Challenges for Community and Popular Radio in Latin America

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1. Introduction

It is an honor for me to be here before you, to exchange practices and opinions. I would like to thank the organizers, especially for giving me the test to summarize in 15 minutes the challenges that the Latin American Community and Popular Radio face today.

2. Radio is in a crisis

In Chinese, there are two characters for the word "crisis". Individually, they have different meanings. One of them means "problem", and the other one means "challenge". This is exactly the current situation of popular radio in Latin America: a crisis, a problem that must be faced as a challenge.

The Latin American Association of Radio Education (in Spanish, Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica, ALER) gathers 107 radio stations and communication centers in 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries. It is, therefore, one of the main actors of popular and community radio in the continent.

Since the 50's, this movement has promoted the use of radio to build fairer societies, and to democratize speech. First, it was called educational radio, and later, with different connotations, popular radio, community radio or citizen's radio.

During its 30 years of existence, ALER has developed many strategies to achieve that great goal through book and manual editing, training, technical assistance, and research. In addition, since 1997, it has contributed through a continental satellite

project called ALRED (Spanish acronym for *América Latina en Red*) [Latin America on the Net].

In 2000, ALER initiated a research project titled 'Force and Incidence of Popular Radio'. The main goal of the study was to provide feedback to the movement about its true force and incidence, in order to promote relevant re-definition processes.

In the project, a group if 17 ALER researchers surveyed a total of 74 popular and community radio broadcasters in Latin America, between June and October 2000. In addition, 54 experts on popular communication were interviewed, in 21 Radio Associations and 19 Radio Broadcast Production Centers.

The preliminary report was discussed during an international seminar (in May 2001) and at the ALER Annual Meeting (in June of the same year). The results of the study were validated and further deliberated during different collective reflection sessions: the general situation of popular and community radio is critical. Radio is in a more marginal position than it was 10 or 20 years ago, and its incidence in a social change project is a lot smaller than it should be, given the enormous needs of the great majority of the population.

In February 2002, a historical event occurred. After trying to coordinate the event for years, AMARC and ALER —the main engines of popular and community radio movements in the continent— got together for three days. Both organizations acknowledged the critical situation and agreed to work together to implement a process for "strengthening integral management of popular and community radio in the political, communication, institutional, and economic aspects."

At present, a joint strengthening process is successfully working in Central America, and a similar one is being implemented in the rest of the Continent.

Within the framework of these processes, we are currently conducting a second continental study, this time a joint effort of ALER and AMARC. The study is called *"La Práctica Inspira"* [Practice Inspires]. As its name indicates, its goal is to inspire the strengthening process. The study has identified 50 experiences in 16 countries that have proved to be successful in their integral management or in specific aspects of their project.

3. Findings and Challenges

In order to understand the crisis of most radio stations and communication centers, we must look at the projects integrally.

3.a.   A First Look: At the Heart of Radio: its political communication mission

The last 20 years have brought about many economic, social and cultural changes, motivated by the neo-liberal model, in almost all of the Continent's countries.

New realities create new demands, new demands compel new answers. Other things are also necessary: new relationship strategies with audiences; thinking again political and cultural aspects; investing time and energy to understand what happens in society, etc.

"The Political and Communicational Project of popular and community radio stations is not an end in itself; it is framed within a larger social and political project. The history of popular radio stations shows that they were all born as part of a development, education, literacy, evangelization, cultural communication or social and political change project. This larger project, which is the basis for popular and community radio, is described in terms of:

1. A new democracy: a more humane society, based on democratic coexistence, which implies the democratization of the State and of society itself.

2. A new egalitarian and integral development clearly differentiated from neo-liberal proposals."[2]

For most radio stations, there is still a lot to be done to create a new Political Communication Project based on true knowledge of their surroundings.

In general, radio stations have a difficulty in adapting their projects to new realities and to respond to the re-orientation challenges it implies. This problem is deeper among traditional radio stations, which find it more difficult to renovate their reading of reality and their strategies. A relatively small group —many of them new stations in the Southern Cone— has been able to start with new ideas and practices.

3.b. Sustainability of Popular Radio

For the Popular and Community Radio project to have capability and incidence, social, institutional and economic sustainability is a must.

a. Social Sustainability

Social sustainability is the 'external support', the sense of usefulness created by every communication project: its relationship with audiences and social actors.

- The different social actors interviewed for the study agreed to say that Popular Radio is more necessary than ever, but that more cooperation and strategic work are necessary.
- Less daily contact with the population and with audiences was observed. In the study, radio stations are said to be "flying away to the inside."
- Knowledge of reality is not very systematic, and is often based on past or personal experiences used as sources of knowledge.

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[2] Geerts, Andres y Van Oeyen, Victor; La Radio Popular frente al nuevo siglo: estudio de vigencia e incidencia; [Popular Radio and the New Century: Force and Incidence] ALER; Quito; 2002

b. Institutional Sustainability

Institutional sustainability refers to the 'institutionalism' that should exist within a project: the roles, functions, coordination and organization mechanisms, use of technological resources, personnel management, training, etc.

- Although there are interesting participatory management experiences, lack of participatory mechanisms has been verified in many radio stations.
- Training has decreased considerably and is more a matter of supply than a project's need.
- Very few institutions have systematic planning, evaluation and research mechanisms.

c. Economic Sustainability

Economic sustainability is the ability to self-provide the necessary funds to ensure the project's continuity and appropriate fulfillment of its goals.

A large number of radio stations are in a precarious situation or are hardly capable of achieving a minimum stability that would allow projection. We can observe specific consequences, such as less possibilities to go out into the field, laying more personnel off, lower salaries, and fewer original productions.

Alfonso Gumucio, a member of the Practice Inspires research group, will give more details about criteria for economic sustainability in a few minutes.

3.c. Programming

Programming makes radio stations different from other social change projects. It is their public face, through which they create meaning, foster debate, make subjects' visibility possible, generate information and opinion, etc.

Community radio's main strength continues to be there, in local events, where it plays an important role in promoting inter-communication, information, services, and solidarity.

Fundamental changes in national and international strategies can be observed in several countries, where associations and coordinating agencies promote joint communication projects.

I most cases, national networks have been able to strengthen radio stations' projects, thus having an impact on local and regional environments of the stations that participate in the networks. However, these are still far from achieving comparable incidence at national levels.

Coherence and Integrality

For a project to be solid and sustainable, its mission (communication political project) should be coherent with and the environments where it is expressed. Therefore, for example, one cannot preach democracy without implementing a democratic system within the institution.

Similarly, all the environments of the project must be related with each other. Systematic knowledge of reality will have positive consequences for programming and for economic sustainability.

4. Final Remarks

In the last few minutes, I have shared with you some elements of the situation of Popular and Community Radio in Latin America, based on a study carried out by ALER.

As way of final analysis, we can say that the crisis is real. Both in terms of radio stations, and with respect to international solidarity, the crisis is seen as a challenge. On the other hand, we have seen experiences that could inspire us to

refocus integral management of the projects. Lastly, we can see that the joint effort by AMARC and ALER presents us with a very good opportunity to transform our projects into spaces for social change, which will demonstrate that another kind of communication is possible.

In 1999, Jesús Martín Barbero asked: Do we really believe that history can be changed? Do we believe that society can be changed? Or have we started to accept that history goes where it may, and that we have no ability to change our societies?

Thank you very much!