

**CALL ME IMPURE:  
MYTHS AND PARADIGMS  
OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION**

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**Introduction**

If there is something I have learned during twenty-five years of working and reflecting on participatory communication experiences, is that there is no blue print or perfect model. Each experience is so unique, that there is no ways to build a model that can be replicated in another place, another time, another society. I've also learned that the fact that there is no blue print makes uncomfortable some people in the academic world always willing to find a master key, a "system" that will allow them to propose a new or revised theory.

We can group participatory communication experiences according to some of their features, but we can't pretend to conclude that they all respond to the same common features, except those very general. We can group them, for example, according to the media tool they use (video, radio, print, Internet), but even this is subject to a second review, as none of them is strictly using one tool. We can group them by the subject theme that is predominant (reproductive health, women empowerment, human rights, rural development, environment and conservation, etc) but this one is also a very fragile classification, as there is no experience dealing with just one issue or theme. There are just no closed compartments in society, themes overlap and above all, other issues "invade" the original agenda because people want it that way. We could also group the experiences according to who initiated them, which is an important piece of information when trying to understand the participatory process. Some experiences were originated by the community itself, some other by a local or international NGO, other by an external development or cooperation agency, and some even by the government. But again, nothing is linear when dealing with people's participation; all of the experiences I've met during

my recent research<sup>1</sup> have evolved in different ways and at the end of the day, it is almost irrelevant who started them, although the "manual" of participatory communication -which luckily enough doesn't exist- would say that those originated at the community level are the "politically correct" ones.

Participatory or alternative media must be a frustrating challenge for academics that want to make things fit into a system that will allow them to better understand the way communication works. I myself, the more I know about it by actually meeting the experiences and also reading about them, the more I have questions rather than answers, and definitely, I prefer it that way. I would not feel very comfortable drawing a nice pattern and pretending participatory communication fits there. I strongly believe it is a very loose field of action, and that is precisely what interested me. The minute it will be labelled and classified according to a system... that is when it will be easily controlled.

Too often, the intellectual labelling of samples serves only academic purposes, and do not really help the actual communication process to better develop. I can imagine researchers or academicians going back to the community: "Congratulations, your communication experience has been classified as participatory *and* alternative", or "Sorry, you only classified for enabling people's access, not participation".

The terms "participatory", "alternative", "community" are generously used to refer to a wide diversity of experiences that often are not very participatory, alternative or

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<sup>1</sup> "Making Waves: stories of participatory communication for social change" by Alfonso Gumucio Dagon. The Rockefeller Foundation, New York, 2001.

community-based. This may create certain confusion especially among those that have had little experience at the grassroots level; nonetheless, it is better to use wide definitions that enable to add experiences, rather than tricky straight and narrow concepts that only contribute to exclude many interesting communication processes, and only benefit a handful of experiences that supposedly -but remains to be proved- correspond to the blueprint definition. For example, when discussing a participatory process in radio, what does "participation" really mean? The fact that the microphones of a small community station are open to the individuals in the community makes the radio station an example of participatory communication? Take the network of rural indigenous radio stations that the Instituto Nacional Indigenista -an official institution of the Mexican government- has set up during the eighties, to serve the Tojolabal, the Purépecha, the Maya and many other communities. Individual rural men and women do have the possibility of interacting with the station, either by visiting the station headquarters or because the radio reporters visit the communities to tape interviews. Is this participation or just access? Many will argue that this is a limited form of participation, considering that in the end the access to microphones does not affect the overall policy of the station, which reflect the general government policy on indigenous populations. On the other hand, we have examples of a higher degree of participation, when communities have access as organized entities, not only as individuals. Moreover, we have examples of even a higher degree of participation, which is ownership of the media tool. But the line is not easy to draw between the various levels, and that is why the academic exercise of including some and excluding the rest would be dangerous and not really representative of what is actually

happening on the ground, specially since things evolve very fast, and a particular situation may only be valid for a certain period of time. We are dealing with processes of communication, meaning live social organisms that do not adjust to pre-conceived moulds.

Many efforts to systematize participatory communication experiences are vowed to disappointment, which is good. Nonetheless, there are aspects that we can focus as to find if a group of experiences is actually benefiting the intended people or community, or it remains so external to it that has no impact. There is another big word: impact. It has been used during evaluations to praise or to bury a particular project, but it is in fact a very tricky word as often the impact is perceived as the immediate goal pursued by the investors, not so much as a long term benefit for the beneficiaries. Impact often prompts to measure short-term changes that may not last after external inputs have been withdrawn. Impact often patronizes over communities rewarding instant "behavioural change", and turns its back on those that didn't behave well, didn't drop their traditional unhealthy practices, etc. This is mostly seen in reproductive health programs, generally implemented through social marketing techniques, most likely by US based NGOs.

