

# Media Development

3/2021

WACC

## Democratizing the Public Sphere

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*Media Development* is published quarterly by the  
World Association for Christian Communication  
308 Main Street  
Toronto, Ontario M4C 4X7, Canada.  
Tel: 416-691-1999

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Teddington TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.

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## Subscriptions to *Media Development*

Individuals worldwide US\$40.

Libraries, universities and other institutions (access may be shared with students, staff and users): US\$75

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Cover artwork: Brad Collicott

Published in Canada

ISSN 0143-5558

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The World Bank notes that the public sphere “is an ideal of good and accountable governance. Its requisites are free flows of information, free expression, and free debate. The ideal public sphere is truly participatory and the best protection against abuse of power.”<sup>1</sup>

Requisites beg questions and answers. In Voltaire’s “best of all possible worlds”, everyone would be equal and treated equally. Everyone would have access to information and knowledge (raising political and economic questions as well as problems of technical infrastructure). Everyone would have the capacity to speak out and everyone would be listened to.

But we do not live in an ideal world. According to Oxfam, the world’s richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people. Almost half of humanity is living on less than \$5.50 a day. In 2020, global extreme poverty rose for the first time in over 20 years as the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic aggravated the impacts of conflict and climate change. About 120 million additional people are living in poverty because of the pandemic, with the total expected to rise to about 150 million by the end of 2021.

Alongside all this, there is communication and information poverty. Its key manifestations include lack of access to platforms to raise concerns about issues that affect lives and livelihoods; under/misrepresentation in media content; low levels of media literacy; limited access to relevant information, including public information; absence of a free, independent, inclusive, and pluralistic media sector; media concentration in the hands of the powerful; and social and cultural factors that obstruct genuine participation.

It seems obvious that access to affordable communications is an essential condition of social inclusion:

“Media cannot effectively contribute to social

progress until opportunities for access and participation in the production and development of media content are more widely shared... Media infrastructure is a common good whose governance and design should be much more open to democratic engagement than currently.”<sup>2</sup>

Then there is the fundamental question of political will, as evidenced by Pradip N. Thomas in his article “The politics of public space in India” in this issue of *Media Development*:

“In India, where rampant and rapacious forms of neo-liberalism have defined public space and the terms for public encounters, there has been a steady securitisation of public spaces leading to the creation of walled and privileged publics. In other words – a separation of publics across caste, religion, and class lines. This is a dangerous precedent.”

The ideal public sphere includes but is only partially configured by “public interest media”, based on a form of journalism that brings into the public domain information that the public has a right to know. Often implied in this definition is that but for investigative journalism, undisclosed or censored information affecting the public might remain hidden. The Pentagon Papers (*Washington Post* and *New York Times*, 1971), Watergate (*Washington Post*, 1972), sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy (*Boston Globe*, 2002), NSA surveillance (*Washington Post* and *Guardian*, 2013), and the Windrush scandal (*Guardian*, 2018) are just a few examples. Many more can be found in media outlets in the global South.

**Civitates**, a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe, defines independent public interest journalism as, “Journalism that informs the public about what matters to everyone in society, made by actors who are independent of vested (political, corporate or other private) interests, and that is committed to the pursuit of truth, seeking to provide the public with reliable and accurate,

balanced and representative information, in accordance with the standards of the profession.”

Put simply, the public interest is about the general welfare, security, and well-being of everyone in the community. The public interest is not just what readers, listeners, or viewers want as consumers or as entertainment. It is about issues that affect everyone, even if many people are not aware of them.

In terms of their coverage of politics, economics, society, and culture, public interest media may take the shape of a national newspaper or broadcaster. However, there is also a vital role to be played by local media, currently under threat by a concentration of corporate media ownership that threatens news plurality and a diversity of voices and opinions.

The financial viability of local news media has been drastically affected by the ubiquity of digital platforms. With fewer journalists on the ground, some stories are not even being covered. The effect is news deserts (regions without adequate coverage); a scaling back of coverage; forced mergers with other outlets; and loss of advertising income.

The “public sphere” is inevitably fluid and is made up of kaleidoscopic patterns of overlapping influences, pressures, dominant and less dominant voices. It is also subject to technological change, marked most recently by the digital. Some people are already speaking of a “post-public sphere”, with considerable uncertainty about what comes next.

As Philip Schlesinger shrewdly observes:

“The idea of a post-public sphere designates the breakdown of an existing model, signalling uncertainty about how long it will take for another ensemble to develop. Of course, we cannot be sure when, or even whether, that will happen. In the context of current instability, however, it is worth recalling that structural change has always driven conceptions of the public sphere. This has resulted in periodic reconstructions of how it works. Its periodic reformulation in the most influential theoretical development of this idea shows how, at any

given moment, political, economic and technological conditions define its scope. In short, the post-public sphere is part of a developmental history.”<sup>3</sup>

It is even more important, therefore, for those most concerned about securing an equitable, accessible, and balanced post-public sphere – whatever form it takes – to be consulted at every opportunity and for human rights and social justice principles to underpin it.

#### Notes

1. See “The Public Sphere” issued by the World Bank’s communication for Governance and Accountability Program (commGAP) and republished in this issue of *Media Development*.
2. “Why the media is a key dimension of global inequality.” *The Conversation*. 7 February 2018.
3. Philip Schlesinger. “After the post-public sphere”. *Media, Culture & Society* 2020, Vol. 42(7-8) 1545–1563.

## Recent issues of *Media Development*

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# Democratizing the public sphere

Philip Lee

*Digital connectivity has transformed the notion of the “public sphere”. This is true at all levels: global, regional, national, community, and personal, where digital technologies have become ever more present and integral. Before digital, media and communication ecosystems that contributed to public awareness and agenda-setting were simpler and, in theory, easier to regulate and reform. In contrast, today’s digital communication domains revolve around complex technologies that make them difficult to regulate, creating opportunities for governments and big tech to control. In this context, how can civil society reclaim a public sphere that is credible, inclusive, and trustworthy?*

The observable universe is estimated to contain some 225 billion galaxies that exert gravitational pull on their systems of stars, stellar remnants, interstellar gas, dust, and dark matter. Each galaxy contains black holes from which no matter escapes.

This paradigm of gravitational attraction (influence), light, darkness, and black holes, offers a conceptual model for today’s public sphere, where areas that exert powerful influence co-exist and interact with those exerting weaker influence, as well as with those into which information vanishes.

What is the public sphere? Philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas has spent a lifetime interrogating this question. He writes:

“The public sphere can best be described as a

network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions” (Habermas, 1996: 360).

In simpler terms, we could think of the public sphere as the network of spaces (traditional media, social media, messaging apps, university campuses, public gatherings, places of worship, and coffee shops) where citizens have an opportunity to make sense of issues that affect them and their societies, influence public awareness of those issues, and contribute to agenda-setting processes that ultimately lead to legislative, policy, and practical responses.

In contexts where such communication networks are functional and transparent, democratic debate and freedom of expression are usually taken for granted. Others struggle with issues of accessibility and affordability, diversity and plurality, ownership and control, privacy and security, representation, and misrepresentation. Still others face censorship, repression, and murder.

“These political, economic, social and cultural obstacles to full inclusion in society impact lives and livelihoods – in particular those of marginalized, underserved and excluded men, women, young people and children in many countries of the world” (Lee & Vargas, 2020: 1).

A recent example during the Covid-19 pandemic is the impact that the “digital divide” has had on people’s lives and livelihoods. In country after country, those with limited or no access to information and digital technology – the poorest and most marginalized – suffered disproportionately.

## **The public sphere is fluid and porous**

Public spheres are not fixed entities. They interact in complex ways; they transform themselves

in relation to the political, social, and cultural ideologies that make them up and the technological infrastructures that underpin them. In theory, the media in the dominant public sphere oversee political and social accountability, with a formal public service remit supposedly guaranteed by financial independence and government non-interference.

Such “public service media” provide content intended to inform or of cultural value, as opposed to commercial media, whose content aims to attract a large audience and thereby maximize revenue from advertising and sponsorship.

But even that distinction between public service and commercial media is blurred. For example, in the United Kingdom, Channel 4 is publicly owned but largely commercially funded. It programmes a lot of entertainment while being subject to a public service remit under which Channel 4 News has established an enviable reputation for reliable, factual coverage of national and international events.

Public service media also facilitate the implementation of cultural policies aimed at uniting disparate parts of a country. For example, Canada is committed to bilingualism (English and French). As a result, its national public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) is publicly funded, employing translators and journalists who speak both official languages and encouraging the production of cross-cultural material.

Interestingly, TV Ontario (TVO), one of the CBC’s provincial counterparts, describes itself as “Ontario’s public educational media organization and a trusted source of interactive educational content that informs, inspires, and stimulates curiosity and thought.” It often faces a struggle to secure enough funding to enable it to continue its mission of “Empowering people to be engaged citizens of Ontario through educational media.”

In the UK, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also supports multiculturalism and diversity. In New Zealand, the public broadcasting system supports broadcasting for the

country’s Maori people, with the aim of improving their opportunities, maintaining their cultural heritage, and promoting their language.

In contrast, the “alternative public sphere” – community media, blogging and vlogging – is markedly different, today vastly extended by the Internet and digital platforms and offering its own form of journalism. Guy Berger, director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO, has made the point that:

“Citizen journalism and blogging challenge the status of institution-driven journalism, as well as the occupational ideology of professional journalists and journalism. At large, the internet decentralises the privileged position of the media to interpose itself between source and user. It also alters the spatial horizon of community or nationally based media” (Berger, 2010: 560).

How, then, do such different media constellations and clusters exert a gravitational pull on public awareness of issues that impact people’s lives? How can they help shape public opinions that encourage positive political and social change?

### **Towards mutual understanding through trust**

The theory of “communicative action” expounded by Jürgen Habermas explicitly recognizes the dignity of all human beings. It asserts that systematic discussion can reveal universal truths and codes of conduct that enable those involved to reach agreements from which they can all benefit. As such, communicative action is a political, economic, and social tool of immense value. However, it depends on the capacity of everyone to dialogue and their willingness to try to understand each other’s perspectives. In this way, they can agree actions that have just consequences for all. Trust is crucial.

A starting point for moving towards mutual understanding is engaged dialogue – the kind that involves the desire to hear and understand what other people are saying and how they

see the world. It is what behavioural scientist Adam Kahane calls “deep conversation”. He describes four models of talking and listening. The first is “downloading”, consisting of polite, socially acceptable, conventional exchanges in which people do not listen carefully and nothing new is explored. The second is “debating”, when people actively search for new information or perspectives and engage in argument.

The third model is “reflective dialogue”, characterized by placing oneself in the position of another person and listening to oneself through his or her eyes and ears. The fourth and most powerful is “generative dialogue” in which two or more people experience a sense of common purpose and are fully engaged with what is taking place and its potential for change. The premise is simple:

“The way we talk and listen expresses our relationship with the world. When we fall into the trap of telling and of not listening, we close ourselves off from being changed by the world and we limit ourselves to being able to change the world only by force. But when we talk and listen with an open mind and an open heart and an open spirit, we bring forth our better selves and a better world” (Kahane, 2004: 4).

Engaged dialogue, particularly its “generative” form, is the most democratic, in which everyone takes part on an equal footing, and everyone is listened to. It is reminiscent of the talking circle, a traditional instrument for dealing with conflicts, misconceptions, disagreements, or deeper problems that interfere with the everyday concerns of a person or a community. Talking circles enable people to search for new directions, making amends, righting wrongs, and creating new pathways toward conflict resolution and the possibility of reconciliation.

Independent media, alternative media, and social media can all contribute to communicative action, deep conversation, and generative dialogue. They can also challenge the hegemony of traditional mass media enterprises by pro-

viding information that is credible and reliable. However, the experience of the past decade has undermined transformational dialogue through *unregulated public communication* that has led to confusion and has adversely impacted human rights by spreading misinformation, sowing distrust, and inciting hatred.

In the 1970s, Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire argued for a new type of communication and education based on dialogue, one more conscious of social structure and which envisaged both sender and receiver as equal partners. It allowed learners to look at the world from

“A transparent, engaged, and dialogical public sphere is essential today in light of the many challenges brought about by digital communications. Fortunately, policy makers are taking notice.”

their own perspective, escaping the ideological slant imposed by dominant groups in society (Diaz Bordenave 1976, quoted in Rogers, 2006: 111). As Freire himself put it, “being dialogic is not invading, not manipulating, not imposing orders...being dialogic is pledging oneself to the constant transformation of reality” (Freire, 1973, quoted in Huesca, 2003: 212). That is precisely the vision of the public sphere we should aim for.

A transparent, engaged, and dialogical public sphere is essential today in light of the many challenges brought about by digital communications. Fortunately, policy makers are taking notice. For example, recent discussions at the level of the European Union produced a report acknowledging “both the potential and the risks of new digital technologies, and that these risks have an impact on human rights and fundamental freedoms, not only at an individual level but also in a societal dimension. In this context, governance mechanisms and a regulatory framework are critical” (22nd EU-NGO Human Rights Forum).



The report went on to call for legislators “to make the digital space work for everyone: putting the dignity of people at the centre and safeguarding all human rights, from the right to privacy, to non-discrimination, to taking part in decision-making processes. This requires building extended coalitions where a plurality of actors should have a say.”

The information and knowledge that people need to govern their lives and make informed decisions comes from a wide range of sources, including public interest journalism, and affordable, transparent, and accessible communication platforms. These sources are vital both for democratic accountability and citizens’ participation in democracy. As sociologist Elisabeth Clemens has pointed out, they reinforce:

“A vision of rational individuals governing themselves through collective deliberation. By means of critical discourse, self-interested or private individuals reflect on common concerns and discover the nature of the public good, justice, and truth” (Clemens, 2010: 374).

In this spirit, in January 2021 the Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression (CCDE) published the final report of a three-year initiative designed to offer insights and policy options that support Canada’s democratic and social cohesion. After nine months of study and deliberation, the CCDE identified a series of functional steps to enable citizens, governments, and platforms to deal with the matter of harmful speech in a free and democratic, rights-based society like Canada. As the report noted, “Along with a more open and accessible public square has come a less trustworthy and safe one. This represents one of the central paradoxes and challenges of our times.”

