

Chapter 19

Miners' radio stations A unique communication experience from Bolivia

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Very little has been written about the Bolivian miners' community radio stations, and very late, at least in comparison to more recent experiences of participatory communication in other regions of the world¹. The radio stations have been largely ignored, and I believe the main reason is that they had no institutional 'owner'. These days, we find that an institution or a program lies behind every single new project in the area of development communication and communication for social change, be this an international NGO, a UN development organization or a government agency. I do not question the authenticity or independence of communication experiences that are protected and nourished within institutional frameworks, but it is definitely not the same thing to emerge genuinely from the grassroots as to be a project created with backup helping it to survive

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¹ Very little was published during most of the first 30 years of development of the miners' radio stations, the decades that cover their most vital phase. A few articles were published in the late '70s and early '80s, written by Bolivians in Spanish (Lozada and Kuncar, 1983, and Gumucio, 1982) or, even earlier, in French (Gumucio, 1979). In 1983, Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron and Eduardo Barrios co-directed the first documentary film on the miners' radio stations, with support from UNESCO. The first book, in Spanish, came out only in 1989: *Las radios mineras de Bolivia*, edited by Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron and Lupe Cajas. The book was one of the outcomes of the first international conference on the Bolivian miners' radio stations, "Realidad y Futuro de las Radios Mineras en Bolivia", organised by the Centro de Integración de Medios de Comunicación Alternativa (CIMCA), with support from UNESCO, in the emblematic and historic city of Potosí, in November 1988. This conference gathered both practitioners and academics. Alan O'Connor, who was among the first in the United States to write about this subject, attended the meeting. It took more than a decade for O'Connor to translate and edit his own book *Community Radio in Bolivia - The Miners' Radio Stations* (Mellen, 2004), currently the only work in English on this seminal participatory communication experience originating in the highlands of Bolivia.

318 | and become widely known. The miners' radio stations did not have that backup, nor did they benefit from any publicity orchestrated by an institutional parent. That is one of the reasons why they are, or were, so unique.

I cannot think of many other experiences that synthesize so well the most significant characteristics of participatory communication for social change: born out of the community itself, financed and managed by the community, genuinely participatory on a daily basis, well integrated into the social movement, with a wider than local impact without losing its local priorities.

A snapshot of history

The history of the Bolivian miners' radio stations has been described elsewhere and a mere description would take up most of the space available for this text. For the purpose of this essay it may be enough to say that the origin of the stations goes back as far as 1949, or even 1947, if we include *Radio Sucre*, which was founded in the mining districts of Catavi and Siglo XX by high school teachers in Llallagua, the local town close to the two mining centers². Second came *La Voz del Minero* (1949), this station set up by the miners themselves, which was founded in 1946 by the powerful *Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia* (FSTMB).

The first two radio stations were created amid considerable repression from autocratic and military governments struggling to retain power for a small 'rosca' (rich class), in a country where elections were decided by 10,000 voters, since the large majority of the population was excluded using the argument that only those who could read and write were qualified to vote. It was only after the triumph of the social uprising of April 1952³ that the miners' radio stations mushroomed at the heart of the most important mining centers. When the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR) came to power and nationalized the mining industry, miners felt the new ownership was an important step toward economic independence. As the years went by, and even though their social situation remained basically the same, mine workers became important political actors and the indisputable leaders of the social movement in Bolivia. Although the country's roughly 30,000 miners represented less than 10% of the working class during the 1960s, their significance for the Bolivian economy was and had always been enormous, since mining products represented as much as 60% of total exports.

At some point in the 1960s, every miners' union in the highlands of Bolivia wanted to have its own radio station. During the 1950s, '60s and '70s, nearly thirty were created, managed and sustained by the workers themselves, who would donate a portion of their monthly wages to cover the operating costs. With few exceptions, all the staff were selected locally. Some of the announcers

2 Lozada, Fernando and Gridvía Kuncar refer to this short-lived station in "An historic experience of self-managed communication", in Fernando Reyes Matta (ed.) *Comunicación Alternativa y Búsquedas Democráticas* (1983), Santiago, Chile: ILET/Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

3 This resulted in the abolition of the army, the nationalization of private mining, the establishment of universal voting rights and agrarian reform.

who started very young at the microphone of a miners' radio station later migrated to the cities and became well-known journalists. Usually, the union would choose the local Secretary of Culture as director of the station. As Jorge Mansilla Torres recalls: "Who do the miners choose as Secretary of Culture? The most well-read person in the place, the most lettered. To put it in another way: the teacher"⁴. Sometimes, the announcers became as popular as the union leaders.

Radio stations started airing community messages, or calling miners to union meetings, or airing those meetings in full length. People living in the mining camps knew they could use the microphone of the radio not only to request the music they wanted or to announce a sporting activity, but also to complain about the state-owned mining company's abuses and denounce the precariousness of their living conditions. The stations quickly became the cultural, social and political center. Rather than going to the police with a complaint, people would go straight to the radio, even for matters involving family issues, such as "My husband is drinking too much and beats me", or "My neighbor took my chickens".

