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## Citizens' media and communication

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# Citizens' media and communication

*Jethro Pettit, Juan Francisco Salazar, and Alfonso Gumucio Dagon*

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*Citizens' media and communication are still poorly understood in the mainstream of development policy and practice – and are prone to simplistic forms of implementation, because of the lack of a coherent grasp of the social, cultural, and political processes that make them transformative. Introducing the articles in this guest issue, the authors find that citizens' media is about more than bringing diverse voices into pluralist politics: it contributes to processes of social and cultural construction, redefining norms and power relations that exclude people. Local ownership and control of their own media can allow people to reshape the spaces in which their voices find expression.*

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Governance and public policy; Rights; Technology

## Alternative media and development: coherence or confusion?

Worldwide, there has been a steady growth and emerging sophistication of alternative, citizens', and community-based media and communication. These initiatives are gaining recognition for their role in processes of social and political change, and in challenging the structural causes of poverty and exclusion – by giving greater voice to those affected by inequalities. Such hopes are especially strong at a time when citizenship and accountability are high on the development agenda. Innovation and accessibility of new technologies has also fuelled interest, stimulating donor support for the use of alternative media and communication within both development and democratisation programmes.

While there is certainly promise in these trends, the reality is that alternative and citizens' media and communication are as yet poorly understood in the mainstream of development policy and practice – and so are prone to simplistic or technically driven forms of implementation. Often simply equated with the technologies they use, alternative and citizens' media and communication are used instrumentally and without a coherent grasp of the social, cultural, and political processes involved in making them transformative and sustainable. This guest issue of *Development in Practice* seeks to clarify the confusion and to stimulate dialogue about the deeper role and potential of citizens' media and communication within development and social-change processes.

Why the confusion? In part, because there is such a huge diversity of initiatives that come under the labels of alternative and citizens' media and communication. Some are categorised

by their technical medium or sector, such as Community Radio or Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for development. Some are one-off experiments or projects, while others are linked to emerging or established traditions of alternative media or communication. Some draw their inspiration and support from donors and development agencies, with origins in the fields of 'Development Communication' or 'Information, Education and Communication' (IEC). Others are located within alternative, bottom-up 'communication for social change' practices. Some rely heavily on 'outside' funding and expertise, while others originate more from 'inside' particular social groups or movements. The geographic and cultural location of media and communication initiatives creates further diversity, as the particularities of North or South, language, region, nation, ethnicity, or gender contribute to distinct traditions and practices. Finally, the rapid pace of technological change and the many new forms of media and communication taking hold in these diverse contexts leads to a plethora of definitions and meanings.

Because there are so many different strands of alternative, community, and citizens' media and communication, in practice the lines between them are often blurred. Media and communication initiatives are by nature permeable and dynamic, constantly influencing and borrowing from one another – even more so with the global acceleration of inter-cultural exchange and diffusion. Media created in one tradition may be altered or transformed by another. So, it is not always possible to say whether a media or communication initiative is mainstream or alternative, is initiated from 'outside' or 'inside', is part of a development intervention or intrinsic to a social movement, or is distinctively derived from a particular national, cultural, or movement context.

The categories are also blurred by the use of similar language and terms to describe what may be quite different things in practice. Diverse ways of understanding media and communication, and various explanations about their role in development or social change, all feed into the confusion. There are well-developed concepts, theories, and case studies related to alternative and citizens' media (see Downing 2001; Rodríguez 2001, 2006; Stein *et al.* 2008) and their contributions to social, cultural, and political change processes. Yet these sources are not as familiar as they should be to the mainstream of development research, policy, and practice, which lack exposure to current thinking in the fields of media and communication. 'Development studies' rarely acknowledge media and communication as relevant disciplines – except perhaps in efforts to better diffuse research findings, to promote social marketing for behaviour change, or to support the role of a free press within democratisation. The role of alternative and citizens' media as processes of communication, dialogue, and self-expression, by which people can create their own knowledge and alternative sources of power, is not widely understood.

## An incomplete picture of media and communication

As a result of these somewhat blurred experiences and explanations, the role of citizens' and alternative media and communication in enabling pro-poor development and social change is not adequately supported beyond small activist groups in the media and development communities, although such initiatives continue to gain in strength. In the mainstream, development actors have tended to view media and communication as means of getting content from more powerful, central, and knowledgeable actors to less powerful, peripheral, and uninformed actors (CFSC 1999). This is evident in the ways 'information' and 'communication' are used interchangeably, and the terms 'media' and 'communication' are used largely to refer to mainstream journalism and broadcasting (Gumucio Dagron, this issue). Media and communication are seen as instrumental means to other outcomes, rather than as developmental ends in themselves. Activities and budget lines for media and communication are often added to projects as

an afterthought, and are the first to be cut when resources are scarce. Few donors are willing to recognise and support alternative or citizens' media as a developmental process in itself, independent of sectoral aims and outcomes.