The CCDE based its work on the generally accepted principle that free speech is fundamental to a democratic society and that the Internet is a means of enabling more people to participate in public debates. At the same time, it saw the rise of hatred, disinformation, conspiracies, bully-

ing and other harmful communications online as undermining these gains and having a corrosive impact on democratic expression in Canada.

The previous year, WACC Europe published *Breaking Down the Social Media Divides* addressing the proliferation of hate speech and negative narratives on online platforms, and suggesting ways to counter those narratives. The report noted that:

“All people have the right to live in dignity, free from discrimination. This applies everywhere, including in our online interactions. Unfortunately, intolerance and hate speech online are both widespread and dangerous in today’s world. Hate speech goes far beyond disagreement and threatens democratic societies because it attacks and silences people.”

Encountering hate and discrimination online can be distressing and hurtful. As social media have become a fixed feature of people’s lives, individuals and communities need to find ways to promote diversity and respect online. This is about what can be done to create a public sphere in which all people are able to express their voices in a respectful and dignified manner. As the report concludes:

“In a world that is increasingly divided, where people retreat into their filter bubbles and refuse to have conversations with those who do not share their views, there is a strong and urgent need to engage. We need to break down the divides we see on social media and in life and talk with each other.”

### **Digital justice and inclusion**

In today’s world, it is relatively easy to suppress political and social dissent and peaceful activism by controlling access to the Internet and censoring social media platforms. Rather than a blanket response, civil society is calling for policies to combat online harms that are proportionate and that avoid the potential for over-censorship of content.

Regulating social media platforms calls for several measures. One is a statutory duty to act responsibly imposing an affirmative requirement on all platforms, including social media companies, personal messaging apps, search engines and other internet operators involved in disseminating user-generated and third-party content. In addressing harms, this duty must balance freedom of expression and opinion against hate speech and incitement to violence.

Another measure is to establish regulatory bodies, operating within legislated guidelines, that represent the public interest and remove content moderation and platform governance from the exclusive preserve of private sector companies. Such regulatory bodies would work in cooperation with a “social media council” serving as a publicly accessible forum to reduce harms and to improve democratic expression on the Internet. Civil society organisations would need to have a seat on both the regulatory body and the council to facilitate independent oversight and to prevent these spaces from being co-opted either by state or private sector actors.

Another idea gaining traction in some circles is that of creating public or non-profit alternatives to existing private digital platforms. These would be platforms that, much like public service media, operate outside the logic of the market and exist primarily to promote democratic debate, ensure transparent access to information, and guarantee freedom of expression.

Finally, neither regulation nor oversight can succeed without a functioning mechanism with the possibility of legal and financial redress to tackle complaints, resolve disputes, and take down content that presents an imminent threat to an individual or a community.

Today’s public communication sphere may depend on digital technologies, but the principles of balance, fairness, truth-telling, and respect for human dignity that underlay public service media still apply. As has been noted elsewhere:

“Social exclusion can only be overcome when principles of inclusion and participation form the bedrock of policies and actions aimed at ‘leaving no one behind’ (the mantra of the Sustainable Development Goals). The principles that underlie communication rights determine who participates and whose voices are listened to when decisions are made. This is a sine qua non, since the core of human rights standards is that their normative implications pertain to everyone: the very concept of communication rights implicitly demands concrete measures for the inclusion of all people everywhere” (Lee & Vargas, 2020: 19). ■

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# The public sphere

## World Bank

*The idea of the public sphere is normative. It is an ideal of good and accountable governance. Its requisites are free flows of information, free expression, and free debate. The ideal public sphere is truly participatory and the best protection against abuse of power. In reality, we only find approximations to this ideal. However, promoting good governance means striving toward the ideal of a truly inclusive public sphere.*

To understand the meaning and the nature of the public sphere today, it is helpful to look at the development of the meaning of the term. Its meaning has always been closely tied to historical circumstances and to technical developments. The historical trajectory also highlights the relevance of the public sphere for promoting democracy and political accountability.

Originally, the public sphere was a specific meeting place. With the development of media and communication technology, the character of the public sphere changed from a location to a communication network (Splichal, 1999).

- \* Ancient Greece – the most general understanding of the public sphere comes from the Ancient Greek city-states, where citizens directly participated in political decisions (Habermas, 1962/1995). Public life was tied to a specific locale, the agora, where citizens exchanged and discussed opinions.
- \* European Monarchies – in the non-democratic state-forms of later centuries, the royal court was the public sphere, and only the king determined what was public.
- \* • Salons – Over the course of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, coffeehouses (Eng-

land), salons (France), and table societies (Germany) became places where aristocrats and members of the middle class met to discuss art and politics. In these gatherings, “authority of argument supplanted the authority of title,” (Price, 1992: 9). Social status became disregarded entirely (Habermas, 1962/1995). With the development of the first mass medium, the newspaper, the groups that met in salons and coffee houses became truly public: “Newspapers made public affairs and discussions about such affairs accessible to individuals scattered across space” (Splichal, 1999: 23). Technically, this denotes the advent of what is today understood as public sphere.

- \* Tribal gatherings – in stateless communities in Africa or in regions with strong tribal traditions, tribal gatherings have similar functions as Western citizen assemblies, or indeed the ancient agoras. Such meetings represent the public life of the tribal community.
- \* Church congregations – in periods of political struggle, the church often provided a space for members of oppressed or marginalized groups to gather and articulate their objectives.
- \* Today, the public sphere is even more strongly tied to the media. It is “defined in relation to the mass media, because the mass media permit the circulation of opinion and offer the conditions in which the forum can function” (Bentivegna, 2002: 52).

The term “public sphere” gained prominence with the spread of new communication technologies in the 1990s. The Internet in particular is considered to provide unprecedented opportunities for exchanging information and for deliberation among a large number of people of different backgrounds. Access for minority voices and political outsiders is considered to be essential to a well-functioning public sphere (Marx Ferree, et al. 2002: 299).

The concept of the public sphere has a long tradition in philosophy and the social sciences.

the contemporary understanding of the term is mainly based on the work of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who provided a comprehensive analysis of the nature of the public sphere and its historic transformations (Habermas, 1962/1995). He defines the public sphere as a

“Network for communicating information and points of view... the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions” (Habermas, 1992/1997: 360).

The public sphere is situated between private households on the one hand, and the state on the other. It is a space “where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns” (Odugbemi, 2008: 17).

Until the invention of the printing press, citizens came together in a particular space, for instance a coffee-house, where they discussed with other people. The development of mass communication has changed the nature of the public sphere from a physical space to a communication structure. Today, people can get in touch through telephone or the Internet, and they can find out about what other people think by reading a newspaper editorial or by watching local television news.

Therefore, today’s public sphere goes beyond space and includes all channels of communications through which citizens can send and receive information. This two-way-flow of communication is essential: A public sphere does not exist if, for instance, a government publishes information but does not listen to the people.

The public sphere is for the state what the market is for the economy (Splichal, 1999). In the public sphere, the goods that are exchanged and the currency that is traded are not of economic, but of political nature. The main product of the public sphere is public opinion, and ideas are the “goods” that are exchanged. This view equates the public sphere with a “free marketplace of ideas”,

a libertarian ideal where everyone is able to propose ideas, and where the best idea will win (see Mill, 1859/1985; Milton, 1644/1927).

### **Constitutive elements**

A functioning democratic public sphere rests on five pillars (Odugbemi, 2008):

- \* *Constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties* – Freedom of expression, opinion, and assembly. Most countries today accept basic civil liberties as agreed upon in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- \* *Free, plural, and independent media system not under state control* – The media system is often seen as the main institution of the public sphere (McQuail, 2005). As such, it can only guarantee equal access and voice to citizens if it is independent of political and corporate interests.
- \* *Access to public information* – This includes freedom of information legislation and a culture of transparency and openness. A large number of countries have adopted freedom of information laws. However, such laws need to be complemented by a culture that is conducive to openness and inquiry.
- \* *Civil society* – A vibrant civil society supports citizens’ demand for accountability and participation in the public sphere. Civil society organizations organize and promote the citizen agenda.
- \* *Sites of everyday talk about public affairs* – Everyday talk is an important factor in the formation of public opinion. Sites of everyday talk are all places where people come together to discuss politics (such as workplace, coffee shops, schools).

The constitutive elements of the public sphere work together based on the underlying principle of openness and publicity (Splichal, 2006). The philosopher Immanuel Kant articulated the principle of publicity as a legal maxim and as a fundamental principle of democracy. He stated that all actions that affect other people are wrong if they do not hold up to public scrutiny

(Kant, 1795/1983: 107-144). Kant also designated the public sphere to be the space for “public use of reason”. The public use of reason is based on ethical principles of communication (Habermas, 1981/1984), such as respect for opposing speakers and viewpoints, the ability to compromise, and other principles of fair public debate.

### **The public sphere and civil society**

The democratic public sphere is a “structural force in politics... a critical part of the architecture of good governance,” (Odugbemi, 2008: 15) which again is crucial for the elimination of poverty. The public sphere is a participatory space where citizens’ voices are amplified.

The concept of the public sphere is closely tied to civil society, although they are not synonymous. Civil society organizations act and can gain voice and influence in the public sphere, thereby exerting influence over official authorities through public opinion (Habermas, 1992/1997). It is “in the free and open public sphere that social movements acquire a public voice, fight for recognition, assert themselves, seek to shape public opinion, influence leaders and policy makers, and bring about change” (Odugbemi, 2008: 28). Good and accountable governance builds upon a free flow of information, free expression, and free discussion of matters of political concern.

### **Actors in the public sphere**

- \* *The public* – The traditional understanding of the public refers to an imaginary group of people that are connected through their mutual interest in one or several issues of public concern. The members of the public need not be located in the same place. In contemporary social science, the term is often equated with politically relevant groups of citizens, for instance the electorate, civil society, local communities, or mass media audiences (Price, 2008: 11-24).
- \* *Civil society* – Civil society and the public are closely related, but conceptually not synonymous. Civil society is constituted by

organizations and activities that have no primary political or commercial character and are not motivated by profit or power (Splichal, 1999). Under certain circumstances they can become part of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1995).

- \* *Public officials* – The state is not a part of the public sphere, but it has the capacity, and even the obligation, to be an actor in the public sphere. In the democratic public sphere, public authorities listen to the public and determine the public will, communicate their own issues and positions (Odugbemi, 2008) and provide information about decisions and actions.
- \* *The media* – The mass media “have central significance in the creation of an institutional (infra) structure enabling the organization of the general interest both nationally and internationally” (Splichal, 2006: 703). In addition to providing communication channels, the mass media also introduce and shape topics of public discussion.
- \* *Private actors* – When private citizens or corporations enter the public sphere, they usually do so to promote private or public interests. In the latter case, they become part of the public.

### **Public opinion**

Public opinion is a product of the public sphere, and a crucial concept in governance and political decision making. Public opinion refers to:

- \* Affairs related to the state, the government, or social institutions;
- \* Issues that are open and accessible to everyone;
- \* Events, policies, or decisions that concern people that do not participate in them (Mill, 1859/1985);
- \* Issues of common concern;
- \* The public good (as opposed to private interests).
- \* Public opinion is often understood to have the following characteristics:

- \* it represents one prevailing opinion among many possible ones.
- \* it tends to be transitory.
- \* it refers to the dominant opinion, the opinion of the majority.

Public opinion is formed through processes of collective decision making according to the following process (Price & Neijens, 1997: 336-360): Issues of concern are articulated; possible solutions to a problem are developed; decision makers assess the consequences of choosing one option over the other; decision makers evaluate alternative solutions; decision making.

Public opinion is crucial for politics. As Scottish philosopher David Hume stated: “It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded” (Hume, 1994: 16). Public opinion is the basis of political power and legitimacy, and any government “is secure only to the extent that the relevant population willingly consents to the rule” (Odugbemi, 2008: 17).

### **The public sphere as threat**

Not only democratic governments need to be aware of the functions of the public sphere. Hostile public opinion can be a threat to democracies as well as autocratic regimes. In authoritarian contexts, hostile opinion can build underground and may eventually erupt to disturb the political order. Through mobilizing public opinion, opposition groups may be able to gather substantial support and frame reform proposals that a government may be forced to heed. In the worst case, divisive groups may fracture the public sphere, causing political chaos or even violence.

Politicians and technical experts sometimes argue that it may not be advisable to follow public opinion in every instance. It is assumed that people often do not know or do not care about particular governance issues. If this is the case, following public opinion may even be detrimental to citizens’ well-being. A healthy and open public sphere is a remedy against uninformed and unconsidered opinion. The idea of democracy rests upon the assumption that if people are

educated, have access to all relevant information, and if they are able to deliberate on issues, they have a right to have their say on how they are governed. Public opinion is not the “tyranny of the majority”, but the considered product of deliberation in the public sphere.

### **The public sphere as opportunity**

A properly functioning public sphere that allows for free information flows and for equal participation in deliberation will provide real opportunities for successful and good governance. Governments’ legitimacy rests on the support of the people. National unity or at least an operative consensus enables the effective implication of policies. Citizens’ genuine support for government programs and reforms is a prerequisite for their success. Active and informed citizens provide valuable input into the process of governance,

“A properly functioning public sphere that allows for free information flows and for equal participation in deliberation will provide real opportunities for successful and good governance.”

helping to improve the quality and effectiveness of public service delivery. In short, governance is only good and democratic if citizens are able to form considered opinions within an open public sphere.

