

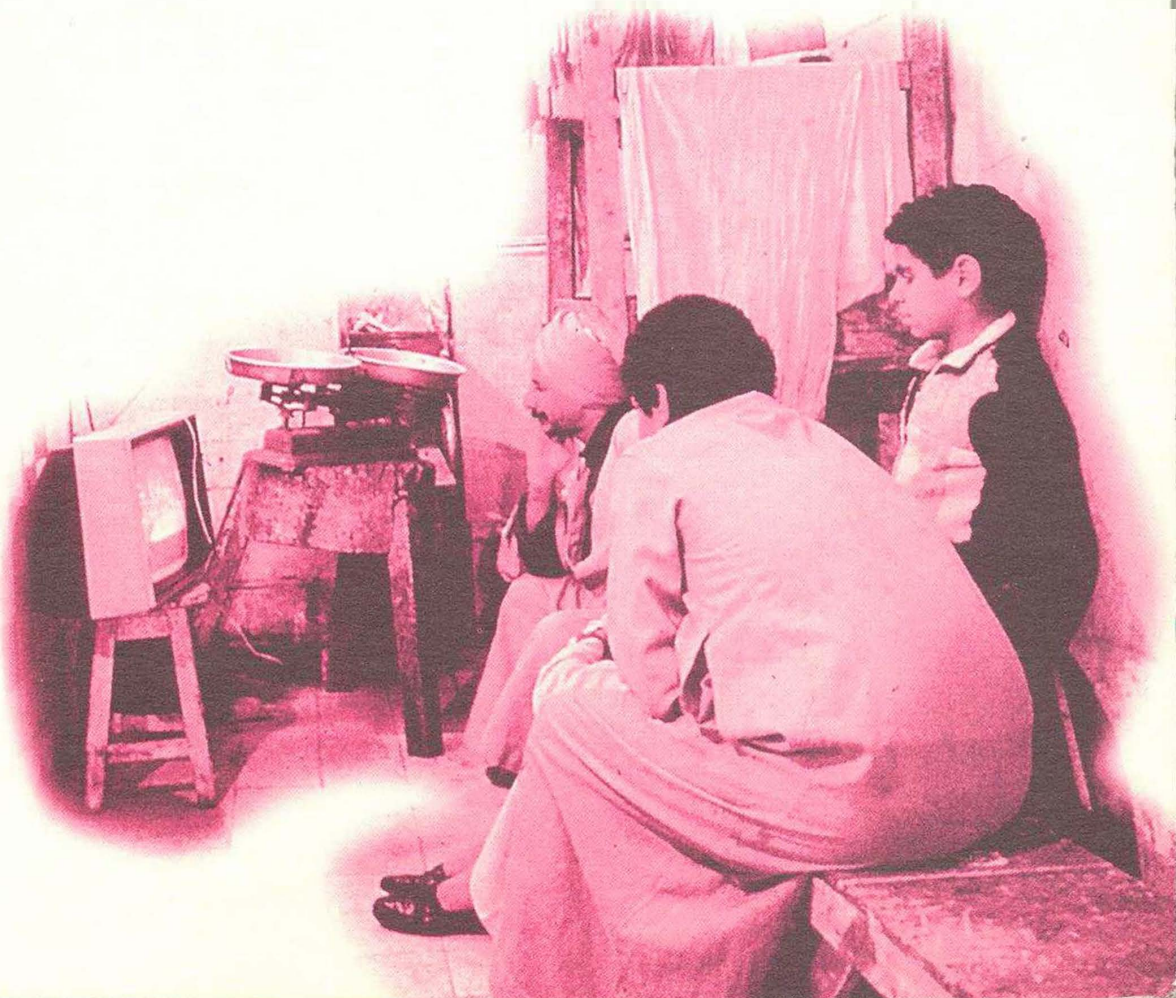
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Equity, Growth and Participation: The Information Age



The Quest for Democracy in Communication: Outstanding Latin American Experiences

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Emancipation from European colonial rule early in the past century did not lead to democracy in Latin America. While subscribing to the principles of the French Revolution, most republics in this part of the world tended in practice to perpetuate power concentration by minorities at the price of misery and oppression for majorities. This rendered democracy nominal.

Such a state of affairs has not remained unchallenged. The struggle to change that structure of privilege started about the time of the Mexican Revolution. Since the late '30s large political organizations made up of middle-class workers and peasants have exerted in several countries of the region peaceful but strong pressure for a genuine and full democracy. They sought for the masses political participation and distributive justice, along with respect to their dignity and freedom. Blind resistance to this insurgence, often assisted by violent authoritarianism, brought about as of the early '50s not only such diverse revolutionary regimes as those of Bolivia, Cuba, Peru and Nicaragua, but also bloody guerrilla movements, like those of Colombia, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Peru. At present, while the population keeps growing faster than food production, the extreme poverty of the masses seems to be approaching explosive levels. And attempts at building true democracy are threatened by social distress and the danger of dictatorial rule.

