



Community Media as an Exercise of Communicative Citizenship: Experiences from Argentina and Ecuador

Medios comunitarios como ejercicio de ciudadanía comunicativa: experiencias desde Argentina y Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

Recent Latin American reforms in the field of communication reshape and strengthen the role and challenges of the popular, alternative and community media. This paper analyzes different experiences arising from the results of two pieces of research, one in Argentina and another one in Ecuador, both carried out through a qualitative methodology, namely in-depth interviews. The theoretical framework mainly draws upon the grounded tradition of Latin American studies on popular and alternative communication for social change, and it also includes recent contributions from European studies. The objective of both research projects was to account for the communities-media relationship, by unveiling the existence of mutual bonds between social organization and content generation. Analysis of results shows that communities' direct participation in the foundation, management and sustainability of such media reverberates in the production of organic content related to their own interests and needs –usually neglected both by public and commercial media– and also in a greater media pluralism and media supply diversity. Moreover, results allow considering popular, alternative and community media as key environments both for democratizing communication and shaping communicative citizenship. Both studies highlight a common challenge, that is, the need to consolidate trans-local and trans-national networks in order to establish a common action at the level of the media global order, thus enabling to measure their influence on the public agenda.

RESUMEN

Las recientes reformas latinoamericanas en el ámbito de la comunicación reconfiguran el rol y los desafíos de los medios populares, alternativos y comunitarios. El presente trabajo, basado en dos investigaciones de tipo cualitativo, una en Argentina y otra en Ecuador, analiza algunas experiencias concretas en este campo. El marco teórico de referencia se inscribe en la larga tradición de estudios latinoamericanos en torno a la comunicación popular para el cambio social, integrado también con aportes recientes de estudios europeos. El objetivo de las indagaciones era dar cuenta de la articulación comunidades-medios, intentando mostrar la existencia de vínculos recíprocos entre organización social y generación de contenidos. El análisis de los resultados evidencia que la participación directa en la fundación, gestión y sostenibilidad de estos medios por parte de la comunidad repercute en la generación de contenidos orgánicos a sus intereses y necesidades –normalmente desatendidos por los medios públicos y comerciales– y también en una mayor pluralidad y diversidad de la oferta mediática. Además, los resultados permiten avizorar que los medios populares, alternativos y comunitarios son espacios fundamentales para la democratización de la comunicación y para la construcción de una ciudadanía comunicativa. Un desafío que se desprende de las investigaciones es la necesidad de consolidar redes transnacionales para una acción concertada en el plano del orden global de la comunicación mediática, pudiendo medir su potencial incidencia en la agenda pública.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Alternative communication, communicative processes, global/local, communicative citizenship, community radio, democratization, participatory communication.

Comunicación alternativa, procesos comunicativos, global/local, ciudadanía comunicativa, radio comunitaria, democratización, comunicación participativa.



1. Introduction and the state of the art

The model of the political system and the role of the state are essential conditioning factors for examining the set-up of a media system. (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In Latin America, the void generated by the state by failing to establish clear rules in the democratic management of the radio spectrum has been filled by social actors that have set up initiatives in popular, alternative and community media (MPAC). Such media, which are free from free-market logic, have taken on functions ranging from socio-educational purposes to the creation of content which is both informative and entertaining. These initiatives have been made possible because they have prioritised the building up of the commonwealth – i.e. collectives that are organised in common by producing knowledge relationally (Hardt & Negri, 2009) – as opposed to the primacy of the individual as well as to the privatisation or nationalisation of media communication.

The first radio stations, set up in the 40s, play a key role in this scenario, in particular, Radio Sutatenza in Colombia. They were created thanks to the drive of some Liberation Theology priests who considered literacy as a fundamental resource for the emancipation of oppressed peoples. Such a line of thought reflects the Freire model of communication which conceives media not as a persuasive and domesticating extension but rather as an educational tool which facilitates the collective production of content. According to Tufte (2015: 107), this is a distinction between «depositing information –the banking pedagogy– and the empowering process of learning [...] in a dialectic process of action-reflection-action –the liberating pedagogy». Along the same lines, Bolivian radio stations, linked to the nationalisation of mines, appeared in the 50s, followed by the Ecuadorian Popular Radio Schools (ERPE) in the 60s. These experiences paved the way for other organisations to become media communication actors in the 80s and 90s, during and in favour of the struggles of peasants, workers, students, miners, women and indigenous peoples (Beltrán & Reyes, 1993) who began founding their own media stations in order to promote solidarity between social grassroots groups as well as their organisation and subjectivization (Kaplún & García, 1987; Martín-Barbero, 1991).

