OURMedia

Alternative Media Scholars and media organisations: What Role Can They Play?

Our Media

I am very happy for being here with all you, communication activists, media scholars and colleagues. I am aware of most of you have proposed smarts approaches to citizen or community media. Because of that it is not necessary spend time in defining these media and it would be insensible in my personal case because I am not an academic. I just want to point out some basic assumptions:

- There is not any voiceless community
- Every community is able to endow a minimal institutional organisation in order to express its voice, to be a part of the symbolic circulation, to communicate. These organisations, that we could call "communicative institutions", actually are the same we call community, citizen, free, alternative media.
- This ability to communicate is a <u>Right</u>. Communication organisations and Human Rights organisation call this the Right to Communicate. We understand it as a fundamental human right that supports and underpins all others rights.

Community media are a clear expression of the citizen and communities Right to not only receive but also to disseminate information, that is, an affirmation of the community's right engage in symbolic re-interpretation through the media.

By promoting interaction and citizen participation, community media, As social institutions, offer a valuable scenario for building social capital. Politics, work, the market, education, the

agreement on an adoption of certain "rules of the game", conflicts and even love cross road these community media local spaces. Because of their capacity for facilitating symbolic exchanges these media are a key element in reshaping power relations and in building democracy. Their mere existence is an indicator or pluralisms and diversity of their host societies.

When expressing their voice, communities reach another dimension in the political sphere. As they talk communities put themselves in the flux of symbolic circulation; they gain fluidity in their participation in mediated life of citizens. Therefore, these communicative institutions facilitate acknowledging –and some times discovering- scattered, fragmented social groups as they irrupt in citizen life. This way, community media guarantee diversity and support pluralism.

Community media are long time and experienced survivers. They have survived the cold war, democratic crises at local and regional levels, and the unquestionable faith on the market´s ability to distribute resources and to solve social conflicts. They survived academics disinterest and the shift on investment priorities of financial agencies and multilateral and bilateral organisations.

Community media have been relegated to a marginal place on the debate, planning, and implementation of a communication public sphere. Nevertheless, they have been able to survive. Currently, they face another challenge: that of globalisation. But I think community media will overcome this challenge taking advantages of the opportunities that globalisation offers. Community media should use certain tools of globalisation, such as broader and cheaper networking resources towards the creation of a global community of support.

The response of community media towards globalisation must include the following aspects:
- fair and clear rules of the game that allow the recognition of community media as a third media sector, along side public and private media sector..
- recognition of the Right to Communicate.
- Recognition of the airwaves as a public good that belongs to the entire society.
- Adoption of suitable mechanisms to guarantee access to this resource.
- Recognition of community media as institutions that are part of the communities and as producers of significant social capital.

- Acknowledgment of the role of community media in defending and promoting linguistic and cultural diversity.
- Establishment of a friendly financial environment that can respond to the singularities of community media.

The development of these key elements is not a synchronic process. It is not a question of a single, rigid strategy for everybody neither is it going to be a response to an isolate source of pressure. These goals will depend on regional and local historical conditions, and economical and political factors. In many cases the force that functions as a catalyst has been the intervention of a specific social actor while in other cases it is an unpredictable interaction of stakeholders that almost accidentally make things move. Let´s take a look at some examples of these processes such as India, East Timor and Thailand.

In the Indian case it is widely accepted that the breaking point was the 1999 Supreme Court judgement which established that the airwaves were public property and explicitly banned any monopoly of its use. This decision should advance the communication legal frame which still rooted on the Telegraph Act of 1885.

In despite of the communication monopoly of ALL INDIA RADIO and DOHORSAN –India´s government mainstream media- India has an impressive tradition of grassroots organisations working with media and struggling towards the Right to Communicate. However, the driving force behind the Supreme Court´s judgement was not the media activists but the intervention of the Bengali Cricket Association, that is of commercial interests linked with sport broadcasting.

Communication access is a need felt by very different social actors; however, as in this case, sometimes only one of them is in the position and has the power to move things forward. An interesting lesson of this experience is learning that there are many paths towards the same goals and that those who may seem our "enemies" –the mass media, corporations- can become unexpected allies.

