

Alternative Media in Latin American Grassroots Integration: Building Networks and New Agendas

DANIELA PARRA

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico

In recent years, Latin America has experienced different integration initiatives aimed to cultivate a more unified and sovereign position in the world. However, the neodevelopmentalist and extractivist policies that characterize some of those initiatives have been rejected by social movements. In awareness of the vital importance of communication, alternative media projects are promoting grassroots integration through new agendas, narratives, and aesthetics in Latin America. This article shows the important role these projects have in the articulation of regional social struggles in order to promote coordinated actions concerning common issues and alternatives to the rationale of dominant media.

Keywords: alternative media, Latin American grassroots integration, social movements, political economy of communication and culture (PECC)

The relation between alternative media and grassroots integration has not been fully explored in Latin American integration, nor in its communication studies. However, the growing relevance and influence of these experiences have increased the debate on how they build new national solidarities, counter-hegemony, and popular power on a continental scale. These possibilities need to be studied in very complex contexts, taking into account the challenges that alternative communication usually represents. This article aims to establish connections between ostensibly dissociated objects, and to widen the analysis and comprehension of the voices of those who build communication bridges throughout Latin America.

Most studies about Latin American integration have focused on the economic dimension of the process. These views have enhanced not only the theoretical, but also such practical matters as free trade and cooperative production, displaying a history of both good intentions and failures. The appearance of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) in 1991 added new political and cultural elements to this analysis (Páez & Vázquez, 2008). Likewise, the births of the Bolivarian Alliance of the People of Our Americas-People's Trade Agreement (ALBA-TCP) in 2004, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)

Daniela Parra: dan.parra@yahoo.com

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in 2008, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean Nations (CELAC) in 2011, opened the discussion to such complex matters as security, defense, infrastructure, energy, technological independence, and a new financial organization for the region.

The new initiatives generated debates about how integration could promote participatory citizenship in order to strengthen national sovereignty, economic cooperation, and conflict resolution between countries. It also redrew the objectives and strategies to be followed that, with the time, could allow integration gain social support and sustainability.¹

In this regard, since the 1990s, several researchers, academics, and social activists have warned about the need to incorporate a cultural and communicative agenda for a solid integration scheme. Several authors (García Canclini & Moneta, 1999; Garretón, 2003; Martín-Barbero, 1992) have emphasized the scarce place that these dimensions occupy in integration projects, and have called for new public policies for communication's democratization. Such policies are fundamental for communication to be more than a media issue, but "a space for dialogue, consensus and articulation of plural voices, divergent intentions and unstable solidarities" (Sierra, 2008, p. 1,370).

In these debates, the presence of different alternative media projects arose. These projects began to address with great interest the multiple realities of the continent, and they also had an active role in integration initiatives promoted by social movements. Their role has created new media agendas for Latin America, as well as new media networks to establish links and exchanges among grassroots movements.

Currently, these experiences are still few and incipient, but gradually acquiring relevance in a context of media monopolization and political struggle throughout the continent. Multiple social movements are now aware that an emancipatory communication can create new paths for grassroots integration. The intention is to explore the nature of these types of communication experiences, recognizing the subjects behind them and pondering the possibilities and difficulties of such an enormous task.

Tracing Latin American Grassroots Integration

Latin American integration is a multidimensional phenomenon composed by spatial scales, cultural heterogeneities, national inequalities, power relations, and transnational spaces (Harvey, 2004).

¹ Without losing its validity and current importance, the impulse that Latin American integration had between 2006 and 2012 has lost some strength. This is due to economic and political crisis within and between countries, lack of consensus between divergent ideological projects, changes in regional leadership, internal contradictions of progressive governments, and social pressure for democracy. Other factors of this deceleration have been the impulse of the neoliberal integration project of The Pacific Alliance and the strengthening of free trade agreements between the European Union and the United States. Likewise, changes in global geopolitics show Asian nations, especially Russia, India, and China, as new centers of power.

In this sense, three main integration projects can be identified: one imposed by capital (e.g., Free Trade Area of the Americas [ALCA] and free trade agreements), one driven by governments and states (e.g., MERCOSUR, UNASUR, ALBA-TCP, and CELAC), and one composed by social movements (e.g., Americas Social Forum [FSA], Continental Social Alliance [ASC], Vía Campesina, among others). These projects are not only economic or commercial, but also geopolitical, ideological, and historical. Disputes and consensus take place between them in order to maintain hegemony versus new counter-hegemonies.

In a grassroots dimension, Latin American integration reveals the establishment of different alliances—some historical, others more recent—of social movements and grassroots sectors which have joined their efforts to defend their territories, resources, identities, and autonomies from capitalist damage. According to Elizabeth Jelin, the democratic deficiency of official integration organisms has been surpassed by the ways in which social actors seek integration independently. This has been enabled through

porous national frontiers permanently trespassed by migratory currents, cultural exchange of diverse type and tourism. These exchanges have generated kinship and friendship networks as well as transnational labor relationships that are vital for the daily lives of large population sectors. (2001, p. 260)

From a Gramscian conception, grassroots integration refers to grassroots sectors that have historical determinations and an organizational dimension, and are in permanent conflict with hegemony (Acanda, 2007). In Latin America, although these sectors are diverse and multiple, cohesive elements that identify them can be recognized, such as “dignity and autonomy repossession, defense of their identities, rebellion against oppression, solidarity as a tool to confront critical situations” (Argumedo, 1993, p. 156).