### **Policy implications**

An open and democratic public sphere rests on legally guaranteed civil rights, most importantly freedom of expression, opinion, and assembly, as well as access to information laws. Such laws will only be effective in a culture of openness. That means that public officials should feel committed to the public’s right to know, not the government’s right to secrecy. Media regulation should guarantee that the media can fulfil its democratic roles without political or economic pressures. Literacy and education promote a citizenry that

is interested in public affairs and that is willing as well as able to participate in governance. Policies should target these main factors to promote a public sphere that enables good, democratic, and accountable government. ■

*Source: The communication for Governance and Accountability Program (commGAP), a global program at the World Bank, which seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development.*

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# The politics of public space in India

Pradip N. Thomas

*Jantar Mantar is the location for public protests in Delhi. It is a site at which literally scores of major protests have taken place – the Right to information, anti-corruption, the Nirbhaya and Hathras rape cases, anti-CAA (Citizen Amendment Act) rallies against contentious citizenship laws, the Farmer's protest among numerous others. This, despite attempts by the National Green Tribunal, the police, right-wing groups to restrict, disrupt protest. A range of National Security laws including a colonial-era law on Sedition, have been used to place journalists, students, social activists and protestors behind bars – a prospect that in the context of Covid-19 can turn into a death sentence.*

Arguably, spaces such as Jantar Mantar are where the meanings of democracy are debated, expressed and listened to, where truth is held up to power, where causes and issues become 'public' and where people become aware of the strength of collective power. Democracy, however, is an anathema to the current hyper-nationalist government in power and its proto-Fascist leadership that is very much in the tradition of Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in the USA and Erdogan in Turkey. And in this context, the networked public sphere simply has to contend with a centrally supported misinformation regime – often referred to as the BJP's infamous IT Cell and its support for troll farms and counter-publicity initiatives at spinning the

story of the government's successes even in the context of its tragic, even criminal mishandling of the second Covid wave in India.

While this propaganda machine is in full flow, what we are seeing is the relentless death of the public's right to speak, to critique, to offer alternative stories. It is quite extraordinary that those who speak up against the government's lack of preparedness, the lack of hospital beds, oxygen in Delhi and neighbouring Uttar Pradesh have been jailed. While all manner of traditional remedies such as smearing cow dung and drinking cow urine are given publicity, there is little space for evidence-based public communications. "Positivity Unlimited" is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS, a cadre-based National organisation and power behind the government's) PR response to the Covid crisis and it is quite extraordinary to see the media embrace and communicate the wholly fictitious and manufactured message of Positivity Unlimited.

### **Politicisation of public communications and public space**

Public communication is more than just the citizen's right to communicate or to enjoy being in communicative environments. It is the right to exercise our senses – of touch and feel, to socialise, to share, to eat, to be along with others, in the context of collectivities that are at the very core of public communications. In this sense there are definite correlations between freedom of expression and the right to public space for the one cannot exist without the other. While governments the world over are chary of the right to free expression they have, over the years whittled away at public space that is fundamental to the enabling of free expression. What we are seeing in country such as India is the politicisation of public communications and public space.

While it is perfectly normal to be involved in public forms of religious communications that involve many millions of publics, such as at the Kumbh Mela, an important gathering of Hindu sects and devotees, in the current dispensation, it is not natural for collectivities to gather in a pub-

lic space and /or share communications or communicate the need for reform and social change. So, what seems to be happening is that the very idea of what constitutes a public is being redrawn, reimagined, reassessed in exclusive ways.

Another example of the ruin of public space is the grand project of establishing a new Parliament complex – The Central Vista (that sounds like a hotel complex in Singapore!) ostensibly because the previous one created by the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens across 2,800 hectares, with 3,000 government-owned properties and 600 private bungalows is a reminder of India's colonial heritage. It does not sit well with the muscular men and women belonging to Hindutva who would rather include cows and peacocks but not the ordinary people of India in their vanity projects.

There is an assault on public space in India and common lands are fast disappearing under the twin onslaught of the State and the Market. In fact, Lutyen's Delhi is up for sale. God men and gurus too have played their role in expropriating public space. The South Indian godman Sadhguru built his massive Isha Foundation on forested lands inhabited by tribal groups and which were also important elephant migration corridors. It would be such a perfect gesture if that property were to be taken over by the government and deliberately allowed to disintegrate and revert to forest, elephants and tribals.

### **Forgotten public spaces**

Arguably, one of the consequences of Covid-19 has been a retreat into private space – and very little possibilities to "encounter", to meet, by chance or by design, the Other. In that sense Covid-19 lock-downs have led to the death of public space and to a certain unmaking of cities that were meant for crowds and for minglings. At the same time, people in lock-downs have used their balconies to communicate – to sing, play music, to share and collaborate in a range of social and cultural activities – highlighting the value of public spaces that we often take for granted.



Here again there are distinctions to be made – of the forced symbolic publicness imposed by the political class to celebrate the contributions made by poorly paid nurses in the UK and in India or the clanging of pots and pans and the lighting of lamps to shoo away the spirits of Covid-19 as against the spontaneous manifestations of publicness and celebrations of public space by neighbours in Covid-stricken neighbourhoods around the world. Perhaps such spontaneous expressions of publicness need to be recorded in a repository of pandemic convivialities – ideas from which could be drawn up to enrich and enable public spaces in a post-pandemic environment.

### **Online public space**

What about public space online? Often theorised as limitless space, it is really available for all to take part in? In the context of Web 2.0 governments, the private sector and civil society have all placed their trust in the digital revolution as the pathway towards economic productivity, citizen participation, and multiple efficiencies in access to goods and services. While there definitely are efficiencies in the platform economy, grandiose, supposedly public projects such as Digital India, have in Covid-times been exposed for what they are – exclusive, market-driven in a context in which opportunities for both market and state surveillance have become immense.

The experience of Covid has brutally exposed the digital divide. While online education was good for the privileged who had access to laptops, to smart phones and the Internet, students from lower caste and class backgrounds in prestigious institutions like the Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) at one end of the spectrum and kids in rural schools at the other suffered because of a lack of access to basic technologies such as a connected laptop. There are some amazing stories of a single smartphone being used by multiple children in a rural setting because lessons and learning resources are being delivered through Whatsapp. There are heart-breaking stories of rural folk who simply had to take their stricken loved ones by foot, or autorickshaw to a

hospital because they did not have a smartphone and did not have access to social media to find out the availability of an oxygen cylinder in what are poorly equipped, neighbourhood health facilities.

The turn towards online registration for most, if not all social security schemes has left informal workers without any connectivity high

“The atrocious circulations of Covid remedies on social media in India, ranging from the benign to the surreal and downright harmful, reveal the gaps in digital literacy that exist today. In a largely unregulated environment, anything goes and all sorts of religious charlatans and self-made doctors prescribe all sorts of remedies.”

and dry. Even Covid-19 registrations under the government scheme CoWIN require the use of smart phones that are just not as ubiquitous as media coverage has consistently reported. The dire state of rural health facilities – the lack of primary health care, basic health facilities, lack of doctors and health professionals has been exposed by this pandemic – in other words, the woeful state of public health in India. It is distressing to think that billions of dollars have been spent on a variety of vanity projects while ordinary Indians have been left to fend for themselves.

### **Limits of the digital revolution**

What Covid-19 has perhaps demonstrated is the very real limits to the digital revolution. The fact that those who have smart phones can access services but also fall prey to misinformation and disinformation does not say much about the quality of online spaces that people inhabit. The atrocious circulations of Covid remedies on social media in India, ranging from the benign to the surreal and downright harmful, re-

veal the gaps in digital literacy that exist today. In a largely unregulated environment, anything goes and all sorts of religious charlatans and self-made doctors prescribe all sorts of remedies. Baba Ramdev, the entrepreneur guru and yoga specialist actually made fun of those frantically looking for oxygen – for according to him, there is enough oxygen out there in the atmosphere that can be sourced through the deployment of effective, yogic, breathing techniques! Such are the parallel worlds that people inhabit in India today.

So where can one find examples of people protecting, maintaining, and expanding public space in India? There are many examples with decentralised public services run by women in the Southern Indian state of Kerala – the Kudumbashree project that focusses on the financial inclusion of women through micro-initiatives being easily one of the most progressive of its kind in the country. This project that began in 1998 has been successful because of the key role played by women in neighbourhood groups who have helped each other in empowerment processes.

Perhaps the best source of material on people and public space is contained in the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) that was established by the well-known Indian journalist P. Sainath. This archive contains a wealth of stories from rural India on the incredible challenges faced by the forgotten people of India whose public spaces have been steadily eroded but who also maintain incredible resources of hope that are public in nature – from music, art, and performance to traditions of sharing that keep these communities and public spaces alive. The section Things We Make offers a wealth of examples of creativity and the skills and traditions that continue to provide musical and artistic goods and services that are essential to public performances.

I remember a short-lived experiment in Chennai – the Sangamam – a government-based initiative that brought all music – both Carnatic/Classical and folk forms to select parks. It was free of cost and open to everybody rich and poor, low caste and high. The *paraiattam*, Dalit drummers and Brahmin Carnatic vocalists and in-

strumentalists shared the same stage and were at least momentarily of equal worth and status. The urban Chennai crowd witnessed the wealth of performative traditions from their home state – from the exuberant to the staid. To my mind this was one of the best examples of publicness – and one that is rarely found in the rest of the country.

Another example of such publicness is the Carnatic vocalist T. M. Krishna's experiments with bringing both Carnatic and folk music to the *Urur Olcott Kuppam*, a fishing village, located in Chennai, South India. T. M. Krishna's remains one of the most significant innovators in breaking down the barriers between "high" and "low" cultures in India and facilitating public spaces for all.

## Conclusion

Public spaces are subject to political will. In India, where rampant and rapacious forms of neo-liberalism have defined public space and the terms for public encounters, there has been a steady securitisation of public spaces leading to the creation of walled and privileged publics. In other words – a separation of publics across caste, religion, and class lines. This marks a dangerous precedent.

In order to counter this trend, there is a need for cultural and political literacies and movements that support the public, and environments online and offline that enable celebrations of commonality, of minglings and understandings, of the unity in diversity that the framers of India's Constitution believed in – but all of which is under threat from the forces of Hindutva. ■

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# Reclaiming a feminist digital public sphere from the margins

Deepti Bharthur & Ankita Aggarwal

*“Because of the greatness of our city, the fruits of the whole earth flow in upon us,” proclaimed Pericles, one of the founding figures of the Athenian democratic city-state. In a eulogy for the fallen soldiers of the Peloponnesian war, he extols the virtues of the ancient democratic Greek city state. Pericles’ words and its modern day variations are often read as a call to the positive openness that democracy begets to us through its institutions and principles, including that of public discourse and dialogue.*

Indeed, no other social and political tenet, is as celebrated or as dear to the liberal democratic project as that of the communicative – the freedom, means and the opportunity for individuals to engage in rational and meaningful dialogue that collectively elevates the state of discourse and thereby democracy itself.

The current online public sphere is, however, a far cry from such aspirations. Social media platforms have altered the architecture of the digital and by extension the nature of the communicative public sphere. The internet that once resembled an endless, rambling cabinet of curiosities in hyperlinks and web pages, has been transformed into a datafied algorithmic ecosystem. Like Ouroboros, the mythical snake that cannibalistically chases after its own tail, this planetary-scale content engine incessantly feeds from its virality, pursuing an endless quest for algorithmic optimization and advertising revenue.

Beyond social media’s structural antecedents, a deep-seated crisis of confidence and stability is unfolding within the public sphere. The post-truth phenomenon has firmly lodged itself as a given of discursive relations. The result: a multiverse of political realities and alternative facts that ricochet within echo chambers, exacerbating polarization, ably weaponized through sophisticated data-based tactics.

Political philosopher Martha Nussbaum has pointed to the absence of cultivated emotional capacity to understand and deliberate meaningfully with those we differ from as a structural problem that inevitably short-fuses any process of rational debate and exchange. This fundamental barrier leaves the public sphere an always-flawed idea, an essentially rational project that must constantly grapple with the inherent irrationality of current discourse where communicative action is primarily targeted towards the emotive triggers.

Given this, the “marketplace of ideas” model of governance for free speech fails spectacularly not only because it overwhelmingly and erroneously relies on an inherent belief in the power of reason over that of irrational sentiment, prejudice and bias but also because it is completely skewed in favour of powerful actors of state and market. Platforms, corporations, and state machinations possess disproportionate voice and reach when compared to that of the ordinary citizen, much less the marginally located citizen, individual, or community. These are challenges that the communication rights movement struggles to address today.

The public sphere’s erosion connects to a larger crisis of democracy itself. Growing anger at the social and economic failures of neoliberal globalization has combined with backlash against the gains of the progressive movement to give resurgence to populist and narrow forms of nationalism. Indeed, the democratic ethos struggles to make up for lost footholds today. What we are witnessing is a “post-democratic phase” of the capitalist polity, which, in turn, has given rise to the transitional and “unstable post-public sphere.”<sup>1</sup>

The frictions in this unstable communicative space have particularly impacted how gender justice issues break into public consciousness, how they are constructed, deliberated, and progressed upon. The evolution of feminist discourses from the peripheries of the digital to a more mainstream positioning and politics, a history that has almost run parallel to the devolution of the online ecosystem provides a useful lens within which to understand how alternative spaces and publics can emerge from the margins to shape new and powerful discourses, introduce and “mainstream” the progressive agenda. Beyond the celebratory narrative however, examining these spaces critically, also surface the inevitable associated vulnerabilities to co-option, dilution as well as backlash that such mainstreaming brings with. Even for those who manage to avoid the trap, challenges persist in ensuring relevance and impact in a punishing digital attention economy, while combatting a public sphere that is disrupted and hostile.

### **Tracing feminist discourses from the margins to the mainstream**

Feminist communicative spaces have always existed and thrived on the margins, producing substantive writing, debate, and dialogue through various alternative media including newspapers, pamphlets and “zines”. This legacy carried on in the online space in the mid 2000s with blogs. The pre-platform internet gave rise to a “feminist blogosphere” and what is popularly described as third wave feminism. Feminist blogs, admittedly, mostly North American and European such as *Feministe*, *Feministing*, *Broadsheet*, *Bitch PhD*, the *F-word* and many more arose in this period.

This third wave of internet feminism, which found its legs in a pre-platform era sought to define its direction and politics within the neoliberal capitalist structures that it was born into. By taking on issues in a format and tone that reflected the millennial ethos, from reproductive rights and sexuality to lighter critical cultural analysis of pop cultural material, these spaces resonated with a large but younger, mostly western

demographic of digital native audiences. In 2006, it was reported that there were close to 240,000 blogs that self-identified as feminist.

