expression to the local culture. This explains their positive impact that helps to modernise social thought and allows local and regional integration. They help people to have real expectations and to understand ways of improving their lives. Working with the possibilities of an educational-cultural logic is to improve community capital that money cannot buy: sensitivity, justice and a

real hope for peaceful coexistence, development of intelligence and the increase of knowledge and wisdom. Those media that respond to social-community profitability take on the role as effective facilitators of social democratisation and can stir up material and symbolic production more in line with the needs of the community.

The investments made by these media are not just in pursuit of an economic profitability as commercial principles demand. Instead, they establish a relationship between benefits and costs and objectives. People and the improvement of the social system are at the centre. Therefore, benefits refer to social benefits, as in society's basic rights, such as free access to information, to communication, to education, to science and culture. And they are not just benefits for one individual, a business or a privileged group. Because people are at the centre of the system and because they try to promote social improvements, these media get closer to the objective of democratising communications. In other words, at a first stage, a latent democratisation process awakes in people. In a second stage, people choose a more democratic form of communication.

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### **Experiences in the Development of Community Media in Latin America**

Community media in Latin America have responded to different people and situations. But there is some common ground due to the region's strong underdevelopment. As Beltrán says:

From the 'papelistas pasqueros' (distributors of wall posters) of past times to the 'radialistas comunitarios' (community radio people) of today there has not been a lack of those who have struggled to place communication at the service of democratisation. Over the last 45 years that struggle has taken several forms, it has involved several actors and it has obtained worthy successes both theoretical and practical.<sup>5</sup>

Many countries consider their frontiers, their energy resources or their means of communication as strategic areas that need to be looked after and defended. But it is not generally recognised that mass media are equally strategic, not for defence but for development. Without them a country's development would be slowed down or at least would not be promoted. When poverty indices show that there is a deterioration that affects more and more members of society, it is necessary to seek effective ways of fighting this tendency. One way is through popular and mass

education that cannot be offered in schools because some members of society have left it too early or have not had access to it. Radio is a good option because of its extensive coverage, the speed by which its messages can reach their target audiences and its relatively low cost.

Without a massive international effort and the participation of community media it would not have been possible to defeat smallpox, polio or measles in most countries. The dangers of HIV/AIDS are still present partly because there has not been sufficient, appropriate and timely information about it. In the commercial media, economic profitability prevails and in other situations it is the logic of political profitability that seeks an easy clientele, eroding the needs of the unprotected social sectors. Thus community media are more important than ever and educational, popular or community radio are especially so, not only for their positive accomplishments in the region, but because they can be both from the communities and at their service.

The simple production, great mobility and relative low costs, the possibility of listening to it while performing other activities, the increasing presence of receivers in vehicles and its service vocation make radio an ideal community medium. Apart from these more obvious advantages, it can create a powerful bond among the listeners and be an important source for the expression of their worries and ideals.

Community radio started in Latin America at the end of the 1940s with radio schools in Colombia and the educational radios that appeared in 1947-48 in many countries, in much the same way as they had in Central Europe and England in the 1930's. In the 1950s, there were the miners' radios and the peasant radios in Bolivia. Later on, there were the radio cabins in Latacunga, Ecuador, the rural cassette-forums of Mario Kaplún in Uruguay and a similar experience with the Pila Project in Guatemala.<sup>6</sup>

The two basic models of radio schools that started to operate in Latin America used a combination of media with an educational agent at their base to maintain an interpersonal/face-to-face relationship with the participants. The first, the Integrated Fundamental Education (EFI) model was used by the Popular Cultural Action (ACPO) in Colombia; the Federate Schools in FEGER in Guatemala; the Honduran Popular Cultural Action (ACPH) in Honduras; the Popular Radio Schools (ERPE) in Ecuador; and the Institute of Popular Culture (INCUIPO) in Argentina. In this model,

education has a promotional sense and teachers have the responsibility of organizing, supervising and evaluating the group of participants. They also promote and stimulate, in each community, the necessary steps for the improvement of the conditions and the quality of life of the population. In general, the teachers are volunteers and they concentrate in a town or a peasant community as educational agents who work face-to-face with participants at a radio school. Their main task is to facilitate and stimulate the expression of culture in the community.