Without naturalizing these alliances, since they are constructions made out of conflict and address multiple tactics and strategies, social movements related to integration have generated collective ways to denounce, organize, plan, and develop initiatives against dominant sectors. Since the 1990s, in light of catastrophic results of neoliberalist policies and the rising of the so-called progressive governments in the first decade of the 20th century, social movements embraced Latin American integration as a central matter to work on, using the concepts of “people’s integration,” “integration from below,” and “grassroots integration.”

Unifying Pains: Social Movements and Grassroots Integration

During the 1990s, the significance and accomplishments of popular mobilizations gave social movements a clear notion that grassroots integration needed to be built. This period was a result of a maturing process that began in the emancipatory struggles of the 19th century² and the socialist fights of the 1960s and 1970s, and it was forged by the recent bonds and solidarity networks across the continent.

² Continental unity has been a historical desire which was first predominantly defensive; that is, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial. The first visions developed during the independence processes led by revolutionary leaders between 1810 and 1830 (Codas, 2006) intended to build a unified political entity,

The strong presence and solidarity of Latin American organizations in the anti-globalization movement was explained by a previous wave of articulations. Some examples are the Continental Campaign "500 years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance" in 1992, and the Intercontinental Encounters for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism organized by the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) in 1996, 1997, and 1999. Some other social mobilizations led to the victory of progressive governments, especially in South America, who encouraged participatory mechanisms in integration organisms to guarantee political independence and regional sovereignty.

In 2005, the People's Summit against the ALCA in Mar del Plata placed Latin America as the prime example of social criticism, resistance, and alternatives to neoliberalism. Social movements gained a bigger Latin Americanist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist awareness, allowing them to debate and propose new paths for integration with "the conviction that without a regional projection there is no way to consolidate the grassroots achievements gained in each country" (Katz, 2008, p. 26). Since then, activist groups began to organize forums, meetings, and articulations to think and act toward integration.

By 2009, in the middle of the global economic crisis, the Declaration of the Social Movements of the Americas' "Building people's integration from below, encouraging ALBA and people's solidarity facing the imperialist project" was presented during the World Social Forum (WSF) in Belem do Pará, Brazil. Appealing to the principles of solidarity, self-determination, sovereignty, and respect for human rights, identities, and cultures, the declaration affirms:

It is necessary to build together a Latin American grassroots integration project that reconsiders the concept of "development" to defend nature's common goods and life, moving toward an alternative civilizational model from the predatory capitalist project, assuring Latin American sovereignty against imperialism and transnational plundering policies, embracing all emancipatory dimensions, confronting the multiple oppressions generated by capitalist exploitation, colonial domination and patriarchy, which reinforces oppression against women. (Rebelión, 2009, para. 8)

According to this proclamation, integration cannot wait for the state's decisions, but must be taken "from below," in direct and horizontal ways, in order to reach autonomy. However, the presence of the multiple social actors involved exposed that there were several approaches to reach integration, not only about the vast agenda that had to be addressed, but mostly about the methods, strategies and political means to achieve it.

The main challenge for such social movements is then to build an anti-capitalist continental articulation to prevent them from dissolving in "a series of community interests geographically

independent of the metropolis, being best represented in the figure of Simon Bolívar. At the dawn of the next century, the Cuban José Martí outlined a revolutionary proposal for a unified Latin America, with the masses as protagonists in opposition to United States' Pan-Americanism. His influence on discourses about Latin American integration is still present.

fragmented, easily absorbed by the neoliberal market penetration" (Harvey, 2009, p. 406). David Harvey suggests that a way to achieve this is to underline "the pattern and systemic qualities of the damage caused in different scales and geographical differences" (2009, p. 102) which can be called common pains.

The recognition of these common pains constitutes a solid ground for grassroots integration, which needs new routes for dialogue in order to coordinate and debate the strategies and methods to make it happen. This is how communication awareness has developed movements that search for integration (Bolaño, 2010), urging new strategies to get to know each other, coordinate projects, rebuild social tissue, and gain significance in the public sphere.

Communication's Role in Integration

As mentioned before, there are three main tendencies in Latin American integration that are not necessarily exclusive, with meeting points and tensions among and between them: capitalist integration, a state organism's integration, and grassroots integration. The distinction is equally useful to analyze the place that communication has in integration, using the theoretical perspective of political economy of communication and culture (PECC).

