

Media Democracy from the Ground Up: Mapping Communication Practices in the Counter Public Sphere

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Introduction and Overview

The need for compelling new ways of thinking about and visualizing communications systems, that function truly in the public interest, cannot be underestimated. The current threat to the public sphere associated with the increasing privatization, commercialization and conglomeration of media systems is well documented. However, most research and knowledge production in this area has been of one kind. It has focused on the picture from above, on the regulatory frameworks, rationale and operations of the dominant corporate and state information and media systems. Even reform efforts have been evaluated from the perspective of the dominant powers.

This work has provided a useful critique, but it has also left out many critical actors and spheres of democratic communications—those of the counter-public sphere (Fraser, 1990). The counter-public sphere, as Fraser, has described it, is that space in society where emerging or marginalized groups coalesce and work to form new collective identities, to mobilize into constituencies, and to articulate problems for redress. As the source of many new ideas, practices and policies – indeed as the engine of social change (Rochon, 1998) -- the importance of this sphere to a healthy democracy cannot be ignored. Their experiments in participatory democracy and communications can provide a critical source of analysis and practical models (Wainwright, 2003).

In our current work, we focus on mapping the communications practices in this sphere, and we discuss how these practices are changing or evolving in the context of significant restructuring of media systems in the US and internationally. The concerns of actors in this sector – social movement groups, alternative or independent media producers and media justice advocates, for example – intersect to some extent with the concerns of dominant media critics, but there are also important differences, and we highlight both these shared concerns (for example about decreasing access to mainstream media for all voices of dissent) and differences (re the critical importance of citizen or alternative media, for example) in this report.

This kind of counter public sphere research is important for several reasons: First, it allows us to begin to understand the democratic communications practices, paradigms and technologies that are being invented and circulated outside the dominant systems. Second, it can help us to understand the effects of the restructuring of the dominant communications system on other democratic sectors, and as such to gauge the health of

the counter public sphere more generally. Third, it can provide us with “best practice” examples of existing democratic media that are truly working in the public good -- for example the case study of Colombian citizen radio that we report. In addition, researching counter public sphere practices and responses to media restructuring can extend our vision beyond an elite approach to media reform that looks mostly to expert critics for assessments about these effects. We argue that that the experience, the vision, and the specific policy suggestions of those engaged in democratic communications every day are important perspectives, and that their creative engagements with these problems may also serve as guides to the future.

Our current field projects both involve analyses of democratic communications in the counter public sphere. We draw on them here, not as definitive studies, but as examples of the utility and richness of investigating media democracy from the ground up, rather than the top down. “The Qualitative Evaluation of Citizens Radio in War Zones Project”(Rodriguez) describes a citizen radio project working in the public good and serves as a model of democratic participatory communication functioning outside of the dominant system. “The Media Deregulation and Community Politics Project (Barker-Plummer and Kidd) investigates the practices of a wide range of social movement and media reform groups in the Bay Area’s counter public sphere, investigating their communication practices and assessing their responses to media restructuring. It provides a glimpse of how communications restructuring is affecting this critical sphere.

Media Reform: A Movement of Movements

Within the counter public sphere we identify three interconnected, but uncoordinated, spheres of action related to democratic communications.

The first, the media reform sector is engaged in challenging existing dominant corporate and state media and information systems for more equitable access and distribution of resources and technologies, rights and representation; and advocates a corresponding shift to democratic logics/paradigms. These groups are centrally focused on media and media reform as the central issue.

The second sector we see as important in these debates, is the alternative or independent media sector. In this sector, actors are creating and sustaining independent projects, systems and networks of media and communications autonomous of the control and logics/paradigms of corporate and state media and communications systems.

Third, we are interested in the social movement sector and the ways in which social movement communications practices intersect with both the dominant and alternative media systems.

Historically, social movements have always had strong links with alternative media, where their emergent critiques and concerns have been more readily received and this continues to be the case. However, we also note in our work a growing and potentially very powerful link between issue and identity based movement groups, and media-

reform-focused groups. As information is shared and the critical effects of media restructuring are beginning to be felt throughout all three sectors, we believe that there will be more of this kind of coordinated activity. In fact – with appropriate resources, good will and skilled bridge-makers -- we see the strong potential for a “movement of movements” around media justice and communications democracy as more and more social justice groups realize the potential consequences of the loss of this important public resource. Indeed, as we illustrate below, this has already happened in a number of cases.