This limited vision of the role of media and communication is unfortunate, particularly in light of shifts that have taken place in the way 'development' has been reconceived since the early 1990s (Servaes 2001, 2006). These changes include the spread and scaling up of participatory approaches from the 'micro' project level to more 'macro' policy and governance spaces, and from a focus on the local to linkages with national and global levels (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). This has been paralleled by the rise of rights-based development approaches (Pettit and Wheeler 2005), a shift from seeing poor people as 'beneficiaries' with needs (or 'clients' who use services), to recognising people as 'citizens' with basic human rights (Cornwall 2000), and to more diverse understandings of the meanings of 'citizenship' (Kabeer 2005). Having a voice in the decisions affecting one's life is increasingly seen as a right in itself, rather than as a means to an end. But if development is to be based on the notion of citizens having rights and having a say in the distribution of resources – rather than meeting the needs of beneficiaries by filling resource deficits with outside aid, knowledge, and expertise – then what is the role of citizens' media in this process? Why are so many media and communication initiatives still seen in such narrow and instrumental ways?

## Citizens' media defined through practice

Fortunately, such perspectives are increasingly being challenged from below, as the empowering effects of alternative media and communication become more widely appreciated, and as new methods and technologies become more accessible. Individuals, groups, communities, civil society organisations, and social movements are demonstrating the power of bottom-up, locally owned and controlled forms of media and communication. The methods include participatory video, community radio, multimedia centres, theatre-for-development, music, traditional and digital storytelling, the Internet, community television, mobile phones, and diverse forms of print media such as posters – often used explicitly within processes of strengthening participation, citizenship, empowerment, and social change.

Significantly, many of these experiences go beyond conventional intentions of bringing 'citizen voice' into pluralist politics through the media. While these approaches do amplify unheard voices in important ways, they can also work to redefine dominant social and cultural norms, and boundaries of power that marginalise and exclude. By having access to their own forms of media and communication, people can actually define, claim, and give meaning to their citizenship, and re-create the social and political openings and alternative spaces where their voices might be heard. In many ways, community media can be defined through practice, or what Salazar and Córdova (2008) call the 'poetics of media', to refer to the critical and active practice of media making in which citizenships are enacted through everyday life media practices.

These multidimensional experiences are showing that media and communication can no longer be reserved as engineering tools of powerful and centrally located actors – they can also be potent weapons of the weak and marginalised (Gumucio Dagon, this issue). This kind of bottom-up media is about raising voices, but also about finding voice in the first place, preparing it, expressing it through diverse cultural and creative forms, and creating the social and political conditions for making these expressions legitimate. It is about reshaping boundaries, not just being heard within them.

Citizens' and community-based media are not without risks. Like 'civil society', they are not by definition benign, 'pro-poor', or progressive, and can be used in harmful ways by fundamentalist causes or to fuel ethnic or political conflicts. These are real dangers to be aware of. There are also

challenges in supporting community owned and controlled media in a context of ever-greater private consolidation and globalisation of media ownership – in which the media cannot be assumed to be a civic guardian in relation to the state or market. These risks and challenges are all the more reason to better understand citizens' and community media and their progressive potentials.

To assist in this process, the growth of alternative media has been mirrored by growing networks of activists, practitioners, and researchers looking for better ways to understand and support these initiatives.<sup>1</sup> The idea for this issue of *Development in Practice* took root within OURMedia/ NUESTROSMedios, a worldwide network of alternative media activists and academics that has been evolving since 2001 (Cadavid 2007). The last three conference events – in Bangalore (2005) on media democratisation, Sydney (2007) on sustainability of citizens' media, and Accra (2008) on inclusion, identity, and innovation – have been productive spaces of dialogue where a gap between the world of development policy and practice on the one hand, and the world of alternative and citizens' media on the other hand has been recognised yet again. There appeared to be a lot more exchange and debate about the *developmental* role of citizen's media among the latter group than the former, with the exception of development communication practitioners (who frequently state their frustration with the low priority their work is given by many development agencies and donors). Even where grassroots media clearly play a role within social and democratic movements, civil-society activities, and rights struggles, this contribution has not been well understood, appreciated, or supported by many development actors. Media and communication are still seen as technical 'add-ons' to projects, as forms of message delivery, or as ways of enabling voices to be projected (not necessarily heard) within formal political processes.

