

# The renaissance of citizens' media

Clemencia Rodriguez

In the form of a travel log noting the emerging global movement of citizens' communication initiatives, the following article looks at the triangle formed by citizens' media, policies on information and communication technologies, and social movements. The author calls for stronger links between academia and activists and argues that only with strong global networks will a global movement move forward toward a media utopia.

1994, Mexico. Against the backdrop of an entire world on edge expecting the birth of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Zapatista National Liberation Army emerged with an array of creative, inspiring, and efficient uses of information and communication technologies for social and political mobilization. To this day the strategic and artistic ways in which the Zapatistas used the internet and networked old and new technologies are cited by young media activists from the north as the first glimpse of a new, imaginable communication utopia.

1999, Seattle. The take-over of global capitalism re-appears as a redundant scenario for another significant historical event, as hundreds of anti-global capitalism activists convened in Seattle to resist the mandates of the World Trade Organization. Aware of the weight of information and communication, they set up the first Independent Media Center (IMC). Different from the traditional ideas of the left, that assumed communication and information as simple transmission tools from an enlightened elite to the masses, the Seattle IMC re-invented communication as a central sphere for consensus building. From the beginning, the IMC was not thought as a communication centre where information products were designed for the un-informed majorities, but more as a hub of exchange, dialogue, and articulation to be used by all.

These two events marked the renaissance, in the last ten years, of a field so many communication scholars had declared dead: the field of alternative media studies, also known as citizens' media, radical media, médias libres, participatory media, community media, or grassroots media. If during the 1980s communication academics seemed entranced by the antics of the mass media, the new millennium began with a newfound interest in researching and theorizing alternative media and community media. As someone who has obsessively studied citizens' media since the early 1980s, I have witnessed the change at many levels, from the number of publications on the subject to the level of attendance to academic events about citizens' communication.

Also, in the realm of theory the last decade has produced some of the most exciting proposals to understand citizens' media, such as the work of John Downing about radical media, the work of Chris Atton on alternative journalism, and the work of Dorothy Kidd on Independent Media

Centres. In 2001 I published my own proposal in *Fissures in the Mediascape*, in which I coined the term 'citizens' media' as my own attempt to capture the fluid and complex nature of alternative media. Citizens' media emerges from the need to overcome oppositional frameworks and binary categories traditionally used to theorize alternative media.

In *Fissures* I suggested two moves to accomplish this goal: first, that instead of defining alternative media as that-which-is-not-mainstream-media, we define them in terms of the transformative processes they bring about among participants and their communities. Second, that we break away from a binary and essentialising definition of power, whereby the mediascape is inhabited by the powerful (mainstream media) and the powerless (alternative media). I believe this type of binary thinking limits the potential of alternative media to their ability to resist the big media, and blinds our understanding of all other instances of social change facilitated by citizens' media.

Instead, citizens' media articulates the metamorphic transformation of alternative media participants (or community media, or participatory media, or radical media, or alternative media) into active citizens. That is, citizens' media is a concept that accounts for the processes of empowerment, conscientisation, and fragmentation of power that result when men, women, and youth gain access to and re-claim their own media. As they use media to re-constitute their own cultural codes to name the world in their own terms, citizens' media participants disrupt power relationships, exercise their own agency, and re-constitute their own lives, futures, and cultures. Citizens' media is a concept inspired by Chantal Mouffe's theory of radical democracy and citizenship; here, Mouffe defines citizenship as the ability to gather forces to shape one's symbolic and material world, and not on the basis of the liberal tradition.

The 1980s marked an era of invisibility and marginality for citizens' media; today, after Chiapas and Seattle, citizens' communication faces a new obstacle: insularity. Scholars and activists working with or about citizens' media cannot continue working in isolation from at least two other crucial sectors: scholars and activists working with or about information and communication technologies (ICTs) policy and social movements built around the need to transform current ICTs systems. ICTs policy, ICTs social movements, and citizens' media need to converge, to listen to each other, and to ultimately become three spheres, each with its own identity, goals, and histories, but operating in permanent interaction.

At present, the triangle citizens' media, ICTs policy, and ICTs social movements exists only as an incipient effort to build bridges between areas of scholarship and activism that have lived in isolation from each other. Nevertheless, in the few spaces where these three have had an opportunity to interact, the possibilities for cross-fertilization and mutual empowerment are remarkable; in the rest of this text I would like to sketch such possibilities.

## **Citizens' media**

Sunday, ten in the morning, Quito. Sunday, five in the afternoon, Spain. Separated by five time zones, Ecuadorian citizens interested in immigration issues interact via Callos y Guatitas with Spanish immigration experts. Callos y Guatitas is a radio programme designed and produced by a coalition of Latin American and Spanish NGOs with the goal of using ICTs to improve the experience of immigration of Ecuadorian citizens in Spain. Believing that Ecuadorian immigrants can make important social and cultural contributions to Spanish society, Callos y Guatitas uses ICTs to improve, first, the experience of immigration of Ecuadorians in Spain and, second, the quality of interaction between Ecuadorian immigrants and their Spanish hosts. Callos y Guatitas brings out common grounds, affinities, and possible mutual enrichment. The name — Callos y Guatitas — refers to the same beef tripe dish, which is called callos in Spain and guatitas in Ecuador (Girard 2003).

