

Impact of the Radios Populares

A self-critical analysis of the current role of the Latin American community radio stations

By Christoph Dietz, CAMECO

The Latin American Association of Radio Education, ALER (Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica) presented the results of their study *"Force and Incidence of the Radio Popular"* at their 11th General Assembly (May 28th - June 3rd in Cumbayá near Quito, Ecuador). This research is of particular importance for any radio practitioner in the developing world as well as for their partners in the north, as

- it is a study which emerged from inside the radio movement and which they themselves organised;
- it gives a representative insight into the current situation of the "radios populares";
- it is a very detailed study (one general final report, in addition 12 national reports);
- it is the first overview of its kind!

The participatory radio movement in Latin America has experienced significant changes. In the beginning the "radio schools" (escuelas radiofónicas) focused on literacy via radio waves. In the seventies - during the dictatorial regimes and with the emergence of liberation theology - many stations abandoned their formal education programmes and moved towards the defence of human rights, the denunciation of political corruption and the empowerment of the marginalised sectors of society. As the political and social situation has changed considerably in the last 15 years - the redemocratisation process and the emergence of many new community radio initiatives, the end of the East-West conflict and the reduction of the funds available from the northern donor agencies - the radios had to adapt to these changes. Nowadays the "radios populares" have to compete with powerful commercial media enterprises, and in addition there is a notable disillusionment about the real impact of radio projects in driving forward the political and social development in the south.

I will try not to give a complete summary but will highlight the most important outcomings of the report. Some principal aims of the research were to find out

- which thematic priorities they have

Source: *InteRadio* Volume 10, 1998



- which influence or impact the radio stations have at local and national level
- how well the stations know their audience
- which relationships they maintain with other sectors of society
- if the stations are “institutionally sustainable”, i.e. the suitability of internal organisation, planning, research, training etc.
- if they are “financially sustainable”

Methodology

The sample included radio stations in 12 Latin American countries, but due to logistical problems it was not possible to include Brazil. 74 quite different radio stations were selected: old and young, big and small, both belonging and not belonging to ALER. In addition, 22 production centres, 22 radio associations and 54 radio experts were visited. The consulted persons within the institutions were the respective directors, the marketing responsables, journalists, representatives of NGO's and the above mentioned experts.

The methods of data collection included questionnaires (about the economic situation, staff management, training, application of new technologies, the situation of the production centres and the national co-ordination bodies), personal interviews, group discussions and the study of project documents. In every country the fieldwork was done by a group of seven researchers: one national and six foreign experts. The visits lasted two to three weeks per country. The collected data was summarised in a national report, and every radio station received a copy of their respective national report. The general final report summarises the results of a common workshop assisted by all 16 researchers involved as well as the main topics of the 12 national reports and the questionnaires.

Altogether more than a thousand people have been interviewed (individually or collectively), the fieldwork lasted 30 months, and the preparation of the national reports required another 30 months. The final report, written mainly by Andrés Geerts (Dominican Rep.) and Victor van Oyen (Bolivia), needed about three months work before publication.

Thematic emphasis of the radios populares

Some years ago, the central issues dealt with by the “radios populares” were about social change, liberation, surmounting poverty and the political mobilisation of the people. Nowadays the fundamental ideas are concentrated around gender relations, the environment, strengthening civil society and democratisation. Not only the themes have changed, but also the style. Nowadays the main focus is on information and news programmes, in the past there was more emphasis on educational programmes.

Despite the commonly shared conviction that the fight against poverty, justice and political mobilisation are also central themes in the current situation, few radio stations continue to give them priority. It seems that the new agenda - gender, environment, civil society - mainly reflects the priorities of national and international financing bodies.

Analysing the historical development of the “radios populares” there also seems to be evidence

that they are more important and creative in times of conflict and war than in democratic circumstances.

