

Transforming public space: a local radio's work in a poor urban community

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Among processes towards democratisation, it has been asserted that alternative radio has a central role in the citizen making of the poor. However, it is important to analyse in detail what possibilities an alternative or citizens' radio has to strengthen ideas of citizenship and transform the public space into a critical and deliberative public in urban sites. This paper focuses on one local Catholic radio station in Huaycan, a shantytown on the outskirts of Lima. It describes the radio's journalistic work, showing examples of how they mobilise local leaders and monitor democratic processes, such as municipal elections and the district's participatory budget. In addition, it shows how the public uses the radio to channel their claims. It also identifies the factors that prevent the radio from fully empowering the public and transforming public space into a more critical and democratic one.

KEY WORDS: Civil society; Governance and public policy; Rights; Latin America and the Caribbean

Alternative or citizens' radio is one of the few channels that can open up possibilities for the democratisation of society and citizen making of marginalised people. It is therefore important to discuss the role of radio in the formation of a public sphere in poor urban localities. Development studies in Latin America have mostly focused on rural areas. Similarly, most communication and media studies have been on popular and community radio in rural areas, with little attention to local urban radios, even though most of the population of poor countries lives in cities. Slums, human settlements, and shantytowns have grown massively within and around Latin American cities since the 1970s, and levels of poverty and marginalisation have not improved.

This article presents the case of a local radio that aims to strengthen citizenship ideas, contest established social and political structures, and collaborate with the development of a local community from the community perspective.¹ The idea is to show the assets and limitations of the work of a local radio with these aims, in helping to create a critical or deliberative public sphere. For this purpose, I use the case of Radio Enmanuel (RE), a local radio owned by a local Catholic church, which is situated in Huaycan, a shantytown within the municipal district of Ate, in Lima, Peru. I deliberately do not refer to RE as a 'popular', 'community', or 'citizens' radio, since these terms can in practice represent very similar types of radio work. Although I believe that *citizens' media* – in this case *citizens' radio* – would be an adequate term to synthesise 'popular' and 'community' radio, I am cautious of using the term for RE for

reasons I explain later. This article also explores whether differences between the terms ‘popular’ and ‘community’ radio are practical.²

Behind the analysis is the theory of public sphere or space and earlier studies on alternative and citizens’ radio, which have emphasised the importance of the Catholic Church for these radio movements in Latin America. The paper draws on field research from Huaycan, where I observed and interviewed radio staff and listeners in the community, and also analysed the radio station’s programmes.

Relevance of Radio Enmanuel and Huaycan

Huaycan in itself is an interesting case to study for several reasons. This locality represents a particular history among the dozens of shantytowns founded in Peru since the 1970s. Ten thousand families organised in four cooperatives, in coordination with the Municipality of Lima, carried out a project in 1984 to solve their housing problems. The project, supported by a technical team, carried out an alternative, collective neighbourhood plan, which was shaped by the neighbourhood association, now called Comunidad Urbana Autogestionaria de Huaycan (CUAH, Self-Managed Urban Community of Huaycan) (Calderón and Olivera 1989). Through years of hard work and popular mobilisation in demand of basic needs, the population achieved a feeling of unity and independence (Muñoz 1999). They accomplished this alone, as local municipal support had failed on account of opposing political interests. In other words, the population of Huaycan developed a strong community identity in the early years, which meant that both the locality and its people can genuinely be spoken of as a community.³

Huaycan’s history also reflects the recent history of Peru: the constant migration from rural localities to the cities and into urban poverty/housing since the 1960s, internal war in the 1980s (when Huaycan was affected by the presence of the Shining Path), and political manipulation and violence that undermined civil society in this community in the 1990s (CVR 2003). RE is situated within this context, an initiative of the local Catholic church, which has been engaged in the history of this community from its beginning.⁴ The local church then got a place in the planned main square, began to offer several social services, and later built a proper church (now the Cathedral of Eastern Lima). The idea of local radio came up because, as the town grew, the neighbourhood association units could no longer communicate by means of loudspeakers and communication was indispensable (as in other communities like Villa el Salvador; see, for example, Brunetti 2000). This church then decided, in 1996, to operate a radio station in order to help the community and probably also to counterbalance the emerging evangelical churches. The establishment of RE as a legal local radio station has been possible through the status of Educational radio.⁵ Another legal radio project would have been unthinkable, because of deficient regulations and state administration of media in Peru.

RE has the largest radio audience in Huaycan (see also Roja García 2006). While this is partly because of the poor reception of national and central city radios, I argue that RE is more than simply the radio with the best or oldest signal in the locality, it represents a symbol that the local people identify with. The radio is one of the most visible institutions in the locality, together with the cathedral, municipal office, and CUAH office in the main square. Together, these structures symbolise progress, the dream of a new city – which had been the aim of the first settlers (Lastra 2002).

The importance of RE does not lie in its role as a channel for missionary work. Rather, as I shall show, the relevance of a radio like this within alternative or citizens’ media research lies in its ability to transform their religious objectives into broad secular aims that collaborate to strengthen citizens’ rights, community development, and participation of local associations.