### **Myths to go: scale, visibility and purity**

The image of alternative medias and participatory communication experiences as small, isolated and pure forms of community communication does not correspond to reality any longer. Maybe never did.

### Mirage media

One of the myths on alternative or participatory media is that the experiences are isolated. The question is: "isolated" for whom, from which perspective? For several hundred thousand refugees along the border between Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, *Radio Kwizera* is far from being an "isolated" communication tool, though it may seem extremely isolated when seen from Dar Es Salam or New York. For the refugees the station is the most visible and influential media they've ever been in touch with. And they have more real access to it than many people in urban areas, who in spite of being surrounded by numerous print and audio-visual media have no possibility of making their voices be heard. From the perspective of any rural community, what remains far and isolated is the urban settings that are hard to reach. Their own rural community media is at reach, access is granted, and in terms of contents the needs of the community are dealt with. Isolation exists in terms of access to other benefits: credit, roads, or services, however in terms of communicating, a community that has its own media channels is far better than a community that doesn't have any.

Moreover, all community based participatory experiences show that a local radio station, video project, or any other communication experience has helped in the struggle to bring to the community what was long needed. Peasants from *Tacunan Community Audio Tower (CAT)*, in Davao del Norte, in The Philippines, told me that they were certain they could have not obtained electricity, roads and safe water within a couple of years if it was not because they were able to voice their needs through their simple six cone-speaker system. In the urban slums of San José Buena Vista, Santa Luisa El Milagro and La Trinidad, hanging over ravine near de centre of Guatemala City,

neighbours are convinced that their small radio station *La Voz de la Comunidad* has made the difference compared to other poor neighbourhoods when dealing with natural disasters and preventing further human losses; through the radio they were able to organise better and respond to emergencies. The self-employed market women of the SEWA union, in India, some of them illiterate, have used video cameras as a tool for making their statements about health, sanitation, gender and other issues, earning respect from their community, from male leaders and from local authorities.

The issue of isolation should be looked upon otherwise. Few consider that a media experience is isolated if it happens to develop in an urban setting, which supposedly ensures "scale". However, it is likely that many communities will not benefit from it, rural and urban. The visibility of an alternative radio station or print media in a large urban area is only a mirage. You know it's there, but you can't really touch it or benefit from it. In the cities, media for development and social change are only handful exceptions among many other commercial options; they are actually more isolated than rural media in terms of not benefiting from the attention of the intended audiences. They isolate themselves and on the other hand, they isolate communities that remain out of reach, depriving them from a media they can nurture and grow with, a media of their own. By searching visibility or scale, media for social change and development that separates itself from the community to compete with commercial media usually does a poor job. In rural and marginal areas, where options are limited, the "isolated" grassroots media are actually on top of local preferences. Not long ago, when visiting rural communities in the highlands of Ayacucho, in Peru, I was able to confirm

something I had already seen in other continents: local audiences prefer local media because they feel better represented. The women groups I met in Vilcashuamán or Huanta (Ayacucho), all agreed that even if they were able to listen radio stations from Lima, the capital city, they were more fond of *Radio Huanta 2000* or *Radio Vilcas*, their own small local stations. These two are not even community media oriented towards social change and development. They are just privately owned local media, airing very simple local news early in the morning and popular music for the rest of the transmission time.

### Size matters

As for the other myth, "small", there is also a lot to say. If "big" means reaching large numbers of people -sometimes quality doesn't even seem to be important- certainly alternative and community media are generally not big. It is mostly a matter of choice and strategy, not an issue of technical means or money to expand. Once again, *La Voz de la Comunidad* in Guatemala is a good example. The team that runs the station decided to place their FM transmitter in the lowest part of the ravine, as to voluntarily limit the reach of their transmissions to the three slums that are built on the slopes. On the one hand, they know they will avoid getting in trouble with the law, as a "pirate" radio station. On the other hand, they feel their programming is tailored to the needs of their own constituency and have no interest in getting further.