Although in normal times the radio stations were important for the role they played in education, culture and community service, in times of political turmoil their importance extended beyond Bolivia's borders. During the military coup of 1981, foreign correspondents stranded in Peru or Chile updated their news using the short-wave broadcasts of the miners' radio stations, at a time when all the commercial media in the main cities had been shut down by the military. In case of a national emergency, the first thing workers and their families, and nearby peasants, would do, was rush to the radio station to protect it, because they knew that the first thing the army would attempt to do was to close the stations down. In those critical times, every housewife, student or worker would take turns at the constantly live microphone to tell listeners about how they were resisting. Eventually, all the radio stations were destroyed and closed down, but as soon as the first signs of democracy were in sight, the unions would place the reinstatement of their radio stations among their main demands.

In terms of their historical context, of the development of local capacity and of the solidarity drive that animated all of them, of the use of appropriate technology, of the sense of ownership that was developed, of the generation of local content, of the strengthening of capacities of local staff, of their long history of 50 years, and of their impressive number at peak, for instance, these stations have no parallel with any other community radio story in the world.

A unique example of participatory media

Since most of the alternative media grassroots communication experiences that we know of originated under the tutorship of a formal institution (NGO, church,

⁴ Interviewed by Héctor Schmucler and Orlando Encinas, in *Comunicación y Cultura* No. 8, México, 1982. Jorge Mansilla Torres, born in Llagagua, started as a young announcer and later became director-founder of *Radio Vanguardia* in Colquiri, and a well-known journalist and poet in Bolivia and Mexico, where he lived in exile.

320 | government, international development agency), the miners' radio stations stand as a unique example of a truly participatory process right from its inception. Too often in development media, the participatory process is something that is 'added' to the original scheme by improving 'access' for the surrounding community. This is not so in the case of the miners' radio stations, where the community lay at the origin of the experience.

One could write a case study on each of the almost 30 miners' radio stations that came to life since then, and the result would be thirty different stories in terms of the way they operated, the power of their equipment, or the staff structure. Their equipment, for example, was anything but standard. Some operated in AM, others in FM, or in short wave. The transmitters could be as small as 200 KW or as big as 2,000 KW. This often depended on the population in the mining district, but also changed during the individual history of each station. Some were so poor that they had little to offer in terms of programming; others were proud of their collections of music records and tapes that put their stock at the same level as the national networks. Some had small improvised booths within a union building, and some, such as *Radio Vanguardia* (of Colquiri), had a huge auditorium.

At least five times in their history, in 1965, 1967, 1971, 1978 and 1981, they suffered attacks from the army and destruction of their premises and collections. Even today, some show the scars in the walls.

However different in their individual stories, certain elements make all of them part of the same family in terms of the process of participatory communication, and they are all united by history. A brief description of the main essentials that characterize them all follows.

Participation and ownership

Most of what qualifies today as 'participatory' in communication experiences is actually 'access'. The miners' radio stations were truly participatory, in terms of people knowing that no one could at any point prevent them from expressing themselves through the microphone. But even more important than this individual type of approach to freedom of speech is the fact that the miners' radio stations were the voice of the collective, represented in some of most democratic unions that Latin America has ever known.

In spite of Bolivia's being such a highly politicized country, and the mining districts' specifically being places where all political tendencies would meet (nationalists, communists, Trotskyites, etc.), one important characteristic that was preserved over the years was that the union leader was above all a leader of the union, and only secondly a political party militant. This aspect is personified by the highest of all the leaders in the history of the Bolivian labor movement: Juan Lechín. While he had his own political party, the PRIN, which he used basically in order to gain some parliamentary representation, in the daily struggle he never allowed his party to cast any shadows over his main role as a union leader. A typical mining

union in Bolivia would seat side by side leaders that came from such diverse political parties as the POR, the MIR, the MNR, the PCB, the PCML, the PRIN, etc.⁵

The social and political sustainability of the miners' radio stations was guaranteed by the sense of ownership that every single miner and housewife had over the radio station. The fact that such a historically poor segment of the population would voluntarily give one day of its monthly wages for the radio stations is significant. Self-financing and self-management came hand in hand.

Language and cultural pertinence

Miners' radio stations had their own style, creating a style for community radio fitted to the cultural needs of the miners and their families, but also to the surrounding peasant communities. For that reason, language was important. Programming in Quechua and Aymara, the two main languages, was often aired. Peasants and miners would express themselves at the microphone in either of the two languages. Social sustainability benefited from this approach.