FIELD PROJECTS

The Media Deregulation and Community Politics Project, San Francisco Bay Area, USA

Clearly media restructuring is affecting the counter public spheres as well as the mainstream. Among our respondents –media reform, alternative media and social movement groups, we found a general agreement about the shrinking space available in mainstream media for all grassroots groups. Some of the more professionalized groups have found ways to compete for this shrinking space, but other, lower resourced groups, often representing the poor, people of color and immigrant communities, and those with contrary political positions, have experienced continued and increased marginalization from the dominant media, and exclusion from the dominant public sphere. Even those professionalized groups who have had important successes in getting other concerns inserted into public debate, however, have encountered serious resistance and lack of interest when they turned their attention to the need for structural reform, including the media.

Alongside this shrinking access to the dominant sphere is a growing role for the independent, autonomous and ethnic media. Faced with systemic exclusion from the dominant media, counter-publics must create their own communications, sub-contract with independent producers, or turn to these other media. For immigrant community groups, in particular, English-speaking media have become difficult targets of their efforts, and their public education and advocacy work is done through “ethnic” media sources.

For these reasons and others, most of the groups we talked to agreed that media reform was a critical issue. Not all of the groups could afford to spend time and resources directly on this issue, but all agreed that current media structures caused barriers to social justice advocacy and to democratic communication. Importantly, many groups saw media literacy as well as media reform as critical needs for their communities.

We also noted in this first set of interviews some important shifts in technology use, as well as innovations in production and programming developed by groups to compensate for, and to go around mainstream barriers, but also to create alternative public spheres for debate. The increased use of Internet resources, for example, to create new horizontal links and networks were encouraging signs of vitality in democratic communications

outside the dominant public sphere. Despite significant barriers to public communication, our study also notes some significant successes for these groups. We develop each of these points in turn below.

(i) The shrinking public sphere of dominant media

First, our Bay area investigation confirms that the space in the mediascape for public discourse and debate has shrunk, fragmented and time-shifted. The great majority of groups that we interviewed see the current shape of the dominant media as a major problem for their work. Consolidation has sharply reduced the overall number of news departments, particularly in radio. Global corporate restructuring has led to severe cutbacks in staff across all commercial and public media, with a corresponding drop in coverage of locally originated stories that do not fit corporate news office frames, particularly from counter-publics.

(ii) “Professionalization” among well resourced groups

Those community groups that are able to mobilize the necessary resources have responded to media’s shrinking sphere by increased professionalization. Groups, for example, like Children Now and Forest Ethics have emerged, in which not only is communication a key strategic activity, it is the purpose of the organization to target media and other specialized audiences with immediately useable studies, analyses and opinions. These highly professionalized groups report significant “successes” in their targeted communications, except when the subject relates to structural media reform. Our children’s advocacy group, for example, reported routine success in accessing media in all issue areas except media reform. When they broached media ownership and education programming issues, for example, they did not get their usual coverage.

This professionalization in media strategies by social change groups is not unproblematic for the counter public sphere. If the best resourced groups take a pragmatic or assimilationist approach to the narrowing media window, rather than putting forward a larger vision of social change, or engaging in structural change of the mediascape itself, it may well undermine the forces for more structural change in the long term.

In our survey, a number of groups are devoting more resources to “communications,” defined very narrowly, as ‘message development for the mainstream media or other stake-holders,’ or what is better known as public relations for non-profits. For some groups, and in particular, the environmental groups, this tactical reshaping had proven effective in reaching the mainstream media or corporate stake-holders. However, our concern is with the loss of horizontal connections with other groups, or outward communication towards educating the general public. We need more research and discussion about this professionalization of communications strategies by social movement groups and we will pursue it locally in our follow-up teach-in with groups.