Were the tin miners' radio stations in Bolivia small? Consider this: their political influence was such, that no military coup in Bolivia ever succeeded if the army didn't first capture, destroy and close the "small" miners' radio stations, almost invisible in their locations at the mining *campamentos* of

Potosí and Oruro<sup>2</sup>. Maybe each individual radio was really small, but the network had national influence. Moreover, in times of crisis, when all media houses in the main cities were heavily censored, foreign correspondents in neighbouring countries would listen to the miners' radio stations to get a sense of what was happening in Bolivia. As the army entered the mining districts to silence the stations one by one, another station would pick the signal and continue airing the news, until the army got again too close to keep on going. Size is always relative, we should know that already.

The video experience of *Teleanálisis* in Chile, during the dictatorship of Pinochet in the mid seventies, is another interesting example of size not being the right parameter to classify -often to patronize- alternative communication initiatives. While Chile was living under a very strong censorship over the media, young cameramen equipped with light portable video equipment went into the streets to document people's resistance, violations of human rights, repression and social discontent. Video news were quickly and roughly edited underground and then distributed on VHS cassettes through unions, churches and resistance groups who would multiply each cassette in large numbers, so to reach more population. Was it a small experience? Thousands of people were reached by the video documentaries produced by *Teleanálisis* and the subsequent discussions certainly contributed to build resistance to the dictatorship. This was the alternative television in Chile under the military dictatorship. Both *TV Viva* of Recife, in the north of Brazil, and *TV Maxambomba* in Rio de Janeiro, are part of this broad family of alternative screens. *TV Serrana*, in

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<sup>2</sup> "Las radios mineras de Bolivia", by Alfonso Gumucio Dagron and Lupe Cajías (editors). CIMCA-UNESCO, La Paz, 1989.

Cuba, shares the concept of providing people both a voice and a different programming, apart from what the national television networks can offer. The three have chosen the word *television* as part of their name; as if they wanted to clearly signal that they are an alternative to commercial or state owned television stations. Same as *Teleanálisis* did in Chile -though in a different political context- the three current experiences reach thousands of people in public squares, market streets and poor neighbourhoods. *TV Maxambomba* and *TV Viva* are strong in creating urban video shows that stimulate discussion on social issues: marginality, prostitution, child labor, street violence, or sexual diseases. The Cuban experience, on the other hand, serves rural communities that had previously little access to media. Their main feature is the "video carta", video-letters sent by children from one community to another.

One of the principles of alternative, community or participatory media is to multiply the number of communicators, not only the number of consumers of information. The act of communicating becomes collective, in terms of the participation of people at all stages of the process, including the production of messages and the distribution through alternative channels. While many communication strategies for development still focus on massive diffusion of messages -AIDS being a good example- the "other" media struggles to provide echo to local voices, rather than impose ready-made solutions. Campaigns are huge efforts of information, rather than communication. Usually measured by the size of the audience, these huge and expensive campaigns fail to involve people in the discussion of their problems. Campaigns are also part of another agenda: wide visibility for the cooperation agency that is behind -a direct link to what I call the "annual report syndrome". "Think big"

is a good slogan for commercial advertising, which often leads to failure when mechanically applied to the promotion of social issues.

Growth for the sake of growth has never benefited the ultimate goals of community or alternative media. The example of *Radio Sutatenza*, in Colombia, is emblematic<sup>3</sup>. This was the first known experience of community media in Latin America and the rest of the Third World, a small radio station that started operating in a small rural community of the Tenza Valley as far-back as 1947, and soon -too soon- became a powerful media house that massively produced literacy programmes but moved away from people -even physically, to the capital city of Colombia.

Which is better? One radio programme that reaches one million people with one standard message and language, or one hundred radio programmes that reach ten thousand people each (total, one million), with messages tailored to the local culture and traditions, in the local language and possibly made through a participatory process that involves each community? Many experts working in development agencies would take the short cut: think big, reach as many as you can in a short period of time. I definitely support the option that allows people to be in control of their own media, call it alternative, horizontal or participatory. However, it takes longer, because of the social process embedded.

### Call me impure

Myths emerge when the knowledge of reality is limited. During the sixties and seventies, under the impulse of both dependency

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<sup>3</sup> "Educación Fundamental Integral: Teoría y aplicación en el caso de ACPO", by Hernando Bernal Alarcón. Acción Cultural Popular, Bogotá 1978.

theories and the day-to-day struggle against dictatorships in most of Latin America, political polarization brought to the discourse of development the ideals of community based social regeneration. The myth of the community as a compact and pure entity was promoted. Anything from the community level had an aura of purity and righteousness. This was not really a bad thing, considering the hard times that the progressive movement was living in Latin America. Nevertheless, times have changed, and communities have revealed themselves as less compact entities.