PECC has contributed to understanding communication's role in the capitalist accumulation process and the way it overcomes its crisis. This perspective has tried to escape a mechanist and totalitarian view of media effects, as well as an excessive autonomy of ideology or culture regarding the economic sphere. Therefore, it allows scholars to link "the analysis of national and supranational power structures and ideological processes . . . with the proposal of responses to dominant classes' projects" (Bolaño et al., 2005, p. 9). Hence, it enables a dialectical articulation between the study of hegemonic apparatus and the alternatives to them. It also permits a view of Latin America within the communication mode of production in global capitalism.

In this sense, we first recognize a capitalist communication integration with media conglomerates and transnational cultural industries as leaders of Latin American "unity." Using deregulation and liberalization to avoid all kinds of frontiers, capitalist actors have spread a vision of the region according to their economic interests, the same that capital needs to deepen its process of accumulation and social reproduction (Mastrini & Bolaño, 1999; Moraes, 2011).

In Latin America, the internalization of communications and technological convergence has strengthened media groups such as Televisa (México), Cisneros (Venezuela), O Globo (Brazil), and Clarín (Argentina). Offering multimedia services, these groups have centralized more capital through a North American commercial-inspired structure (Mastrini & Becerra, 2006). Consequently, the region has become part of a global logic of information production composed by the contradictory phenomena of standardization-differentiation and monopolization-sectorization. This has led to an unequal exchange between our countries, as well as between the global North and South.

The capitalist info-communication order (Miège, 2002) limits not only access, but also the possible diversity of content, themes, narratives, formats, or genres that can be produced from and about

Latin America. The image of what we are has been committed to few people, leaving our cultural background at the mercy of reductionist representations that generally provoke disagreements, exclusions, and racist and discriminatory attitudes. This has prevented the appearance of possible solidarities and meeting points among countries and cultures. Besides economic agents of major influence, mainstream media act as political trenches where elites express and justify social relations rationalized by the dominant systems (Mattelart, 1970). In this sense, the deepening of dispossession projects against popular sectors that defend their territories, resources, identities, and world views, has one of its epicenters in the ideological offensive carried out by dominant media and cultural industries.

Second, we identify the proposals made by state integration organisms in relation to communication and culture. At a national level, some governments have been gaining power over the private media system with new participation rules and regulation policies that have reactivated the struggle for hegemony and created new paths for media democratization. Countries like Argentina show undeniable progress, with an important impact on a regional scale. However, some difficulties and contradictions have been revealed. According to Dênis de Moraes, progressive governments' public media "also act as political parties because their ideological perspective—tuned in to the visions of the political subjects that command the governmental machine—influence the ways of verifying events and the assessment of facts" (2011, p. 61). The confusion between public and state is tangible in the way that some media areas act as governmental spokespersons, denying the plurality of voices of those who do not share their political views. In addition, there are still numerous projects that copy "commercial media formats and, applying the narrow mindedness, showing reactive and non-proactive policies, losing the opportunity to spot ethical differences" (Aharonian, 2013, p. 21).

The multi-national television project Telesur, created in 2005 by the Venezuelan government, shows some of these limitations. Although the project began with creative, diverse, and innovative content to promote Latin American integration, current programming is mainly news that counterbalances the negative dominant discourse about the Venezuelan government. Even if Telesur's news programs address different themes, they are similar in format, aesthetics, rhythms, and editing to the capitalist media. This has limited a heterogeneous agenda for Latin American integration. Telesur has succeeded in creating alternative information and positioned some themes in the public debate, but it has not been able to transcend the national or allied governments' interests.

Projects like Telesur are promoted by progressive governments as alternatives to hegemonic models of communication and means to effective integration. Then, a doubt arises: Beyond rhetoric, are these kinds of projects real alternatives to dominant ideology and capitalist integration? This question can only be answered if other forms of communication are recognized. This is the third tendency: alternative media initiatives which coexist with capitalist and state forms of communication. Social movements who stand by grassroots integration have insisted that alternative communication is essential to shape "a media agenda allied to social movements and alternative communication networks to position themes and perspectives different from mainstream media" (ALAI, 2012, para. 1).

Alternative Media and Grassroots Integration

According to Margarita Graziano, "alternative stands up not only in front of another concept of communication, but of power relations, signed transmission and code imposition that those relations allow" (1980, p. 6). The concept of alternative is tied to the notions of alternative information (*contrainformación* in Spanish), counter-hegemony, and popular power. More than a technological modification, alternative media involves social appropriation to transform collective relations toward a political project of structural change conducted by emancipatory ideological assumptions (Neüman, 2010).

Particularly in Latin America, the large tradition and diversity of grassroots communication experiences demonstrate that alternative media practices carry within them new social practices determined by context, daily praxis, and class relations confronted against the rationale of social reproduction (Mattelart & Piemme, 1981). This implies—as Natalia Vinelli and Carlos Rodríguez mention—that alternative communication relates to and can only be comprehended through a wider ideological or political project. According to the authors, the alternative discourse "manifests the necessities of political juncture and the objectives of social organization incarnated in media practice" (2004, p. 13).