## Bridging the gaps

This guest issue of *Development in Practice* seeks to bridge these gaps and clarify the confusion – with case studies and critical analyses of citizens' and alternative media and communication within processes of social change and empowerment. It aims to contribute to current debates on the practices of 'making our media' (Stein *et al.* 2008). Our open call for papers after the OURMedia 6 Conference in Sydney attracted a large range of authors, including many from beyond the OURMedia network. The sheer volume of expressions of interest underscores the timeliness of this themed issue, and sadly we could only accommodate a third of the proposed contributions.

In selecting the 20 articles in this issue, we gave preference to those articles that explored connections between citizen participation and innovations in bottom-up media and communication. We looked for examples of grassroots media being used not only to amplify voices, but also to reshape social and cultural norms which underpin relations of knowledge, power, and marginalisation – as methods of social transformation and empowerment, whether on a project basis or within broader social movements. Our intent was to connect experiences and insights from the world of alternative media and communication with the world of development policy and practice – and so contribute to better understanding of the role of alternative media in strengthening citizenship and achieving rights-based development. Finally, we were interested in articles that would dispel confusions often arising between real participation, where communities make decisions (not limited to media programming) and represent themselves, and mere consultation or access.

The cases collected in this issue represent a wide range of experiences and interpretations. Seven themes emerged which we have used to sequence the articles:

- understandings of media, the state, and the public sphere
- experiences of indigenous peoples' media

- media and communication as methods of transformation
- media and voice in development practice
- community radio and citizen voice
- the role of media in social movements
- participatory communication in research.

These are not hard and fast categories – indeed all of the articles speak to more than one theme – but they can help us to navigate the many issues arising.

### *Understandings of media, the state, and the public sphere*

The first four articles set the conceptual stage for this issue of *Development in Practice*, highlighting useful ways of thinking about these challenges from an 'alternative media and communication for social change' perspective. The first, by Gumucio Dagon, paints a stark picture of the costs to the development industry of ignoring the power of grassroots communication practices. Acknowledging communication as a participatory process means sharing decision-making power on development issues – which the larger players prefer not to do. For powerful development agencies, even if participatory communication would ensure sustainability of their programme investments, it threatens to undermine their vertical ways of working in developing countries. But there are positive steps that could be taken to transform the profession and its role in development.

The two articles that follow raise questions about the concentration of private media ownership and control, and the challenges of creating cultural and political space for poor people's voices and media democratisation to take hold. Saeed charts the struggle to create a legislative framework for community radio in India, locating these efforts within debates about complex relationships between media, the state, and society. Saeed warns that the media, which has a traditional democratic 'watchdog' role – expected to limit the excesses of state and market – has become a dominant market actor that is itself complicit in marginalising the poor. This poses a powerful argument in favour of more community owned and controlled media in India.

Similarly, Kidd and Barker-Plummer explore the changing relationship between the media and the public sphere in the USA, another case of alarming growth and concentration of private media ownership. Their research on examples of poor people's media organisations illustrates the ways in which citizens' movements are creating their own 'counter-public spheres' to challenge ways in which poor people's issues are framed in the dominant media. Like Saeed, Kidd and Barker-Plummer draw on variations of Habermas's framework for understanding the relationship between the media, democracy, and the public sphere, concluding that social movements actually need access to both alternative and dominant media. Together, these articles provide useful language and concepts for grasping the potential of citizens' media.

The demise of public broadcasting is taken up in greater detail in the case of Nigeria by Milligan and Mytton. State-run broadcasting organisations are often ill-prepared for their public-service role in emerging democracies; they are poorly resourced and are often subject to forms of state or elite control persisting from periods of authoritarian rule. The authors examine support provided by DFID to a radio programme in northern Nigeria that sought to improve communication and debate between the government and the electorate. In conditions such as this, they argue, development actors could engage more with state-controlled media to promote the interests of the poor.

### *Experiences of indigenous peoples' media*

Across the world, indigenous peoples' media production is on the rise, offering fresh post-colonial critiques of communication and media practices. Salazar looks at indigenous discourses of development in the context of struggles for self-determination and self-representation, sharing some insights about the need to decolonialise research methodologies and media-making practices to accommodate for fluid epistemologies of development.