In fact, one of the main obstacles when supporting grassroots development initiatives is dealing with communities as complex social universes. Most of the failures that characterize development projects executed by governments or cooperation agencies are due precisely to the fact that those organizations consider communities homogeneous and compact, especially in rural areas. Although it is generally true that a community, by its definition, represents certain commonality of interests and destiny, it is no less true that communities are also clusters of interests and power struggles. What may unite communities is culture and tradition, and what may divide them is exactly what divides society at large: economic and political interests. The most simple development idea or project, if consulted with the community, will bring to surface those interests. A community, which is only a society in a smaller scale, is also made of rich and poor, though we -from the outside- may not see the difference immediately. A rural community, where we often assume everyone is equal, may be clearly divided between those that own more land or own better land, and those that own less land and not so productive. Moreover, we may find many poor *campesinos* (peasants) that do not own any land and work for a

salary (or for food) on others' land, or do small jobs in the village, repairing bicycles, shoes or radio sets.

An apparently homogeneous community -for the outsider- has diverse structures of political power that often clash one against the other. The traditional leaders, the new political leaders, the religious leaders, are some of them. But there is also those that have specific economic interests as a group, for example the cooperatives. In the Aymara communities of the highlands of Bolivia, traditional leaders and modern union leaders have generally managed to get along very well. The elders have accepted the new union leaders as long as they represent the community as a whole. In some cases, the traditional leader has been elected as union leader.

However, what happens in a context where new leadership is imposed over the community by political parties or by government structures? And what happens when new religious denominations start penetrating a community that only knew one faith before? Most rural communities in Latin America adopted an indigenous version of Catholicism since the times of the Spanish Colony. Modern Catholic priests in Peru, Bolivia or Ecuador are wise enough to recognize the value of religious and cultural traditions and it is not unusual to see them performing in ceremonies of clear syncretism, such as the "challa" in the Aymara world. For this ceremony, intended to attract the best fortune for a recently built house or for inaugurating the planting season, a *yatiri* (traditional priest), will bury a dried lama foetus and will perform other rites with coca leaves, sweets, alcohol and fire, while the Catholic priest will give his blessing with sacred water. Somehow, culture was strong enough to incorporate some of the Catholic influences without losing its essence. But things

are changing now with the irruption of new denominations that are not willing to harmonise with local traditions.

Given this complexity at the community level, any development project may face incredible challenges to be accepted. I've seen -especially in African countries- the difficulty for a community to decide where a new borehole and hand pump should be installed within the community. The technicians have often to struggle to convince the community leaders to accept that the best location is the one that serves better the majority, such as the centre of the village, the backyard of the school, or the health post. The first reaction of many traditional leaders is to have the hand pump next to their house, so to have control over it. In small and deprived villages of Nigeria or Burkina Faso, and generally in any other part of the rural world, to control the water source is to have a lot of power over the life of the community.

Maybe this is why many development agencies prefer not to embark into a process of consultation, but rather impose the project vertically. Which obviously leads to the failures mentioned earlier and affects the social tissue of a community.

The complexity of the social structure at the community level is far from being a burden, is actually an opportunity for building democratic societies through participation. Real, consistent, long term and sustainable development is only possible through organized and democratic communities, where decisions are made attending to the needs of the majority, and where leadership is elected through a democratic process of participation. Certainly, community media can do much to support this process.

Many years ago, in 1969, Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinoza wrote his manifest titled "For an imperfect cinema"<sup>4</sup>, where he defended the New Latin American Cinema aesthetics and poetics, suggesting that in the "imperfections" in the narrative of the New Latin American Cinema resided the substantial difference with the European cinema. While "imperfect", our cinema was committed with social change and brought art closer to people. Something alike has happened with community and alternative media: being "impure" becomes an opportunity for creativity and social change.

### **Shaky paradigms**

One thing is what has been written on alternative or participatory media, and another thing is how alternative or participatory communication experiences have evolved since the fifties. Too often, the image of alternative media that has been presented as a model does not really correspond to how things were happening on the ground. Good-willed allies of community, alternative or participatory media often popularised concepts that were more related with their personal political views, rather than with the complexity of media at the grassroots level. Alternative or participatory media as always being inflexible, subversive, confrontational and intolerant, or excluding dialogue, alliances and wider participation from other sectors; alternative media as being always at the defensive, seldom proactive or open to the society at large.