Another privilege of the few

Inextricably interwoven with the fabric of society and crucial to the power game, social communication has played a key role in the preservation of the *status quo* and, thus, in inhibiting evolution

towards real democracy. Mass media do not fully reach the masses – in part because of illiteracy, poverty and lack of electricity, especially in the rural areas. For most advertisers, those who are not in the market are not in the audience. Therefore, with variations of degree, the media mostly seek to reach the well-to-do and educated segments of urban society. Radio is the exception, but the messages of most stations are also essentially addressed to the upper strata.

Media ownership is overwhelmingly private and at time oligopolistic. Commercial advertising, often dominated by multinational corporations, and government publicity are the chief sources of income for media institutions. International news – from the region to the world, vice versa, and even within the region itself – are mainly handled by U.S. and European agencies. And highly advanced communication technologies – from computers, through optical fiber, fax and laser, to satellites – are the business of powerful non-Latin American firms.

Radio for peasants

Latin Americans, again, did not passively accept such an unfair situation. By about the end of the '40s they had started building media formats that would give the forgotten people access and participation in mass communication, which were denied to them by commercial and government media. One of those formats was the radiophonic school of Colombia, a combination of special broadcasts with group listening and discussion guided by a trained local volunteer and supplemented with print and graphic materials.

This was the creation of a young parish priest in the Andean village of Sutatenza who built in 1947 a

Luis Ramiro Beltran writes of the forty five-year long struggle in Latin America to democratize social communication. He examines two of the major aspects of that experience, and compares the implications of these theoretical and practical innovations for national development, in comparison with those of main-stream media performance.

very small and rudimentary broadcasting station in order to reach more peasants in his jurisdiction with religious messages, for which he gave them single frequency receiving sets. Soon, however, he added messages to promote literacy and, later, health, nutrition and farming messages as well. Within a dozen years or so this humble venture had grown into Cultural Popular Action (ACPO), perhaps the largest and most sophisticated agency for non-formal education for rural development in the world.

Run by the Catholic church, subsidized by the government and assisted by several foreign aid agencies, ACPO reached in its heyday some 200,000 registered "students" through a country-wide network of powerful stations, field institutes for the training of local leaders, a large print shop – which published a peasant weekly newspaper – and facilities to produce some audiovisual materials too. So successful was ACPO that by the early '80s its influence spread across the region through the establishment of a Latin American Association of Radio Schools (ALER), now headquartered in Ecuador.

ACPO was a pioneer contributor to the democratization of communication in that it was a system specially built to reach the peasants and help them make decisions and take collective actions for development. However, the system was run by the church for the peasants, not by the peasants themselves.

Radio by peasants

In Bolivia, adaptations of the ACPO format gradually came to actively involve peasants in broadcasting in their own native tongues, mostly Aymara and Quechua. Sponsored as well by the Catholic church, a number of small stations formed Bolivian Radiophonic Education (ERBOL), a cooperative undertaking now operating for more than a quarter of a century. In the context of the Nationalist Revolution of 1952, a few peasants established in La Paz another original format of democratic communication. Renting the very early morning hours of several commercial stations – the "dead time" – they produced programs in Aymara ranging from news and folk-music interludes, through "soap operas" with native topics, to educational broadcasts and contests. They also provided their listeners, for very modest fees, information exchange services equivalent to the postal, telegraphic, and telephone services the state had failed to provide them. Much more recently, a few peasant-run union and rural indigenous community stations have emerged – yet another format created and operated by Indians for themselves and by themselves.

Comparable experiences were also gained in other countries having sizable autochthonous populations for whom Spanish is not their native language. This is the case in Peru and Ecuador, a country in which another Catholic priest established a peasant communication format: recording cabins in small and remote villages, from which peasants, given basic broadcasting training, sent their contributions to a central transmission point. Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica,

Guatemala, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, especially through Radio Enriquillo and Radio Santa María, are among the other countries where imaginative uses of radio have allowed for a significant measure of democratization in mass communication.

The voice of the voiceless

An outstanding case of alternative participatory communication in the region was that of miner's unions broadcasting stations – again, in Bolivia. Starting in the late '40s and lasting until the present day, the stations were established, financed and managed by workers whose monthly salaries were often below 40 dollars and whose life expectation was hardly above 40 years, due to malnutrition and lung disease caused by mineral dust. The miners built those stations to defend their interests, which previously were ignored or attacked by the mass media. Their audience was given from the start almost unlimited access to the microphones by placing them in the mines themselves, as well as in marketplaces, churches, schools, streets, and sports fields. They admitted to their tiny studios virtually anyone willing to say something of importance to the people and, in many instances, acted as community gathering organizers for unions and other grassroots organizations. Criticisms were broadcast not only against authorities and political parties, but even against union leaders themselves when they were seen to be failing in their duties. So influential were these stations from the '60s to the '80s that some of them were at times closed or even destroyed by military repression, especially in periods of nation-wide strikes or conservative coups d'état.