These spaces built the pre-platform readership and audience for feminist issues and laid the all-important groundwork for inserting feminist discourse into a newly emerging digital attention economy. But this generation of media voices invariably ended up promoting a certain kind of feminism that tended to over-emphasize individual choice and focus less on structural issues. Unable to move beyond consciousness raising and feed into grassroots activism, these victories in discourse breakthrough inevitably fell prey to the inevitable co-option strategies of capitalism, transforming feminism into a bland but lucrative marketing palette, served up for a wider audience of women through snazzy messaging and a dilution of substantive politics.

An ideal illustration of this is Dove’s advertising campaigns. Dove successfully tapped into the body positivity movement, which was being critically deliberated in third wave feminist blogs, to advertise its products for “real women”, deploying themes of empowerment and self-care. The manipulations of this messaging, despite its feel good nature become all too clear when juxtaposed against the highly sexist and hyper masculine advertising tactics that parent company Unilever follows, without a trace of irony, in promoting its other line of male hygiene products, *Axe*. A more recent and jarring example of this includes a 2017 plain-white cotton t-shirt from the couture label *Dior* that retailed for the exorbitant price of \$710. Its claim to fame, a single line claiming, “We should all be feminists.”

Andi Zeisler describes this as “marketplace feminism”, the process by which feminism becomes rebranded as “an identity that everyone can and should consume”. The intentional stripping away of its progressive underpinnings makes it possible “to promise potential detractors that feminism can exist in fundamentally unequal spaces without posing any foundational changes to them.”

Beyond corporate capture, the depoliticiza-

tion of the online feminist communicative space also runs the risk of lending legitimacy to the very structures that it once sought to dismantle. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it a brutal reality check on gender disparities with respect to both disproportionate job losses faced by women as well as the skewed distribution of care responsibilities they faced. In an almost perverse way, we also saw an uptake in “performative domesticity” on social media platforms with Instagram feeds of idealized and well-packaged narratives of domestic work such as gardening, baking and home improvement projects. Such highly classed narratives, which stress effortless and feel-good marketization of domesticity, invisibilize the enormous undervalued labour, challenges and drudgery that women, especially without economic means or without conventional family support systems undertake.

### **Contending with online violence**

The widespread uptake of both “market feminism” as well as its more critical counterparts, which do exist, has also resulted in the rise of deeply misogynistic, retaliatory online behaviours and sub-cultures. The same tools that have allowed radical and progressive communicative spaces to emerge from the margins have also allowed other kinds of counter publics to coalesce, ones that go deeply against the democratic grain.

Incel culture is an exemplar of this kind of internet fuelled outrage. Incels are men who see themselves as unfairly excluded from a sexual marketplace that has been transformed through the rise of mainstream sex-positive culture, an explosion of internet dating apps, and not least, greater agency for women in exercising sexual choice. The Incels’ violent political ideology, which stems from this rejection, seeks retribution, not against a culture that rewards markers of sexual, social, economic and cultural capital, but against women for wielding sexual agency and capital in ways that exclude them. The toxic masculinity discourses that emanate from these obscure corners of the web not only percolate into the online public sphere but have led to numer-

ous incidences of physical violence that call for a war against women.

Beyond such extremism, violence in other forms including hate speech, threats, and online harassment and doxxing is shockingly normalized for women, whether for the prominent international activist who chooses to speak out on an issue and is then subjected to a flood of threats as retaliation, or for the young college student who already under its chilling effect, begins to self-censor her speech and representation so as to not attract “unwarranted attention”. Legal frameworks to address technology mediated violence as well as the inadequate responses of platforms are badly failing women and their communicative rights.

A surface assessment of the current digital ecosystem may indicate that feminism has never had it better. After all, our screens and feeds light up with messages, memes and endorsements reaffirming that the future is female! But digging deeper reveals a less inspiring reality. Feminism’s cultural currency has grown at the expense of its political edge. Shallow forms of pluralism seem to compromise real diversity and the right to be heard – a vital aspect of communicative agency – does not meaningfully obtain for vast swathes of the world’s women. For those that do manage to defeat these odds, the forces of virulent online misogyny remain a constant threat.

### **Re-looking to the margins**

Habermas, who posited the original theory of the public sphere, stresses the “idea of inclusive critical discussion, free of social and economic pressures, in which interlocutors treat each other as equals in a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern.”<sup>2</sup> Later, in proposing a theory of communicative rationality, Habermas proceeds with the assumption of mutual intelligibility and rational persuasion in dialogue, an “ideal speech situation”, free of coercion from within which consensus building takes place.<sup>3</sup> While always acknowledging that such ideal case scenarios are only ideal, Habermas knowingly offers us this normative

prescription, arguing that the aspiration is a prerequisite for any democracy that seeks to be truly transformative.

Indeed, democracy's restoration and its very success hinge on a guarantee of space for rational and free communication – one that allows for introspection of systems and structures within the “lifeworlds” of society and culture. And yet, such an ennobling quest is only truly successful if it is able to construct that space critically, both in semantic and political terms that challenge rather than acquiesce to existing power structures and relations.

To that end, one must begin by abandoning the idea of an “unsullied” and “free-flowing” public sphere that facilitates dialogue among enlightened citizens, a narrative that predates Habermas' postulations, and has been no more than a necessary and convenient fiction that democratic societies have told themselves to hide deep undemocratic currents. From the propertied male class of Pericles' ancient Greece debating at the agora, to the enlightenment age coffee houses frequented by young European men of means, to the extraordinary optimism that surrounded the early internet, which opened communicative doors for a sliver of the globe's population, a sustained process of myth-making continues to serve this platonic ideal of public discourse.

The inherent exclusions along the axes of gender, class, caste and race are not merely accidental omissions but rather structural to these discursive spaces. As Nancy Fraser shows, the liberal “turn” in the post-enlightenment phase restructured dialogic spaces to the effect of entirely eliminating working class men, women and people of colour. Rejecting the supremacy of any one ideal public sphere, she instead calls our attention to the numerous counter-, multi-dimensional and co-existing publics that have always abounded on the margins of the mainstream and have played critical roles in fostering conscientization and moving the needle forward on the progressive agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Building on this, remaking the current unstable and diffused public sphere should not

be about salvaging a broken and exclusionary model. While the normative ideal of the open communicative space as a first principle of the democratic polity must always be preserved and pursued, this is not an essentially incompatible goal with that of nurturing the multiple public spheres that can emerge from the margins to bring stability in fluidity. In this regard, alternative feminist media spaces located in the global south provide useful direction and learnings.

### **Khabar Lahariya**

Khabar Lahariya is an award winning feminist media initiative that constructs its identity from and for the margins. Set up by a non-profit organization, Khabar Lahariya began as a print newspaper in 2002, covering local news on gender related issues in seven regional dialects of Hindi. The initiative was explicitly aimed at producing women-led and created local and independent news content that centre a feminist perspective to reporting and covering social, political and economic issues in “media dark villages” i.e., geographies that do not make it onto the mainstream media's radar.

Towards this, Khabar Lahariya worked to build a grassroots cadre of women reporters, located in rural North India, to tell stories intimate to their communities and their lives in local dialects. Women journalists collected reports and photographs, edited and produced stories, and brought out and distributed newspapers to over 600 villages, gaining a readership of over 80,000 readers over the years.

As audiences started going digital, Khabar Lahariya expanded online with a multi-dialect, multi-lingual website and a YouTube channel averaging an audience of five million a month. Today, while its audience base has grown to include not just the national but the global, Khabar Lahariya retains its core focus on the hyperlocal last mile. Its unique vantage position has allowed to surface new angles to mainstream narratives and make astute connections between the global and the local. For instance, it was able to draw national and global conversation towards the nuan-

ces, complexities, and diversities of socio-cultural-economic prejudices through a cutting feature on [Me Too Rural](#).

The digital shift for a once print initiative such as Khabar Lahariya has meant rethinking strategic decision-making around engagement and community-building by experimenting with “a hybrid offline-online model/playground”. The team behind the initiative is blunt about the complexities that come with online presence and fame. In the case of Khabar Lahariya, journalists struggle with new challenges to the legitimacy that the online space opens them to. Further, as their reporters and editors have been able to build on their role as local opinion-makers in the digital space, they also negotiate the magnification of abuse and harassment that accompanies this prominence.

For the women who work for Khabar Lahariya, rooted as they are in the hyper-local context that they report on, online harm and retribution is not an abstract notion. They cannot rule out the odds of running physically into the same [men who post unsolicited comments](#) on their photos in their villages. Khabar Lahariya’s journalists therefore [navigate](#) the online space with great caution, exhibiting care in how they choose their battles. Self-imposed censorship in many cases becomes a palatable alternative to losing their hard won freedom to continue working.

As a media initiative, grounded in feminist principles coming from very different locations, with different approaches and target audiences, offer working models for how an online space can be effectively deployed to demonstrate the possibilities for true and meaningful communicative diversity and impactful discourse. Khabar Lahariya equates success with real impact and change on the ground. This includes holding the powerful to account, effecting decision-making on the grassroots levels and challenging patriarchal knowledge systems through a feminist and subaltern journalistic practice where, women journalists from marginalized communities are deeply embedded within their local contexts.

## Conclusion

Reclaiming the public communication sphere in today’s digital paradigm needs a radical new imaginary, one that is built on feminist and digital justice principles and looks to the margins instead of the mainstream for solutions. Stabilizing the current unstable post-public sphere requires us to seek “fluidity” as recourse rather than a deterrent and embrace rather than shrink away from the idea of a “post-public”.

The still-emerging regulatory regimes around the digital communicative sphere, currently a space of contestation between state and market forces, need therefore to move beyond damage control mode to actively build new institutions that restore public trust, promote and protect alternatives and provide clear and well-defined public protocols of participation. The elimination of the spectre of online violence remains an imperative that is not just legalistic but at the heart of what is cultural and social.

The post-public needn’t be the splintered and fractured enemy of the public sphere which haunts and diminishes our democracies, but rather the multitudes that have always sustained and continue to sustain the ethos of vibrancy, diversity, and representation through grassroots and alternative efforts. Such shifting and fluid post-publics always carry the ability to coalesce around an issue and provide critical public articulation, thereby expanding public reasoning. They may move and shift, but as Me Too or other movements for democracy in recent times have shown, they can also generate constitutive and incremental changes, which will ultimately have far-reaching impact on the social/legal/institutional discourse. ■

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# Public communication in Latin America: Obstacles and overcoming experiences

María Soledad Segura

*In addition to the old problems of public communication in Latin America, such as media systems concentration, limited access to public information, attacks on press workers, etc., today there is the massive, networked and instantaneous dissemination of fake news, alternative facts, disinformation and hate speech; harassment through social networks; and polarization.*

**K**nowledge-producing institutions – such as science and journalism grounded on the collection and the analysis of objective and verifiable facts – are confronted by and coexist with anti-scientific discourses, alternative facts, and false or misleading news (Waisbord, 2018a). Also, reactionary discourses have continued to attack human rights in general and particularly subaltern people (lower classes, women, sexual dissidents, victims of genocides such as dictatorships, civil wars, etc.) (Segura, 2015; Waisbord, 2018b).

Moreover, they have targeted political correctness as false, deceptive, and hypocritical (Waisbord, 2019b). These issues are articulated: alternative facts about history and fake news about current events are usually linked to anti-scientific and anti-human rights discourses as well as to stigmatization and discrimination of vulnerable social groups.

I argue that the challenges to democratic communication in Latin America are multi-faceted, and that these issues are part of a general problem. Based on Habermas (1994) theory about validity claims and normative grounds of public dialogue, they can be grouped in three types of threats to democratic communication: threats that challenge the notion of truth grounded on empirical demonstration and logical argumentation which underpin science and journalism; challenges against the normative consensus on human rights and democracy; and the reactionary critique of speeches that recognize rights and criticize forms of stigmatizing – so-called political correctness. It is a moment of crisis in democratic communication with no clear solutions.

Collective agreement on procedures to define the truth or on respect for human rights as the ground for democratic communication is stable and durable, but it is not unchangeable. The dominant paradigm in a certain historical period and in a specific society is a result of political and social struggles, and it is always challenged by alternative discourses (Angenot, 1989; Foucault, 1992; Williams, 2000; Mozejko y Costa, 2007). Nevertheless, this situation does not necessarily imply a crisis. The paradigm crisis, as the present one, occurs when it is not clear which is the dominant option.

This constitutes a problem for democracy insofar as its radicalization is based on the expansion of equality and social justice, so that national and popular aspirations coincide with the affirmation of human rights, the division of powers, and political pluralism (Mouffe, 2011). From this perspective, democracy is an unfinished, inclusive, continuous, and reflexive process, which demands that democratic communication enables the real participation of all social sectors for their demands and aspirations be heard and taken into account (Fraser, 2006).

Thus, strong and free public debate is necessary to control power, articulate and express demands, claim rights, and propose policies reforms, for public presentation of different social



sectors, and for democratizing subjectivities.

### **Extreme social, economic, and cultural segregation**

What are the chances of these deliberately misleading or false speeches, hate and discriminatory discourses being accepted based on? Why are these counter-values so widespread in our societies? Which are the levels of violence and inequality that make these discourses attractive?

The rupture of the normative consensus on the definition of objective truth, personal sincerity and social rectitude is linked to extreme social, economic, and cultural segregation. An increasingly segregated society does not facilitate democratic, constructive, and high quality debate. Therefore, these problems are particularly acute in societies, such as Latin American ones, characterized by deep historical and structural social and economic inequality; unemployment; dependent national economies; weak welfare policies; significant authoritarianism both in governments and society (Araujo, 2016); “delegative democracies” (O’Donnell, 1997); and longstanding political polarization that have led to genocidal policies and human rights violations.

These problems have deepened in the region since 2015 with the new wave of right-wing governments and the growing public presence of cultural conservative movements (Segura, 2015; Waisbord, 2018), and even more with the Covid-19 pandemic and the isolation measures implemented in almost all countries in 2020 (Segura, 2020c).

### **The alternatives**

Various social actors have developed practices not only to provide different kinds of solutions to the above-mentioned problems but also to find different ways of telling fact-based truths, debate the acceptability of derogatory expressions, and extend the respect and recognition of stigmatized, invisible and subaltern people. These alternative ways of overcoming such problems can also be grouped in three sets whose limits – as

well as those of the problems they address – are not strict nor fixed because there are relationships among them.