Somehow, these ideas were promoted above alternative and participatory communication experiences and only contributed to freeze an ideal model that was very useful for the political

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<sup>4</sup> Julio García Espinoza, "Por un cine imperfecto" (1969) en "La Doble Moral del Cine", EICTV, Ollero & Ramos, Editores. Madrid, 1996.

and ideological purposes of "gauche divine", but didn't service well the struggle of community media to mature as tool of social change, education, entertainment, socialization of knowledge, economic development, etc. By revising the wealth of experiences that we now know, some of which have already disappeared, we realize that the intellectual avant-garde took sometimes a straight road to radical definitions, while the concrete experiences showed much more flexibility and the will of establishing dialogue and building coalitions.

Participatory communication experiences have a long history, especially in Latin America. It has been more than fifty years since *Radio Sutatenza* in Colombia or the miners' radio station *La Voz del Minero* in Bolivia started their activity. Actually, they were there before the wave of enthusiasm for "alternative media" arose in the sixties and seventies and the war of labelling started on paper. I have not met any grassroots or community media experience worried about deciding if the label *participatory* or *alternative* or *horizontal* or *popular*... was the most accurate or appropriate. The truth is: we were rushing for definitions and labels, not the real actors in the participatory communication process.

At the community level, what was clear was the feeling of being different from... and of being other than... The clarity of being "alter" didn't have to do with any intellectual choice, it was just a fact of reality. Participatory communication experiences are "alternative" in a different perspective. Most of them were originated not so much as to oppose an existing pervasive media, but just because there was no media around and a community voice needed to be heard.

It certainly makes a better participatory tool when it originates because people desperately needed to express

themselves about their life and their problems, rather than because somebody come up with a well-designed project to "empower" people. I don't think the Bolivian miners ever thought about politically empowering themselves when they created a very small radio station at the mining *campamento* of Siglo XX, North of Potosi, in the late forties. Initially, they just wanted to better communicate within their community and with their constituency. They wanted to call for meetings, to air dedications and music that miners liked, to announce the arrival of letters and postal parcels, to make known when new provisions arrived to the *pulpería* - the mining company store, and read messages from miners' families. They soon realized they were also heard in nearby peasant communities, the poorest of Bolivia, and in other neighbouring mining camps. After the 1952 Revolution and the nationalization of mines, the political influence of these radio stations grew as other mining unions created their own stations with the same original goal: better communicate with their constituency, a few thousand miners and their families. Soon enough, they realized that the radio allowed the union to put pressure on the government when fighting for their rights. If a union leader was put in prison, or the *pulpería* was empty, or safety was not ensured for workers inside the mine, the radio would say it and this was enough to make the government react, or else face strikes and demonstrations that could easily spread to the rest of the mines in the country.

Mining unions got stronger as radio became their voice and the voice of every single miner that wanted to express something. Often housed at the union building, miners' radio stations would air live the union meetings so their constituency would know exactly what was discussed and who said what. This had an

enormous influence on participation and on how union leaders were recognized and elected. Though most of them were militants from the various political parties -Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), Communist Party, Trotskyites, etc., they were above all union leaders, and miners would elect again those that showed they were above all committed with unity within the union and the Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia -the powerful FSTMB- rather than a political party. Many miners wouldn't even recall if Federico Escobar, Irineo Pimentel or Cesar Lora -among many other great leaders- were Trotskyites, communists or nationalists from MNR. They were recognized as genuine leaders of the workers of the mines, and the radio had a lot to do with it. Traditionally, union leaders in the mines of Bolivia have been elected in a most democratic way. Every single vote from a single miner counts to elect even the Executive Secretary of the federation (FSTMB). The radio has been instrumental to let the leaders position themselves not only on matters concerning directly the daily life of miners (salaries, provisions, security), but also on national issues, which have always been in the heart of any union discussions. If there is one aspect that clearly differentiated the unions of Bolivia with the style of "trade unions" in North America and in other countries of Latin America, this has been the concern for national issues and the intervention of miners in national politics. This was very clear when mining unions voices their support to the guerrilla of Ché Guevara in 1967, and obviously the reason why the massacre of Saint John took place on a frozen night of June 1967 in Catavi, Llallagua and Siglo XX mining *campamentos*. The power of radio -which is why radio is largely dominant in participatory communication experiences- is understandable in a

context where most of the people are either illiterate or have no possibility of accessing any other kind of media. This was true for most of the fifties and sixties, though it started to change during the seventies.