East Timor case illustrates how legal frame can go forward the development of concrete social forces. After centuries of Portuguese colonialism, East Timor was invaded by Indonesia. Local people struggled for independence in different ways. On of these ways was

the FALINTIL guerrilla. (FALINTIL is the Portuguese acronyms for East Timor Liberation Army) This movement of resistance set up and ran a pirate radio station –Radio FALINTIL- which informed and motivated people and guerrilla as well.

After the wave of violence originated on the results of the 1999 pro-indepence referendum, the United Nations should carry out a military and political intervention in order to guarantee the indepence process and support the establishment of the newest country of the world.

Thank to this intervention Radio FALINTIL became the first "legal" community radio station and settle on the premises of the former Indonesian Army Special Forces Headquarters. The station now is called the "Voice of Hope". Former FALINTIL guerrilleros broadcast from the same place where they were tortured.

Communication legislation in East Timor is really progressive: it establishes Free Speech and the Right to Information, banns censorship and monopoly, guarantees mass media and free press, and establishes the right to create media. In despite of the military and politic al liberalisation process, legislation on media is not the result of any "media-access" movement but of the interest of multilateral organisations on testing communication, politic and social participation policies in a live-experience laboratory. The third is the case of Thailand, which I know principally through some papers of Professor Ugonrat Siriyuvasak who is a member of the National Broadcasting Commission. Thailand´s broadcasting media always has been under tight control of the government. Property of media is concentrate on a few official hands: just the Royal Army of Thailandia owns more than 120 licenses of radio and television.

Because of the political crisis of 1992 the Thai government made its first steps for satisfying Free Speech demands and Information Rights. The Article 40 of the new Constitution statued that radio, television, and radio communication frequencies were national resources and must be used for the public good. The Constitution asked for the establishment of an independent regulatory entity.

Along side this process, 25 NGO and grassroots organisations set up a partnership with the aim of preserving the notion of public property of the airwaves and advocating for the implementation of Article 40. This partnership was called Working Group on Monitoring

Article 40. The Working Group established an informal co-operation with academics in communications with the purpose of putting communication reform on the public agenda and proposing a social-cultural approach rather than a techno-corporative one for media reforms.

This alliance had a real effect on the law. The Working Group and the academics worked along side with grass roots organisations in towns and mountains, and with a main political opposition parties in order to guarantee at least 20% of the licenses for the "peoples sector" and a place in the National Broadcasting Corporation Board. Eventually, this informal alliance achieved these two goals in the law.

Provisions of the law have not been fully implemented and the "people sector" is still waiting for real, concrete access to the media. Nevertheless, changes in communication landscape in Thailand obey to a long-standing social movements towards media democratisation and to the weakness of an unsustainable regime of privileges. Involving academics in the debate was important and sometimes made the difference.

I can resume the learning derived from the struggles we have seen in these case as follows:
- Establishing strategic alliances is useful, even with unexpected allies
- Being able to react appropriately to the uncertain social and political context is a must.
- Attaining an active, co-ordinate position in the Public Arena is fundamental.

Where do we have to do presence in regional and global public communication policy debate? How could we brand citizen and community media on the globalised Public Arena?

I want to point out two of these public scenarios where community media must do presence: The World Social Forum and the World Summit on the Information Society. In neither of them community media have a specific thematic space.

The World Social Forum constitutes one of the most important places in the anti-globalisation struggle, but surprisingly, communications does not deserve a single thematic axe but just scattered workshops. Our participation in the Forum this year taught us that it is not enough shaping our supposed "enemies"; we must do advocate with our "friends" and allies as well.

In the World Summit on the Information Society communication rights are positioning because of the work of several communication organisations that campaign for the Right to Communicate long time ago. But the digital divide is the "*vedette*" and all other themes are mere factors of the have and have-not information debate. There is a high risk of having a Summit handled by corporative interests where governmental participation would be reduced to simple referees of information monopoly and control. Communication organisations have a space in the Summit because they have been on line at the doors of the International Telecommunication Union for a while. I do not know if the Academy has been invited. But I know that the main thing in this sort of Summits is not to be invited but to be there. A co-ordinate work between academics and media organisations could give us the boarding pass to advocate for the Right to Communicate and community media on the Information Society.

Why community media and their organisations have such as erratic presence on the Public Arena? How we could co-operate in order to influence public policy debate? These are broad questions that deserve further discussion but, for the beginning, I can say that our fortresses are our weakness.

