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Community Television in Colombia: Or of How Perseverance Begets Fortune...

By Patricia Tellez

It is hopeful and almost utopian, to call it anything, that community media are still an important topic and that there is a world network interested in their reality; that there are academics, experts, and activists concerned about and occupied by them, and that in addition, they have ratings. All of this in a global world characterized by technological development, which at times seems to be more important than approaching and managing information. Proof of it is your presence at this panel on the evaluation of community media.

There are enough reasons to think that for some globalization leaders whose priority is technology, community television is one of the questions that were not solved in the "last century." They may think that today's questions about this mass medium have to do with how it will adapt to the new media environment. It is characterized by convergence, digitalization and networks, which not long ago were part of "science fiction" and the industry's technical discussions, but which today are key elements of this society of knowledge and information we inhabit.

However, you must know that, fortunately, in Colombia this issue has "mourners." Public agencies, non-government organizations, foundations, popular communication collectives that include young men and women seduced by images, and other older people, perhaps already retired, who have all become spokespersons for their communities are working on it today. They are true Quixotes in far away corners of the country who work daily to succeed at this utopia with different degrees of organization. For them, the issue has become a life project, to which they have given their all, and which has caused them happiness and disappointment...

We will concern ourselves with them in this paper. Based on their brief history we will approach attempts at systematization and evaluation during the last few decades to learn about their achievements and limitations. We will then consider the Action Plan currently being developed by the Ministry of Culture's Communications Office with the support of the National Television Commission, (Spanish acronym, CNTV).

We shall begin, but before that, we thank Our Media / Nuestros Medios for the invitation to this event. It is also an excuse to see old friends and fellow travelers in experiences that will undoubtedly strengthen citizen and community communication and media projects taking place in different countries.

The Necessary Context to Understand their Current Situation

It is not easy to try to recuperate the history of this mass media in Colombia. Its origins are enmeshed in elements related to technological, social, historical, media, and geographical aspects that may be interpreted in different ways when looking at the past.

This characterization of the puzzle pieces was taken from a text by Social Communicator Enrique Rodríguez, who together with Luis Fernando Barón and Julián Tenorio coordinated the work team that first diagnosed local and community television in Colombia in 1997. The work was entitled "Señales de Humo" (Panorama de la Televisión Local y Comunitaria en Colombia. ["Smoke Signals" the Local and Community Television Scene in Colombia] Fundación Social, CINEP: Ministerio de Comunicaciones. Bogotá: LAC: Impresores, February 1998.) The work, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Communications, was the result of a collective project coordinated by the Research and Popular Education Center [Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP)] with the Social Foundation.

In Colombia, the process started in the early 80's. Its beginning is marked by technological factors related to the increasing use of satellites to broadcast information, the increase in television offering in the United States, and the development and reduction of reception equipment and audiovisual signal distribution costs.

As a result, its consumption reaches middle class and lower-middle class households, which before could not afford this technology. In the following years, its distribution increased, as well as the number of people able to use it. With the advent of parabolic antennas, a key element for community television, differences for their development and appropriation in rural and urban areas are established.

Around 1980, drug traffickers' grandiose architecture gives rise to those "big dishes" in high-end fenced apartment complexes, later quickly popularized thanks to their low cost. In addition, no royalty fee was paid. Moreover, the consumer enjoyed contact with varied audiovisual offerings (different from national television, which was very limited at the time) from signals originating in different countries. This situation started to gradually change consumer habits in Colombia.

Reality was different in rural areas. The ruggedness of the national territory explains in part public, and later, private channels reception problems in the farthest municipalities of the country.

On the other hand, the political and administrative de-centralization that started around 1980, gives mayors greater autonomy in the management of public expenditures. Thanks to this circumstance, and attracted by the novelty of the medium, some of them decided involve themselves to turn it into an important mechanism for citizen participation.

Others, as it happens sometimes, used it to propagandize and seek electoral publicity, but both should know how to channel the communities' needs through

this medium. We can mention TeleJericó in Antioquia, TeleItzmina and TelePlatino in Chocó as examples of positive pioneers.