Meadows explores the impact of Aboriginal Indigenous community radio and television in Australia, where there has been a strong tradition of reaching a wide range of audiences for a number of decades. Drawing on the first-ever audience study of the sector, completed in 2007, locally produced Aboriginal media is shown to play a central organising role in community life, whether for Aboriginal populations living in major cities or for those in remote parts of the continent. The study also reveals new insights about the relationship between audiences and producers.

In contrast, the challenges of providing state support for indigenous radio networks in Mexico are documented by Castells-Talens, Ramos Rodríguez, and Chan Concha. While the authorities presented a new model of state support which would transfer ownership of 24 indigenous-language radio stations to local people, the authors' research found that after three years of operation there was little citizen participation and strong technical, financial, and ultimately ideological dependence on the state.

### *Media and communication as methods of transformation*

The next three articles take a different angle, exploring the uses of media and communication methods to facilitate personal and social transformation in specific community contexts: participatory video in Fiji; theatre of the oppressed in India; and theatre and clowning in Guatemala. These examples differ from those presented thus far – and focus on media and communication as methods of individual and community empowerment, rather than on their broader societal impacts.

Harris shares findings from an ethnographic case study of a participatory video workshop she facilitated with rural women in Fiji. She looks at the ways in which the women and their communities engage with participatory media processes, and the implications for dialogue, community building, and representation in a fragmented and multicultural society. Participatory video is explored using frameworks of empowerment and social capital, including ways in which the women integrate their local networks, norms, and practices in their media-production processes.

Mills describes the work of the West Bengal-based (India) theatre group Jana Sanskriti, inspired by Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed', which helps people explore power relations in their lives and societies through image, storytelling, and introspection. These techniques allow individual and collective concerns and stories to surface, creating images of real situations which are then performed in communities to open up debate. Mills finds that theatre cannot provide instant transformations, but can enable people to develop their critical awareness and to experiment with alternative behaviour in safe spaces – allowing them to connect personal and structural power relations.

Savdié and Chetley relate the experience of the Clown Project, which uses street theatre, dialogue, participatory workshops, printed materials, and other forms of both 'organic and symbolic communication' to address the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS in Guatemala and other countries in Central America. The authors have found the need for a careful and critical analysis of culture in formulating communication strategies for specific vulnerable groups, and for

sensitive blending of 'insider' and 'outsider' knowledge. In this way, they combine locally owned action strategies with capacity building and transmission of essential communication messages.

### *Media and voice in development practice*

Voice is a critical aspect of development, concerning questions of freedom and empowerment and raising wider implications for meanings of citizenship and power. Tacchi, Watkins and Keerthirathne explore the participatory creation of media content as a method of communication for development, drawing on an innovative mobile multimedia project in Sri Lanka. The 'e-Tuktuk' is a three-wheeled auto rickshaw, which combines a laptop, printer, telephone, loudspeakers, and data projector to link rural communities with a stationary multimedia centre. Using 'ethnographic action–research', the authors demonstrate that supporting people to create their own media content can enable marginalised communities to have a voice in development concerns.

The uses of mobile phones in development processes have exploded in recent years, but have not been debated in the context of citizens' media. Goggin and Clark look at how mobile phones have been taken up by citizens to create new forms of expression and power in the context of community development, with examples including Grameenphone, agriculture and markets, the Filipino diasporic community, HIV/AIDS healthcare, and mobile phones in activism and as media. The authors argue that mobile phones form a contact zone between traditional concepts of community and citizen media on the one hand, and emerging movements in citizenship, democracy, governance, and development on the other hand.

### *Community radio and citizen voice*

The three articles that follow provide contrasting examples of the challenges of making radio a vehicle for citizens' voices and community development. Milan critically examines the legal frameworks for community radio, outlining steps that can be followed by development advocates and communities in creating policy environments more conducive to community radio. Two case studies demonstrate how media policy can be reshaped to better meet the needs of civil society: the UK, where there is a legal process for licensing community radios; and Brazil, where thousands of 'illegal' community stations face repression, but consultations are under way for policy reform.

In a conflict region of northern Uganda, Ibrahim looks at the restrictions faced by radio presenters in their day-to-day work, and identifies strategies they adopt to maintain spaces for dialogue and debate. Her case studies show how difficult it can be for media actors in conflict situations to play a meaningful role in peace building – in the face of repressive media laws, intimidation, a lack of information, and weak managerial support. Ibrahim shifts attention from dominant debates about media freedom and censorship to investigating what can be done to support the daily struggles of media actors.