In the last decade and coinciding with the rise to power of new-ilk governments in different countries all over the continent, the state would appear to have assumed the task of paying back the historic debt accrued with the social sectors as a result of adjudicating most – and in some cases all – of the radio spec-

trum frequencies to businessmen from the private sector. Effectively, as Chaparro-Escudero (2009: 147) argues, «a civil society which is not guaranteed the Right to Communication is a society whose opinion has been kidnapped and usurped by those who proclaimed themselves as citizens' representatives and spokespersons».

In Argentina, Law 26.522 on Audio-visual Communication Services (LSCA), approved in 2009, recognises the right of access to one third of the radio spectrum to private non-profit entities, including community stations: these are recognised for having «a social purpose, [...] for being managed by non-profit social organisations», for counting on the «community's participation in terms of ownership» and in all aspects of their functioning, and for being «independent and non-governmental» (art. 4). Similarly, In Ecuador, the Organic Law of Communication (LOC) passed in 2013 recognises the right of access to one third of frequencies to community media, defined as «those which are owned, managed and steered by non-profit social collectives or organisations, communes, communities, peoples and nationalities» (art. 85).

The MPAC are a crucial tool for exerting social pressure on the traditional media powers and for empowering citizens and ensuring their active involvement in the public arena. As Vinelli says (2014: 40), these are experiences which define an «area of cultural production marked by the interaction of communication and political struggle». As they are managed by communities of people sharing the same territory as well as economic, socio-cultural and/or organisational interests (RNMA, 2013), the MPAC have been creating a bond with their social and territorial environment (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001); a bond which is embodied in an opening up to participation in their activities and which cements a strategic, symbiotic and non-instrumental relationship with local actors in the same way as Bolivian mining radio stations (Herrera-Miller, 2006). This attitude ensures a participative management and a horizontal communication process (Rodríguez, 2009) leading to the production of content which is rooted in the context where the medium and its participants act. These media, therefore, serve their communities and are embedded in them, thus generating a content which promotes social and political engagement (Carpentier & Scifo, 2010). They are collectives which are self-determined and self-managed, thus creating an independent communication project which reflects the differences undergoing society (McQuail & Van-Cuilenburg, 1983). For that reason, despite their formal-legal ownership, they

have a common belonging – i.e., they are based on the part-whole relationship which «de facto» pre-exists the «de jure» ownership and which connects actors to their social and territorial environment (Maddalena, 2012).

The MPAC are distinct from public and private media due to their non-hierarchical organisational structure, to the issues they deal with and to their point of view and, furthermore, they have an anti-hegemonic outlook because they are rooted in the masses which had always been silenced (Martín-Barbero, 1981). They are media which aim at «challenging the power of those who [...] establish the rules of the game of speech» (Mata, 2011: 3). As they are spaces for meeting and participation in everyday life, such media have been set up as tools for political intervention and social transformation (Vinelli, 2014). On one hand, because they allow citizens to be « subjects that demand and propose in multiple real-life arenas, [as] the production of such demands and proposals is unthinkable without the independent exercise of the right to communicate, i.e., to make something common» (Mata, 2006: 14). On the other hand, because they facilitate the cultural task of social movements of proposing new frameworks for interpreting reality and new ways of relating and interacting, thus transforming their activity into «symbolic challenges to the predominant codes» (Marí-Sáez, 2014: 69).

2. Material and methodology

In accordance with Yin (2003), we considered Argentina and Ecuador as two revelatory case studies. On one hand, because they allowed us to forecast the same results accordingly to our hypothesis. On the other hand, because each of them allowed us to analyse the phenomenon of the MPAC in a hitherto unknown scenario which changed recently by means of the legal reforms.