Impact at local and national level

The study shows that the main strength of community radios is their local integration. As the homogenised commercial networks don't consider the local context, the people hear "radios populares" for the local news, for their specific cultural expressions, and for their familiarity with their "barrio" (quarter). The community radios are not only important because of their news programmes, but also because of the social services they offer (greetings, personal news etc.), the discussions, cultural events and so on. Nevertheless, some commercial stations have already copied the most successful elements of the participatory radios. Where the advantage of local integration is not backed by professionalism radios populares are already losing their audience.

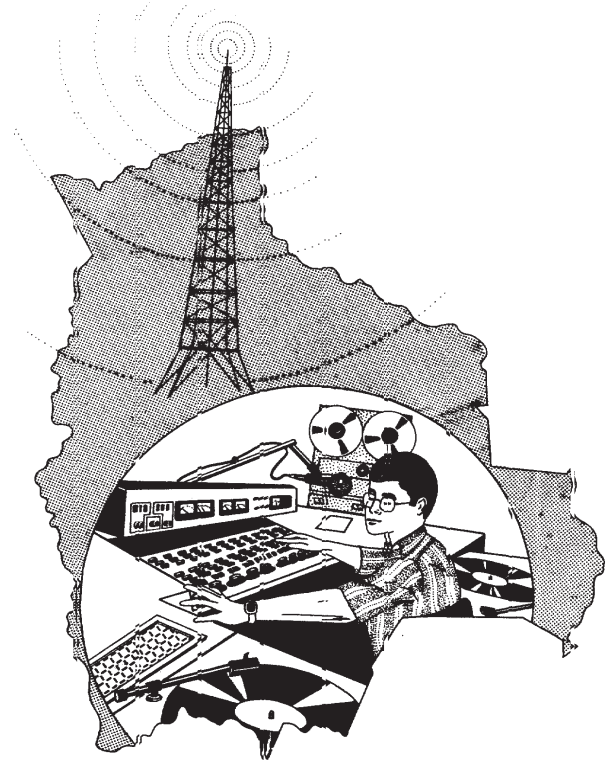
National news programmes have been implemented in various countries. In the beginning the primary aim of these programmes was to complement the local news produced by the radio stations themselves. Later on, the objectives moved towards influencing public opinion at national level. At the moment there are daily national news programmes and other satellite programmes in five countries. The study shows that the national programmes strengthen the news coverage of the member stations. However, "radios populares" continue to be a marginal voice within the national context. Only the Peruvian "Coordinadora Nacional de Radio" (CNR) has become a major voice in the national context. It is not only due to the few available funds and the competition of commercial networks that the networks have, up to now, not been able to establish themselves as serious competition to the commercial chains, but mainly their lacking capacity to define an adequate strategy. The national activities are not based on the participation and sharing of the responsibility of their members, and there are no alliances with other radio stations which don't belong to their own association. This means that many towns where the association doesn't have members are not covered by the national news programme.

This situation illustrates partly the relationship between the member stations and their national co-ordination body. The "Coordinadora" works mainly as a service centre and not as an association developed and maintained by the active participation of their members. The claims of the member stations far exceed their own contributions and the participation they can offer the national association.

Audience

In general, the collaborators of the radio stations are convinced that they know their audience and their realities, because "our audience are people like ourselves". This means, that the knowledge of the social reality and the audience is empirical and intuitive. Perhaps, this concept is valid in the case of the small community stations, where in fact the station is part of the community. However the regional radio stations as well as the urban stations face a completely different situation. Normally the "radios populares" don't study their audience in a systematic way.

One main characteristic of the "radios populares" has been the dialogue and participation of the



Source: La Radio en Bolivia, Frans van Linden & Boris Crespo, ERBOL

audience. Participation is a principal concept of the “radios populares”: the people themselves shall become a subject of their own communication. So it is no surprise that all interviewed radio stations regarded participation as an important part of their work. Nevertheless, it is notable that the journalists don't leave their studios and enter the villages as they did before. The programmes produced by communities have diminished as well as the contributions by the networks of “reporteros populares” (community correspondents). The journalists only go to the people to cover the news (as all other radio stations also do), abandoning little by little their former practice of developing radio programmes together with the people according to their daily life. A great part of this development is explained by the financial constraints experienced by the “radios populares”.