(iii) Increased Marginalization among low resourced groups

Those groups with the least amount of economic, cultural, and social capital continue to have major problems of access to dominant media. For example, representatives of poor and homeless people (SF Homeless Coalition, for example), youth (the Ella Baker Center), people of color, (Latino Issues Forum), and immigrants (Mujeres Unidas, for example), all told us of their difficulties being heard by mainstream English language local media. Only a few of these groups were able to “earn” dominant media coverage, and the coverage was usually a very brief sound bite, with little context, where their perspectives were marginalized by the required “objective interview with the other (much more conservative) side.” With few exceptions, all had difficulty getting consistent access to in-depth coverage that was not tokenizing or stereotypical. While some have been successful in campaigning for specific policy alternatives, it was virtually impossible to discuss more long-term strategic visions of social justice.

(iv) The importance of the alternative media sector-to counter-publics

The alternative media sector in the Bay area has grown quickly, partly in response to this blockade of access to dominant media by social justice groups and other counter-publics. In stark contrast to the corporate and public media, this sector has played a major role in analyzing and mobilizing around issues of media democracy and justice, and offers a small, but significant offset to the local democratic deficit of the corporate and public media. Most of the groups had no problem gaining access to the alternative media.

However, alternative media does not always reach the strategic targets of many social justice movements who want to shift the public discourse. While the local alternative media sometimes reaches a small, but critical mass of activists, local policy makers, and allies, counter-publics often find that they do not usually reach state and national policy makers, non- English-speaking audiences, or large numbers of the voting public. As well, working through the alternative media can be time-consuming, and sometimes difficult, given the decentralized and under-resourced nature of operations. And of course, alternative journalists are not immune from stereotypical or biased coverage.

We also interviewed a small set of alternative media practitioners and will be continuing this work in the fall. We note that the Bay area alternative media sector has played a critical role as counter public sphere for media reform and media change, providing information, context, discussion and debate, and acting as mobilizer during key moments. As our own previous work has noted, the alternative media sector prefigures some very good models of democratic practice, in terms of media production; and knowledge production about specific policy changes, models and longer-term strategic visions.

(v) The role of “ethnic media.”

Conglomeration and consolidation have had an especially detrimental effect on media not owned by white-dominated corporations (González and Torres, 2004, Kidd, McGee and Fairbairn, 2005). More systematic research is needed to analyse the concrete effects on specific counter publics, their relations with other counter-publics, and with the mainstream. For example, what impact has the recent consolidation of Black- owned

urban radio and television stations had for African American communities? As well, what impact has the consolidation of Spanish language media by Clear Channel, NBC and other conglomerates, had on both monolingual and bilingual groups within Spanish-language communities? And what impact has the transfer of almost all of these diverse media to white-dominated transnationals had for the interaction among all counter-publics?

For non-English speaking or bilingual communities, the “ethnic” media plays a central role in facilitating education and debate and in creating local spheres of discussion. For the immigrant rights groups we talked to, for example, journalists from Spanish language media, for example, were the most reliable respondents. For Mujeres Unidas, a Latina education and advocacy group, and Day Laborers, for example, it was ethnic media, including both national and local sources, that allowed these groups to communicate with their constituents and to create a space for the community to learn about their rights and to mobilize for action. This link was eased of course by shared language, but these groups, all of whose communities and representatives are, in fact, bilingual, had also tried and repeatedly failed to gain serious attention from English language media. In fact, groups whose constituencies are bilingual, or from marginalized communities, must shape their communications work to address three distinctly different media sectors, the dominant, the alternative and the “ethnic.”

(vi) Innovative production

One of the critical focuses of social movement communications is the collective witnessing, articulation and circulation of “subaltern” experiences (both collective and individual) that is seldom explored in dominant discourse (Rodriguez, 2001, Kidd 2003). This of course, is the heartbeat of much alternative media, in which authors and producers, unable to access the dominant media, search out alternative channels for their narratives and innovative productions. The Bay area is one of the more prominent hubs of this activity; in one example, independent documentary film-makers, supported by the Film Arts Foundation, often draw the subject matter for their films from counter-publics in the Bay area, and then circulate these issues locally, nationally and internationally. In turn, the film-makers work is sustained by the diffuse networks of counter-publics.

(vii) Communicative Successes

As well, counter-publics create their own communications projects, for both internal and public use, in which participants share everyday, tacit knowledge of the conditions of their life, their survival mechanisms and creative innovations. These new discourses cannot immediately be turned into “policies” or “demands,” but have to be extensively discussed, and then pieced together with theoretical, historical, statistical” knowledges to arrive at some common project or solution (Wainwright, 2003). However, the horizontal sharing of these knowledges has often led to very practical criticisms of existing systems and services, and/or to practical experiments in creating alternative services.