Navarro's case study of a local Catholic radio station in a shantytown outside the Peruvian capital, Lima demonstrates how radio works to mobilise local leaders and political authorities and give voice to marginalised people. She asks how community or citizens' radio can strengthen citizenship, and help to create more critical and deliberative public spaces.

### *The role of media in social movements*

The next group of articles explores the role and potential of citizens' media within social movements. Vincent and Stackpool-Moore look at the ways in which communication activities

sustain and mobilise movements advocating for the rights of people affected by HIV and AIDS in Brazil, Namibia, and South Africa. They consider not only the process of amplifying the voices of marginalised people to influence decision making, but also other dynamics such as the processes of framing aims and demands, issues of power and communication within movements, and the creative uses of communication to stimulate resistance.

In a similar vein, Barranquero looks at the potential of alternative media and communication as a cultural strategy for development and social change as part of the growth of new social movements in Spain. Despite great difficulties in building political and cultural space for citizen communication, there is a growing number of initiatives seeking to break this isolation and create suitable legal frameworks for citizen media – supported by the expansion of alternative media and communication networks worldwide, and by revolutionary changes in access to low-cost media technologies.

Writing about a global movement, Magallanes-Blanco and Pérez-Bermúdez explore the role of ‘street papers’ sold by homeless people in dozens of countries as a source of individual and collective empowerment. Through what is now a worldwide network of social enterprises that provide access to employment, capacity building, and mutual solidarity for homeless people – and serving as a vehicle for their voices to be expressed and heard – the authors suggest that street papers have become a dynamic social movement in themselves, and are an important vehicle for social change.

### *Participatory communication in research*

The final two articles consider the potential of creative communication processes within research. Cornish and Dunn look at a range of development-related research initiatives that have used participatory communication as a means of not just transmitting findings to policy makers, but of involving the ‘subjects’ of the research in generating their own knowledge. They find this to be particularly effective where research is understood as a form of activism and empowerment, and not just as a means of discovery. Participatory communication within research can add new dimensions to the idea of ‘citizen voice’ and reinforces the idea of civil society not simply as groups of ‘associations’, but as a vital arena of debate and contestation.

Kafewo, in the final article, considers the uses of participatory research and communication methods within a research project on citizenship and accountability in Nigeria. Using methods ranging from interviews and focus groups to Theatre for Development and Community Action Planning – all within a complex multi-ethnic and multi-religious political context – Kafewo asks whether these methods can be effective in opening dialogue and reducing conflict and aggression. He concludes that as effective as the methods appeared to be, there were many unanswered questions and issues.

## **Conclusion**

This is not a fully representative collection of examples of alternative and citizens’ media, as there are many more themes, issues, and experiences which could be explored. Nonetheless, the collection points to some shared concerns. Among these is the view that researchers and development practitioners are, in effect, communication actors facilitating the recognition and voicing of community interests. All of the authors reflect to some degree on the social and cultural construction of media technologies, and the many ways in which communication is conceived to facilitate and open up community voices and participation – as an essential condition for development to occur.

Many of the articles show that citizens' media is about much more than bringing diverse voices into existing forms of pluralist politics – as important as that is. As longer-term processes of social and cultural construction, citizens' media are part of a process of redefining dominant norms and power relations that marginalise and exclude people. Through having the capacities, the ownership, and the control to manage their own media, people can reshape and create the social, cultural, and political spaces in which their voices find expression. This gives meaning and legitimacy to diverse expressions of citizenship, adding depth and value to formal mechanisms of voice and representation. This is the 'poetics of media' (Salazar and Córdova 2008) in which citizenships are created and enacted through everyday media making.

All of the articles in this collection demonstrate the interconnectedness and interdependence of local and global processes, and the ways in which locally driven media and communication initiatives can be harnessed to bring about positive social change, and address some of the most pressing questions in challenging exclusion. Above all, the articles all affirm the power of citizens' media and communication, not as vehicles to other development ends, or as mere tools of amplification and diffusion, but as vital developmental processes in their own right – with potential to reshape the prevailing norms and power relations that create poverty and marginalisation.

## Note

1. Examples of alternative perspectives and networks intersecting the fields of media, communication, and development can be found within the Communication Initiative Network, [www.comminet.com](http://www.comminet.com); the Communication for Social Change Consortium, [www.communicationforsocialchange.org](http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org); and OURMedia/NUESTROSMedios, [www.outmedianet.org](http://www.outmedianet.org).

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