Regarding the challenges to social consensus on the definition of truth: To limit misinformation, harassment and hate speech, states reform communication policies to regulate Internet intermediaries. Some NGOs, journalists’ associations and research institutions do fact-checking and data-verification of public speech to unveil fake news and disinformation. Professional journalists collaborate to do investigative journalism and data journalism to strengthen their fact and logical bases, while others develop new forms of narrative journalism to tell stories also well documented but narrated with a more literary, subjective, and touching style.

Some media corporations and social network platforms self-regulate. Some organizations foster critical training of social network users. To promote a more popular and public approach to science and to challenge ant-scientific speech, academics work on public science practices, and make alliances with journalists to do more and better scientific dissemination; moreover, there are hybrid experiences between journalist and academic research and discourse. Most of these experiences focuses on rational responses to the challenges to objective truth grounded in facts and argumentation, but some explore new ways of telling.

Regarding the challenges to pro-human rights and democracy speeches: States make public policies and regulations to protect democratic debate; and, along with civil society organizations, promote public institutions of democratic dialogue, truth, peace, and human rights to foster democratic dialogue after genocides, civil wars, or dictatorships. Besides, I argue that social movements – like feminists movements, human rights organizations and others – are actors that contribute to building a new normative consensus on truth, sincerity, and rectitude, because they produce and disseminate alternative concepts, values and meanings (Escobar, Alvarez & Dagnino, 2001); contribute to changing entrenched hab-

its; influence the ways of relationship (Margulis, Urresti, Lewin & others, 2014; Botelho, 2001); perform other possible forms of community and can help build alternative ways of living together (Mercadal, Coppari & Maccioni, 2018). Most of these strategies emphasize both rational and emotional aspects of communication and politics, oriented to building historical truth and collective memory, and common and new democratic values and practices.

Regarding the challenges to political correctness: There are social movement initiatives to expand respectful ways of expression about diverse social sectors and to avoid hate speech and harassment of racist, sexist, homophobic and discriminatory discourse in general. The alternative concepts, values and meanings that feminist and LGTTBQI movements, trade unionism, movements against racism, and others produce and disseminate interpret different issues of social life, and destabilize the predominant cultural meanings of machismo, misogyny, homophobia, heteronormativity, racism, classism.

These actions foster a new consensus re-defining the limits of what is and is not acceptable in public speech in regard to recognition, categorization, and characterization. Moreover, diverse public actors call on the responsibility of political, religious, social, and media leaders in the use of communication strategies. Besides, some of the above mentioned strategies also research impact to debate new ways of political correctness: states communication policy reforms to regulate Internet intermediaries; self-regulation among media corporations and social network platforms; and critical training of social network users. All these demands and proposals raise concerns about both the rational and emotional dimensions of public speech and its reception.

I argue that these three groups of proposals and experiences contribute in different but complementary and articulated ways to the goals of democratizing public communication, promoting democratic reasons and emotions, and building democratic people and societies. These efforts are attempts not to restore the old social

consensus on truth about the facts, on human rights and democracy respect, and on political correctness, but to build a new and stronger one. Thus, these interventions contribute to democratize and strengthen public debate expanding discourses of respect, inclusiveness, rationalities, solidarity and empathy. The challenges they face are huge, but they show virtuous ways to overcome them.

## Results

The alternative initiatives analysed from the theoretical and normative approach proposed, show limitations and potential.

The punitive responses by states as well as by media and platforms to deliberative misleading, false, hate and harassment speech should be limited because of their political, strategic, and practical consequences. Regarding politics, freedom of expression is at the heart of democracy and is essential for the protection, expansion and defence of other rights, social, economic, political, cultural. Strategically, the prohibition or limitation may be counterproductive, because what is intended to combat is highlighted, enhanced, and in some way the self-victimization of the hater is promoted because the perpetrators usually combine aggressiveness with susceptibility, and punishment has a boomerang effect: it further circulates the violence and lies speech that were intended to be silenced.

Finally, from a pragmatic point of view, limiting would not be of much use, insofar as such speech circulates very quickly on social networks and achieves high ratings in traditional media, which shows that they are expressing something that is important for a part of the audience. A part of society is adhering to anti-science, anti-human rights, and hate speech, so these discourses partly promote and partly reinforce what already exists. In state, civil or criminal responses and also in commercial restrictions, the principle of non-censorship should be non-negotiable. In summary, these punitive responses show enormous limitations, because hate speech is a social problem that drags public debate down to the

most elementary and rudimentary social levels (Segura, 2020b).

The self-regulation of corporations finds a strong limit in the private and commercial interests of corporations, which do not usually coincide with the public interest or with a myriad of citizen interests, nor do they have as their main objective to guarantee human rights and the right to communicate. Furthermore, most of these corporations are transnational, so they have serious limitations when considering the cultural and social particularities of each regional and national population. Therefore, it is risky to allow private regulation without state and civil society participation in a multi-stakeholder approach.

The self-regulation of political, media, religious and other social leaders also reveals serious restrictions on power abuses by these actors and their interest in increasing their adherence (rating, followers, affiliations, etc.).

Responding on social networks or traditional media to discriminatory or hate speech with strictly rational counter-discourses (such as fact-check, investigative and data journalism, etc.), with information based on facts and logical argumentation, can have the adverse effect of enhancing the reach of such speech. Furthermore, given the nature of adherence to hatred and discrimination, which is essentially emotional, they are difficult to combat rationally. This type of intervention does reinforce the adherence and arguments of those who are already convinced and impacts highly informed elites such as politicians, academics and journalists in some way under specific conditions. (Segura, 2020b)

As literacy efforts in the reception of mass media in other historical periods taught, the critical training of social network users can be a good ally to improve the individual action of users and audiences, but it has no impact if it is not accompanied by structural and macro-level reforms of public communication.

Strengthening of public debate: From the right to communicate approach, bad public speech should be fought with more and better public speech. The quality of public confronta-

tion of ideas is promoted by the increased participation of other voices and topics and when these new options are respected, legitimized, disseminated. Education in the broad sense – not only formal education but informal educational instances promoted by social organizations, and also awareness campaigns by states or non-governmental organizations – contributes to this process. In this sense, participatory public institutions of communication and human rights and social movements also play a relevant role in promoting democratic reason and emotions of respect, solidarity and empathy (Segura, 2020b).

Thus, all the measures analysed and developed by states, corporations and civil society organizations – even when they have limitations and face serious restrictions – contribute to the democratisation of communication and, in doing so, to societies and subjectivities. Among them, the social movements and participatory institutions of human rights, peace, and truth are the more complex and the ones that have greatest potential not only to offer solutions to the current problems, but also to put forward a new social consensus. Their construction of political power with broad and ambitious alliances helps them to promote the recreation of normative parameters to strengthen public debate.

Innovative strategies to strengthen public debate imply adversarial dialogue that assumes that social harmony is not easy to reach in a complex and massive society, and accept confrontation and power relations in public debate, but also recognize and respect the opponent and do not consider him/her an enemy (Mouffe, 2011). They also place the emphasis not just on data and logical argumentation of abstract ideas, but also on the construction of values, the practical experience and mobilization of democratic emotions.

Besides, if the conditions for acceptability of false, misleading, discriminatory, and harassing speech are high levels of violence and social inequality, one of the main ways to deal with them is to solve inequities and injustices and promote social integration. If the problems of

public dialogue are based on structural inequalities and extreme economic, social, and cultural segregation, policies to reduce these inequalities are necessary. Even so public debate is essential to bringing new public matters into social and political consideration, and to extending the limits of justice and rights. ■

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# Medios comunitarios y su vigencia en la era digital

Jorge Guachamín Llerena

*Los acontecimientos de la protesta en octubre de 2019 y la pandemia del Covid-19 revelaron el impacto de la inclusión digital y cómo ha ido modificando el panorama en los espacios de la comunicación privada, comunitaria y pública. La ciudadanía ha optado por medios alternativos y por las redes sociales, como opción informativa, ante los medios hegemónicos, cuya credibilidad ha sido cuestionada.*

Mientras que los medios comunitarios se encuentran en un momento de adaptación a los nuevos tiempos, donde se repiensen sus posibilidades y potencialidades digitales, cabe destacar que éste no sólo es un debate tecnológico, sino también político, sobre la vigencia e incidencia de lo comunitario como proyecto comunicacional, en especial para los sectores donde no hay televisión e internet, donde la radio es el único espacio de comunicación.

## La red de comunicación desde el territorio como actor de la transformación social

Según el Art. 1 de la Constitución,<sup>1</sup> “El Ecuador es un Estado constitucional de derechos y justicia, social, democrático, soberano, independiente, unitario, intercultural, plurinacional y laico”, que en su diversidad se fortalece por las semejanzas de su pueblo y nacionalidades, con raíces ancestrales diversas como: mestizos, indígenas, afroecuatorianos y montubios.

Pese a las complejidades y dificultades, los

pueblos y nacionalidades del Ecuador se han mantenido en un proceso dinámico de reconstitución, a través del fortalecimiento de su identidad, formas de organización, representación que les permita conocer y ejercer sus derechos colectivos, para de esta manera garantizar las condiciones para un desarrollo sostenible, justo e igualitario.

Ser parte y acompañar este proceso reivindicativo de los pueblos y nacionalidades indígenas del Ecuador, a través de la radio, ha sido el trabajo que desde hace 31 años lleva a cabo la Coordinadora de Medios Comunitarios Populares y Educativos del Ecuador (CORAPE). La comunicación radial ha permitido que las propuestas de luchas tanto individuales como colectivas sean amplificadas en su difusión y que las comunidades en el país se relacionen a través de un trabajo en Red.

Ante un panorama dominado por los grandes medios, CORAPE a través de sus tres Redes: la Informativa Nacional, Kichwa y Amazónica, surge como uno de los esfuerzos motivados por la participación ciudadana de las comunidades locales, en conjunto con varios sectores como los campesinos, pueblos y nacionalidades, para democratizar el acceso a los medios de comunicación y consolidándose, a través de los años, como una red de Redes de medios comunitarios que identifican la democratización de la palabra como eje central para la democratización de la sociedad.

Históricamente, a través de la comunicación se ha potenciado la relación intercultural entre los diversos pueblos y nacionalidades existentes, convirtiéndolos en un actor importante que ha influido en los acontecimientos sociales y políticos del país. Sin embargo, en la actualidad, el debate sobre las nuevas tecnologías y sus efectos parten de la comunicación como derecho en un nuevo escenario que permita su acceso y sostenibilidad.

### **Nuevos escenarios de los medios de comunicación comunitarios, públicos y privados**

Hasta inicios del presente siglo, la radio era el

único medio que llegaba a las comunidades, ya que en aquel entonces no se contaba con televisión ni teléfonos. Esa realidad ha ido cambiando: la presencia paulatina y ampliación de cobertura de servicios privados de internet en áreas rurales y el uso de teléfonos celulares con acceso a internet móvil, han acortado las distancias, brindando una nueva forma de acceder a información a través de las redes sociales; pero también generando exclusión y retraso en el aprendizaje del uso de las nuevas tecnologías (TICs).

Los acontecimientos suscitados entre el 01 al 04 octubre en 2019, evidenciaron el impacto de las redes y la demanda de información desde las comunidades urbanas y rurales, sobre lo que sucedía en el país durante los días de protestas. Medios comunitarios y ciudadanos con un celular en la mano, a través de las redes sociales y transmisiones en vivo, mostraban una realidad que no era visibilizada por gran parte de los grandes medios privados y hegemónicos.

Durante esos días de octubre, los medios comunitarios, a través de sus radios, fueron parte de los espacios organizativos, contrarrestando el cerco mediático del oficialismo y grandes medios aliados, pero también brindando una opción informativa a los lugares donde no llega la señal de televisión o Internet. Siendo una opción también, ante la desinformación en redes sociales.

Pese a que el Artículo 22 de la Ley de Comunicación<sup>2</sup> garantizaba que “la información debía ser verificada, contrastada, precisa y contextualizada”, varios sectores ciudadanos desconfiaron de los contenidos de los grandes medios de comunicación privados, y optó por la información que circulaba y se compartía en redes sociales. Tal fue el impacto, que hasta los grandes medios de comunicación privados televisivos, tomaron varios contenidos en vídeo de las redes sociales y los compartieron en sus noticieros estelares.

Sin embargo, las redes sociales y el Internet se vieron limitados en el alcance de sus mensajes, durante las manifestaciones. Y es en esta parte donde se evidenció la vigencia de los medios de comunicación comunitarios: CORA-

PE desplegó sus equipos para la cobertura noticiosa de este hecho histórico, pero también fue el único medio de comunicación que instaló una cabina en el parque El Arbolito, facilitando los micrófonos de la radio a miles de ciudadanos que llegaron desde las comunidades, para que puedan expresar su opinión ante los hechos que estaban viviendo y llegar con su mensaje, con su idioma y con su sentir, a sus familias que los esperaban en las provincias, en los cantones, en las parroquias, en las comunidades.

### **Pandemia y nuevos retos en la información y comunicación comunitaria**

Desde el 29 de febrero al 25 de abril de 2020, el Gobierno Nacional fue sorprendido por el impacto de la COVID-19 y el 13 de marzo tomó medidas de restricción y aislamiento, pero la falta de claridad en el mensaje oficial a la ciudadanía, sobre la ya declarada pandemia, generó pánico y desinformación. Los grandes medios privados reprodujeron la información y discurso oficialista y llegaron hasta cierto espectro de la población sin satisfacer sus demandas informativas, dejando la puerta abierta a las redes sociales como espacio de información, pero también de desinformación.

En este contexto, otra vez proliferaron y tomaron fuerza, diferentes medios digitales privados cuyas plataformas de transmisión se encontraban principalmente en las redes sociales. Pese a la fuerte presencia de estos espacios digitales en el marco de la pandemia, los medios comunitarios, a través de sus radios, nuevamente evidenciaron su vigencia en el manejo comunicativo y su enfoque sobre esta nueva realidad en la salud pública global.