We adopted a qualitative approach because of the analytical purposes of the research and the need to facilitate a flexible and interactive design (Miles & Huberman, 1994), in order to account for the link between communities and media and to focus on the mutual linkages between social organisation, content production and communities of reference. We carried out semi-structured interviews –15 in Argentina and 14 in Ecuador– by adopting a purposive sampling plan and by selecting interviewees by means of a snowball procedure. We proceeded with the consent of the interviewees, until reaching data saturation and information redundancy (Maxwell, 2005).

In both cases, we explored the origin and the aims

of the communication projects; the activities and programming, by paying particular attention to the issues of common interest for the community; the internal organisation and external relations, by focusing on the interaction with audiences and the social environment; the sustainability strategies; the position adopted in the light of the reforms; the respondents' personal definition of what «community media» means. In the case of Ecuador, we worked all over the country with radio stations only, because radio is the most widespread medium having the greatest coverage. In particular, we included some of the radio stations making up the «Coordinator of Community, Popular and Educational Media of Ecuador» (CORAPE), as it is the most representative organism of the Ecuadorian MPAC, by interviewing directors, editors, reporters and producers of different programmes. In the case of Argentina, we interviewed the representatives of those associations, collectives, NGOs and schools which carry out media activities just in the province of Misiones, as it is an area which is particularly representative of how difficult it is to apply the LSCA (Marino & al., 2015). In this case, we considered only those actors who work with the television and radio format, including those who exclusively or complementarily produce online content, due to the convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) and to the advantages of mass self-communication (Castells, 2009).

3. Results

The most interesting data refer to those elements which define the MPAC as spaces facilitating communicative citizenship (Mata, 2006) and as experiences of diversification –and, consequently, democratisation– of the media supply (McQuail & Van-Cuilenburg, 1983). We refer specifically, on one hand, to the ability of the MPAC to build and maintain an effective link with their social and territorial environment and, on the other, to the processes of agenda setting and content production.

3.1. Community media in the link with the social and territorial environment

Many of the considered communication projects are based on a «buddy climate» (male, 40 years old, worker, self-taught in radio-phonics, A4 Producciones Socio-culturales, Argentina) between the collectives and their own communities; a link which –as the interviewees say– has been built up in the territories from the outset.

«Friends from university [came here], [...] and after it's like the word started to spread about what we

were doing and more and more people started coming [...]. Relatives, friends, local social organisations shook our hands. [...] It was an exchange» (male, 30, communication student, La Rastrojera Audiovisual Production Cooperative, Argentina).

«When soldiers came to take away our equipment [...] we warned the community about what was happening: in five minutes at the radio station we had people blocking the way so they couldn't get past. The soldiers had to leave without confiscating anything» (indigenous female, 50, peasant and political activist, Radio Ilumán, Ecuador).

So much that, in the case of some school radio stations, the neighbours and parents of the children even took part in decorating the station.

«The egg cartons design looked fantastic: [...] the little boxes where they put the eggs! [...] [We said] to all the neighbours who had [egg cartons] or the shops who were going to throw them away: «no, no, bring them here!». And the schoolchildren painted them with crayons and [stuck the egg cartons] on the wall [which was then] sound-proofed» (male, 40, worker, self-taught in radio-phonics, Radio A4 Voces, Argentina).

«The tower [...] was lying in the schoolyard for several months and with the help of the parents we decided to lift it» (male, 40, rural Primary School teacher, Radio Flor de Primavera, Argentina).

In the majority of the experiences recorded, community collaboration took the form of taking part in imaginative and even craft-based initiatives that media set up in order to raise funds and/or obtain equipment; funds and equipment which otherwise they would not have obtained due to their difficult conditions of sustainability which result from their being non-profit organisations made up of members working voluntarily.

«This year we began with donations and in previous years we used the sale of collaboration bonus, such as raffles of craftwork. [...] People supporting the NGO donate products, services, money for fuel» (male, 30, degree in communication, ONG Nativos, Argentina).