Callos y Guatitas is a good example of ICTs used with what Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron has called institutional and social sustainability. According to Gumucio-Dagron, community media become sustainable only when local communities appropriate the communication project behind ICTs (Gumucio-Dagron, 2003). That is, only when ICTs are deeply rooted in local needs and dreams, local cultures and languages, will they become relevant for local citizens. From this perspective, Callos y Guatitas emerges from the specific needs of a very unique type of citizen — Ecuadorian immigrants in Spain, their families left behind, and their new hosts; and as such, Callos y Guatitas responds to the needs, cultural codes, and even difficult schedules of these communities.

Despite its apparent smallness, Callos y Guatitas — and with it the wide array of ICTs used by citizens in all kinds of creative ways that respond to local needs — has tremendous significance; it is only on the basis of citizens' media such as Callos y Guatitas that we can produce a media utopia. Social movements calling for media reform (de-concentration, regulation, de-monopolization, etc.) and the democratization of ICTs need an alternative vision for our mediascapes. The threads that will knit such vision are precisely ICTs employed in the way Callos y Guatitas uses a combination of radio, internet, and telephone technologies.

However, for Callos y Guatitas to be knit into a utopia, this experience needs to be documented, studied, evaluated, assessed, and exposed. This should be the task of communication scholars. Those of us in academia need to focus more our attention on citizens' ICTs to document if and how these technologies are facilitating (or not) change within communities. Long-term qualitative studies are urgent in order to move away from the simplistic quantifiable pre and post variables currently applied more to satisfy donors than to understand social and cultural change.

Our research needs to shed light on the subtle and complex indicators of how power and culture change within a community. For a long time we have insisted on the potential of citizens' media in processes of empowerment and conscientisation; and although we can count on a handful of significant and solid studies in the field, communication academia needs to assume the study of citizens' media as seriously and thoroughly as the study of corporate media.

2001, Costa Rica. Thanks to the intervention of telecommunication policy experts, lawyers, and media activists, the Inter American Court of Human Rights produced a report about Paraguay that sets a precedent for the entire region. In the report, the Court recommends that this country's government applies 'democratic criteria to the distribution of radio and television licenses. Such assignments should not be made on the basis of mere economic criteria but should include democratic criteria that guarantee equity of access to these media' (Libertad de Antena).

### **ICTs policy**

The second corner of the triangle is ICTs policy, or the arenas where proposals on regulation and legislation that shape media and ICTs are produced, discussed, rejected or adopted. Aware of the power of legislation to restrict or support citizens' ICTs, a small number of policy advocates — both scholars and activists — have penetrated the sphere of policy in order to defend the rights of citizens to their own non-corporate ICTs. An interesting case is emerging in Latin America where the Inter-American Court of Human Rights is developing strong jurisprudence to legislate the right of every citizen to use ICTs (for more on the Court see documents by Gustavo Gómez at <http://www.ourmedianet.org/espan/resources.espan.html>).

Unfortunately, too frequently scholars and activists working with or on citizens' ICTs shy away from the policy arena, leaving it for lawyers, telecomm experts, and corporate media lobbies. Clearly at the level of policy, boundaries are demarcated that shape how and to what extent ICTs can be used by citizens; for example, Chilean law restricts community radios to one watt, and Brazilian law establishes a maximum of one kilometre for community radio coverage and forbids community radios to network except in situations of war or natural disasters. As a result, citizens' ICTs are destined to endure what Gustavo Gómez from AMARC calls 'the fate of the three Ps: pequeñas (small), pobres (poor), pocas (few)' (Gómez 2003).

ICTs policy cannot continue existing as the sphere of expertise of a few telecommunication experts and lawyers. ICTs policies from legislation on radio and television frequencies, to broadband and internet governance need to be assumed as significant issues for public discussion. Issues of privacy, intellectual rights, frequency allocation, and media concentration establish the parameters defining how communities and citizens interact with ICTs, and therefore should be at the core of civil society's discussions.

We need to build stronger networks between citizens' media/ICTs activists and scholars on the one hand, and ICTs policy experts and advocates on the other. Typically operating in isolation from each other, these two factions have much to gain from each other. Policy cannot (or at least should not) be formulated ignoring what communities have produced in terms of visionary and creative uses of ICTs. On the other hand, social and cultural spaces available for citizens' media/ICTs are gradually shrinking due to increasing pressure on the part of corporate media to bend policy toward for-profit uses of ICTs.

2001, Peru. Hundreds of volunteers participate in travelling national caravans designed to mobilize Peruvians around the need to question, disrupt, and re-invent their mediascape. What had begun as a media monitoring project gathered momentum as the nation realized the extent to which the media had covered up the Fujimori/Montesinos corrupt administration. Developed by a wide civil society coalition, the Veeduría de Comunicación Social del Perú (Peruvian Communication Citizens' Media Monitoring Project) gathered thousands of reactions and opinions by Peruvians about their media (see <http://www.veeduria.org.pe>). Contrary to common belief in people's indifference toward their media, the Veeduría Project found that Peruvian citizens strongly question the media with knowledgeable analytical and ethical statements.