Al igual que en los hechos de octubre de 2019, los medios comunitarios fueron la principal fuente informativa para los pueblos y nacionalidades del Ecuador, campesinos y comunidades rurales, sobre lo que sucedía en el resto del país, en este caso, el virus y sus implicaciones en territorio, como lo señala el documento conjunto entre UNICEF y CORAPE “Memoria de la experiencia de los medios de comunicación comunitarios de la Red CORAPE durante la emergencia sani-

taria - Ecuador 2020”.<sup>3</sup>

Es allí cuando los medios comunitarios cobraron un rol especialmente relevante, no solo en cuanto a la trasmisión de datos sobre el progreso de la pandemia, sino con respecto a la orientación de la comunidad sobre el cuidado, protección y prevención de la enfermedad desde perspectivas científicas, pero también ancestrales y comuni-

“La fortaleza de los medios comunitarios, en los nuevos escenarios, está en conectarse nuevamente con su audiencia local, a través de nuevos y novedosos formatos digitales, de recoger y procesar la información que interesa a las personas de la localidad.”

tarias. Es decir, la información que los medios comunitarios difundieron tuvo diferentes fuentes: gubernamentales, especialistas de medicina científica occidental y academia, pero también de expertos en medicina ancestral conocedores del tratamiento de algunos síntomas comunes a la enfermedad causada por la COVID-19.

### **La conectividad como derecho humano**

Antes de la pandemia, los medios comunitarios acarreaban varios problemas, ahora se siguen enfrentando a un panorama complejo e incierto. Sin embargo, estas dificultades también representan una oportunidad. La fortaleza de los medios comunitarios, en los nuevos escenarios, está en conectarse nuevamente con su audiencia local, a través de nuevos y novedosos formatos digitales, de recoger y procesar la información que interesa a las personas de la localidad.

La radio cambió, sigue y seguirá cambiando con el avance de nuevas tecnologías y lo comunitario sigue vigente donde lo digital aún está ausente; esta situación nos obliga a pensar a los medios comunitarios como un espacio fundamental para el acceso y difusión de información con tecnologías y formatos amigables para

las comunidades. De ahí que los medios comunitarios y el acceso de las comunidades a las nuevas TICs deban ser parte de las estrategias nacionales de comunicación e información.

La emergencia sanitaria evidenció la precaria conectividad que existe en la mayoría de las zonas del país. “Según una encuesta multipropósito de UNICEF en 2018, en el Ecuador solo el 37% de los hogares tiene conexión a internet, la situación es más grave aún para los niños de zonas rurales, donde solo el 16% de los hogares tiene conectividad, lo que da cuenta de una enorme desigualdad del derecho al acceso a la información”.<sup>4</sup>

Por lo tanto, no solo se requiere garantizar la libre expresión de los medios comunitarios, sino también, implementar medidas que permitan el acceso de las comunidades a nuevos medios y a nuevas tecnologías para que se sostengan en el tiempo.

La reflexión sobre los efectos de las brechas digitales tiene implicaciones en los ámbitos culturales, políticos, económicos y sociales, por lo tanto, la inclusión digital de los medios comunitarios debe estar ubicada en el debate de la elaboración de políticas públicas.

La importancia de la comunicación en territorio y su sostenibilidad fue parte del “Informe Anual de la Relatoría de Libertad de Expresión de la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH)” de 2002,<sup>5</sup> donde se señala que la pobreza y la marginación social en que viven amplios sectores de la sociedad en América Latina, afectan la libertad de expresión de los ciudadanos, ubicándolos fuera del debate público.

No es suficiente el reconocimiento del sector comunitario en las normativas de la comunicación, sino que éstas también deben incluir medidas afirmativas que permitan a los sectores menos favorecidos contar con las mismas oportunidades de acceso transparente a las frecuencias, como parte de un ejercicio real democrático.

La lucha por democratizar la comunicación en nuestros países no empieza ni termina con un gobierno, sino del trabajo conjunto de entender las necesidades y contenidos que requiere la

audiencia en torno a los Derechos de la Comunicación, pero también de la creación de nuevos medios comunitarios que amplifiquen su voz y opinión. ■

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Jorge Guachamín, ecuatoriano, Licenciado en RRPP y Comunicación Organizacional. Desde hace 14 años ha trabajado en Comunicación Comunitaria con un enfoque de Derechos Humanos, articulando con las realidades locales del territorio, en el marco del respeto de las cosmovisiones de los Pueblos y Nacionalidades. Desde hace tres años se viene desempeñando como Secretario Ejecutivo de La Coordinadora de Medios Comunitarios Populares y Educativos del Ecuador - CORAPE, donde trabaja junto a un equipo humano comprometido con la comunicación comunitaria del país, coordinado a la organización a nivel nacional, con las radios afiliadas, fraternas y centros de producción comunitarios.

# La comunicación en la defensa de los territorios

Monica Montalvo Mendez y Suleica Pineda

*En México se han identificado más de 800 conflictos socio-ambientales generados por proyectos mineros y energéticos en los últimos doce años: presas, gasoductos, eólicas, termoeléctricas y parques solares son instalados sin consultar a los pueblos afectados. Esta situación no es muy distinta en el resto de América Latina. Este contexto, entre muchas otras cosas, atenta contra el derecho que tienen las comunidades campesinas e indígenas para su autodeterminación y decidir qué tipo de desarrollo quieren.*

**E**n México, son cada vez más frecuentes las amenazas a los territorios a causa de la implementación o del intento de implementación de megaproyectos extractivistas. Esto ha llevado a comunidades campesinas e indígenas, así como a personas que habitan en las ciudades y que entienden de la gravedad de estas amenazas, a organizarse para luchar en defensa de estos territorios.

Estos movimientos han recibido como respuesta violencia y represión hacia las mujeres y los hombres que se asumen como guardianes de los territorios, y que están haciendo propuestas alternativas, a nivel local o regional, para crear horizontes de esperanza.

De acuerdo al informe sobre las personas defensoras de los derechos humanos ambientales publicado por CEMDA, del año 2012 al año 2019 son 499 ataques registrados hacia estos

guardianes del territorio.

Una parte fundamental de las estrategias que los movimientos en defensa de la tierra han realizado, tiene que ver con la comunicación.

La reflexión que compartimos en este artículo se basa en el trabajo realizado por un periodo de tres años (2018-2020) desde la Sandía Digital junto con el programa de América Latina y el Caribe de Witness.

Primero compartiremos los actores hegemónicos y de resistencia presentes en las luchas en el ámbito de la comunicación, para luego compartir cómo se entiende la comunicación y para finalizar con la importancia de que sus voces, sus historias y sus relatos sean visibilizados.

## Tejer las voces

La Sandía Digital es una colectiva feminista conformada por mujeres profesionales de la producción audiovisual y del cine, del periodismo, las artes plásticas, las ciencias sociales y la comunicación comunitaria, interesadas en contribuir a fortalecer el ejercicio del derecho a la comunicación y la autodeterminación de las personas, grupos y comunidades que actúan a favor de la justicia socio-ambiental y de género, y a la defensa de los derechos humanos en México y América Latina.

En 2018, nos dimos a la tarea de realizar el diagnóstico de cuál es el papel de la comunicación en la defensa del territorio en México,<sup>1</sup> este proceso nos permitió colectivizar nuestras preguntas en torno a cómo y qué se estaba haciendo en relación a comunicación en las luchas contra proyectos extractivos de distinta índole.

Este diagnóstico se hizo a través de entrevistas con especialistas en el tema, por medio de reuniones con comunidades de aprendizaje formadas por integrantes de movimientos, organizaciones sociales, periodistas y comunicadorxs que luchan por la defensa del territorio en diversos estados del país como Chiapas, Oaxaca, CDMX, Puebla, Morelos, Michoacán, Tabasco, Veracruz, Jalisco, Sonora y Baja California.

Las reflexiones resultado de este proceso





de casi un año nos dejaron ver que existen una diversidad de actores en la comunicación en la disputa del territorio y nos pareció pertinente situarlos en dos grupos.

### Actores hegemónicos

Entendemos por actores hegemónicos de la comunicación a aquellos que dominan el discurso dentro de las comunidades narrativas vinculadas con un proceso de defensa de determinado territorio. Es a través de los relatos que nos construimos como personas individuales y también como grupos identitarios mediante los cuales modelamos, en el terreno simbólico, nuestra realidad y nos proyectamos hacia el espacio público. Cuando hablamos de comunidades narrativas nos referimos, entonces, a grupos que tejen y comparten relatos con los cuales dan sentido y orientan, en este caso, su actuar como sujetos en los mapas que circunscriben los conflictos socio-ambientales.

En general, vemos que quienes ejercen mayor poder en la toma de decisiones sobre el

avance de los megaproyectos extractivos, y por lo tanto en el terreno simbólico o inmaterial también, son los siguientes actores:

- \* Empresas e instituciones financieras internacionales
- \* Los gobiernos
- \* Medios de comunicación

Sobre este último punto si bien en México 71 millones de personas tienen acceso a internet,<sup>2</sup> el 37% de la población sólo se informa a través de la televisión abierta o las grandes cadenas de radio que pertenecen a monopolios. En México existe una alta concentración del sector de la comunicación en pocos actores. Existe un duopolio en los medios de comunicación.<sup>3</sup>

El mapa de la comunicación se actualiza constantemente y particularmente en la arena digital. En relación directa con la transformación de los procesos, dicha actualización constante se traduce en el establecimiento de discursos dominantes y contra-narrativas en el espacio público. Esto contribuye a que los discursos, opiniones, historias y hechos emanados desde los movimien-

tos sociales que defienden el territorio puedan tener una presencia más directa e inmediata en estas arenas.

No obstante, el dominio de quienes manejan las plataformas para que estos espacios digitales sean posibles aún está determinado por grandes empresas y por lo tanto muchas veces operan de acuerdo a sus agendas e intereses.

En este sentido, los medios de comunicación ya sea digitales o tradicionales, son los principales responsables, hoy en día, en la ampliación de los discursos de las empresas y los gobiernos.

Independientemente del tipo de megaproyecto (minería, fracking, represa, hidroeléctrica, turismo, etc.) es posible identificar una narrativa del despojo que se repite: el actual modelo capitalista -y los conceptos de bienestar, progreso y desarrollo que éste implica- no es puesto en discusión. Sólo existe un modelo válido, legitimado y visible. Todo lo demás es invisibilizado. Y en este modelo, los megaproyectos son un componente clave.

### **Los actores de la resistencia**

Entendemos a los actores en resistencia relacionados con la comunicación como aquellos que se posicionan conscientemente en este mapeo de poder del lado del movimiento social en defensa del territorio o de los bienes comunes. Les nombramos “en resistencia” debido a que, en razón de las imposiciones de megaproyectos que involucran violaciones de derechos humanos y crímenes medioambientales, dichos actores han tenido que situarse en una posición de defensa, identificamos principalmente a tres grupos de actores:

#### *Movimientos sociales y comunidades en defensa del territorio.*

Por el papel central que ancestralmente han tenido en el cuidado de los bienes comunes o Tejido de la Vida, son los movimientos o comunidades quienes suelen ser el núcleo central de los diferentes procesos de defensa del territorio en

el país.

La forma de comunicar y de organizarse será muy diferente si el movimiento corresponde a una estructura social y política ya establecida (asamblea ejidataria o comunidad indígena, por ejemplo<sup>4</sup>), o si se conforma específicamente para resistir frente a un proyecto. Estos grupos gen-

“Para muchos actores de la resistencia, la comunicación es vista como una herramienta para transformar el mundo. Se pueden construir, a través de la comunicación, horizontes posibles, que desarrollen representaciones más justas del mundo.”

eralmente realizan la comunicación a través de medios comunitarios, comisiones de comunicación y vocería.

#### *Redes y Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil (OSC) locales y nacionales*

Alrededor del núcleo central de defensa del territorio, generalmente acompañan a los distintos procesos sectores de la Sociedad Civil Organizada y redes que han gravitado en diferentes órbitas que en muchos casos han sido esenciales para el avance estratégico en los pasos a seguir en la defensa del territorio.

#### *Periodistas independientes y medios libres.*

En diferentes momentos y diversos grupos de periodistas han podido mantenerse al margen de la imposición de agendas relacionadas con el empuje en la imposición de megaproyectos, esto ha logrado ser un contrapeso real en las narrativas que en muchas trincheras se libran cotidianamente en los procesos de disputa territorial.

Para muchos actores de la resistencia, la comunicación es vista como una herramienta para transformar el mundo. Se pueden construir, a través de la comunicación, horizontes posibles, que desarrollen representaciones más justas

del mundo. Es importante trabajar en torno a mensajes o ideas que provoquen reacciones, que generen conciencia para llevar a la toma de acciones.

En las múltiples acciones y objetivos que los actores de la resistencia hacen, son tres grandes estrategias para defender el territorio desde la comunicación:

1- La comunicación para habitar el territorio.

2- La comunicación para prevenir e informar frente a amenazas.

3- La comunicación para la incidencia.

## Conclusión

La comunicación es un elemento transversal e indispensable en las estrategias de defensa del territorio. Es clave tanto para fortalecer los procesos, los sujetos políticos, afirmar las identidades, conocer los territorios y las alternativas al desarrollo, como para hacer prevención, denunciar las afectaciones de un proyecto, visibilizar los problemas y derechos que les están siendo violentados, apoyar las estrategias legales y de incidencia política. Sin la comunicación, muchas veces estas no podrían llevarse a cabo. Sin embargo, por su carácter transversal, suele ser invisibilizada. Esto nos impide pensar en la comunicación de manera más estratégica y usarla en su plena potencialidad.

No se puede pensar en la comunicación de manera aislada. Es indispensable que los habitantes de los territorios afectados por megaproyectos puedan contar sus historias, para romper los relatos hegemónicos que representan “el peligro de una sola historia”, como lo mencionado por Chimamanda Adichie, escritora nigeriana. Chimamanda nos advierte que hablar de una sola historia nos vuelve vulnerables e influenciados.

Las narrativas construyen posibilidades: ¿cómo vamos a caminar hacia el mundo que queremos si ni siquiera lo hemos nombrado?