«We told people that, due to a lack of funding, we were going to have our electricity cut off and we would be taken off air. As soon as we published the advert, people started to arrive with money donations, from 5 cents upwards. In less than 15 minutes we had raised enough money for the electricity bill, so we paid for it and we're still working» (female, 55, housewife, leads a women's association, Radio Sucumbíos, Ecuador).

A regular interaction with the communities is developed in the digital media, when the MPAC have websites or are active in social media. In these places audiences can express their support or encourage debate, which, in turn, serves to generate loyalty to the medium and identification processes among listeners or viewers.

«[When they try] to boycott us, the readers are always there. Yes they are, by supporting us [...] with emails [...]. Sometimes they make comments on Facebook. We have a direct contact with lots and lots of readers» (male, 30, journalist and political activist, Revista Superficie, Argentina).

«When the migration began [...], it became important to learn how to use internet, social networks and to be a link between those who stayed in the country and those who left. We were a sort of postal service, because when there were no greetings or messages on air, people came to ask if anyone had left a message for them» (male, 45, peasant, Radio So-noonda, Ecuador).

Over time, such a bond became stronger and grew with other activities which took place outside the radio station, such as workshops, festivals and study groups.

«For children's day or for some charity event, [...] [we went to] a bakery, [and we said]: «look, we're organising an event and we need you to donate, say, two dozen buns for children's day». And, well, the bakers gave generously [because] we were locals, from the same neighbourhood» (A4 Producciones Socio-culturales, Argentina).

«We saw the need to create meeting places with the community, not only on the radio but also opening our meeting room. In that way, we started organising journalism courses for children and teenagers. This has become something the people expect and when we don't open them the people ask why!» (Radio Sucumbíos, Ecuador).

The convergence between all these types of media and non-media spaces makes it possible to keep in touch with the communities permanently, thus helping to provide them with useful and concrete tools for the development of their economic, social and cultural life.

«The challenge [is] to try to provide the community, that is, all the children, teenagers and neighbours, with a set of tools helping them in the development of the community itself» (Radio Flor de Primavera, Argentina).

«We were teaching classes on the radio and making programmes about organic agriculture, explaining how to prepare the land and sow seed. Until one

day the people said: «yes, what you're telling us is all very nice but we want you to come and sow with us!». That's what we did and so began the organic quinoa project and the farm» (Indigenous female, 40, self-taught in radio-phonics, Radio ERPE, Ecuador).

3.2. Community media in agenda setting and content production

The link with the social and territorial environment extends to defining an agenda which is firmly rooted in the territorial issues, that is, local cultural, political and social ones. In many cases, the communication projects sprang up to accompany and highlight the struggles of local social organisations and, therefore, to provide «an alternative and different look at a large number of issues and [...] topics which nobody was talking about or dealing with» (Revista Superficie, Argentina) in the commercial and public media and, which, by contrast, «where a source of concern for the community [and] ranged from local issues to national ones» (male, 50, degree in communication, Radio Latacunga, Ecuador). For that reason, the programming pays particular attention to certain topics and conflicts of local interest within the framework of a national and global scenario which (im)poses priorities and emergencies. In this sense, therefore, the agenda criteria reflect the need to consider social demands of citizens as subjects with rights.

«There are the issues of social organisations, the issue of the aboriginal peoples, the matter of deforestation, the topic of reservoirs, the area of human rights [...] because they are, let's say, the ones that build citizenship» (La Rastrojera, Argentina).

«Our agenda is marked by social struggles. When we were making claims about the land, the water, the rights of the indigenous population, the language, it was all very clear, and these [are] our issues. Nowadays more emphasis is given to rights, justice and access to healthcare. We are involved in people's day-to-day lives» (Radio ERPE, Ecuador).

Whatever the topic may be, it always covers a perspective which is close to the collectives and the communities in which they operate, even by using their own language or dialect.

«We were told about the first of May [...] because on that day the worker's day was celebrated through-

out the world [...]. We started to bring it in as well [...] to reflect upon the work of fathers or even boys who were working too. [...] For example, it was said: «my daddy works in such and such a job and sometimes he comes home tired or upset, [...] because he doesn't get paid much, he gets paid very little and they make him work very hard»» (male, 30, degree in teaching and teacher at a rural school, Radio Voz Juvenil, Argentina).