Almost all of the groups interviewed gave examples; including making visible hate crimes against homeless people, challenging the favouritism in labour practices at City Hall, increasing local election coverage, providing a pro-peace perspective from military families, and changing corporate and state policy about global sweat shops. The Ella Baker Center, for example, has been able to shift public policy around youth prisons. In concert with a coalition of groups, and through a combination of public meetings, educational programmes and reports on alternative visions, and targeted media campaigns around specific policies, the Center successfully moved policy and opinion.

In another example, Global Exchange has been able to translate national exposure it received around its Nike sweatshop campaign, into attention to its in-depth advocacy web site. In the last few years, the organization's site traffic has increased tenfold. People hear about the group in national media, but they learn about (and are mobilized around) the issues at the website.

(viii) Innovative public and popular education programmes

In a parallel vein, several of the counter-publics emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for self-representation for their members. For example, the programmes of the Poor News Network and Third World Majority are notable for their inclusion of media production training coupled with media literacy. As popular educator, Paulo Freire suggested, in creating images of themselves and the world, groups who have been systematically disappeared, or "abused" by the media arrive at sharp critiques of the existing system together with brilliant visions of alternatives. Although these knowledges are also not immediately turned into "policies" or 'demands,' especially in the narrowly defined existing media reform efforts, two of our respondents noted how this process of horizontal sharing of knowledge has led to very practical criticisms of existing systems and services, and to their deeper involvement in media change. There is little systematic evaluation of these programmes, the opportunities for exchange, or the kinds of policies put forward. In our convening of groups, we hope to explore some of these strategic visions for policy change.

(ix) Innovative technologies and programs

Alternative media in the Bay area have experimented with some tactical media interfaces, such as the use of micro-radio, portable video, cell phones (including cell phone cameras) and the Internet during large demonstrations. Some of the counter-publics have developed very effective web-based public advocacy interfaces. Generally, we found an increase in the use of web-based technologies among all groups, from increasing email use to creating web-based mobilizing tools. The potential of web technologies for research, self-publishing and knowledge building, makes them especially important in this sphere as a way to go around the barriers of consolidated media. We are interested in following up this thread of technological change in the counter public sphere in the next stages of the project.

(x) Horizontal links: Towards a Movement of Movements

There are many and growing links between these three spheres, of reform, alternative media and social movement communications. All of the issue and identity based movement groups think that structural media reform is essential, and they had heard about or were in touch with the media reform centered groups. In addition, most of the media groups and social movement communication groups circulate information horizontally to parallel groups, to allied groups, counter-publics and movements. Generally, we found personal, organizational and network links between all three sectors and the potential for much more coordinated activity.

This shared knowledge is critical. In the Bay Area, we can demonstrate the importance of linking activities in these three spheres in two recent media campaigns -- micro-radio and the resurgence of Pacifica Radio. The successful campaign to reinstate micro-radio, for example, was a result of the combined work of lawyers and other activists in the reform sphere (court challenges and FCC lobbying and policy initiatives); circulation/mobilization via the alternative media; and the building of links with potential counter-publics (students, musicians, labor groups, etc.). The successful campaign for a democratic Pacifica was also a result of reform (state court challenge), alternative media (micro-radio and weekly newspapers) and support from counter-publics (demonstrations, meetings, concerts, etc.).

Media Alliance, a media-reform focused advocacy group and coalition builder, has been developing as an important hub for this kind of work. The organization experimented with its role as network hub during the Pacifica crisis. It has developed this work during the more recent campaign around media ownership rules, and was cited by many of the groups we interviewed. Now, they are acting as the local hub in a national effort to effect change in the cable license renewals with Comcast. An important aspect of this work is the targeted training to counter-publics with limited resources, such as the Poor News Network, and the Coalition on Homelessness. They also share tips on media training with groups such as the 3rd World Majority.