### The right side of god

Even the Catholic Church, which is the most influential in Bolivia, recognized the importance of the radio in rural and marginalized urban areas. Early in the fifties Oblate priests founded a new radio station at the Siglo XX mining camp, overlapping the same area of influence than *La Voz del Minero* - actually, very close from it physically- and *Radio 21 de Diciembre* of Catavi, a mining district just below Llallagua. The new station was named *Radio Pío XII*, after the conservative Pope. It's goal, clearly spelled since it started, was to "eradicate communism and alcoholism" from the mines. The powerful transmitter of *Radio Pío XII* soon collided with the worker's ideas about life and politics. At same point, the miners attempted against the stations throwing dynamite sticks -which actually make more sound than harm when not surrounded in metal or glass. Their reject for *Radio Pío XII* was straightforward. They perceived the new station was attempting against their own radio stations and dividing them on issues of politics and social behaviour. On the other hand, the Oblate priests quickly learned that their good intentions and harsh ideas had to be confronted to a reality they knew little about before arriving to the mining camps. Within the next two years their position evolved towards a major commitment and solidarity with the miners and their organisations. Eventually, and until today, *Radio Pío XII* became a very important ally of the workers from the mines, and definitely

suffered the same attacks and repression from the army every time the mines were occupied.

Does the fact that the Catholic Church is involved in a participatory communication project attempt to the "purity" of the participatory experience? It is indeed a serious question to consider, given the fact that a large number -to say the least- of the most interesting experiences of communication for social change in Latin America, are led by catholic organizations. One of the largest radio stations in Bolivia, *Radio San Gabriel*, with enormous influence on Aymara peasants from the highlands, is owned and run by the Catholic Church. If we quickly browse through alternative communication experiences in Latin America we will find a vast majority of the most stable, permanent and committed were and are founded, funded and run by the Catholic Church. I've seen a similar pattern in Asia and Africa. In The Philippines, several of the most successful small radio stations that are part of the *Tambuli* network are in the hands of progressive religious groups. The same for *Radio Kwizera* (Radio Hope) in Tanzania, near the border of Burundi and Rwanda. This station gives hope to hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing away from the war between Hutus and Tutsies, and is a project of the Jesuit Refugee Service.

If the "ownership" of the media is central to the definition of a participatory communication experience, then all these communication projects shouldn't qualify within a strict definition. Sure, they facilitate access and allow the voices of people to be heard, so they are "participatory" in the sense of involving their constituency, but ultimately the priests that run the stations make the main decisions. Their solidarity with the people they serve is out of doubt. The contents of

their programming addresses the real needs of peasants, refugees, poor urban dwellers, miners, etc., with segments dealing with topics such as human rights, agriculture, environment, education, literacy, local culture, indigenous organization, health and sanitation, etc. Above all, their constituency considers to be represented through these radio stations. They are part of the daily lives of those who struggle for freedom and dignity in many places of the world. And as such these alternative media experiences have also been subject of attacks, repression and censorship. The bullet scars are still visible over the walls of *Radio Pío XII* in Bolivia; other stations have faced legal challenges to continue functioning, as happened with *Radio Huayacocotla* in Mexico, mostly in countries where there is no specific legislation for community radio. In fact, thanks to their status of religious radio stations and to the protection they receive from religious institutions above them, they have remained active in circumstances where other community media were wiped out, either violently or with the force of a legislation that favours private sector interests and government censorship.

Again, if we look at the way these religious radio stations operate and serve people, we have little doubt about them pertaining to the "right side", the side of people, the side of democracy, the side of freedom of expression, the side of cultural pride and local identity. We tend to overlook the real ownership of the station in terms of the licence to operate, the equipments and staff, because the impact on social change is what interests us the most. People are benefiting from it, people are participating, people are "part" and are "partners" of changes that affect society. Building coalitions is essential for participatory communication to develop and be

sustainable, and it is from this perspective justifiable in a long-term political strategy to have as allies the Catholic radio stations as they have given full proof of commitment and solidarity. Indeed, most participatory experiences and alternative media projects have originated under institutional arrangements that are linked to local NGOs and international cooperation development projects funded by religious organizations.

### The wrong side of god

The question of "ownership" may come back as a tough question to answer, specially given the fact that a new wave of religious radio stations may completely change our perception about these local media in terms of been or not appropriate to peoples' needs. To put it bluntly, thousands of religious stations owned by small Pentecostal and Evangelist confessions are popping out in rural areas of the Third World, with messages and contents that have little to do with democracy, support to local culture or defence of human rights. The Catholic radio stations that started in Latin America during the sixties and seventies are clearly recognized as playing on the "right side" of the communication game, and playing with the people and for the people, to say it simple. The new wave of stations from religious denominations that often do not even exist outside of the country or even province where they operate, are clearly playing on the "wrong side" and against the values of communities they are supposed to serve.