«It was the only radio station which spoke to us in our own language. That's where our mothers and fathers could find out what was happening in our province and our country. It was as if we mattered to

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them and they spoke to us in a language we understood» (indigenous woman, 40, self-taught, peasant, Radio Guamote, Ecuador).

Overall, it turns out that for the respondents it is particularly important to generate an agenda which was capable of bringing out issues and points of view which were not in the public arena, in an attempt to give them a role and, as such, to accompany the people involved in local conflicts and to «broaden the mind» of the most vulnerable sectors of the population «a little» (Mirada de la Gurisada, Argentina), through information and entertainment activities which are sensitive and different from normal ones, so that audiences would see the MPAC as open spaces where they can express themselves and as an empowerment tool. And, even though not always, the goal was achieved and the community project is connoted in terms of media counter-power that, consequently, democratises communication.

«Why would I want another radio station if the Sucumbíos is always open to broadcast what I ask for? I don't need another medium: they take my calls and I can speak my mind» (Radio Sucumbíos, Ecuador).

In the same conception of the community media this aspect is detected.

«The media are power and whoever controls

communication has power. To have a community medium is a way to counter that» (male, 25, degree in communication and member of a rural youth organisation, Mirada de la Gurisada, Argentina).

«It seems to me that democracy is an ideal and that we have to build it by ourselves and we must learn to live with our differences –that’s what it’s all about. And, well, that’s where we have to build a community medium» (male, 30, degree in communication, Productora de la Tierra, Argentina).

In coherence with such community bonds and socio-political challenges, the actors organise the internal activities and take decisions in a completely participative and horizontal way: each of the members may propose an objective to be considered and, collectively, it is decided whether and how it should be tackled. There is no hierarchy among members, except when somebody liable for certain formal issues is needed.

«We get together round this table and we propose ideas. We work on those ideas and one person says: «I think we could deal with this or that issue». Somebody else might say: «no, because that issue is like this or that» (Audiovisual Production Cooperative La Rastrojera, Argentina).

«Our news, production and rural teams meet every week. There we decide the issues to be considered and the organisation of the radio station» (Radio Latacunga, Ecuador).

Such a participative and osmotic communication process, makes the space’s appropriation both by the medium’s members and the communities they belong to possible, as some experiences demonstrate.

«They asked us to give them permission to train other schools which had been opened recently. [The children] got behind it and said: «Let’s do it! Let’s do it!». It’s as if they feel that the radio station is theirs» (Radio Voz Juvenil, Argentina).

«What began as a programme about organic farming and today is a quinoa-exporting project [...] went through a process of organisation and making it their own. Today, the families of the peasants are the organisation, they take decisions and meet together on the radio» (Radio ERPE, Ecuador).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The results which we have analysed show at least four common elements which must be considered in the conclusion. Firstly, the differences between community media and commercial and public media both in terms of how they are conceived and organised in order to comply with their function; secondly, the nature of the broadcaster providing the service; thirdly,

the nature of the link between such an actor and the medium appropriation; and, finally, the political potential which the MPAC may have in facing the activity of the dominant communication media.

One of the defining features of the MPAC is a mutual dependence between the medium appropriation and the community nature of the subjects who make it theirs. Thus, the reference to the «community» concept must be thought as the construction of an alternative entity which unfolds and permeates the appropriation and consolidation of the medium from the outset. This should be understood as a form of support in the subjectivisation of the underlying social organization which determines itself as such precisely from this experience (Vinelli, 2014).

Therefore, what can be concluded from the research is that the community medium is not like other commercial or public media because it does not carry out the function of mediating between reality and the representation thereof by means of several salaried workers as if it was a common Ford-style Company – i.e., a company whose production depends on each factory worker doing his job in a stipulated way as a functional and tidy part of a whole. In the case of a community medium, the depiction of the real life follows a different process as it is not based on the role of experts selling their knowledge of reality to listeners who are, effectively, mere consumers.