By nature, community mediatic discourse is always fragmented, polyvalent, temporal, and plural. Community media emerge, grow up, strength and die in an autonomous and independent way. And paradoxically, some times in silence. Their diversity of interests, constituencies, and procedures make difficult establish and maintain sustainable associations and groups. There are few examples of organisations working globally that have kept their original values and purposes. AMARC –the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters- is an example of difficulties and stubborn instinct to survive. AMARC is an International NGO gathering more than 3000 members world wide around the purpose of support and develop community and alternative radio under the basis of solidarity and international co-operation. I think I am in the position to acknowledge some of the weakness for interacting on the Public Arena.

 These media express a community or interests with a geographical dimension, which make difficult to be aware of the importance of regional and global scenarios. What are the relations between Chiribiquiete Stereo –broadcasting on the Colombian Amazonian, VOICES –based in Bangalore, and Community Radio Maliana –giving accurate information to the refugees in the border between East Timor and Indonesia? What are the relations between these three media organisations and the World Summit on the Information Society?

Answering these questions could be easy here, in Barcelona, but is not for communities involved at local level. Need of interacting on scenarios beyond the community space, of networking and participating in global debate, are not evident. In order to avoid scattered and weak participation in Public Arena would be sensible –in collaboration with Academy- supporting networks at grassroots level, and mapping community media sector with accurate information about actors, process and lessons.

Nevertheless, networking and mapping are not enough to make stand on the Public Arena. It is also necessarily to produce knowledge and to manage relevant, pertinent, and timely information. Community media are spaces of production, circulation, and validation of local knowledge. Both of knowledge derived directly from producing communication and also knowledge derived from the construction and maintenance of social relations and networks. However, due to historicity of their discourse and their functioning community media are not used to document neither their experiences nor their learning.

Also, some of these media play an important role in the defence of linguistic diversity and so they work with languages that do not have a written form such as the Senegalese radios SUD FM and JAMONO FM, which broadcast in the threatened languages Wolof and Puular.

How is local knowledge produced, shared, and articulated in community media? How is the historical experience of communities transformed, mediated, and reproduced through their media? It would be very valuable to guess some answers to these questions with the creativity and rigor of academics.

Also, apart from researching their own ability to produce and circulate knowledge, community media have the need to document their own accumulative experience and to come up with strategies and plans of action. We have been working in this direction by developing regional and national strategic studies. My friend Ashish Sen has mentioned some of the work done by VOICES in India. We conducted similar studies in Thailand, Cambodia, East Timor, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Other efforts have been implemented in Latin America and Africa, all of which talks about a generalised need for documentation and the limitations to meet this need.

I believe that communities and academics belong to different knowledge systems and therefore inhabit universes that hardly touch, thus replicable models respond more to a methodological ideal than a historical reality. On the other hand, I do not think we need to always re-invent the wheel and that in fact communities and academics can learn from others´ experiences as long as we respect the singularities of different learning systems.

On this basis I believe in the potential of a joint project between academics and community media toward the design of different and flexible methodological tools that can be used by media projects in different contexts and stages of development. However this would imply the need to overcome the discordance of rhythm; while Academy's interventions are delayed –it observes what already happened, community media's actions are live –they are the protagonists of communication as they construct what is happening. To co-ordinate these difference times has to be one of the first steps towards a future collaboration.

The last aspect I want to point out is the lack of confidence of community media in themselves. This is due to the fact that very frequently community media are evaluated with mechanisms design for –and in many cases by- the mainstream media. Moreover, many of these evaluations that violate the nature of community media and distort their reality, are demanded by the same organisms that are supposed to support them. It is common to find funding agencies willing to provide resources for community media but unable to do so because of the lack of good and fair evaluation strategies. The design and development of appropriate self-evaluation tools is another priority in this co-operation between academics and community media.

The fragmentation of this sort of media, their limited ability to document their experience and gained knowledge, and the lack of an accurate assessment of the sector, in part explain the difficulties they face for survival. Their creative political force and their capacity to subvert the status quo explain the reticence of the powerful toward allowing them to survive.

Let me finish with a very appropriate quote by Pradip Thomas:
    Quote:
"In reality no community is voiceless. Their voice may be suppressed. It may be expressed in a way that we cannot hear or understand easily. It may lack confidence. Yet, every community has

a voice, and they are using it in the best way they know how. So, we need not be their voice. We simply have to provide them with the channels to make their voices heard more loudly and articulately".

Thank you.

Montreal, July 15 2002.