But apart from this cultural approach to daily life, there was also a well laid out policy, recognizable in many documents approved by national congresses of the FSTMB, which considered the radio stations not only as instruments for communicating demands for higher pay and better living conditions, but also for enhancing local culture and education. The cultural plans that Libert Forti⁶, as Cultural Advisor of the FSTMB, coordinated included everything from theatre, super 8 film production, dance, music, poetry, and photography⁷). The radio stations were instrumental in shaping the cultural platform of the miners' federation.

The amount of culture involved in the process was no doubt a result of the miners' own past as indigenous Aymara and Quechua population. The strength of the cultural baggage they brought into the mining districts fed into the labor movement key values and principles of solidarity, collective work, community decision-making, and communal justice, among other concepts that originated in the pre-Hispanic rural community (known as the *Ayllu*). These values prevented the miners from building typical trade unions that were only concerned with pay issues.

Local content and networking

Even if the miners' radio stations were too poor to have correspondents in La Paz or other Bolivian cities, they managed to produce their own newscasts. Local

⁵ *Partido Obrero Revolucionario* (POR), the main Trotskyist party; *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (MNR), which led the social revolution of 1952; *Partido Comunista de Bolivia* (PCB), the communists aligned with Moscow; *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR), which evolved towards rightist positions; *Partido Comunista Marxista Leninista* (PCML), the Maoists; *Partido Revolucionario de Izquierda Nacionalista* (PRIN), Lechin's own party.

⁶ Libert Forti is a theatre director and an anarchist with a long tradition of struggling side by side with the Bolivian workers.

⁷ I happened to be in charge of drafting the film and photography proposal, at Libert Forti's request.

322 | items were, of course, most important but the stations also provided a different view and perspective on national news. Sometimes they would pick up news from the national networks, but if they did, they would often add their own perspective on the issues, i.e. the social and political perspective of miners.

The stations' microphones often traveled out of the studio. Young reporters with small cassette recorders would constantly talk about local problems to workers, housewives, and peasants coming into town. Some of the stations were certainly more open and participatory than others, but in general the local population was instrumental in the creation of local content, and this constituted important feedback for the union itself.

One important aspect that contributed to the institutional sustainability of miners' radio stations was their sense of being part of a larger body. Although they were not formally a network, but merely a series of independent stations guided by similar principles, they often acted as such when common interests were at the top of the agenda. This could occur, for example, when a sporting event such as a car or bicycle race happened to involve several mining districts, or in times of political turmoil when the stations became important as national and international sources of information, as noted above.

The decline

By 1988, only 16 of the 26 radio stations set up since 1949 remained on the air⁸. The main cause was that the mines were closing as the international price of tin collapsed. The United States' strategy was successful in killing the International Tin Council⁹. The Bolivian government tried to halt the highest-ever inflation in history, and dictated economic measures that were radical and painful. As a result, thousands of miners lost their jobs and migrated to the cities.

Although the mining industry decreased drastically, some mining districts where a large population had developed continue to struggle for survival. The weakening of the miners' federation (FSTMB) meant that the leaders fought each other to impose the views of their political parties, thus permanently damaging what the unions had treasured for so long: their political independence. On top of it all, a wave of privatization affected the legislation that protected community radio stations, and opened up a new front for struggle¹⁰.

In spite of the above constraints, there was a late attempt to revive the miners' radio stations by setting up new ones strategically situated to serve both miners' and peasant communities and nearby cities. *Radio Matilde* in the mining

8 These were: *Cumbre*, *Chichas*, *Pio XII*, *La Voz del Cobre*, *Animas*, *La Voz del Minero del Sur*, *Sumaj Orko*, *San José*, *La Voz del Minero*, *Vanguardia*, *21 de Diciembre*, *Radio Nacional de Huanuni* and *Viloco*.

9 During the Second World War the United States forced Bolivia to sell its tin 'for peanuts', way below the international level, as a contribution to the 'war expenses'. Decades later, the US was still able to manipulate the international price using its stocks of Bolivian tin.

10 It was 2004 before a new decree issued by President Carlos Mesa recognized community radio stations, and their importance for education, culture and social development.

district of the same name, north of La Paz, was the result of such an attempt, actually being the only station to last for about 18 months after coming to life early in 1985. By that time it had been transferred into the hands of peasants in the Chaguaya community.

Bolivian miners' radio stations today cannot claim the importance they held during forty years from the early 1950s onward. However, they are a unique example of participatory communication for social change. Their history is only now being studied and recognized. Compared with other participatory communication and freedom of speech movements in the world, these stations stand as an example of political consciousness and perseverance in the social struggle.

In the words of Alan O'Connor: "The so-called 'black bloc' of anti-globalization protestors demonized by mainstream media fifty years later seem positively polite and fun-loving when measured against the history of armed resistance and strikes of the Bolivian miners"¹¹.

The dynamic between the miners' unions and miners' radio stations acquired the power of dynamite in the context of Bolivia's struggle for a participatory society.

11 In his introduction of *"Community Radio in Bolivia - The Miners' Radio Stations"*.