The vision of the actors involved in the MPAC is to produce content which is the fruit of subjective experiences in the time and space of the local real-life situations which are nearby and shared. It is not considered as a raw material to be made suitable and marketable for the media. In the case of community media, the local reality is not thought of as something outside, because the media gesture arises from and for it as a requirement for a non-instrumental social and cultural praxis.

Furthermore, the notions of newsworthiness and agenda –which have turned journalism into a commercial activity– have been seriously undermined by the work of the MPACs: rather than the extraordinary and sensationalist nature of an event, it is the everyday nature of the reality that is expressed by the community narrator. In the case of community agenda setting, it is not a question of particular –economic or political– interests which underlie the creation of the commercial and public media agenda, but rather the conviction that any content may be mediatized because it is the product of a real-life experience and is, as such, of collective interest.

Research results demonstrate the nature of the

subject as a service-provider for community media communication. This is characterised by the collectivisation processes which serve to drive it forward and the relationships which are forged with and among the communities –in addition to the cultural educational and social purposes which exclude any profit. The ways and spaces of interaction generate a strong bond which, in turn, creates a sense of social identity and mutual belonging (Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002) around the medium which is an intrinsic part of the space, rather than separate from it. The people who are linked to the medium agglutinate around the aim of producing media content based on a common interest and all work together towards that goal with a horizontal organisational structure. It is in such relationships among all participants that a process of edifying and acknowledging of what is held in common, shared because of its social function, is triggered. Such a process qualifies the final product. In this way, the MPAC are shaped as spaces and processes and, at the same time, as media products which are created by and within the – either conflicting or cooperative – interaction of a molecular community which builds an alternative and bottom-up media power to challenge the status quo (Cerbino & Belotti, 2016).

The direct involvement of the co-creators and co-consumers in the management and working of the MPAC has repercussions not only in the production of content, which is more organic to their interests and needs, but also in the generation of a greater plurality and, especially, diversity in the national and global media arena (McQuail & Van-Cuilenburg, 1983): not only more voices are hosted, but also different ones. Diversity is, in some ways, what gives meaning to community practice: it involves a wide variety and number of actors, each one with their own outlook, under the logic of communication as a social service and the medium as a house which is open to anyone who feels the need to publish messages and call meetings or to make public their complaints and claims. In effect, such a domestic dimension accounts for how well the communication practices have adapted to the times and rhythms of the community (Millán, 2003). It places the MPAC among and beyond the public and private sectors as they are units which «take part in public economics by means of productive activities» and, at the same time, are per se complex economic units «in their own right» (Silvertson, 1994: 88).

In this way, it is not only a question of the sum of a variety of content, but rather the relationship which is established among the participants in communication, which generates a social bond between actors

who were historically ignored or alienated (Martín-Barbero, 1981). This approach to the production of content depicted in different types of organisational processes allows the MPAC to draw up their own agenda of issues which counteracts the ones which are published by conventional media and relates to topics which are of personal interest to everyday citizens. This makes it possible to produce arguments and schools of thought which are not subservient to financial capital or the dominant positions. That, in turn, leads to a production of public opinion with greater levels of autonomy and criticism. MPAC are spaces which trigger a sort of virtuous cycle through which the citizens themselves, who view their demands through the MPAC, feed critical and active thought of other citizens who, in turn, will feel enabled to speak their mind. For that reason, we consider the MPAC a civic empowerment tool for carrying out communicative citizenship: they portray the ability of citizens to be subjects of rights in the field of public communication (Mata, 2006).

Consequently, these experiences are an antidote to globalisation and to the dominant national-state arguments, as they facilitate the creation of arguments and realities starting at a local level and with a gesture which challenges the status quo. This is the reason why it is good for them to assume the role of building networks which connect different local experiences by raising them to the global level. From there, common fronts can be drawn up more efficiently in order to resist the battering of globalisation. This also implies the ability to overcome difficulties which they face. In addition to the obstacles dealing with the MPAC's functioning and history, there are new ones: the launch of local, national and regional platforms to fight for the effective application of the laws in order to demand for an increase in the range of opportunities for the community sector; the professionalization of an activity which, to date, had been carried out on a voluntary basis and with limitations caused by scarce resources which, very often, had brought on unsurmountable problems of economic sustainability and management.

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