The second model originated in the Canary Islands, Spain, and was adopted in Latin America by Radio Santa María in the Dominican Republic; the Faith and Happiness Radio Institutes (IRFA) in Venezuela and Bolivia; the Costa Rican Institute for Radio Education (ICER) in Costa Rica; as well as by stations in Guatemala, Ecuador and Paraguay. In this model, the teachers are called 'correctors, guides or trainers'. Their role in the teaching-learning experience, individual or in a group, when stimulating participants, is to complement and enrich the information received by each person, and to create opportunities for discussion, exercises or practical applications to reinforce what has been learned.<sup>7</sup>

In Latin America there are other important and more recent experiences of communication that started from the impulse to denounce anti-democratic situations where communication options in favour of the dominant communities went against the majority of the people.

In many countries, some small educational and community radios prospered, generally with the backing of the Catholic Church that helped whenever it could with ideas, people, places and contacts. Some of these addressed the local peasants and others the new rural immigrants who lived in great numbers on the outskirts of the cities. The best representatives of these are in Mexico, Guatemala (Federate Schools), Honduras (ACPH), Nicaragua and Costa Rica. In Costa Rica in 1983, the ICER launched a programme of 24 community radios managed by an association of community organisations. The staff was voluntary and the funds came from local subscribers, limited advertising and sporadic subventions from local government. This project received support from the Ministry of Communications and has its own licensing category. Also outstanding are those in the Dominican Republic (Radio Santa María), Argentina (INCUPO), Perú and Ecuador (ERPE). The latter, as already mentioned, suc-

successfully created the radio cabins strategy, which are posts for rural recordings from where peasants with some education send their dispatches to a central radio station that broadcasts them.

In countries such as Uruguay, Venezuela and Guatemala, the rural cassette-forums strategy has given good results. This is a dialogue system among groups of farmers based on the circulation of tapes with debates. It links rural organisations and creates a means of communication among peasant co-operatives. In many other countries the popular reporters strategy has been successful. It consists of the training of volunteers to act as correspondents for educational and community radios in small communities.

In Paraguay in 1988, a 'radio-speaker' surfaced, and after the coup of 1989 there were four. In 1992, they started the first Riverside Network of Popular Loudspeakers, and with some projects in FM radio they formed the Network of Popular Radios. The Paraguayan Association for Community Radio, 'Comunica' was founded in October 1995. It started as the Commission for Promoting Community Radio in Paraguay and in September 1994 it wrote a "Blueprint for Community Radios under the Special Regime of Concessions". These were joined by an educational and public-service radio of the University System of Communication of the Polytechnic School, which forms part of the Universidad Nacional de Asunción, which began broadcasts in 1994. The operational costs, the strong pressure from commercial radios and the legal difficulties due to the lack of a license mean that some of these experiments are short-lived. The Polytechnic Radio is still on the air. The Network has some 10 stations broadcasting and another five are in different stages of preparation. Comunica has more than 20 stations on the air and another 15 in different stages of preparation.

Community media have emerged throughout Latin America and the Caribbean mainly in the form of radio. They are similar to those that promote people's participation and the defence of their interests in other parts of the world. For example, in Canada they are known as community radios, while in Europe they chose the name of associative radios. In Africa, they are referred to as rural radios and in Australia, as public radios. In Latin America the variety of names reflects different practical experiences: educational radio in Bolivia, free radio in Brazil, popular radio in Ecuador, community radio in Paraguay, participating radio in El Salvador, native radio in México, citizen radio in some parts, interactive radio in others and communal radio in yet others.

Over all, it is still necessary to strengthen these community media, so that they can demonstrate that it is possible to protect the population by adopting a Code of Ethics that commercial media have not been able to develop and, even less, respect. In addition, they can avoid the worst vices of an aggressive advertising industry of consumerism and can accelerate the democratisation process. And they could do all this while earning good and respectable audience figures, with quality planning, constant training and a real presence in the community.

In addition to radio, popular theatre has been a traditional means of expression in Latin America. It is at the centre of community groups, students, teachers, religious communities, sport groups, co-operatives, unions and political parties. Its strength lies in allowing and stimulating the expression of social classes with few privileges. It commonly uses local languages and maintains their own narrative structures. There have also been many experiences using visual images, some of which have been important and promising. The International School of Cinema, Television and Video (“Escuela de Tres Mundos”) in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, has formed several generations of good video makers. There were encounters of Latin American video-makers in Cochabamba, Bolivia in 1989, and in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1990. In Brazil, Fernando Santoro and Regina Festa promoted an Association for the Use of Video in Popular Organizations which has helped several organisations to make use of this means of communication. In Chile and Perú, Manuel Calvelo made an imaginative and innovatory use of video for the education of peasants. In Perú, the Centre for Popular Communication of Villa El Salvador, a popular neighbourhood in Lima, resorted to modest loudspeakers and simple newspapers, community press, video and cartoons until they started a radio station and later a television channel. In Sandinista Nicaragua, several grassroots organisations had simple Super 8 equipment to produce cinema shorts.