From a more global perspective, one of the under-researched links in democratic communications is the impact that successful campaigns in other regions have on activists in the US. For example, many groups in the Bay area and in the US more generally have been inspired by the practices, strategies and visions of media activists in Latin America -- such as the Zapatistas or more recently, the Bolivarian circles in Venezuela -- and around the world. As well, local activists have brought back important knowledge and experiences from collaborating in global networks, such as, for example, the global Independent Media Center, or the projects of Berkeley Liberation Radio pioneer Stephen Dunifer.

This emerging movement of communications movements, encompassing all three spheres of activities, is not static; as there is a lot of traffic of individuals and groups between sectors. For just one example, activists from the indymedia movement, and other autonomous media producers, have been very involved in recent US and global media reform efforts. As we have found confirmed in our present work, actors from social

justice movements have been essential in conceptualizing, mobilizing, and organizing alternative media, and media reform initiatives too. While many of the groups we interviewed in the Bay area have had very little time to address media reform on a regular basis, their insights at the two public hearings about the FCC media ownership rules were part of the inspiration for our present project as they provided some practical understandings of the impact of media consolidation. Their contributions to this study have provided important reminders about how to shape future policy to allow for greater representation of all, deeper discussion of policy alternatives, a multi-language and cultural approach and more accountability of media of all kinds.

Qualitative Evaluation of Citizens Radio in War Zones, Magdalena Medio, Colombia

One of the more serious obstacles to constructing knowledge about the capacity of citizens' media to democratize the public sphere revolves around evaluation. Frequently financed by international and multilateral donors, citizens' media initiatives have to conform to evaluation methodologies and procedures that do not address their potential for democratizing the public sphere. For example, leaders of local community radio stations in Magdalena Medio, Colombia, claim that their stations are playing important roles in the following areas: 1) cultivating a plural and democratic public sphere; 2) cultivating a culture that urges citizens to get involved in local decision-making processes; 3) demanding accountability from local governments; 4) cultivating a culture in which difference is legitimate and conflict is resolved via non-violent means; 5) serving as a connector among different social movements and social change initiatives at the local level.

In a country such as Colombia, where armed groups ranging from guerrilla organizations to right-wing paramilitary groups and drug traffickers have legitimized a culture of strong individualism, impunity for delinquency, and disbelief in the rule of law, this particular use of radio technology as citizens' radio is making a significant contribution to building a democratic public sphere. Conversely, donors—which, in the case of the stations in Magdalena Medio, include the World Bank and the European Union—impose traditional evaluation models that ask stations to collect data on items such as the number of community members trained in radio production; the number of listeners; or the number of programs produced. Abstract indicators such as 'impact' or 'outcomes' form the basis of these traditional evaluation models; as a result, the data collected and the evaluation produced bypass the construction of knowledge about the issues listed above—the *raison d'être* of the stations. In other words, while the goals of these community radio stations go in one direction (democratizing the public sphere), the evaluation goes in a different direction (coverage, ratings, and quantity of content produced).

This is the context in which a group of three scholars¹ approached AREDMAG—a network of seventeen community radio stations operating in Magdalena Medio (Colombia), with a proposal to design a different type of methodology that could produce the necessary knowledge about how community radio stations are democratizing the public sphere, strengthening local governance, and engendering a culture of peace. As academics, we approached the Magdalena Medio media activists with the following foundational principles: we would engage in a process of collective construction of knowledge; we would not use the traditional formula in which academics construct knowledge *about* community activists; and we would engage in a non-hierarchical process of knowledge construction *with* activists.

Working with AREDMAG's board of directors we designed a participatory, qualitative evaluation methodology. Every aspect of the methodology, from the sampling, the data collection techniques, and the questions used to elicit qualitative data was a product of collective discussions and decisions between academics and activists. During this process it became clear that we possessed different types of knowledges (for example, academics had the ability to operationalize issues into data collection techniques and questions; on the other hand, activists knew well the inner dynamics of each station, and this knowledge became crucial in designing a sample that would represent each of these different dynamics). Working with a sample of sixty participants coming from all seventeen community radio stations in Magdalena Medio, a total of 160 individual narratives and eighteen group discussions were collected, recorded, and analyzed (the methodology elicited individual narratives that would then be discussed by small groups; the results of the small group discussions would then be discussed in a plenary format by the entire group of sixty).

Given space limitations this section will only focus on two of the issues evaluated: 1) community radio and peace building; and, 2) community radio as connector among social movements and on 3) the lessons learned.

