Pluralism and the Internet:

CHANCES FOR LOCAL RADIO

by Bruce Gerard*

Source: Bertelsmann Briefe 139

The local nature of radio's programming

How often have we heard that Internet and other new communication technologies will lead us to a world in which we all share the same culture of „cyberspace" and all speak the same language? Some new initiatives in Latin America are questioning this myth by combining modern technologies and radio.

Whether we understand it as a consequence of capital's search for new markets and cheap labour; of the communication technologies that make it possible; or of a human search to know our world, globalisation is inevitable. However, rather than throw up our hands and renounce our responsibilities as community broadcasters, we have to work to ensure that the world we live in allows for civil society to establish international agendas and active participation in the debates that shape our lives and that increasingly are taking place in the global village rather than the town hall.

Ever since the first radio station was founded almost 80 years ago, the medium has been characterised by the local nature of its programming. While only a very few television stations produce even 20% of their own programmes, most radio production has tended to be created locally and live. Radio, more than any other mass communication medium, speaks in the language and with the accent of its community. Its programming reflects local interests and the medium has made important contributions to both the heritage and the development of the cultures which surround it.

We can identify three tendencies affecting radio's local nature: globalisation, concentration of ownership and control of the media, and new initiatives seeking to protect and expand the role of radio as a democratic and pluralist medium - as a citizens' medium.

Speaking of globalisation, it is enough to underline the historic presence of the international news agencies (North American and European) and, more recently, the entry of the global CNN empire into the radio news market. Far from giving us a global view of the world, this globalisation of radio news restricts us to the view from the North, and interprets Latin American reality from that perspective.

We are also experiencing a centralisation of ownership and control of communication media. The multimedia empires of O Globo in Brazil and the El Clarín group in Argentina are good examples. In the Argentinian case, El Clarín is owner of Radio Mitre and Radio 100, the two stations which produce the programming for Cadena, a satellite service for radio stations in the interior of the

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country. Exactly how many radio stations re-broadcast the programmes of this network is unknown, but there is no doubt that it is the most important network in the country.

The same centralisation phenomena exists in Peru, where three stations located in Lima send their signals via satellite to relay stations throughout the country, and have a larger audience than the fifty biggest stations outside Lima.

Looking beyond national frontiers, the Red de Radios del Cono Sur is made up of Radio Mitre and Radio 100 from Argentina, the Rede Brasil Sul (property of O Globo) and Radio Gaucha in Brazil, the Paraguayan Radio Ñanduty, and Chile's Radio Cooperativa.

It is unnecessary to say much about these two tendencies. They are everyday news. There is no subject more interesting to the media than the media themselves.

New Technologies - New Initiatives

The third tendency is a response from the region's independent and community radio stations, those that we can refer to as citizen radio stations. The same communication technologies which make globalisation possible, may also make it possible for community and independent radio to help civil society in its bid to influence the nature of the global village.

Supportive new tendencies

During the past two years a number of new initiatives have begun to show us how this might be done. In particular, the Internet is being put to use by radio stations to form international networks with offerings that are distinct from those of the traditional news agencies. There are examples in Africa and North America, but here we focus on Latin America.

In 1986, the broadcasters who met in Vancouver, Canada, for the Second World Conference of Community Radio Broadcasters, passed a resolution requesting a study of the feasibility of establishing a radio news service. AMARC's board quickly realised that the cost of international communication was so high that millions of dollars would be needed to set up the agency. The resolution was filed away.

However, the desire for the agency could not be filed away so easily. Similar resolutions were repeatedly passed at every AMARC conference, until in Senegal, in 1995, participants realised that with the Internet it might just be possible.

In March 1996, the Agencia Informativa Púlsar, an initiative supported by A M A R C and Ecuador's Centro de Educación Popular (CEDEP), began to send a daily summary of the region's news via Internet to 48 radio stations. At the time of its second anniversary, Púlsar had more than 1,000 subscribers in 50 countries, its services including:

* En Línea: News from Latin America updated throughout the day.