As social aspects that explain expansion of the phenomenon, we find diverse and creative appropriation of it by consumers who use it to broadcast events, social activities and general interest issues for the community.

A last element necessary to understand the context in which community television emerged is the legal aspect. The existence and permanence of a “mixed model” during more than 40 years, where individuals exploited almost at will the State’s monopoly, appears as an obstacle to develop the industry and democratic and participatory television that would truly foster visibility of different social actors.

At this point, it is important to mention that despite changes in media, and particularly, in television legislation, approaches to it are still somewhat “behind the times” in Colombia. For example, in the last three years there have been three reform bills, and currently we are experiencing one of them. Therefore, we can safely say that while this medium’s technological development travels by “Concord,” our legislation has traveled by mule for the last few decades....

Let me make an aside to point out how in reform bills currently under study, community television unfortunately becomes invisible again. They appear as a quilt, which rather than attending to the crisis’ key aspects, are centered on termination or strengthening of the National Television Commission. This is the medium’s regulatory agency, which is in fact the crisis’ “tip of the iceberg.” However, there are other aspects that deserve attention, such as the case of INRAVISION, the reflection upon public service, the role of new modalities, by which I mean local and community television. We only wish that in this respect, general interests would prevail over individual ones...

What Do We Mean When We Talk about Community Television?

Agreement 006 of 1999 issued by the CNTV regulates service delivery. It establishes: “It is the television service delivered by organized non-profit communities, to produce its own programming to fulfill educational, entertainment and cultural needs. The service should be delivered as closed circuit television through one or several channels in the network. Also, since it is limited in its geographical area, and not for profit, the service shall not be confused with subscription television.”¹

Let us look at some aspects to characterize this kind of service based on the Agreement mentioned. It defines the concept, the scope of coverage (6,000 members), its funding sources, advertisement (6 minutes per half hour broadcasted), programming characteristics (it must produce 2 weekly hours of its own programs), other signals it can receive (7 kinds, to wit: educational, cultural, children’s, news, sports, movies, and one musical), among other aspects.

Looking for its Own Identity

Again, when looking at the history of community television evaluation, we must refer to “Smoke Signals.” After a meeting of local and community television stations in Sasaima (Cundinamarca) in 1997, where the National Promotion Committee was created, the first action plan for it was formulated. It contemplates the need to diagnose the reality of this type of television in the country.

The coordinating team included Gloria Erazo, Luis Fernando Barón, Darío Angel, Enrique Rodríguez, Julián Tenorio, Harold Salazar, Andrés Mutis, Benjamín Casadiego among other people from different regions and universities, public agencies, and NGOs.

¹ National Television Commission. Agreement 006 of 1999 that regulates non-profit television service.

I mention them as a way to honor them, since what I intend to do at the Communications Office at the Ministry is “simply” to pick up their legacy. They are the Sanchos to the Quixotes I referred to before. After many years, some of them are still supporting this noble cause through regional processes, and there is also a larger group of anonymous strugglers. They are still trying to collectively revive projects, which are their “life projects” as I said before.

It is precisely this first research into national coverage that makes the emergence form “anonymity” of community television possible to start a search for identity that is still ongoing. At this point, it is important to clarify that causes for concern include not only its invisibility but also the damage caused by the association of “informal” or pirate operators to it, which has stigmatized community channels.

Findings by “Smoke Signals”

For the first diagnostic, the country was divided into 6 regions: Caribbean Coast (Atlántico, Bolívar, Córdoba, Guajira, Magdalena and Sucre); Santanderes (Arauca, Norte de Santander and Santander); Antioquia and Chocó; Center (Boyacá, Cundinamarca and Meta); Caquetá, Huila and Tolima; and Southeast (Cauca, the coffee-growing region, Nariño, Putumayo and Valle del Cauca).