1) Community radio and peace building

We found that the role of the stations in local processes of peace building cannot be reduced to a formula. In each context stations have found their own unique ways to cultivate a culture of peace, to mediate in specific conflicts, or to keep legal and illegal armed groups (guerrilla organizations, paramilitary groups, drug traffickers, and the state's army) at a distance, therefore protecting civilians and civil society. What follows is a description of the most salient ways in which stations are playing important roles as peace builders.

1(i) Mediating among local parties in conflict

¹ The academic team includes: Amparo Cadavid, Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombia; Jair Vega, Universidad del Norte, Barranquilla, Colombia; and Clemencia Rodriguez, University of Oklahoma, USA.

In one case, the station mediated between citizens who complained about how street vendors had invaded a park with their merchandise; the entire park had become a street market, making it impossible for citizens to reclaim and use this public space. The station mediated between the vendors and the citizens, until finally the local mayor had to intervene with a solution acceptable to all: a market would be built for the vendors who agreed to vacate the park. At least two elements should be emphasized here. Although the station was a legitimate mediator, it was not capable of resolving the conflict; however, this incapacity became the necessary trigger that forced local authorities to assume their role as keepers of public spaces. In other words, governance and accountability were also improved in this locality thanks to the station. Secondly, parties in conflict coming to the station to voice their arguments knew that the entire community was listening. Thus, the process of mediation also became a process of addressing the community. Each party had to reflect on everything they said, they became accountable for what they said in front of the entire community. The station as mediator is therefore not the same as a private mediator that keeps all discussions confidential.

1(ii) Mediating between local authorities and citizens

In one example, the citizens of a small town and the local police force were engaged in conflict due to an incident in which the police over-reacted to a rowdy party of youngsters. Unhappy with the police reaction, citizens attacked the police; the police retreated and came back with reinforcements. A riot followed and left four people with bullet wounds. The station began mediating between the police and the community. The station's mediation prevented the conflict from escalating. Ultimately, the police acknowledged its mistakes and the community recognized that respecting the rule of law and supporting the legitimate local authorities is the only way to build a culture of peace. Many other narratives address the weak presence of the state in Magdalena Medio and how this is a source of multiple conflicts. In all these narratives, the station demands accountability from local authorities and activates the discussion around the responsibility of the state to guarantee the rule of law, citizens' rights, and the protection of communal well-being. On the other side, the station generates a discussion about the need for citizens to become involved in demanding accountability on the part of their local authorities, to engage in citizen participation, and to ensure that the rule of law is maintained.

1(iii) Mediating between illegal armed groups such as guerrillas and paramilitaries and civilians

Guerrilla organizations have had a strong presence in the region since the birth of the ELN in Magdalena Medio in 1965. For the last decade, the right-wing paramilitaries have waged a war to "clean" Magdalena Medio of guerrilla and guerrilla sympathizers and civilians are caught in the middle, and victimized by both groups. In one instance, the station director was detained by the ELN, one of the guerrilla groups in the region. As soon as the station heard of their director's detention it broadcast a communiqué in which they demanded that the guerrillas respect his life as a civilian who was not involved with any of the armed groups. Immediately messages and letters of support began pouring in from individuals and social organizations within the station's reach. The station kept broadcasting all these messages, some addressing the captors with demands to respect the

captive's life and to free him, and some addressing the director himself with messages of hope and support. In view of the obvious rejection of their action on the part of the community, the guerrillas called the station to demand that the community go all the way to their camp to recover their leader. The station broadcast the demand and in six hours 480 citizens approached the station saying they wanted to go get their community leader. A caravan of buses, trucks, and tractors packed with men, women, and children made a fifteen hour journey through the high Andes until they reached the guerrilla camp. Two days later they came back bringing the station's director with them. This collective action, facilitated by the station, sent a clear message to the guerrilla and other armed groups in the region that the community had declared itself neutral, and that all armed groups were expected to respect civilians' rights.