On the other hand, there are also some examples of new radios, especially in the urban context, which have successfully opened their micros for new cultural, musical and social expressions.

Relationship with other sectors of civil society

Twenty years ago the political mobilisation was one central aim of the “radios populares”. As a consequence of the decline of the “movimiento popular” - indigenous organisations, trade unions, basic communities - the relationships are nowadays far less intensive than before. In the meantime new social actors have emerged - cultural initiatives, environment groups, NGO's, consumer initiatives and so on. In general the stations limit their relationship with these groups to occasional journalistic coverage. But there are only a few examples of mutual collaboration where the “new social actors” and the radio stations commonly produce programmes. All the consulted NGO's stated that they consider the “radios populares” as important actors for social change, but at the same time they asked for more openness from some of the radio stations.

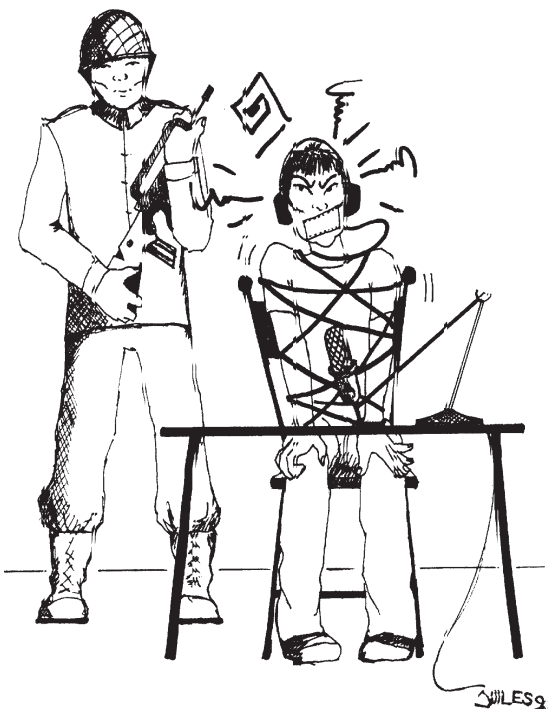
Regarding the relations with government institutions there are some radio stations which completely refuse to collaborate with, although the majority of the stations maintain contacts with governmental bodies. The radio schools were the forerunners of this practice, but now there are other common areas such as health, ecology and rural development. The relationships are mainly utilitarian, but at local level in particular there are some promising alliances.

The relationship with the other mass media is contradictory. Many radio stations continue to see the commercial media as their fundamental enemy representing the rich and stabilising the political system, and in contrast these “radios populares” conceive themselves as the good ones, the only ones committed to the people. Of course, there are also radio stations which realise that the reality of the media is more complex. In some countries, a collaboration has been established with some commercial media, especially in the field of news exchange. In others, the confrontation continues, especially where commercial radio associations hamper the legalisation of community radio.

Management (“institutional sustainability”)

The research confirmed that the management area is one of the main weaknesses of “radios populares”. In the majority, the management doesn't correspond to professional criteria. For instance: professional experience is not considered as much as personal relationships by the selection of personal. The nomination of the directors corresponds more to the affinities of the

Source: *InteRadio* Volume 8, 1996



owner than the management or professional skills. The majority of the personal starts without practical experience. Only 37% of the personnel are women, and they nearly always work as auxiliary staff.

Few institutions rely on systematic planification and evaluation. According to the authors of the study, the “febrile activism” of many radio stations hinders them by the reflection and redefinition of their work. Many radios learned how to plan projects and “to invent theoretical frameworks” as requested by international agencies. But this doesn’t have consequences on long-term planification and institutional development. Only the Peruvian CNR has successfully implemented a long-term strategical plan, and some of their members are doing the same locally.

Recently more audience surveys have been realised, especially in the Andean countries. Nevertheless, few institutions use the research results systematically for permanent qualification and improvement.

Obviously there is a contradiction between the participatory approach of the “radios populares” and their internal organisation. Only few stations are headed by a team, and in general there are few participatory elements in the management.