In general, work was carried out in stages that can be grouped in three activities: i) localization of regional teams and their methodological and organizational design; ii) localization of the channels, training of survey takers, compilation of information (surveys and interviews) and finally; iii) systematization of information into a data base, review of surveys, regional report writing, information systematization, and final report writing.

The survey was considered the central instrument for diagnosis. Its main goal was to collect information about performance of community channels based on aspects

such as: geographical location, internal structure, infrastructure, programming, and personnel, among others.

When summarizing the diagnosis' results it was evident that there are several different experiences backed by historical, regional identity meshing processes. They also appear as organizational and social action processes in economic, political and cultural environments.

Among them are the 1991 Constitution, administrative decentralization processes, and new forms of citizen participation, which make minority groups more visible.

With respect to the location of channels, the research found they are more often found in mid-size cities and smaller municipalities, than in large cities. They "flourish" in social strata 1, 2 and 3 of those municipalities. They are almost never found in rural areas because of cost.

It is important to point out that legislative processes have been favorable to the development of many channels, as well as being a determining factor in their paralyzation and disarticulation. Therefore, of the approximately 400 channels found, there are only 40 authorized by the CNTV, with around 30 of them about to obtain licenses. We must note that this research took place almost simultaneously with the creation of the CNTV, and that at that time, community channels were just starting to meet the requirements of Agreement 029 of 1997, which came before Agreement 006 of 1999 that regulates the service today.

Financial and managerial aspects have been crucial to these experiences. The good will of people enthused with the issue is not enough. The majority of them have not reached minimum economic sustainability levels, thus becoming non viable.

This last point is closely related to organizational processes that support these experiences. Despite internal problems, in some areas first and second level associations (operators' associations and federations) started to grow. They are starting to collectively develop an interesting reflection about their work.

The issue of programming is very interesting, since it gives life to this community project. It is approached from a "gut feeling," rather than being based on any knowledge of genres or audiences, which is evident in each channel's offerings. News programs and magazines are the most favored formats. In addition, live broadcast of sports and cultural events are popular.

Citizen and Community Media Tables: Another Diagnosis

After 2000, and a second part of this retelling, we find the open call by the Ministry of Culture's Communications Office through the so-called Citizen and Community Media Tables that intended to find policy guidelines to formulate the Culture National Plan.

When trying to summarize them, we find as immediate precedents, the creation of the National Council for Culture, Art, and Citizen Media as a response to a call by the Ministry of Culture. The council's creation stemmed from a meeting convened by the Ministry in June 2000 that was attended by nearly 40 people representing regional and national station associations, and independent media collectives, among others.

Later that year, the Ministry issued a resolution for the first time acknowledging these media as "cultural expressions of Colombian nationality." Thus, this granted them status as legitimate actors to participate in the Culture National Plan (2002-2010), which should become a favorable environment for the construction of truly democratic citizenship in this country.

Thus, the once called “alternative media” will be honor guests at these tables where people working in television, radio and printed media meet. All this, in order to collectively design public policies that influence the creation of an industry that has an important role in the development of citizenship. During this process, which is not yet done since one of the tables has not taken place (Valle and Chocó); common problems, strengths, and weaknesses have been discussed while looking for a common direction to implement collective actions that will strengthen all of them.

In terms of the number of participants, community radio has had the most, followed by television, and printed media. In the case of television, the table has had varied composition. It has included everything from communication collectives to parabolic antenna consumer associations, and independent producers, students, and teachers from the Communication Schools where they are produced. Attending representatives of community channels expressed that some of them have recently obtained licenses and have had difficulties complying with Agreement requirements.

In the final analysis of the tables’ results, we find that there are important tasks to be done despite the channels’ positive aspects, including their self-management tradition, links with the community, relatively low production costs, and national presence. Several topics were addressed including sustainability, programming and legality as opposed to legitimacy. With respect to sustainability, work on behalf of social companies by improving their management, among other things, is required. In addition, training in the design and implementation of communication projects that support the channels is needed.

With respect to programming, there were requests for training specifically for community television channels as defined by its programming. In addition, the importance of knowing how to construct a programming grid, to know about the location of its bands, and of audience development was pointed out.