2) Community radio as connector among social movements in the Magdalena Medio

Although the leaders of the Magdalena Medio community radio stations have a mental image of their stations serving as strong connectors among social movements and grassroots organizations in the area, the evaluation results showed a grimmer picture. Once evaluation participants had mapped the actual links between each of the stations and any other social organization at the local, regional, national, and international level, it became clear that only three of the seventeen stations are well connected with civil society organizations. Some stations struggle between the need to open their doors to programming by local grassroots groups and the need to maintain an acceptable production quality. Other stations still reflect single voices—generally the local priest's. An important outcome of the evaluation was that participants concluded that it was much more important to reach tight levels of connectedness and articulations with other progressive social movements and grassroots organizations in the region than to reach large audiences.

Another significant finding was the differences in perception and actual operation of the regional radio network. Although the Magdalena Medio stations perceive of themselves as a network, the links between stations are either nonexistent or weak. Instead the strongest link is between each individual station and the networks' board of directors; more than a network, the stations are consolidating into a system with a core and seventeen satellites. The need to cultivate a real network, in which all the nodes can communicate without the need to go through a center, became clear to all the participants.

3) Lessons learned:

3 (i) Local actors and knowledge construction:

All processes of this evaluation processes were collectively developed and implemented by a team of media activists and academics. Therefore, the media activists acquired a sense of ownership of the process right from the beginning. They did not feel the evaluation was imposed by outsiders, but emerged from their own questions about their project. In other words, the evaluation responded to what *they* wanted to evaluate. The evaluation is anchored on stakeholder-generated indicators.

3 (ii) The knowledge emerged from the stakeholders themselves

As a result, the Magdalena Medio media activists clearly see how the results of the evaluation can be used to improve, re-direct, or re-think their communication project. In other words, local research is being used by media activists to transform practice. Some examples of how the knowledge produced by the evaluation is being used:

a) the Magdalena Medio media activists (and especially AREDMAG's leadership) had "a feeling" about how their citizens' radio stations were democratizing the public sphere and building a peaceful social fabric; however, they had a very hard time articulating this to outsiders. Therefore, they easily lost track of their goals and "fell in the trap" of trying to defend their stations in terms of numbers of listeners, or quality of the programming. However, after they read the first 70-page evaluation report, they are much clearer on how to articulate and defend the stations roles. For example, recently the European Union development experts involved with the Magdalena Medio suggested creating a large, professional, and centralized radio station that instead of supporting 17 small local stations. AREDMAG's leadership used the evaluation results to explain to the EU experts how the role(s) their stations are playing could not be replicated by a central station without links to small local communities.

b) the evaluation process per se had an impact on AREDMAG's stations. The Magdalena Medio is a large region with a difficult geography and unreliable transportation systems. Travel, even between communities that are close, is very difficult. Therefore, people working in one of AREDMAG's radio stations rarely interact with people from other stations. As a result, radio producers who are very aware of their own station do not possess a clear vision of the roles played by the 17 other stations in the region. During the evaluation 60 participants from all of the 17 stations came together for a workshop that lasted three days, and had the opportunity to hear approximately forty individual narratives and group discussions about their stations. At the end of the three days they had a much clearer idea of what their stations do in the region. The evaluation itself generated a process of collective memory.

c) the evaluation results about the extent to which AREDMAG's stations are connected to local and regional social movements and grassroots organizations made clear a scenario in which some stations are very well connected to their communities, while others are only weakly linked. On this basis, stations that are weakly linked are looking up to stations that are strongly connected and the questions follow: "how are you guys doing it?" Therefore, the evaluation triggered a process in which knowledge and know-how has begun flowing between stations.

3) iii) Many networks and relationships traverse the world of social change in Colombia.

Therefore the word is already traveling about this evaluation methodology, its potential uses and how stakeholder-friendly it is. As a result, several other citizens' media initiatives in the country have asked us to evaluate them. Currently we don't have the capacity to undertake all these evaluations, but we are working in two directions that would facilitate the circulation of this knowledge: first, training an evaluation team (consisting of other academics and graduate students) and second, publishing a manual

about how to design and implement an evaluation process following our methodology. Recently, the Colombian Ministry of Culture asked us to present our evaluation methodology to a team of consultants and Ministry officials working on citizenship and public spheres projects throughout the entire country. These are not necessarily communication projects, but are all projects that intend to strengthen processes of civil society participation in public spheres (i.e., governance, civic education, local participation projects). A note of clarification: the results of the evaluation do not flow easy from one local context to another precisely because the data is very context-specific; however, the evaluation methodology seems to travel more easily from one context to another, and even into arenas that do not have anything o do with communication and media.