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### **Technologies Used**

In Latin America the technology used is the one that is available. In terms of equipment, the technology ranges from simple loudspeakers to communicate with neighbours from the block, to small radio stations, most of them FM, with more and more in FM-Stereo. Some are broadcasting in AM, Medium Wave and others

in Short Wave. Depending on the country and the degree of access and safety of telephone lines, there are also a few experiments on the Internet. There are other stations which, with great difficulty, have built terrestrial parabolic antennas that can get a specific signal from satellites with the right decoder. The options are programmes from the Satellite Division of Radio Nederland (RNW) from Holland; the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) from England; the Deutsche Welle (DW) from Germany; Radio France International (RFI) from France; the Voice of America (VOA) from the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The diversity of technologies used applies not only to the experiences in radio but also to cassette-forums, recordings in video and television programmes, as well as to the preparation and distribution of daily, weekly, by-weekly and monthly papers and leaflets, instructions, notebooks, books and manuals on a vast variety of subjects.

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### **Latin American Policies Related to Community Media**

Latin America performed a pioneering role with regard to national communication policies when it proposed to optimise and rationalise “social communication systems by consensus and legal procedures”.<sup>9</sup> The American Convention on Human Rights was signed in Costa Rica on 22 November 1969. Article 13 on freedom of thought and of expression is a milestone in the consolidation of concepts guaranteed in the main humanitarian declarations and international agreements that promote the free exercise of communication as a universal human right.

In the 1970s, the desire to promote the democratisation of communications grew without precedent. It was a decade for proposals on national policies of communication in line with an ideal world that would achieve a new international information and communication order. The conservative mercantile communications system was questioned and new ways of alternative communication were proposed with revised concepts and research, teaching and production practices in the communication field.

UNESCO sponsored the first meeting of experts on national communication policies in the region, held in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1974. The recommendations and conclusions of that meeting were incorporated in the working documents of

ministers and other government officials who, in 1976, attended the Inter Governmental Conference on Communication Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, sponsored by UNESCO in San José, Costa Rica.

In most European countries, the belief in the logic of socio-cultural profitability in the mass media relates to an ideal of a public service. In Latin America, on the other hand, the logic of socio-cultural profitability, in general, has not been developed by the State, and, obviously, even less by commercial mass media or by non-governmental organisations.

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### **Training Programmes for Developing Community Media in Latin America**

There are three organisations which provide training for the development of community media in Latin America. The first, the Latin American Association for Radio Education (ALER)<sup>10</sup> was the result of an initiative to unite the radio schools of Latin America, combining 18 radio and educational institutions from 12 countries. Experiences with informal education programmes were added later and these turned into an association of mass popular radio. To date, it has about a hundred members from 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. ALER has more than a million students in radio courses and more than 15 million who participate in university programmes on agriculture, health and other development programs. Its objectives are: to modernise popular radio and strengthen them as spaces to build democracy; to revise their programmes taking into account the demands of their context and the reality of their audiences; to carry out their work as dynamic enterprises; and to be familiar with and introduce new technologies. In addition, they aim to consolidate projects among popular radios at a national, regional and continental level to ensure their impact and presence and to strengthen ALER's identity and actions as a Christian association of regional scope. Recently, ALER launched its 'network of networks' project.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to it, the whole continent of Latin America tunes in daily through satellite to hear the voices of correspondents from every country.

The World Association of Community Radios (AMARC)<sup>12</sup> represents the world movement of community radios and offers a variety of services in train-

ing, exchange and representation to its members. It has some 450 associate radios and radio production centres across Latin America and a presence in all the countries of the region. It offers workshops in radio, training methodology and the building of small radio stations, and gives advice on the management and legalisation of community radios.

The Communication Networks for Latin America and the Caribbean (or G8)<sup>13</sup> have the following lines of action: to organise and carry on seminars, workshops and festivals; to train and educate; to produce and edit printed and audio-visual material; to research; and to advise. Their strategies deal with: legislation, to support the creation of a legal framework and reform of present telecommunications laws that are obsolete and discriminating; training and education, to respond to the needs of communicators; and public relations, to fight for democratisation in communications.

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### **Final Observations**

The experiences in community media in Latin America have not been exclusively with rural areas or marginalised communities. Many have been developed within urban areas and not necessarily in marginalised communities. The legitimisation of community media does not have to do with their geographic location or with the community's marginal character, but with the development of a collective conscience to define the experience.