Alternative media entails non-private and collective forms of property; a participatory and flexible mode of management; alternative ways of funding with voluntary work and social activism; media content that addresses different and complex realities with innovative aesthetics, formats, and genres; audience participation and constant feedback; technological adaption and appropriation to overcome technical barriers; and integration with grassroots movements to contribute in their organizational processes, among other characteristics (Atton, 2002; Pierucci, 2004; Reyes, 1981).

In addition, alternative media experiences refer to "subjects-actors involved in the processes of production, distribution and consumption of communication contents" (Crovi, 2011, p. 265), which encompasses collective phenomena, interactions, identities, territories, and spaces in which social appropriation and representation take place. Furthermore, Clemencia Rodríguez's (2001) perspective on citizen media is useful to see that this particular media transforms, culturally and symbolically, the subjects which participate in its daily creation. Citizen media has become a space to question, confront, and dialogue with established and newly born identities about Latin Americans.

With this basis, there are two main and inseparable dimensions in which to analyze the relation between alternative communication and grassroots integration. In a cultural and symbolic dimension, communication works as a cohesive mechanism, a tool for dialogue and identification. This suggests the possibility to elaborate new forms of representation, content, formats, narratives, aesthetics, and discourses that allow for the encounter of diverse social sectors and cultural identities.

On the other hand, communication is a strategic tool for collective organization and working class struggle, as well as a catalyst for grassroots political projects (Vidal & Roselló, 2009). Referring back to the notion of pains, communication is present in Latin America's class conflicts, impositions, antagonisms, negotiations, mobilizations, subordinations, acculturations, resistances, etc.

To build grassroots integration, alternative media faces several challenges: defining its political project, overcoming bureaucracy and sectarianism, gaining sustainability through shared financing and management, reaching the region's population with innovative media content, and influencing new communication policies, among others. Still, one of the main challenges regarding social movements is being able to create collaborative articulations between mobilized sectors within the context of capitalist atomization (Mata, 2011; Reyes, 1981).

Alternative Networks in Latin America

In Latin America, several experiences of alternative media articulation have been in practice for several decades. The first big experience was Latin Press (PL), a news agency born in 1959 in Cuba by a group of the most influential left-wing journalists, including Rodolfo Walsh and Jorge Eduardo Masetti. In 1972, one of the largest grassroots radio associations was created: the Latin American Association of Radiophonic Education (ALER). Other important projects in this decade were the Latin American Special Information Services Agency (ALASEI), born in 1976, and the Latin American Information Agency (ALAI) in 1977, an organization that is currently working in production and information exchange, giving support to social organizations in communication skills, and promoting communication rights (ALAI, 2014).

According to Dorothy Kidd (2007), in the 1980s, alternative media networks began to link locally and globally for content exchange, technical training, and campaigns to legalize community radio, as well as to discuss issues about technology and communication policies. During this decade, networking was a response to corporate and military communication networks, coordinating joint responses to similar problems. New global convergences emerged, and there was a strong regional presence, such as the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS), and the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). For Kidd, this networking provided a "platform and connective tissue of many new transnational social movements" (2007, p. 242).

During the 1990s, experiences like the Latin American Summit of Alternative Media held in Quito in 1993, the mobilizations against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1998 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999, and the innovative communications initiatives of the EZLN (the Mexican Zapatista Army for National Liberation) indicated that a national movement could transcend boundaries for international solidarity. It also revealed the potential that social networks and the Internet held for the achievement of social movements' goals (Leon, Burch, & Tamayo, 2005).

Later, the website Minga Informativa was created in 2000 to mobilize and train Latin American social movements in communication skills. The appearance of the World Social Forum (WSF), along with the social and economic crisis that erupted in Argentina in 2001, led to an explosion of alternative media and new social uses of technology. By 2002, the failed coup orchestrated by the media against Hugo Chavez showed that alternative media had a central role to both break the media blockade imposed by the national and international reactionary bourgeoisie and allow popular mobilization.

In 2005, the 1st Communication and Information Global Forum (FMCI) discussed new technologies, empowerment, community media, cultural diversity, democratization of communication, and social movements' news agendas. Later, in 2009, the Florestan Fernandes School of the Landless Worker's Movement (MST) in Brazil gathered 40 journalists from 10 countries to develop strategies to defend their communication rights, support the efforts for Latin American grassroots integration, and train new communicators and social leaders (Vidal & Roselló, 2009).

In 2013, the Latin American Summit on Communication for Integration took place in Ecuador. Organized by ALAI and ALER, this meeting brought together representatives of social movements, alternative and public media projects, public entities, and integration organisms. One of the main achievements was the establishment of the Communication Forum for the Integration of Our America, a space that seeks to influence integration policies, share and create content, build databases, promote media observatories, and guarantee technological sovereignty in the region (León, 2013).

It is important to mention that, in these meetings and articulations, the technological issue has been addressed specifically. New technologies have profoundly changed dynamics within social movements. They allow new possibilities for articulation, access, production, and circulation of content, but also demand new skills, knowledge, and technology development (León, 2005; Zallo, 2011). The Internet has enabled a low-cost message transmission "where alternative communication projects located in different parts of the globe can link and enhance their knowledge exchanging experiences of struggle in their specific contexts, enabling concrete action" (Colectivo ConoSur, 2004, p. 91).