* Compendio: All the news of the day delivered in a single package at the end of the day.

* Ciberbrujas: Weekly news and information by, for, and concerning Latin American women.

* Ñuqanchik: A daily service in Quechua, an indigenous language spoken in the Andean region.

* Audio: 20-40-seconds audio clips featuring the voices of news makers and commentators.
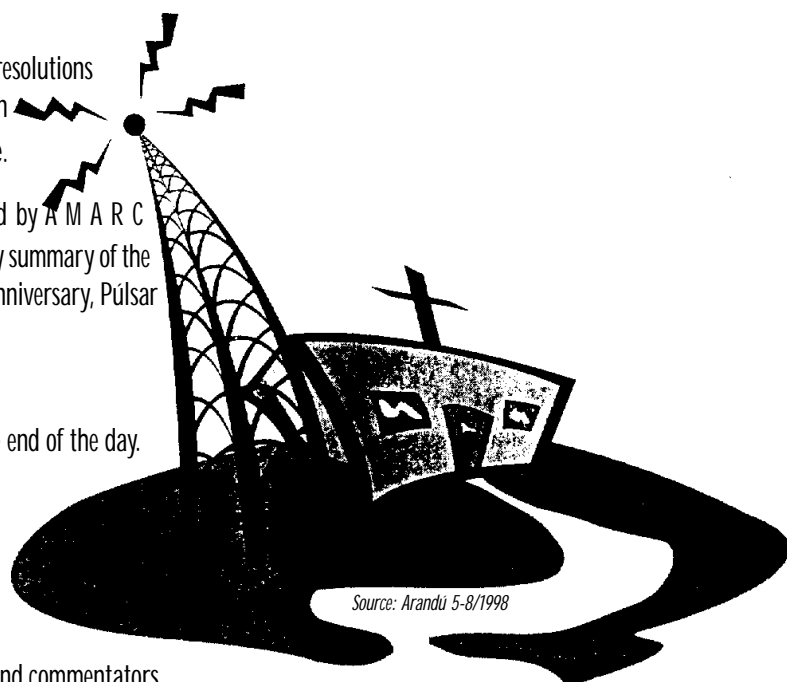
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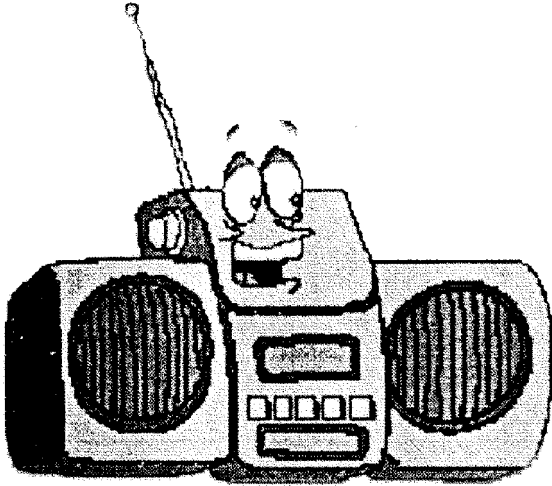
Source: Integração 10/1998

Low-cost services with high efficiency

Ñuqanchik - „ourselves"

Perhaps the most novel of Púlsar's services is Ñuqanchik, a joint project of Púlsar, the Centro Peruano de Estudios Sociales (CEDEP) and the Red Científica Peruana (RCP). Ñuqanchik, a Quechua word meaning „ourselves", began in August 1997 by producing and distributing, via the Internet, three short radio programmes daily.

Probably the most important indigenous language in Latin America, Quechua is spoken by some 10 million people. Radio is by far the most important medium for the Quechua-speaking community. In Peru alone it is estimated that 180 radio stations regularly offer programmes in Quechua.

We know that many of these stations do not have the necessary equipment to receive audio via the Internet, but with the support of the Red Científica Peruana and its „cabinas públicas" (community Internet access points), they do not need to own this technology. Each „cabina pública" has a direct connection to the Internet and all the equipment necessary to receive and send audio files. All a radio station has to do is go to the nearest „cabina pública" with a cassette, record the programmes on the tape, and later broadcast them. Even more interesting, the stations can send their own news, commentaries, and programmes via the same channel, turning an informational service into a low-cost network in which everyone can be both correspondent and recipient.