However, those present were mostly concerned about legal aspects, and particularly about their relationship with the National Television Commission with respect to compliance with Agreement 006, which regulates this kind of television. The main concerns have to do with difficulties complying with the requirement of having two daily hours of their own programming (14 hour per week), given restrictions on reception of coded signals.

Given the country's economic crisis and its effects on this industry, another issue that worries operators is the tax obligations, which seems to be excessive judging by the situation of most channels. Among the different taxes they must pay, we found the following: 7.5% of gross income to the CNTV, 16% to the National Tax and Customs Office [In Spanish, Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales] (DIAN), royalties to industry organizations such as Colombian Authors and Composers Society, SAYCO [Sociedad de Autores y Compositores de Colombia] and Colombian Association of Interpreters and Phonographic Producers, ACIMPRO [Asociación Colombiana de Intérpretes y Productores Fonográficos], and posting rights, paid in some areas of the country, to cite just the most overwhelming.

Community Television Action Plan

Following the worktables in December of 2002, the Communications Office at the Ministry of Culture designed what has been called the Action Plan for Community Television in Colombia with the support of the CNTV. In fact, the project was designed last year, but due to budget problems, its implementation only started this semester.

At that point, there was a meeting in Bogotá that included the team responsible for the first diagnosis, as well as some legal representatives of community channels in Colombia. The proposal was presented to them and their opinions were heard.

This plan is focused on three basic strategies: an updated diagnosis; training workshops to fulfill needs detected during the media tables, particularly about programming and management; and delivery of a “portable video library” to each channel.

Let us look at each activity and their findings during the 6 months since the project started. It is currently in the final phase of data collection.

Today’s community television context is different from the one at the time of the first diagnosis. Although the CNTV already existed, the first attempt at regulation only took place in December 1997, that is, the same year the research project took place.

However, once the agreement was issued, people and companies that were affected by it generated a series of lawsuits. This in turn generated uneasiness and uncertainty among those interested in this issue. At that moment, there was a change in the CNTV board of directors, and the new administration decided to issue new regulations to mend mistakes made previously. Consequently, the former Agreement was invalidated, and the new project, which would become Agreement 006 of 1999, began.

Using an existing community television regulatory agreement as reference, it was decided to study channels with CNTV authorization up until December 20, 2002. The last Board of Director’s meeting for the year took place on that date.

Then, there were 43 such channels registered and almost 30 in what has been called the “second round”. They are channels that were making adjustments (related to their grid, budget, or technical aspects) as a result of requirements by the regulatory agency.

In short, the diagnosis' main goal is to offer an updated picture of these channels' reality in the country. As a result, a similar questionnaire has been designed. It is designed to collect information related to: the channel's location, its creation, its budget management, programming, human resources and last but not least, the channels' perception of the regulatory Agreement.

The reason for the workshops as a strategy is very simple. Both in "Smoke Signals'" conclusions and recommendations and during the Media Tables, participants reiterated their request for training on various topics: production and realization, evaluation of materials, programming, and community channel management, among others.

However, the issue of programming was given priority as an "excuse" to think about the channels' management. These two issues are fundamental since people in the project went from recording the soccer game on Friday, the town's bazaar on Saturday, and Mass on Sunday to trying to broadcast 2 hours a day (14 hour a week) of their own programming. That is when they ran into problems...

Programming is a generic topic, and in the case of these channels, it must be the key to their identity and give sense to their existence. Let me explain myself: experience has taught me that there is not "one" programming for community television. There is television programming, and I must appropriate it in order to work in this type of television. The "passion" that images generate, particularly on groups of young people, is not enough.

Since the medium "has already been invented" and audiovisual language has its own grammar, it is necessary for people who work in it to have basic knowledge to complement it with high doses of creativity, a characteristic already present in most of the channels. Often, these experiences under the guise of being alternative, alter quality, aesthetics, and television language...

What can be said about management of community channels? It already sounds commonplace to say that “not for profit” is different from “for bankruptcy.” However, this is what has happened sometimes.