Regarding these possibilities, it is worthwhile to gain some distance from celebratory speeches that conceptualize new technologies as the ones which operate and enable social change. Assigning them "characteristics as if they were inherent—transparency, horizontality, interactivity, unlimited access to knowledge, etc.—when they are only potential" (León, Burch, & Tamayo, 2005, p. 224), ignores the structural asymmetries, power relations, and historical circumstances in which they are inserted.

Searching for Latin American Voices on Grassroots Integration

The following considerations are part of my master's thesis, which based on field research and interviews with members of alternative and community media who participate in regional networks and have a special interest on Latin America and integration processes. The projects were chosen for their links to social movements and their autonomy from the local governments and market. They also demonstrate eagerness to create links to organize, produce, and exchange communication products within Latin America. Some of these are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Projects and Participants Analyzed in Field Research.

Country	Project	Description	Participants
Regional (decentralized)	Otramérica	Digital media with news and analysis on Latin America and the Caribbean	Paco Gómez – journalist, founder of Otramérica
Chile	Red de Medios de los Pueblos (RMP)	Network that gathers Chilean radio, TV, digital, and graphic projects	Pablo Villagra – journalist, member of the network
Chile	Mapuexpress	Digital media about the Mapuche people in Chile and Argentina–also about other indigenous people of Latin America	Felipe Gutiérrez – Mapuche journalist, member of the editorial group
Argentina	Barricada TV (BTV)	Alternative and community TV channel in open signal and Internet	Natalia Vinelli – journalist, academic, project founder
Argentina	Red Nacional de Medios Alternativos (RNMA)	Networks that gathers radio, TV, news agencies, websites, and graphic projects in Argentina	Alejandro Pérez – journalist of the news agency ANRed and active member of the network
Uruguay	Radio Mundo Real	Grassroots web radio project in service to social movements and community radio stations	José Elosegui – journalist and active member
Regional	Alba Movimientos	Regional articulation of social movements allied to ALBA with their news website	Carina López – journalist, coordinator of Argentina’s social movements for ALBA

Regional (coordination in Venezuela)	Alba TV	Latin American network of alternative and community television outlets	Pablo Kunich – communicator, one of the network’s coordinators
Brazil	Webradio Unila	University and community radio of the Federal University of Latin American Integration (UNILA)	María Gimena Machado – student and member of the project
Regional (decentralized)	Agencia Púlsar	Latin American news agency of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC)	Alejandro Linares –journalist, coordinator in Argentina of South America’s news
Regional (coordination in Ecuador)	Contacto Sur	Radio program with news on Latin America and the Caribbean—part of ALER	Isabelo Cortez – ALER’s information and content director

My field research consisted of a four-month visit to Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, as well as some virtual interviews with people in Venezuela, Uruguay, and Ecuador. The analysis from the interviews was complemented with data from documents obtained during research visits and media web pages to ensure the full comprehension of each media entity’s political positioning, tasks, and articulations with other media. Finally, a review of their productions and content was achieved through research of their audios, videos, notes, etc. This gave a closer look into their agendas, narratives, and aesthetics. Triangulation of these three elements, according to specific theoretical categories, was the main source for the observations developed in this section. The analysis pursues the identification of common tendencies, issues, and challenges, as well as specific characteristics of each media, technological support, and country.³

³ It is important to point out that this article only addresses a small portion of the field research material and analysis. In relation to the study limitations, a deeper acknowledgment of each project on its daily dynamics is needed, as well as more time devoted to analyzing their productions. The focus is centered on South American experiences, with an absence of projects in Central America and the Caribbean. Nonetheless, research confirmed that some of these projects are the most active and outstanding in continental networks, as well as in their approach to grassroots integration, and therefore constitute a fairly representative sample of what happens elsewhere in the region.

Without being able to thoroughly discuss each element of analysis in this article, we propose the following topics for discussion: a) the political and communication basis of the projects, as well as their views on integration, b) the characteristics of their media agendas and use of new technologies, and c) the way networks and regional media allied with social movements operate to promote grassroots integration.

Political Views on the Table

Generally, these projects share the aim to function as communication bridges between social organizations, territories, and subjects with an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-imperialist basis. They seek to be a space for grassroots expressions, showing their demands or interests and shaping ethnic, gender, or class identities. To reach these aims, strategies focus on technical training, public support to social movements, and alternative information agendas, all to break the siege imposed by mainstream media:

In Otramérica we have a political view of reality, we do not hide it. We are very clear about our anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-extractive principles. We have a special trust in communities, and we will always believe in a community rather than in some official spokesman but with journalistic standards—because we are also a media. We do not make propaganda; we try to avoid pamphlets, and try to be very pluralistic from a left view. . . . Anyone who wants to write does it, as long as it is from the perspective of building another world. (P. Gomez, personal communication, February 26, 2013)

Political and ideological definitions of these media are also intersected by a Latin American identity which is not merely an idealist or utopian discourse. Aware of the common oppression and dispossession throughout the continent, as well of the synchrony in social struggles, Latin America becomes a place for common action. Consequently, solutions to each country's issues are seen as attached to the achievements made on a continental scale.