Peoples media

Radio has been the favorite medium in the movement to democratize communication, but it was not the only one. The imaginative use of audio-cassettes through simple and low cost recorder-players placed in public places was exemplified by the "pila" (laundry) project in Guatemala. And in Uruguay a "cassette forum" system enabled farmers' cooperatives around the country to periodically dialogue about their problems and aspirations.

Nicaragua experimented with super-8 mm film production by workers with comparable educational aims, but with minimal guidance from professional movie makers. In Brazil, workers managed to establish and run a television channel on their own. Many of the best known Latin American independent film producers established an international movement characterized by films depicting the people's plight in the region and advocating democracy. People's theatre and puppet shows as well as people's songs and simple comics were included in the arsenal of mass communication for reform. And even the press, the most elitist of all mass media, was at

times used to struggle for democracy, as in the case of the "prensa nanica" (midget press) in the worst days of the military dictatorships of Brazil.

Multimedia in the slums

A modest but very effective multimedia approach to democratize communication is that of Villa El Salvador, a Lima shanty-town with half-a-million inhabitants, mostly Quechua peasants who migrated from Andean villages. Stimulated by a charismatic teacher, the community built, little by little, resources to improve communications both within it and with the rest of the city and the nation. Loudspeakers in places of concentration, mimeographed papers, simple posters and public discussion sessions were among the media initially used. In time more sophisticated media – movies, videos, and television – came to integrate the effort addressed at bolstering community capabilities to struggle for democratic development. Throughout the entire remarkable exercise decisions were made by consensus and actions were implemented through voluntary cooperation.

Theory follows practice

This whole rich practice of democratic communication formats, happened, in most cases in the absence of any theory for it. It was the people who, on intuition and impulse, gradually created an assortment of "mini-media" through which they could express themselves. And, if there was an institution behind such creative process, it was the Catholic church.

The initial efforts to define democratic communication started only in the '60s, when the first contributions to reconceptualize communication in the direction of democracy took place. In the early '70s, much research documented undemocratic aspects of the traditional communication theory and practice, and soon a few scholars attempted to construct models for democratic communication, as well as the reconceptualization of news and of communication rights. The approaches were diverse and generated terms for communication such as "dialogic", "participatory", and "alternative". Newer contributions placed emphasis on the communication behaviour of people as a part of the culture of the dominated strata of society. And through the '80s numerous new contributors came into this intellectual game, producing a large and valuable volume of literature, which may now be ripe to make possible an overall scientific theory.

Proponents of bases for such a theory share the view that the traditional model of communication, rooted in Aristotle and developed by Lasswell, falls short of being a democratic one. Because it sees communication as a unilateral process in which messages go from few but mighty sources to many but powerless and passive receivers, it is regarded as vertical: that

is, monological and domineering. And because it places persuasion as the chief, if not the only purpose of communication, it is manipulatory and, thus, undemocratic. The propositions of diverse Latin American scholars agree on the need for providing ample access to mass media messages as well as effective participation in the process. They share as well the perception of dialogue as crucial to democratize communication. And finally, they tend to regard democratic communication as necessary to help transform society in the direction of equity.

Many other strategies

Latin Americans have also explored other avenues to bring about democratic changes in their communication systems. In 1976, coinciding with the heated international debates on the proposal of the Non-Aligned Movement for a New International Information Order, they held in Costa Rica, with UNESCO's assistance, the first intergovernmental conference in the world on national communication policies. The conference produced a declaration which spelled out a creed of democratic communication, and recommendations were made to reduce the international information imbalance and expand the region's ability for autonomous communication.

Other comparable Latin American endeavours include: the introduction of democratic concerns in the university schools of communication, the questioning of traditional premises and methods of communication research, the establishment of reform-minded regional associations of communication specialists committed to social change, and attempts at building regional news agencies that would improve international reporting about Latin American realities.

Utopia prevails

How successful has the quest been so far? What is the impact of the practices and theories of democratic media on the overall communication system? Under what circumstances can "mini media" do more than alleviate the situation? They will not replace big media, but could their drive for democratization eventually impact the big media? Systematic answers are not yet available. Meanwhile, it is evident that Latin America plays the leading role – in terms of theory, practice, policy and organization – in the historical struggle to democratize communication. And the region is unlikely to give up this long-cherished ideal.

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