Things are obviously more complex than that, because now it becomes very difficult to draw a straight line separating those that play for the people and those that play against. Which is why the question of "ownership" becomes more relevant than ever.

Driving along the road that takes me from Guatemala City to Quetzaltenango (Xela, as called by those that reject the Spanish name for the second largest city in Guatemala), I keep moving the dial of the radio set and one after the other I only find religious stations, dozens of them competing for small pockets of population. Some of them fade out as my jeep progresses on the road, but almost immediately some other fade in with similar sounds: reading the bible, music praising the lord, or even dramatizations with religious contents. The voices of people are absent, only "the voice of God" seems predominant. "El Señor" wants you to do this and that... religious marketing at its best.

Nobody knows for sure how a small country like Guatemala got to the point of having so many religious stations competing for new adepts to the strangest denominations, most of them never heard before. How did these stations managed to keep their frequencies in spite of draconian laws that have declared all community radio stations "pirate media" and "illegal"? Community and indigenous radio stations were forced to bid for frequencies in order to continue operating. They were forced to compete with powerful media owners and pay as much as them for a FM frequency that had only 20 or 30 kilometres of radius of influence. Maya communities were hard-hit and had to invest all their resources in order to gather 50 or 60 thousands dollars to survive. Of course, many disappeared in the process. But the religious stations are still there, multiplied, having increased their number and influence, especially over those communities that have a weaker cultural identity.

The difficulty of drawing the line between the "right" and the "wrong" is because they are not all equal to each other. Some of these stations have a mix programming that combines the

religious contents with advice on health or education issues. Some have even provided free airtime to local organizations to prepare their own programming.

As this phenomenon becomes notorious in many other countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, it raises issues of concern to participatory communication. Some on-the-ground research is needed to better capture the essence of the religious radio stations, from the perspective of communities and content wise. A simple observation, in the meanwhile, shows that wherever a space is occupied by one of these stations, the chances of having a genuine local community radio are largely reduced.

### **Building coalitions**

Community media, alternative media or participatory communication experiences are examples of a process of building coalitions. In spite of it, they have wrongly been perceived as voluntarily seeking for secretiveness, isolation or an inexistent ideal of purity. The discourse of media activists themselves has contributed to this perception. However, there is not one single experience that excluded participation in a very broad sense, not only the bottom-up community based approach. All development communication examples, which have had undeniable impact on social change, involve embedded strategies of building alliances and coalitions without losing the essence of community participation. Even the most "pure" radical forms of community media have a long history of building alliances and coalitions.

In Latin America, during the sixties and seventies, popular communication experiences (alternative and/or participatory), were constructed from the beginning within political oppositional alliances against authoritarian governments, very

often, military dictators. One of the "most" pure expressions of alternative, popular and participatory media, the Bolivian tin miners' radio stations, are an example of this. Radios could have not survived and grow if they didn't have such an intimate relationship with the miners' unions. The radio station and the union made one. The radio was very often housed at the miners' union building, and it was customary to appoint the Secretary of Culture of the union as the director of the station. Union meetings were aired live during five or six hours, and listeners didn't seem to mind. This may not be fully understandable in other context, but we should remember that every single miner was unionised and that unions in Bolivia were highly regarded channels of social participation. Coalitions were also built by the tin miners' radio station with peasant organizations from neighbouring villages, with the Catholic Church and with the universities. Peasants were in the frontline to defend the radio stations when attacked by the army.

Recent participatory communication experiences in Asia and Africa -and certainly Latin America- are even establishing dialogue and alliances with governments. Once participatory media is rooted in the community, the possibilities of establishing dialogue and alliances without losing identity and independence are important. The participation in the larger society, transcending the community level, is increasingly possible by means of new technologies, and there are no more political prejudices to impede contributing to culture and society, especially when a particular region or country is living through a process of democratisation.