When it comes to integration, most projects share a positive vision about organisms such as CELAC, UNASUR, and especially ALBA.⁴ They argue that they build regional sovereignty against the United States' hegemony, recognizing their geopolitical and discursive value. However, the relationship is limited or contradictory because they pursue infrastructure, interconnection, or security projects that do not strictly promote social participation or inclusion:

We understand that [Alba Movimientos] needs to relate with governments that are part of ALBA, but above all, we need to articulate from below and from the left. The way in which articulations are built from below, how each nation sympathizes to another and

⁴ The ALBA-TCP reunites most of the so-called progressive governments: Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. The organization has a Social Movements Council in its structure, but other organizations participate with more autonomy in the Continental Assembly of Social Movements toward the ALBA.

how that is shaping the identity in Our America are things that cannot be thought only from institutions. They must be thought from the people to be learned in a massive scale. (C. Lopez, personal communication, November 26, 2013)

These statements reveal how grassroots integration is approached in different ways, depending on the media's political perspective and its relationship with the state and government in each country. For instance, in countries with right-wing governments (like Chile or Mexico) which criminalize or fully ignore the existence of alternative and community media, political positioning is of autonomy and clear denouncing. Information regarding these governments and national realities is more homogeneous within alternative media.

In countries led by the so-called progressive governments, the relationship is troubled and contradictory. The media siege and manipulation toward these governments has led to alternative information that, at times, lacks nuance and self-criticism. The most controversial case may be Venezuela. The difficulty of having a unified stance is stronger in regional articulations that represent multiple countries and diverse media in a single space, for example, Contacto Sur, a project allied to the Fe y Alegría Institute funded by the Venezuelan government. An ambiguous posture can be perceived in Isabelo Cortez's declaration:

We will always respect each country's decision; ALER cannot act critically toward the ruling party or the opposition. ALER has never declared itself in favor of [President Nicolás] Maduro and neither has Fe y Alegría. However, we will never support those who are in favor of a coup or the rupture of constitutional order. We will never support multinationals or media powers. (I. Cortez, personal communication, May 20, 2014)

The relation has turned even more complex in recent years, with governments favoring extractive projects, dispossession of indigenous communities, and criminalization of social activists. This is currently happening in Ecuador, where an indigenous movement is protesting against President Rafael Correa's decision to sustain a free trade agreement with the European Union; open-cast mining projects; and disrespect of the indigenous rights to autonomy, education, healthcare, and territory, among other issues. In junctures such as these, some media choose to replicate the government's official position that claims it is offensively orchestrated by right-wing sectors aligned with U.S. imperialism. Others try to offer information to understand the demands of the indigenous movement, as well as showing the repression held by Correa's government. Finally, some avoid publishing or wait to confirm information to provide a consistent approach to facts.⁵

New Agendas

Alternative media moves between two main positions that constantly seek to be balanced. On one hand, there is a necessity to produce alternative information regarding the dominant media agenda

⁵ The first position was held by Contacto Sur (Aler, 2015); the second position by AnRed, a news agency that is part of the RNMA (ANRed, 2015); and the third position by Otramérica (2015).

from a grassroots perspective. On the other hand, an original, creative, and quality agenda is required. These two possibilities are in constant tension and dispute, because they are attached to specific political junctures. In the experience of some projects, the disadvantage of just creating alternative information is that, given the urgency to inform, they tend to simplify information, copy commercial formats, and eliminate other important issues that are not in the mainstream media agenda.

In terms of their own agenda, there is increasing attention being paid to prioritizing Latin America in their productions and content. This involves dismantling regional myths and stereotypes, while sharing other realities through independent music, graphic design, film, and theater projects that provide original narratives and aesthetics about the region. This is how Natalia Vinelli from Barricada TV visualizes it:

On the one hand, we turn around these stereotypes, we question them, we ask them questions that bother and disarm them. On the other hand, we narrate from our own vision, we build and circulate our own identities and our own problems. These two elements must always go hand in hand. (N. Vinelli, personal communication, October 19, 2013)

Following Crovi (2011) and Rodríguez (2001), the disarmament of these stereotypes and identities does not only happen from the alternative media outwards. The new rationale of media production questions and challenges the subjects that participate within these projects, like in Webradio Unila:

First we had a theoretical idea on how our radio could be alternative and community based. But the way we made it real was a big problem. It was difficult to realize that there is a lack of knowledge among ourselves of what Latin American culture is. . . . So, communication not only opened channels to meet each other, but led us to discover what is beyond samba or tango. (M. Machado, personal communication, October 23, 2013)

Despite the great diversity of themes that are addressed, the core of their production lies in the symbolic and material capitalist damage visited on grassroots sectors, as well their defensive strategies throughout the region. Main issues include the promotion and defense of human rights (especially of indigenous people, women, children, workers, and social activists), defense of territories (resistance against agribusiness, extractive and mining industries, transgenic corporations), and promotion of grassroots experiences (achievements in gender equality, education, climate justice, food sovereignty, among others).

