

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

## Think global, broadcast local

Why small community radios are playing an increasingly important role in Latin America

Laura Cwiertnia

---

**Societies need media, there can be no doubt about that. But what happens when the mass media is controlled by the government or dominated by the interests of large companies? What is the result when a large proportion of the population feels the headlines and daily reports do not speak to them at all? Nothing good, one would imagine. But is that actually the case? In response to the state of the media, ambitious, independent radio projects broadcast their own programmes in many Latin American countries, often at great risk.**

When examining the press, one expects on balance to hear more negative news from Latin America. There are good reasons why the *Reporters without Borders* human rights organisation banished Mexico, Columbia, Venezuela, Honduras and Cuba to the very end of their new rankings on world-wide freedom of the press. As different as each country is, and as individual as their respective laws may be, the media landscape in the region is marked by government oppression and monopolisation by private businesses. If a government is not calling the tune for newspapers, radios and television broadcasters, then the financial interests of media companies often determine the news agenda. The needs of large segments of the population are often ignored and certain social groups are excluded. "Many mass media do not focus on the common good", reports Christoph Dietz, founder of the Media and Development Forum. As Project Consultant for Latin America for Cameco (the Catholic Media Council), he has been advising development organisations on planning and implementing projects to promote media for many years. "Often the problem is simply that news reporting is limited to the capital, or includes two or three other cities in the best case scenario." In Peru, for example, around one third of the population live in and around Lima. This is the centre of political power and advertising reaches its most important target groups here. But the this concentration of media solely in the large cities means many villages are completely cut off from news reporting. "Community radios are a counter-model. They offer relatively current news from the rest of the country and allow communities to reflect on their specific situations," explains Christoph Dietz.

### One medium from all for all

There are currently more than 15,000 community radios in Latin America and the Caribbean. They refer to themselves as local radio, citizen radio and free radio. There are community radios in villages that consist of just one road, and they are in the great metropolises. Some radios battle for human rights or environmental protection as part of a social movement. Others provide information about daily life in their communities, about changes to the bus schedules or planned baseball games. The term community radio tries to encompass them all and define a common basic principle: the community. "What is understood by *community* always depends on the respective group using the term," explains Viviana Uriona from the

Bundesverband freier Radios (BFR, German Association of Free Radios). "There are radios that do not define it at a local level, declaring instead that anyone who supports the project is part of our community, whether they live here or in India." In contrast to private mass media, community radios define themselves as the property of all members of the community. "Anyone can participate, get involved and pass on their information", explains the media activist. This is the core concept for many community radios: to create a platform for dialogue.

### Tune out and make your own radio

At the Argentinean *FM La Tribu* community radio in Buenos Aires, up to 300 different people participate in shaping the packed programme schedule. Students, social organisations, children's groups --

the greater the diversity, the better. The station's over 60 broadcasts are filled with reports on the widest variety of topics imaginable, from human rights to urban underground music or indigenous myths. It all began in 1989 with a makeshift antenna on a roof. "Initially La Tribu was a secret project. Over the years it has evolved into a place of contact," according to Rafael Lopez Binaghi, a student who has been involved since 2004. La Tribu sees itself as a creative network in which everyone can participate equally. Typical of a community radio, the team values a horizontal structure. There are no hierarchies, everyone has an equal voice and decisions are made collectively. "Turn off La Tribu and make your own radio" is their well-known slogan. "We want to show that every one of us can create his or her own project!" explains journalist Flavia Medici.

### **Battling giants**

Community radios want to offer an alternative to commercial programmes, but this is often their greatest problem. Media in many Latin American countries are viewed primarily as businesses involved in the market economy and almost all are privately owned. In Mexico the two broadcasting giants *Televisa* and *TV Azteca* share a total of 95% of the market. The chronically underfinanced community radios struggle to compete with these commercial giants. Added to this is the influence of the state on the media sector. Since the government regulates the allocation of licences, some community radios wait in vain for permission to broadcast.

The respective legal situation in each country is primarily responsible for these inopportune conditions. "In many cases the laws lag behind actual reality", Christoph Dietz clarifies. "Some of the stations do not have a license yet because some countries simply don't have adequate laws for community radio." Where there are legal frameworks for independent stations, these often restrict the latitude granted radio stations even further. In Chile, for example, for a long time community radios had to limit their broadcast radius to one kilometre. Many of these laws harken back to the time of military dictatorships, but even today independent media are often not accepted. "In some countries community radios are still threatened and persecuted. They have to close shop and their equipment is confiscated," criticises Ernesto Lamas from the AMARC, the World Organisation of Community Radio Broadcasters. Ernesto Lamas has been active in the free radio scene for over twenty years. He founded FM La Tribu and today serves as regional coordinator of AMARC in Argentina.

### **Independent radios for an independent society**

The situation for community radios has improved considerably in recent years, and in some countries they are even legally recognised today. In Argentina in particular a new media law passed in 2009 is creating a furore. The law requires a good third of broadcasting licences to be automatically granted to non-profit organisations. Although the law is certainly in dispute, community radios see it as a success.

A large part of the progress in the region is thanks to radio projects organised by the World Organisation of Community Radio Broadcasters who has been representing the interests of community radio since 1983. "The AMARC fights for freedom of expression, equality and sustainable development", explains Ernesto Lamas. In Latin America alone, the organisation has regional offices in 20 countries. "We want democratic communication for a democratic society." For Ernesto Lamas community media are important actors in society. "Community radios are much more than just information portals: They promote the social, economic and cultural development of their regions."

### **Making their voices heard**

Many local radios work to improve the living situations of their communities through projects on health, education and environmental protection. They organise campaigns for equality and against racism. "The enormous value of community radios is not necessarily in the content they broadcast, but in the process of articulation they make possible," according to Dörte Wollrad, Head of the Latin America Department at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. "The listener is not simply a vessel into which knowledge is poured as into a bucket. The listener becomes a producer." In Ecuador Dörte Wollrad personally supervised a regional media project for a number of years. For her, community radios have a special development policy function, "in particular because they were not initiated by development organisations".

Since democracy began to spread throughout the region in the 80s, the number of community radios has increased exponentially. Their concept of shaking up their societies from the bottom through local projects has promoted national changes and found global support. The grassroots projects have made their voices heard and have been institutionalised as local actors. For Ernesto Lamas, it is clear that: "governments can no longer simply forbid community radios because communities today now view them as fundamental parts of their lives." That is truly good news.