On the basis of an overwhelming negative response of citizens toward Peruvian media, the Veeduría decided to produce its own proposal for a new media law. In January 2004 the Peruvian legislature sanctioned 49,662 signatures petitioning that this new proposal be discussed by Congress. It is the first time in the history of Peru that a proposal for a new media law reaches Congress in the form of a citizens' initiative.

### **Social movements**

The third corner of the triangle is social movements. Here civil society initiatives emerge to raise awareness among communities around ICTs issues, to pressure governments and international organizations to reform media and ICTs, or to gain legitimacy for alternative uses of ICTs that tend to remain invisible, living in the shadows of commercial, for-profit uses of ICTs. ICTs social movements are the engine that will move democratic ICTs policy and citizens' ICTs from the margin to the centre of our public spheres.

Social movements serve as a vehicle for ICTs policy to travel from the narrow forums of experts and hard-core activists into the streets, plazas, and on-line discussions; it is in these public spheres that ICTs policy issues come in contact with the quotidian, with the everyday life dynamics of women, men, and youth of the global south and the global north. ICTs policy issues become relevant only when deeply incorporated into the social and cultural fabric of communities, when profoundly connected to local needs and dreams.

Citizens' ICTs propose the vision. ICTs policy demarcates the boundaries. ICTs social movements build the public sphere. However, too often vision, policy, and social movements operate as separate worlds without much interaction. Looking toward the future, I perceive two urgent challenges to continue strengthening citizens' media/ICTs in particular, and citizens' communication in general. First, we need to build solid, long-term interaction among these three realms. Recently a few forums have emerged where folk from the global south and the global north working with citizens' ICTs, ICTs policy, and ICTs social movements convene and have the opportunity to learn from each other, discuss common issues, plan collaborations, and strategize. The World Social Forums, the World Summit for the Information Society (in particular events such as We-Seize, the Polymedia Lab, the World Forum for Communication Rights, and the Community Media Forum), and the OURMedia annual conferences have emerged recently as venues to advance such interaction.

Second, stronger links need to be woven between academia and activists. Academics have the responsibility to produce sound research about each and every one of the issues discussed above. Scholarly studies of citizens' ICTs, policy, and social movements are crucial for several reasons: to build a historical memory; to maintain a high level of assessment; and to develop novel conceptual frameworks. Unfortunately, academics tend to remain isolated in their own scholarly spheres, not even aware of the existence of activists, movements, and citizens' initiatives.

2003, Geneva. Organized during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) by Seán Ó Siochrú and the CRIS campaign, the Framing Communication Rights meeting gathered around fifty scholars and activists from all world regions to discuss ICTs policy, social movements, and ICTs citizens' initiatives. For an entire afternoon we listened to each other and the issues, agendas, and struggles in each of our regions. For many of us it was the first time we could grasp numerous overlapping areas, the unique relevance of this or that issue in certain parts of the world, the possibilities for collaboration, alliances, and comparative studies. This forum was diverse and inclusive, with strong presence of the global north and the global south, of activists and scholars, discussing issues of policy, social movements, and citizens' ICTs (see report in <http://www.ourmedianet.org/eng/additional.html>).

Perhaps for the first time, I caught a glimpse of what a global movement around the democratization of ICTs could look like. This type of happening and not the official declarations is what makes the WSIS an event of great significance. We need to prepare and take advantage of the second phase of the WSIS in Tunis in 2005, as well as other preparatory forums such as the IV OURMedia conference, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 22-25 July (see <http://www.ourmedianet.org/eng/conferences.html>). Only with strong global networks will a global movement toward a media utopia go forward.

## References

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Clemencia Rodriguez is Associate Professor at the University of Oklahoma, USA, and Visiting Associate Professor at Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia. She has conducted research since 1984 on citizens' media in different international contexts including Nicaragua, Colombia, Spain, Chile, and among Latino communities in the United States. Her publications on citizens' media include *Fissures in the Mediascape. An International Study of Citizens' Media*

(2001); 'The Bishop and His Star: Citizens' Communication in Southern Chile' (in Couldry N. and J. Curran (eds.) *Contesting Media Power*, 2003); 'Citizens' Media and the Voice of the Angel/Poet' (in *Media International Australia*, 2002); 'Civil Society and Citizens' Media: Peace Architects for the New Millennium' (in *Redeveloping Communication for Social Change: Theory, Practice, Power*, (ed.) Karin Wilkins, 2002); and *Contando Historias, Tejiendo Identidades* [Telling Stories, Weaving Identities, 1987]. Since 2001, Dr Rodríguez (with Dr. John Downing – Southern Illinois University, and Dr. Nick Couldry - London School of Economics) has organized the annual OURMedia conferences as forums to discuss citizens' communication issues (see [www.ourmedianet.org](http://www.ourmedianet.org)).