“Necesitamos ver historias donde nos identifiquemos, donde narremos nuestros miedos,

pero también nuestros sueños y esperanzas. Contar nuestras historias nos permite encontrarnos en los ojos de otras y otros.” Enfatiza que “las historias se han usado para despojar y calumniar, pero las historias también pueden dar poder y humanizar. Las historias pueden quebrar la dignidad de un pueblo, pero también pueden reparar esa dignidad rota.”<sup>5</sup>

Desde La Sandía Digital apostamos por los espacios de formación que permitan construir la comunicación desde otras narrativas, con el objetivo de que quienes se formen amplifiquen su capacidad de incidencia para posicionar sus proyectos de desarrollo alternativo en el debate social a través de narrativas transformadoras a favor de la justicia socio-ambiental. ■

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**Monica Montalvo Mendez**, Antropóloga social, maestra y doctorante en Desarrollo Rural. Trabaja en torno a la defensa del territorio y la comunicación desde la academia, los medios libres y junto con movimientos sociales desde el 2007. En sus investigaciones y procesos de comunicación, se ha interesado en las problemáticas y resistencias generadas por proyectos de represas. Desde La Sandía Digital, donde se encarga de investigaciones y formaciones en comunicación para la defensa del territorio.

**Suleica Pineda**, Ingeniera industrial de profesión, forma parte de la Sandía Digital donde tiene el rol de productora, su trabajo más reciente en la producción ejecutiva es el largometraje “La energía de los Pueblos” y el cortometraje “Victoria”, de forma personal y en forma colectiva apuesta por el cambio de narrativas para contar de manera diferente y amable los temas de su interés.

# Breaking the silence: Public communication in/for Palestine

Gretchen King

*This article reviews the challenges and opportunities for communicating about Palestine with the goal of promoting civil society actions that centre Palestinian human rights.*

Four generations of Palestinians have resisted the communication apartheid imposed by the Israeli occupation. The most recent attacks by the Israeli military on Palestinian Christians this Easter followed by repeated violence against worshippers at the Al Aqsa Mosque in the occupied city of Jerusalem sparked another Ramadan uprising that was followed by Israel's bombardment of civilians, including the killing of nearly 100 children, in the blockaded Gaza Strip. During this time, Palestinians effectively resisted being silenced in communication spaces from public media to social media.

## Communication occupation and resistance

Briefly, the history of media development in Palestine mirrors the imposition of the Israeli occupation over all aspects of Palestinian economic, social, and political life. Prior to the war of ethnic cleansing and dispossession waged by Zionist militias across historic Palestine in 1948, the Palestinian press and local radio played an active role in the struggle for national liberation. During the war, the occupying forces not only declared the state of Israel, but they seized communication infrastructure across historic Palestine to do so. For example, Zionists took over the studio and transmitter of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation set up by the British coloni-

al authorities. Palestinian owned newspapers and radio stations were destroyed or captured by the Zionist forces, Palestinian journalists were killed or forced into exile.

Over the next decades, Palestinians in historic Palestine had access to few public communication spaces. Palestinian newspapers were systematically shut down by the Israeli occupation forces. Even when newspapers were allowed to circulate the Palestinian narrative, Israeli military censors deleted and modified much of this content through prior censorship required of the press and imposed on all writers, including poets. In the diaspora, Palestinian refugees took up broadcasting in the 1950s – 1980s as a means to connect Palestinians inside of and in the region around Palestine. Palestinian journalists and resistance groups began broadcasting across the borders imposed by the Israeli occupation over state-owned television and radio infrastructure based in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Algeria.

Later, Palestinian resistance groups in the diaspora setup their own radio stations in Lebanon and Syria dedicated to amplifying the fight against the Israeli occupation. During the First Intifada, Palestinian radio stations broadcasting from the diaspora and heard inside of Palestine filled the gap created by rampant media censorship waged by the Israeli military. Palestinians in historic Palestine also turned to graffiti as a means to communicate the news of the Intifada and later, during the last few months of the First Intifada, they would produce the first television public affairs and news programming prepared by Palestinians inside Palestine through a project affiliated with the Institute of Modern Media based at Al-Quds University. These are just some of the diverse public communication strategies used by Palestinians to resist the Israeli occupation.

In the areas of historic Palestine occupied by Israel in 1948, Palestinian-owned media are nearly non-existent due to heavy censorship. However, since the Oslo Accords, the public communication space grew extensively for Pal-

estinians inside the Occupied Territories. As a result of the negotiations that followed the First Intifada, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories could access state-owned and privately-owned media. The Palestinian Authority quickly setup a newspaper along with television and radio broadcasting. The new government of Palestine also setup satellite broadcasting, a national news agency (WAFA), and issued dozens of broadcasting licenses. Soon after the Internet was routed into the Occupied Territories, with Palestinians today having high rates of internet access supporting a growing number of popular news websites that are complimented by high social media and smart phone use. However, all of these connections are restricted due to the control maintained by the Israeli occupation that can and does shut Palestinians off from connecting with the world.

Communication from Palestinians in historic Palestine was cut by the Israeli occupation in 1948. Over time and through a diversity of tactics, Palestinians resisted the silence imposed by the Israeli regime. Despite the communication gains since Oslo, the recent escalation in violence waged by Israel is a reminder that the occupation maintains control over every aspect of Palestinian life, including all forms of communication.

### **Censoring public communication**

Across historic Palestine, Palestinian media workers and infrastructure are systematically targeted by occupation forces and colonialist violence. The Israeli military has been accused by press rights organizations of enforcing a shoot to kill policy against Palestinian journalists covering peaceful demonstrations. Media infrastructure in the Occupied Territories is regularly destroyed as demonstrated in the recent bombardment of Gaza that levelled nearly two dozen media offices for local Palestinian and international agencies. As a result of Israel's persistent tactic of targeting media infrastructure in Palestine, many Palestinian media facilities have moved to clandestine locations. When the press working in Palestine

is silenced by Israeli military violence, Palestinians across historic Palestine take to the Internet.

The Israeli regime also maintains a digital occupation as detailed by Palestinian scholars like Helga Tawil-Souri. Not only does Israel throttle access to the Internet in Palestine, but it also censors and criminalizes the digital political communication of Palestinians across historic Palestine. Unit 8200 is the largest battalion of the Israeli occupation forces that monitors the com-

“Media infrastructure in the Occupied Territories is regularly destroyed as demonstrated in the recent bombardment of Gaza that levelled nearly two dozen media offices for local Palestinian and international agencies.”

munication activities of Palestinians across all cellular and digital platforms. The Israeli regime has arrested numerous Palestinians for “inciting violence” online, such as Palestinian poet Dareen Tatour, who was imprisoned for three years for publishing her poem “Resist, My People, Resist.”

The attacks by Israeli forces on Easter commemorations, Al Aqsa Ramadan gatherings, and the Gaza Strip were accompanied by a surge in online violence, specifically the use of social media by Israeli colonialists to coordinate attacks and incite violence against Palestinians; however, no Israeli has ever been charged with inciting violence online. During the recent attacks against the indigenous population across historic Palestine, Palestinians took to social media to document the violence by Israeli occupation forces and colonialists. From May 6 to May 19, 2021, local digital rights groups like 7amleh, the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, documented over 500 cases of takedowns or the censoring of Palestinian content on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Around the globe Palestinians and solidarity activists have had content censored across

most social media platforms. This sparked Rashida Tlaib, member of the US Congress, to issue a public letter to Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok calling into question the companies' policies for taking down content and for the ceasing of censorship practices to ensure Palestinian voices are heard.

Indeed, social media are dominated by mostly US-based monopolies whose political and economic structures are fundamentally anti-Palestinian. This includes social media company policies that define criticism against Israel as anti-Semitic, accommodate nearly all requests made by Israel to censor Palestinian content or delete their accounts, and appoint Israeli regime censors to decision making positions concerning the application of "community standards."

In the diaspora, Palestinian narratives are also marginalized and censored by private and public media. From newspapers to broadcasters, researchers have documented a persistent bias towards Zionist narratives. Palestinians and their allies in the diaspora objected to the media's biased coverage of the attacks against Al Aqsa and the bombardment of Gaza. In Manchester (UK), thousands of young people gathered outside the government funded BBC to denounce coverage that framed hundreds of Palestinians in Gaza as "dying" in a "conflict" rather than being "killed" by Israel in an ongoing colonial "war".

Before this, Palestinian journalist and founder of the *Electronic Intifada* news website Ali Abunimah was censored by Deutsche Welle, funded by the German government. After broadcasting an interview with Abunimah, the DW network removed the archive of the interview, published regrets, and slandered their Palestinian guest with accusations. This is in addition to thousands of journalists working in private and public media in Canada signing an open letter against the silencing of Palestinians in media coverage, reporting standards in news organizations that restrict the use of the word Palestine, and the increasing retaliation for reporting on Palestine.

## Breaking the silence on apartheid

Since the printing press arrived in Palestine, the indigenous population has used every communication medium as a tool for national liberation. In the face of the ongoing attacks against Palestinian narratives across public communication spaces, concerted action is required by civil society to pressure media organizations, social media companies, and the Israeli occupation to cease practices that further entrench the apartheid regime in Palestine.

Today, Palestinians are teaching the world how to resist the silencing by the military-industrial-communication-complex resulting from the Israeli occupation and complicity across public, private, and social media organizations. For example, Palestinians and solidarity activists are circumventing social media algorithms and censors by inserting dashes into words or leaving out the vowels. Also, in protest of Facebook censorship over its social media platforms, including Instagram, an online campaign targeted Facebook with negative reviews and one-star ratings in the Apple App and Google Play stores with tangible results as the platform's ratings plummeted.

These online strategies of resistance to social media censorship accompany the persistence of Palestinians in taking public communication space across public, private, and community media to centre the narratives and human rights of the Palestinian people. ■

Dr Gretchen King is the author of a book chapter called "Palestine: Resilient Media Practices for National Liberation" published in the open access book titled *Arab Media Systems* (Open Book Publishers, 2021). She is also the technical director of the award-winning program Radio Free Palestine and the co-facilitator of the Rally Against Apartheid, a digital media literacy initiative based at Lebanese American University where she is an Assistant Professor of Multimedia Journalism and Communication.

# Audiences radio : « C'est une sorte de krach »

**Fiona Moghaddam**

*La radio a perdu 300 000 auditeurs et auditrices depuis fin 2020, plus de deux millions par rapport à l'an passé d'après les derniers chiffres de Médiamétrie. Du jamais vu, en partie dû à la pandémie de Covid-19 mais pas seulement. Entretien avec Frédéric Brulhatour, de La Lettre Pro de la Radio.*

**E**n France, plus de deux millions d'auditeurs et d'auditrices de moins en un an. Le média radio enregistre une perte, historique, de son audience. La crise sanitaire est passée par là et les habitudes du public bouleversées. La radio n'en reste pas moins un média fort, avec 40,1 millions d'auditeurs quotidiens sur la période janvier-mars 2021, d'après les derniers résultats de Médiamétrie. Explications de cette baisse sans précédent avec Frédéric Brulhatour, rédacteur en chef de La Lettre Pro de la Radio et associé des éditions H/F.

**Une telle baisse en une année, est-ce déjà arrivé ?**

Une baisse aussi spectaculaire, de mémoire, je ne pense pas que ce soit déjà arrivé. 2,145 millions d'auditeurs de moins, c'est une sorte de krach, je crois que l'on peut utiliser ce terme. La baisse de l'audience cumulée de la radio s'est amorcée au début des années 2010, précisément en 2012. Depuis cette date, l'audience est sur une tendance baissière.

En ce début d'année, on note un fort décrochage de l'audience qui s'explique principalement par la crise sanitaire, ou plutôt par ses conséquences : c'est-à-dire les confinements suc-

cessifs et le télétravail. Ils ont modifié brusquement les comportements d'écoute, en réduisant considérablement la mobilité des auditeurs. La mobilité est l'essence de la radio.

L'arrêt du monde culturel a aussi eu des effets dramatiques. Avec l'arrivée du Covid-19 et les confinements, les manifestations, que ce soit de grands concerts ou des concours de belote, se sont arrêtées. En conséquence, des grilles de radio, notamment locales, se sont considérablement appauvries, faute d'événements festifs, culturels ou tout simplement faute de proximité à couvrir. Depuis mars 2020, cette proximité s'est seulement incarnée autour du Covid-19, un sujet très anxiogène. Cet appauvrissement éditorial a indirectement impacté les audiences car il impacte d'abord l'intérêt d'écoute. Si la promesse n'est plus tenue, l'auditeur décroche.

Et depuis une décennie maintenant, les Français sont extrêmement sollicités. Il y a plus de chaînes de télévision, plus de radios, plus de flux audio, de podcasts, de réseaux sociaux, de séries. Cela oblige l'auditeur à faire des choix. Alors on entrerait vraisemblablement dans une sorte de nouvelle ère, celle du tassement et du morcellement quasi-naturel des audiences car les nouveaux outils développés sur le web tenteront toujours et à chaque instant de capter l'attention des auditeurs.

**Pourtant, la radio reste un média fort... Comment cela s'explique-t-il ?**

Oui elle reste un média puissant, elle est toujours au-dessus du seuil symbolique des 40 millions d'auditeurs. Mais si cette tendance baissière venait à durer, je pense que la radio passerait sous cette barre symbolique des 40 millions. Ce sera peut-être en juin, au mieux en décembre mais je ne pense pas que cela s'arrête.

C'est l'immédiateté, le média de la mobilité et une facilité d'utilisation. Puis la radio est anonyme, quand vous l'écoutez, on ne sait pas qui est derrière son récepteur - au même titre qu'on ne sait pas à quoi ressemble celui qui parle au micro... Puis il y a la gratuité de service. Vous pouvez l'écouter simplement, quand vous en avez

envie, quand vous en avez besoin. C'est le média de l'immédiateté : en très peu de temps, il est possible de mettre en ondes une information, il faut beaucoup plus de temps pour la télévision, encore plus pour la presse écrite.

La radio a encore de sérieux atouts même si elle a de la concurrence directe ces dernières années, avec l'arrivée d'internet et surtout du haut débit. La 4G et bientôt la 5G bousculent le marché. Car désormais, il existe une autre manière d'écouter la radio : en direct, en replay, écouter un flux sans pub, découvrir un podcast. Ces nouveaux outils rappellent que la radio n'est plus seule sur ce marché de l'immédiateté qui la caractérisait.