The expression 'community media' or 'media for the community' does not necessarily mean that because they are intended for the 'community' or are from the 'community', they have to be small, rustic, simple and the result of the work of some neighbourhood volunteers. Community media are not restricted to cheap or modest technology. This does not mean that they need to have the latest in technology. It means that the common effort can accomplish what many governments cannot do. The future is promising because there are more and better options for community advancement. Community media are born in spaces where there is participation, sharing and building of citizenship. The experiences can be multiplied when the logic of educational-cultural and socio-community profitability is respected.

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## Notes

1. 'L. R. Beltrán when receiving the Prize McLuhan-Teleglobe-Canadá'. *Chasqui* No. 9, Quito, 1984, pp.79-80.
2. Alejandro Alfonzo, 'Comunicación para la educación y el conocimiento, bases del ejercicio de la ciudadanía', in: Tablero Nº 48, *Revista del Convenio Andrés Bello*. Bogotá, 1994, pp. 13; 22-23.
3. Michel Senecal, *Televisión y radios comunitarias. Teoría y práctica de una experimentación social*. Colección Nuevos Signos, 1ª ed., Ed. Mitre, Barcelona, 1986.
4. Rafael Roncagliolo, 'Libertad de expresión radiofónica' in: Revista *Chasqui* Nº 56, Quito, 1996.
5. Luis Ramiro Beltrán, 'La Comunicación: trama de la sociedad y savia de la cultura' in: Tablero Nº 48, *Revista del Convenio Andrés Bello*, Bogotá, 1994.
6. Washington Uranga and José María Pasquini, *Precisiones sobre la radio*, 1ª ed., Ediciones Paulinas, Buenos Aires, 1988, p.124. Luis Ramiro Beltrán, *Comunicación para la democracia: La radio popular y educativa de América Latina*, Festival de Radioapasionados y Televisarios de América Latina y el Caribe. CIESPAL, Quito, 1995.
7. Silvia S. de Pereda, 'Educación radiofónica en América Latina' in: *La radio escolar en Europa*, 1ª ed., IZI/Radio Nacional de España, Múnchen, 1980.
8. I had the opportunity to visit Radio UNISINOS of the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos in San Leopoldo (Southern Brazil). They were on air on FM-Stereo 24 hours a day, with a 500-Watts transmitter, a 70 m antenna and digital technology from a computer of 65 GB that generated the musical programs from its own audio bank; this has the capacity to generate 650 hours of music. In 1997, Radio UNISINOS had several parabolic antennas that they used to get signals from the BBC, the DW, the VOA and news from an Arabic news service.
9. Beltrán, 'La Comunicación: trama de la sociedad y savia de la cultura', op. cit.
10. ALER was founded in Sutatenza, Colombia, on 22 September 1972 as a result of the Second Seminar for Directors of Radio Schools in Latin America organized by the Service Office for Latin America (OSAL), created by Radio Sutatenza, pioneer in a radio literacy project. Its mission is to strengthen the movement of popular radio in Latin America to favor the democratization of communication, the consolidation of local popular radios and the formation of national, regional and continental networks.
11. The network has national coverage and a continental vision as a network of networks with access to programs produced all over the continent.
12. AMARC was founded in August 1983, when 600 radio people from 36 countries met in Montreal, Canada, for the International Year for Communication, promoted by the United Nations. It is an international non-profit NGO based in Montreal and with regional offices in Ecuador, South Africa and the United Kingdom. It coordinates, cooperates, consults, exchanges and promotes community radios around the world. As part of its main strategy (new technologies) in March 1996 it started Púlsar, an international news agency for community radios in Latin America and the Caribbean. It chooses news from the region and writes them in radio style, thus facilitating the assimilation of new technologies and contributing to the development of the regional networks.
13. In October 1994, during a workshop organized by CIESPAL and AMARC in Quito, Ecuador, it was decided to coordinate training and education with various regional participants. On 8 December 1994, eight organizations signed the Agreement for the Development of Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean. These are ALER, AMARC, CIESPAL, FELAFACS, FIP, PROA, RNTC and SCC. They took the name of the Group of Eight (G8). Their first public activity was the 1st Festival for Radio and Television Lovers, held in Quito in November 1995. In April 1996 the mission and strategies were defined. Two more institutions became members: WACC and VIDEAZIMUT; so, they turned the number eight to represent the "infinite sign". It approved the set of rules that turned it into an international NGO in Caracas in November 1996 and it is located permanently in Quito.