In this sense, alternative media narratives tend to unite grassroots sectors and foster solidarities and social participation, rather than division. Projects like Otramérica that focus on the region have the intention to "explore the interdependencies between countries, communities, economic, political, cultural and social facts, people" (Otramérica, 2014, para. 8). However, there are multiple ways to embody this. Some media have a more analytical approach, not about headlines or events, but about processes. Some use a formal and academic language, while others target audiences with easily digestible talks and friendly

language. A lot of clichés appear as well: Descriptions of mobilizations or marches, political statements, and accusations are often more common than information that would actually deepen these processes.

As a topic, grassroots integration is not a priority for many of these projects. One reason is that most of them have to solve their local communication needs first. In this way, integration is addressed superficially because of a lack of human or financial resources to report it. This happens in the Red de Medios de los Pueblos (RMP) in Chile:

We know there is a common problem in Latin America and events happen every day but it is practically impossible to report all those stories. . . . What we have achieved is a peer group dedicated to select and make a news recap of the week. Different media notes are uploaded, but we don't do anything farther than that. (P. Villagra, personal communication, September 23, 2013)

As a response to this absence, alternative media members think that this topic needs to be constantly promoted, both discursively and practically. Their content is progressively incorporating a Latin American vision of reality, displaying common issues from different points of the continent, and widening the debate on integration as an important issue among grassroots sectors.

In this regard, new technologies have been fundamental tools for message circulation. Through the Internet, electronic bulletins are distributed in thousands of e-mails, and simultaneous media coverage is simplified by live transmissions. Notes, texts, audios, and videos can be accessed and downloaded for free. In news agencies and networks like AlbaTv, Púlsar, and Contacto Sur, some productions have a minimal edition so other media can add graphic or aesthetic elements for each local context.

However, most Latin Americans do not have access to these technologies, and being followed on a social network does not mean that a media project is constantly read or heard. A way in which projects like Radio Mundo Real overcome this barrier is by working closely with the community or alternative radio stations that are closer to social movements, to assure they reach places with no Internet access.

Building Networks Against Dispossession

The origins and relationships of these media with social movements is diverse. For instance, Mapuexpress was born as a tool of the Chilean Mapuche social movement to have information, dissemination, and an organizational backup in order to defend their territories and identities. Radio Mundo Real was created by the international organization Friends of the Earth, when they needed to cover the WTO summit in Cancun. Subsequently, that experience gradually grew into a radio project to produce information and constant coverage of actions promoted by organizations such as Vía Campesina and the Latin American Coordination of Peasant Organizations (CLOC). Otramérica began with a group of journalists related with the indigenous movement of Panamá, which first saw communication as a place to contribute, to spread the word about that struggle and reality, and then afterwards, about diverse national and regional realities that were absent in dominant media.

The degree of articulation with social movements varies within each country, as well as the presence and importance that each movement gives to communication in their action spectrum. Networks among regional alternative media—the existence of which reveals Latin American integration itself—also have different degrees of progress. Many articulations are still nascent or initial conversations of how they could work collectively. Others, like AMARC and ALER, are much more solid due to decades of experience in networking inside and outside Latin America.⁶ What stands out is that, for both social movements and alternative media, communication is seen as a catalyst for solidarities needed to strengthen mobilizations and position their agenda in public opinion.

Working with grassroots sectors allows alternative media to participate and cover events, mobilizations, or marches, strengthening confidence among the people they represent. This transcends the traditional conception of media as an information transmitter. It helps to organize and mediate experiences of struggle that can strengthen social movements' capacities. The sectors they are most related to are peasant, indigenous, labor, and student movements, but mostly, people affected by mining and extractive and dispossessive projects, as well as victims of state violence and criminalization of social protest. They are also allied to social movements' articulations, such as the World Social Forum, the People's Summit, and articulations of environmental or feminist organizations.

Mediation between social movements and society sometimes consists in enabling media to spread the social movement's voice on their struggles and realities. The past notion of "giving voice to the voiceless" is now seen as serving social movements, not only to distribute information, but also to make visible and articulate demands, territories, subjectivities, identities, and alternative lifestyles. Consequently, these projects consider themselves part of these processes, spaces for dialogue, debate, and participation.

From a material perspective, grassroots integrations is being made by face-to-face exchanges, festivals, continental encounters, social forums, or experiences like international internships between media projects. The possibility to both know first-hand the physical spaces in which they operate and have a notion of their daily job stimulates one's work.⁷ It is a moment for political debate of what happens in each country in terms of media concentration and the difficulties they have to operate and sustain over time. This is how Carina López from Alba Movimientos perceives the importance of these articulations:

We have been working on initiatives that could, on one hand, enhance, multiply and share rich communication experiences that exist in our continent . . . but also to

⁶ For example, ALER has created nine networks with different themes and objectives: the Pan Amazonian Network, the Kiechwa Network, the Youth Network, the Sound Engineers' Network, the Mayan Radios Network, the Migration Network, the Evangelization Network, the Communication and Education Network, and the American Indigenous Network.