Legitimacy is important but not enough when preparing a budget. Making television is expensive, and it is more so when there is no clarity with respect to financial management. Therefore, this workshop tries to provide management tools based on the definition of community television as a cultural phenomenon, an industry, and approaching it as an audiovisual enterprise. This is based on localization of its environment, planning, design, management and control as processes that must be looked at in every organization.

Finally, you must know that the “portable video library” was not my idea. A couple of years ago, the Cinematography Office at the Ministry of Culture designed a “film suitcase” to help circulate this art form’s best works.

Since the idea was successful as a strategy to divulge and circulate the materials, it has been duplicated and spread through the country and outside it. And, well “copying” successful ideas for worthwhile causes must grant one general amnesty... Suitcases, which is just a nicer word for boxes, were then created that contained materials produced by the Television Unit at the Ministry, and which will be sent to different channels to be broadcast. At first, programs will be part of the Ministry’s programming, particularly from “La Franja” [The Band] and “Diálogos de Nación” [National Dialogues] broadcast through “Señal Colombia” [Colombia Signal].

The country was divided into zones for the workshops and application of the survey depending on the number of channels, thusly: Center Zone (Cundinamarca, Bogotá and Caquetá). Here, we found 7 authorized channels, and three in process. In the Coffee-Growing region (Caldas, Quindío and Risaralda) there are 8

authorized channels and three that merged. In Valle and Cauca there are 6 channels, one in Cauca, and 3 from the second round.

Antioquia is the department with the most channels of this type of television. We found 12 channels there, and one in Córdoba. Next week, we will be working in workshops in Norte de Santander, Santander and Magdalena Medio. In that area, we found 7 CNTV authorized channels and 3 in process.

What Have We Found during this experience?

We found wonderful people who live in what some of them call “show-off municipalities” and therefore want to put themselves in display, while in other regions just the opposite is true. This is the case of Channel 8 in Puerto Rico, Caquetá where due to public order issues, they must keep a very low profile, and even “turn off the channel” at times.

The passion for this medium knows no age or gender. We found a group of retirees managing production of the Commune 11 Channel in Cali, Channel 4 in Ciudad Bolívar (Antioquia); and a women’s collective managing Tele Candelaria, in the village of Villa Gorgona, Municipality of Candelaria (Valle). Their programming is addressed to women heads of household, which are the majority in this community.

Young people are most visible and are part in almost all of the channels. They work doing everything: working equipment, and producing musicals and live programs that generally show the community’s social and cultural activities, and which are received very well.

Their presence has been strongly felt in the Coffee-Growing Region channels, and in Antioquia, which is a department where the collectives they lead have significant participation. Such is the case of the Apía and Santuario channels in Risaralda, of

Salvador and Tele Envigado channels, which are examples of Antioquia's residents' entrepreneurship.

However, not everything is rose colored. Proof of it is the fact that of the 400 channels detected by the first diagnosis, only 40 survive today. This research will allow us to make a more objective evaluation of these projects' present and future. We will be able to measure their true scope, since their value tends to be exaggerated given the great effort they entail for those whose work makes them possible. This might be a reaction to the little importance they are given as the "Cinderella's" of this mass media.

A key issue has to do with observations made so far with respect to the regulatory agreement's demands. Up to this point, the balance is that it should be more in conformity with the channels realities, and therefore some of its demands should be rethought. Some of these are: programming requirements, payments most operators consider onerous, the impossibility of joining a chain, or of co-productions.

These difficulties are obstacles for the development of community television. Surely, the results of this project could motivate the CNTV to propose a new Agreement bill that is more in accord with the operators needs.

In a country in the process of building itself, the presence of these media is definitive. Not having access to them is akin to being socially invisible. The obstinacy and effort of these Quixotes has demonstrated that these projects' utopian quality is just the opposite. I insist: I hope it is true that he who perseveres attains, because people involved in these projects have been particularly persistent. Sometimes I ask myself whether all of them were born under the sign of Taurus....

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