In the last years the training activities of the radios have decreased, due especially to economic reasons and investments in new technologies. Some radios don’t have clear criteria of selection, and often the participation in training activities doesn’t correspond to the real needs of the station but the current offers from training institutions. On the other hand the “pasantías” (a period of practical training in other stations) are considered as being very effective, as they successfully transfer skills and deepen the information exchange and collaboration between the stations.

Financial sustainability

70% of the stations are confronted with a very precarious or difficult economic situation. Only 30% are in a position to maintain their current work for the next three years.

About 50% of the visited stations don’t receive any external funds. These stations are generally the new and small stations. The other 50% receive grants from foreign funding agencies, and in general these stations are the bigger and older ones. The grants continue to be an important part of their incomes, but the contributions from foreign agencies have decreased continuously. The consequences: personal reduction, a high overturn of personal due to low salaries, reduction of own productions and a considerable loss in programme quality. Some stations give priority to thematic issues according to the profile of the foreign funding agencies.

On the other hand, the reduction of foreign aid has also had some positive consequences. There is a growing awareness of the need for sustainability, which is conceived as a strategical issue and not only a short-term question of finances. Many stations started their own marketing department, and some stations concluded agreements with local or public institutions. In rural areas there is an increasing awareness that the stations are offering public services and therefore deserve financial support by the state.



Source: The Tablet 23.6.2001

Discussion of the research

The participants of the ALER assembly agreed widely with the results of the research. The discussion focused especially on the “proyecto político” (political project), i.e. the need to discuss and redefine the role of the stations to strengthen civil society, controlling the political dealings (“fiscalización”) and to force development processes. In addition, it became clear that the sectors of financial sustainability and management should be explored more intensely.

Of course some weaknesses of the research were also mentioned. For financial reasons it was not possible to realise audience surveys or focus groups. This means that the research mainly reflects the self-perception of the stations and their ideological environment and not necessarily the image they have in the general public.

It was also criticised that the existing positive experiences haven't been presented. Some stations are visible actors of social change, depend on a professional management and are financially sustainable. After analysing the weaknesses it would be a further step to systematise the strengths, and in the perception of many participants this would offer the possibility to learn from positive examples and to adapt them according to the local situation.

Another serious critic was that the final report didn't deal so much on the concrete work of ALER within the framework of the radio movement as well as the expectations and experiences which the radios stations have with ALER. E.g., there are not sufficient data to discuss which concrete utility the international satellite programme has.

So, summarised: to which extent do the “radios populares” have impact? They continue to be an important voice at local level, but they have lost terrain. And they were not able to transfer their local impact to a national level. This excellent autocritical study put the current situation of the radio stations - often perceived as the individual problems of each station - into a common context. And the critical issues are on the table.

S U M M A R Y R É S U M É R E S U M E N

Qué impacto tienen las radios populares latinoamericanas?

Durante la 11ª Asamblea General de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica (ALER) en Cumbayá (Ecuador, 28 de mayo hasta 3 de junio de 2001) se presentaron los resultados de la investigación sobre la „Vigencia e Incidencia de la Radio Popular“. El artículo presenta los resultados más importantes de este estudio, basado en visitas a 74 estaciones en 12 países latinoamericanos, el cual ofrece un panorama bastante amplio y detallado sobre la situación actual de las emisoras populares y comunitarias en el continente. Concluye, entre otros aspectos, que muchas radios no han sido capaces de adaptarse a las nuevas realidades sociopolíticas y que a pesar de su peso local pocas veces han logrado incidir en la opinión pública a nivel nacional. Muchas radios carecen de una estrategia clara („proyecto político“), requieren una gestión más profesional y enfrentan serios problemas económicos. Los resultados de este estudio sirvieron a los miembros de ALER como base de discusión sobre los futuros rumbos de la radio popular. A la vez la Asamblea destacó la necesidad de sistematizar las positivas experiencias acumuladas por las radios populares las cuales muestran su impacto en el fortalecimiento de la ciudadanía.