⁷ An important example is the encounter of the RNMA in Argentina that takes place every year. The occasion is especially important to get to know the experiences, challenges, or achievements that alternative media has in other countries, especially in South America.

pressure, influence, try to reach the big media which must be able to show the reality that arises from the peoples of Our America . . . We see that it is very difficult to break that siege and to show the population what actually happens if there is no concrete strength of counter-hegemonic media with a joint strategy at a continental level. (C. Lopez, personal communication, November 26, 2013)

Some difficulties have also arisen, like divisions due to the stardom of some projects, the imposition of a working agenda, and the difficulty of working with distinct technological formats. Another problem is the way in which each media presents other country's news to be understood in a foreign context, which can reduce the complexity of a process or fact: "Generally, to be clear, international news gets simplified, presented in a homogeneous way, this is the bad guy, this is the good guy. Sometimes there is no contradiction or internal dispute" (A. Linares, personal communication, February 24, 2014).

There are also financing restrictions that inhibit a key experience for media networking: face-to-face encounters. The costs that continental reunions require are hardly affordable for most projects. Consequently, they are limited to having virtual meetings or annual reunions among projects from the same country or the nearest countries. Along these lines, one of the challenges is to adopt funding mechanisms to foster these reunions. One last difficulty is the ability to sustain these articulations over time, given the number of members versus the quantity of work, as well as contexts of violence or repression that can restrict or discourage the articulation's potential.

In this sense, networks need to go beyond a sum of projects or technological tools, instead becoming spaces to articulate political and ideological views to discuss communication strategies:

We think the political agreement comes first and then the communication agreement because we have to agree on the role our media is playing. In this context, we see some opportunities for regional articulation but it is necessary to build a coordination not tied to the needs of States and its foreign policy. It needs to allow a progress in common issues for the region as the problem of peace, extractivism, food sovereignty and human rights as key issues and above all, the ways in which people are thinking and building popular power. (N. Vinelli, personal communication, October 19, 2013)

Conclusions

Grassroots integration is a result of Latin America's historical legacy of social struggles. It is a process that aims the articulation of excluded sectors for a post-capitalist social order. Nowadays, this possibility is being encouraged by the conditions of capitalist dispossession that forces grassroots sectors to face defragmentation and create political strategies collectively. In this process, alternative media offers spaces that can link local, continental, and global realities, issues, and alternatives.

For alternative media, Latin America is rapidly becoming a material and symbolic place from which to think and act politically, a space to understand the region's diverse and common realities. As a result, one of their main challenges is to portray and include within each project the social, political, and

cultural plurality of our continent's grassroots sectors. To achieve this, the analyzed projects are trying to defy the commonplaces and canons of classic journalism, along with the standardized formats and genres of commercial media, all to reflect and debate contradictions, not only about what happens during political junctures, but also in daily life.

Given the technological, funding, management, and coverage difficulties, these projects are constantly struggling to provide new and creative agendas, narratives, and aesthetics that can reach a significant portion of Latin America's population, and not only those who are politically involved. Moreover, most of the information that nourishes alternative media—and that is being shared—is presented as news or opinion. There is a visible disproportion of this genre over others, such as the documentary or the cinema, which could help achieve the challenge of embodying our complex diversity.

This is why grassroots integration is central for alternative media. Because exchanging experiences between countries and promoting mutual training, collective content production, technological experimentation, and articulation with social movements will allow alternative media to position solid alternatives to capitalist and governmental models of integration and communication. Networking is a priority in order to have content from the places where facts occur, with correspondents that are often members of social movements. It also allows them to have a minimum and diverse amount of content to be published; to spread information in different projects in order to position a subject and break the media siege; and to tighten links for political debate, artistic production, and technical training.

My field research demonstrates that, although alternative media has the potential to dialectically link a local issue into a regional concern, grassroots integration needs solidarity and the strength of Latin America's mobilized sectors. This explains why the main challenge for alternative media is in how to deal with ideological differences in political junctures or crises, especially for those related with the so-called progressive governments. When the time comes for political positioning and common action, intractable differences may arise, delaying the possibilities to carry out proposals outlined in meetings or joint declarations.

Some organizations still have an instrumental notion of communication that only understands it as a means to spread information according to their needs and interests, especially in conflicts and crisis. When these arise, alternative media should create spaces to promote dialogue, participation, and plurality. This matter is being addressed by most of the projects analyzed here to take a step forward into grassroots integration. In a troubled and complex present for Latin America, alternative media appears as a strategic tool, both to assure the historical achievements of grassroots sectors and platforms and to show us all the possible continents that we are part of and can be part of.

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