### **Il existe une pléthore de contenus audio disponibles aujourd'hui, notamment des podcasts. Cela « nuit »-il à la radio ?**

Directement non. Mais ce qui a changé ces dernières années, c'est que l'auditeur a la capacité immédiate de choisir ce qu'il a envie d'écouter, où et quand il en a envie.

En période de confinement, l'audio digital a complètement explosé. On parle en dizaines de millions d'écoutes, voire pour certains mois de milliard en ce qui concerne les connexions sur les sites et les applications dans leur globalité. Cela montre l'appétence, l'appétit des auditeurs, même en période de confinement quand il y a moins de mobilité. Si l'on n'écoute pas la radio le matin pendant le confinement, on va écouter autre chose, d'une autre manière, sur un autre support. Cela peut-être un podcast, un flux musical sans publicité... L'auditeur a gagné en liberté ces dernières années.

### **Les radios écoutent-elles encore leurs auditeurs et leurs envies ?**

La problématique de la radio aujourd'hui est celle de la publicité. Sur 60 minutes, les stations privées consacrent 15 minutes strictement à la publicité. Selon moi, 15 minutes, cela suffit pour encourager l'auditeur à déguerpir et finalement à rendre une programmation assez indigeste. La solution serait sans doute de réduire les volumes

de publicité en augmentant les prix pour trouver un équilibre. Les régies publicitaires devraient aussi réfléchir à de nouvelles formes publicitaires pour l'antenne. Les radios commerciales privées sont davantage à la peine parce qu'il y a cette problématique de la publicité. Il y a aussi une problématique liée aux quotas : certaines radios seraient dans l'impossibilité de tenir leurs promesses musicales. Et finalement, l'auditeur a parfois tout intérêt à se connecter à un flux audio qui propose une musique sans quota et sans publicité. C'est un peu plus appétissant.

### **Comment voyez-vous l'avenir de la radio ?**

#### **Pourrait-il ne plus y avoir d'auditeurs un jour ?**

Mathématiquement, l'audience pourrait descendre jusqu'à zéro mais très franchement je ne pense pas que cela arrive. Il y a plus de 40 millions d'auditeurs qui écoutent la radio quotidiennement, cela reste, quoi qu'on en dise, un média puissant. Aucun média ne peut rivaliser. Il y a actuellement une secousse mais je pense que la radio va se relever. Elle doit toutefois se ressaisir. Cela peut être en cherchant des réponses dans son ADN, dans ce qui a fait son succès. Désormais, elle n'est plus la seule à assurer le tempo. Elle n'est plus seule sur le marché de l'immédiateté ou plutôt de l'instantanéité.

La radio doit se réinventer, remettre l'humain au centre du processus créatif, aussi bien dans le traitement journalistique, que celui de l'animation. Si la radio a fonctionné, c'est parce qu'il y avait des femmes et des hommes qui avaient un réel savoir-faire. Il faut sans doute aussi replacer l'auditeur au centre du processus, l'accompagner davantage, tout en continuant à instaurer une notion de confiance, de crédibilité. La radio a encore de belles années à vivre. Elle fête son centenaire en 2021, c'est aussi le 40e anniversaire de la FM. Il y a toujours une émulation, la radio fait toujours rêver. Peut-être un peu moins les jeunes générations mais il y a toujours un public de curieux, c'est plutôt bon signe. ■

Source : *France culture*

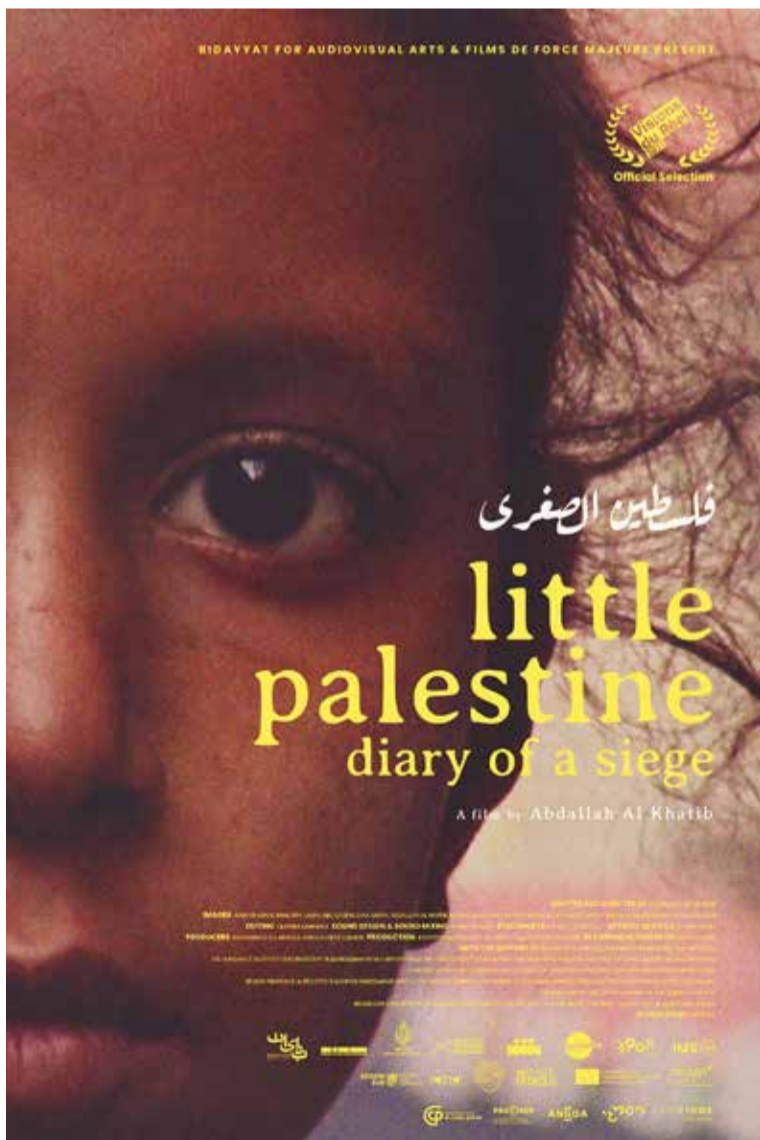


## Nyon (Switzerland) 2021

An interreligious jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS has participated at the Festival Visions du Réel in Nyon (Switzerland) since 2005. The jury includes a representative of INTERFILM and SIGNIS and a member of Jewish and of Muslim faith.

The jury awards a feature-length film in the international competition and possibly a commendation that sheds light on existential, social or spiritual questions as well as human values. The prize of CHF 5'000 is donated by the Swiss Catholic Church, the Reformed Churches in the French-speaking part Switzerland (CER) and its Media Department Média-pro, and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities (SIG).

Due to the Corona-19 situation, the inter-



religious jury 2021 watched the 13 films of the competition for long films online but discussed and evaluated them during a physical meeting. At the 52nd Festival (15-25 April 2021), the jury awarded its Prize to the film *Little Palestine / Journal d'un siège / Diary of a Siege* directed by Abdallah Al-Khatib (Lebanon/France/Qatar 2020). People in the sealed-off Yarmuk refugee camp assert their humanity in the Syrian civil war despite hunger and lack of prospects, while the humanitarian world remains on the sidelines. When a small street choir sings to piano accompaniment and the noise of bombs, their song joins the sad chorale of similar sieges in world history.

Members of the 2021 jury: Noëmi Gradwohl, Bern (Switzerland); Marie-Therese Mäder, Zurich (Switzerland) – President; Jean-Paul Käser, Biel-Bienne (Switzerland); Majid Movas-seghi, Zurich (Switzerland). ■

## Oberhausen (Germany) 2021

The Ecumenical Jury at the 67th International Short Film Days Oberhausen 2020, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize in International Competition of € 1500, donated by the Catholic Film Work and the Protestant Church of Oberhausen, to *Zoom sur le cirque / Zoom on Circus* directed by Dominique Margot (Switzerland, 2020).

A clown is grimacing into the webcam from his living room; an aerialist is trying to stay in shape on her balcony; a circus director is suffering from the cold in his caravan because he cannot afford the heating costs: *Zoom on Circus* brings together the social, political and aesthetic aspects of the current Corona pandemic in an accurate yet heart-wrenching way: the human desire or even the human necessity to laugh even in times of a crisis; the hardship of artists and people engaged in the cultural sector who are threatened by losing their means of existence; the art of improvisation that the circus as well as

Zoom require equally and therefore the technical and social possibility of decreasing the distance by means of humour. Congratulations to Dominique Mayer, for this authentic and entertaining short film!

In addition, the jury awarded a Commendation to *Home* directed by Ngima Gelu Sherpa (Nepal, 2020). *Home* is a film about a son who returns to his family home in Nepal to say farewell to his dying dad. The son films these last days, the passing and the death of his father which appear just as simple and natural in the everyday life of this poor farmer family as the tiny things that usually happen to them. Even though all this is sad, this is the way of life.

Due to the pandemic, the members of the Ecumenical Jury also had to view the films on the internet and meet online. They were Linda Dombrowszky (Hungary); Gundi Doppelhammer (Germany) – president; Anna Grebe (Germany); Christian Gürtler (Germany).

### **International Online Competition**

In 2021, the Oberhausen Short Film Festival included online-only competitions in its programme for the first time. At the invitation of the festival, SIGNIS and INTERFILM nominated a jury for the International Online Competition, which awarded its Prize to *Minnen / Memories* directed by Kristin Johannessen (Sweden, 2020).

*Minnen* is an authentic documentary where we look back on the film-maker's mental illness after she soberly traces her life. Animated sequences display what was in her mind at this particular time of her life. With original footage of her youth added to a recent interview of her own parents, Kristin Johannessen shows, through accurate memories, the difficulties of being different, of raising a child you can't always understand but never want to leave behind. *Minnen* talks about the hope of recovery that must be kept when facing sickness.

In addition, the jury awarded a Commendation to *Kalsubai* directed by Yudhajit Basu (India, 2020). The film explores the history of the goddess Kalsu and her meaning for the women of Bari. It relies on strong visual and acoustic

images that neither explain nor falsify scenically. The almost photographic compositions and their expressive simplicity make the film accessible to everyone and invite you to reflect on your own cultural influences and to question them.

The jury awarded a second Commendation to *Cântec de leagăn / Cradle* directed by Paul Mureşan (Romania, 2020). Unfortunately, even today, many families are hiding dark secrets. The animated short film *Cradle* properly investigates the innermost depths of a family devastated by domestic violence and alcoholism. In such a climate of terror, we see life still existing with a mother taking care of her new-born, trying to protect him and his big brother from bullying. The Members of the Online-Jury were Blandine Brunel (France) – president; Silvan Maximilian Hohl (Switzerland); Michele Lipori (Italy); Phil Rieger (Germany).

### **Children's and Youth Cinema**

In addition, the Ecumenical Jury awarded recommendations in the Children's and Youth Film Competition. From the programme 14+: *Nova* directed by Luca Meisters (Netherlands, 2020), about looking and finding for love and the difficulty of dealing with it. 14-year-old Nova takes on responsibility for her little sister and goes in this process on a journey to discover her feelings. *Nova* is a film that was perfectly staged and wonderfully photographed. The script works without pathos and heavy content and yet does not remain on the surface. From the programme 8+: *Dalía* directed by Brúsi Ólason (Iceland, 2020). The atmosphere of uncertainty determines a young boy's weekend-visit at his father. Here, at this remote farm in the sparse and impressive landscape of Iceland begins a rough path of mutual approximation for both. The injury of the horse Dalía triggers a decisive change of the relationship of father and son. A film that treats the topic of taking farewell from different perspectives in a quiet and impressing way.

The Ecumenical Jury for the Children's and Youth Cinema included Gundi Doppelhammer (Germany); Silvan Maximilian Hohl (Switzerland). ■

## Kiev (Ukraine) 2021

At the 50th Molodist International Film Festival Kiev (May 29 -June 6, 2021), The Ecumenical Jury working online made the following awards. In the International Competition, category Full-Length Films, the Jury awarded its Prize to *After Love* (still below) directed by Aleem Khan (UK, 2020).

Motivation: This powerful story with a



strong script and visuals touches the deepest strings of the viewer's soul by promoting acceptance and non-attachment to pain through embracing one's life regardless of the situation one ended up in, like the main character of the film did.

Metaphoric use of nature is skilfully incorporated to reflect and foster the inner conflict of the protagonist as she follows her instinct and decides to address her sorrows rather than freeze them and let them ruin her from inside. She abandons jealousy for the good of understanding; she abandons a need to possess for the good of sharing; she abandons her grief for the good of moving on in life.

The film advocates mutual forgiveness and understanding, as both outer and inner conflicts bring the main characters to the reconciliation with each other, with the late husband/lover/father and with themselves. The topic of reconciliation regardless of diversity is crucial in the modern turbulent world, where humankind suffers devastating conflicts.

In the International Competition, category Short Films, the Jury awarded its Prize to *Into the Night* directed by Kamila Tarabura (Poland, 2020).

Motivation: This dynamic and complex story about a universal issue of the hard time one usually goes through as a teenager invokes contemplations about standing up for one's true nature. We observe the main character's evolution from pursuing a strong confrontation with the world, particularly with her mother and classmates, to breaking free through a spontaneous uncommon situation as she follows her impulses and makes friends with a girl who is her total opposite. The skilfully set sequence of events builds up a hopeful vibe as the characters embrace their own and each other's personalities, release their emotions, and acknowledge their inner struggles. As the film focuses on identity it suggests that one can overcome external circumstances that oppress their free will and self-expression.

The optimistic message accomplishes the artistic quality of the film and the well-developed inner conflict of the protagonist.

In the International Competition, category Student Films, the Jury awarded its Prize to *Parole* directed by Vojtěch Novotný (Czech Republic, 2020).

Motivation: This gripping and highly emotional story about a challenge to embrace inner combats resonates very well with the audience. The inner conflict of the protagonist, who is his own antagonist at the same time, is in the center of a well-developed plot. As the powerful final scene gives hope for reconciliation, after the young protagonist has been pushed to frightful extremes, the message of the film is the importance of self-relationship and embracing one's inner clashes, no matter what the outer reasons are.

Members of the 2021 Jury: Viktoriia Gosudarska, Ukraine; Béata Kézdi, Hungary; Christine Ris, Switzerland (President of the Jury). ■