When *Bush Radio* was established near Cape Town in 1995, the main support came from the University of Western Cape, the so-

called "bush college". Two years before, the first attempts to be in the air were drastically curtailed by police forces from the apartheid regime, who confiscated the equipment. *Bush Radio* had to struggle during three years to get a legal licence to operate. The station obtained it only in 1995, four years after the liberation of Nelson Mandela. During the apartheid regime, *Bush Radio* fought for freedom of expression and was the first "black" community radio in South Africa. Under the democratic regime, the station has dealt with current needs of the population, through programs aiming to conflict resolution and establishment of a society based on solidarity and equal opportunities. One important program of *Bush Radio* is the "TRC Report" which represents the efforts of the station to build alliances with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as with human rights organizations. Relations with the government have obviously improved on many grounds. An alliance between prison authorities, the University of Cape Town and *Bush Radio*, derived into a very interesting initiative, developing a training programme whereby young people convicted for various offences are trained and allowed to operate a radio station within the prison facility. *Bush Radio* community of listeners has guided this strategy of openness and coalition building. Community participation through various mechanisms ensured and supported a leading role for the station in the community, brokering peace deals between warring factions in townships or between the gangs that control the taxi services in the region.

The issue of ownership comes back once more when analysing a recent experience of coalition building between private radio stations and international cooperation in Indonesia. The history of community media in Asia is very recent and has not

yet had the huge development it has known in Latin America during the past fifty years. Strong authoritarian regimes and a very centralized power has been during decades a barrier to the development of community based participation initiatives. Mass media are still very much centralized in most of Asian countries, in the hands of the government. Only The Philippines has managed, thanks to the process of democratisation, to create some room for community radio -the *Tambuli* stations- and other grassroots communication initiatives. Even legislation is slowly changing to accommodate community media. In Indonesia, any initiative of communication that is alternative to government owned media encounters a strong blockage from authorities. Only commercial private radio stations has been allowed to operate in provinces, but until recent years they were not allowed to air any news, other than the official newscast from the national state radio. An innovative alliance was implemented during the late nineties between 25 local private radio stations and UNESCO with funding from the Danish cooperation. Stations were given new equipment, computers and Internet connectivity, and their journalists trained. Through the use of e-mail and an Internet database the local radio network produces and exchanges local news and embarks in national campaigns for democracy, participation and against corruption. The network aired an educational campaign before the 1999 elections, encouraging people to vote freely and consciously. In spite of repeated threats from the army and attempts of censoring the news produced by these local radio stations, they have strongly pursued their goals. The network is becoming stronger and is a good example of coalition building with the private sector, for the benefit of the community and the nation.

**Conclusion**

The social, political and economic context surrounding community media has deeply changed during the past two decades. Globalisation has generalised the constraints for independent, alternative and participatory communication experiences. New technologies have, on the other hand, introduced new challenges demanding enormous efforts from community media to adapt and survive. If on the one hand the world has generally lived through democratisation processes that have replaced authoritarian regimes and military dictators, on the other hand societies are being controlled and often manipulated through other means, legal or not. Corruption has generalized, as if the democratisation process made it available to anyone. The traffic of drugs, guns, fake currency, live wild animals, precious woods, orphan children, migrant workers, prostitutes, archaeological treasures, has created powerful cartels that have enormous influence on governments, legislators and the private sector. As the problems become international and generalize across borders, alternative and participatory media has news concerns and new potential audiences.

The abundance of commercial media has created a mirage of variety and possibility of choice, though in reality only offers less in terms of contents, less information, and less access and participation. Huge international conglomerates are being formed, including radio, television, print media and new Internet technologies, multiplying the demand through new channels of distribution and dissemination, but actually reducing the supply and the variety of contents. The role of the state as administrator, regulator and defender of consumers and citizen's rights has been completely diminished under the pressure of multinational holdings and a national private

sector that wants to operate with no restrictions whatsoever. Globalisation of media and new technologies is also affecting the cultural tissue of the world, rapidly wiping out differences between cultures, homogenizing societies to facilitate market expansions.

In this new context, alternative and participatory media have a greater importance than ever in the defence of human values and the diversity of cultures, languages and beliefs. More than ever and precisely because there is a need to challenge globalisation, community media has to think local first in order to consolidate cultural identity and reflect community needs. Each communication process being different and autonomous, alternative communication experiences have something in common that has to be preserved and developed: participation and dialogue. If there is a line that we can draw between commercial globalised media and community media, this is precisely along participation in its various forms and dialogue to build alliances and coalitions. Opposition to commercial media alone no longer defines the "alterity" of participatory media. Community media was and is still important to voice people's concerns for democracy and human values, but now more than ever it is also essential to preserve language, culture and identity in a world that may lose in a few decades the multilingual and pluricultural societies that took centuries to build.

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