Even if Ñuqanchik required hundreds of thousands of dollars of foreign aid, it would still be a novel project because of the challenges that it has set for itself. However, one of the truly novel aspects of the project is that its distribution costs are insignificant and its budget only has to cover production costs. Not only is it the sole daily international radio service in Quechua, it is also a low-cost service, and for that reason, one that does not require long-term international financing.

This article began by asking whether „...new communication technologies are going to lead us to a world in which we all share the same culture of „cyberspace" and we all speak the same language?" The Ñuqanchik experience shows us that this homogenised world doesn't have to be the only option. There are still possibilities for pluralism and difference.

The Future

One of the possibilities offered by Internet is the real-time broadcast of radio signals. It is already possible to listen to Peruvian, Colombian, Brazilian and Argentinian radio stations with a multimedia computer connected to the Internet. The possibility of making programming available via the Internet is increasingly real for independent radio stations. In Peru, for example, the Red Científica Peruana has offered to help ten Peruvian radio stations put their programming in the Internet.

Discover possibilities which - not long ago - were dreams

Why would a radio station in Piura or Trujillo be interested in broadcasting via the Internet? It is not only so that Peruvians in the capital or outside the country can listen to the news and weather from their communities. In addition to each of these ten radio stations being able to send their signals, they will also be able to receive the signal of the others, as well as the signals of other stations in the Internet. Bilateral and multilateral audio communication with other stations will be possible. They will be able to broadcast live debates and interviews with the

perspectives of other regions of the country, and other countries of the world. This new technology offers the possibility of a network, or more precisely, an infinite number of spontaneous networks linking the peoples of Latin America at a low cost.

In 1995, before Púlsar existed, I wrote in an article in Chasqui:

„We are still a long way from a world where all peoples are offered equitable access to information and to technological resources. New technologies can play an ambiguous role in the pursuit of this goal: they can make a notable contribution to the democratisation of information and communication or, if not mastered, can generate a widening abyss between the information rich and the information poor."

Four months later, Púlsar sent its first bulletin. At that time it wasn't possible to send audio clips, much less imagine a Quechua-language service using entirely audio material. But as we near the end of the twentieth century, technology is developing with a speed that we previously could not have imagined. And for that reason, radio has to contrive.

In March 1998 Púlsar celebrated its second anniversary. At that time an agreement was reached with AMARC, and the agency changed its status from an independent agency supported by AMARC and CEDEP to a project solely of AMARC. The agreement specifies that the agency will maintain editorial independence and operational autonomy and that CEDEP will have a permanent position on the editorial board.

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

¿Cuántas veces hemos oído que Internet y las demás tecnologías de comunicación nos van a llevar a un mundo homogeneizado? Nuevas iniciativas en América Latina combinan la tecnología de punta y la radio para poner fin a este mito y contribuir a una comunicación más democrática. Las experiencias de la Agencia Informativa Púlsar con sus diferentes servicios son un ejemplo como el Internet puede ser utilizado para fortalecer las características locales de la radio y facilitar un intercambio vivo entre las emisoras y pueblos del continente.

Les nouvelles technologies de l'information (NTI) nous conduisent-elles vers un monde dans lequel nous partagerons tous la même cyber culture et parlerons la même langue ? L'impact d'uniformisation et de globalisation des NTI est bien connu. Mais s'agit-il du seul effet possible de ces NTI ? Des initiatives en Amérique Latine combinant les NTI et la radio soutiennent le développement d'une communication plus démocratique. Bruce Girard décrit ici l'expérience de « l'Agencia Informativa Pulsar » : ses différents services sont un exemple de la manière dont Internet peut être utilisé pour renforcer les caractères locaux et communautaires de la radio et faciliter l'échange de programmes entre les stations et les populations.

Source: Arandú 5-8/1997