Moving Forward

The April 1st New York meetings began to discuss the implications of this research for knowledge about democratic practice. In Aliza Dichter's survey, participants in media reform networks noted their concerns about the problems of internal democracy, such as the concentration and distribution of power, and the related dangers of "founder" and celebrity-oriented power structures. Sasha Costanza-Chock suggested that the differences in approach between the reform and autonomous media sectors within the larger media change movement can be traced to different understandings of "democracy." He distinguished between "representative" democracy, in which activity is focused on reforming the dominant systems of information and communications media, and "direct democracy," approach of "autonomous media" which emphasizes high levels of participation of all group members in collaborative research, production, and circulation. These issues of democratic practice, and indeed the distinctions between representative and participatory/direct democracy models are long-standing, if under theorized, currents, in alternative, participatory communications, and social movement literature, since at least the late 1960s and early 1970s (Downing, 1984, Landry et al, 1985, Riaño, 1994, Rodriguez, 2001, Kidd, 1998). We consider these questions a critically important area for further study.

We argue that much of the creativity and transformative energy necessary for media change will come first from practice; it is a priority for us to examine the complex weave between the actual practices and logics of groups involved in the movement of movements for democratizing communications and then to reflect on this critically. There are contemporary examples of media-related projects, from all three spheres, which foster the high degree of activity necessary for participatory democracy, providing open access to everyone; open mutually agreed rule-governed processes; autonomy from the participatory process of the state; and a genuine sharing of knowledge (Wainwright, 2003). Some contemporary studies are also beginning to analyse the problems and contradictions of practising participatory democracy in autonomous media, and social movement communications, especially as they scale beyond small locally-based projects (Langlois et al, 2005, Brooten, 2004).

We need also to examine the relationship between media initiatives attempting to practice participatory democracy and those following the representative democracy paradigms. Institutions based on representative democracy still provide greater legitimacy for calls for universal access, inclusiveness and citizen participation; and there are ready examples of movements from around the world that combine initiatives of local governments with micro-experiments of participatory democracy (Wainwright, 2003). The US certainly includes many neighborhood and municipal experiences of participatory democracy; however, it is increasingly difficult for these ideas and demands, except in their most watered down versions, to rise up the political system, due to a number of different factors including the lack of political pluralism, a fair electoral system, effective scrutiny of the executive and an independent media system (Wainwright, 2003).

Conclusions

In accordance with SSRC's initial call for "Necessary Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere", we envision an approach that strengthens a scaling up of this movement of movements to transform communications in the public interest. However, we would suggest that, as important as new research is the need to circulate existing knowledges of ongoing practices, and their review, among all three spheres of active groups, and to circulate these knowledges through formal and non-formal education outside of these three spheres.

We suggest more circulation of models of popular education which include systematic methods of evaluation for players in all three spheres. In the Colombian case, evaluation has already begun serving as a route to guide the future efforts of the AREDMAG radio stations. In the San Francisco case, our plans are to hold a teach-in in the fall, bringing together the respondents from our interviews to discuss and reflect on the work, best practices and better ways to strengthen the networks of exchange. In our view, this is the type of knowledge and practice that academics can assist in and that can be used by activists in their attempts to democratize the public sphere.

We would also encourage more discussion among counter-publics of ways that non-media counter-publics can systematically share information to keep up on media issues, and provide their important perspectives to the work. This would seem especially beneficial to groups whose central goal is public education or public opinion change. We would also encourage research that tracks and assesses the success/failure of current media pragmatist strategies – i.e. the limitations of PR for non-profits

In the US, we strongly suggest much more public education about the specific ways that social movements and counter-publics are losing ground in the larger mediascape. This would include more detailed examples of the impact of structural shifts, especially those for marginalized groups, as media corporations centralize production in fewer national metropolises, cut back on local reporters, distinct outlets and news departments, and the number of outlets managed by women and men of colour, etc. As well, an integral part of this public education would be the wider circulation of models and proposals for alternative communication systems –IMC type experiences – and how counter-publics whose primary concern is not media can contribute.

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