I shall argue however, that RE fails to strengthen awareness of the citizens' rights related to *reproduction and sexuality*.

Some definitions

In this article, *public space* is used in a broad way to refer to various sorts of forums, both face-to-face and mediated. Public space is a space that is constituted by face-to-face or mediated spaces that, interconnected or individually, correspond to a community. A community that can be geographically limited as, for instance, Huaycan or Ate district. RE, for example, is part of the public space of Huaycan; however, it also represents a public space in itself. In addition, the term *deliberative public sphere* is used in order to emphasise the critical and deliberative character of the public space (Avritzer 2002). A deliberative public sphere, according to an interpretation of Leonardo Avritzer (2002), can be specified as a space where collective and individual, popular and non-popular⁶ actors within a community have access to participate and have the possibility to add new issues to the discussion agenda. I shall focus on these characteristics while presenting examples of the radio's work.

As Geerts *et al.* (2004) state, even though there are many concepts of radio and different radio practices, there are similarities among alternative radio stations. These similarities (such as similar goals and use of same formats) can make it difficult in practice to establish differences between popular and community radio. A radio like RE is difficult to place in one of these boxes, because, though owned by the Catholic Church, RE can be defined as popular, community, *and* probably also as a citizens' radio according to which perspective is being emphasised. This is because of the way RE functions and its commitment to social and community work.

Taking Geerts and van Oeyen's (2001: 35) definitions of radio movements, RE can be considered *popular* radio, since (among other things) it promotes the integration of the community from the community's perspective, it is socially committed, participative, and critical. However, RE's focus on education (one of the basic characteristics of popular radio) has been relative sparse. RE can also be defined as a *community* radio, since it follows the four lines of action: contributing to development of the town, broadening democracy, defending human rights, and protecting cultural diversity (Geerts and van Oeyen 2001: 38). Finally, it would be convenient to approach RE as a *citizens'* radio using Clemencia Rodríguez's perspective. Rodríguez (2001: 20) says that *citizens' media* is about a collective 'enacting its citizenship by actively intervening' in and transforming the established media. Moreover, citizens' media contest legitimised identities and institutionalised social relations, as well as empower the community involved.⁷

Even though RE is not driven by the community, various community actors intervene in various ways in the daily radio programmes, so in a way it represents a citizens' radio. On the other hand, there are some established social structures related to Catholic values that, as we shall see, RE does not fully contest. Consequently, RE is not a citizens' radio or one of the other types of radio mentioned, but rather a hybrid that could become a citizens' radio.

As a starting point, I shall review the objectives of the radio.

The radio's goals

RE's objectives are, according to the radio's administrator Guisella Rivera (interview October 2006), to 'do missionary work through information, entertainment, and education. Its aim is to make the community aware of the *right to life* and individuals' human and civil rights, and to improve the quality of life. Other focus areas are *the protection of the environment and development* of Huaycan, and the *participation* of all kinds of (civil-society) associations'.

What is interesting is that while taking the objectives and focus areas as a baseline, the radio workers add and reformulate their goals according to the type of programme they are making. For instance, newscasters were less likely to use a language having religious or paternalistic connotations, such as *protect* life or *educate* others. Other reporters, such as the producer/presenter of the youth programme, emphasised *entertainment* as a strategy to sensitise the audience on different issues including *citizens' rights*. These ideas will become clearer as we go through the examples.

Since the radio is part of the local Catholic church, there are restrictions concerning issues related to the Christian perception of the right to life, such as contraception and abortion. However, this does not mean that the radio is silent about these issues; according to Guisella Rivera, this means that the religious view has to be made clear in any broadcast made about these topics. One interesting point is that the staff have a free hand to choose topics and can address sexuality-related issues by using indirect strategies, such as interviewing professionals on the subject area. However, according to my observations, they do not do this frequently. On the other hand, anyone from the community can rent space on the radio – for example, a group of women conducted a polemic programme about couples and sexuality on RE in 2007. According to the producer of the programme, Jenny Fierro, the radio administration was in this case helpful in finding financing for the programme; however, the programme only lasted one season.

Mobilising local leaders

The most popular of RE's programmes '(in terms of audience numbers)' is the radio news, 'Enmanuel al día' – more people listen to this than to national radio networks, such as RPP and CPN (Roja García 2006). It offers the audience local news from Huaycan and the surrounding areas. The staff of this programme comprise the press chief/presenter and two reporters. The press chief, who has lived in Huaycan since its foundation, is one of the most experienced workers at the radio; he obtained his empirical training as a journalist at RE and his personal profile resembles that of most people in Huaycan. This is important since it shows the involvement of community actors. The reporters, by contrast, have done some communication studies, which can supplement the press chief's local, empirical knowledge. The press chief is the one who usually decides what is *news* and what is not.

The information collected for the news stems from face-to-face interviews, telephone calls, and visits to the station of many local leaders, local authorities, and ordinary people. Local leaders and representatives come from the neighbourhood association CUAH,⁸ the parent associations APAFAs (Asociación de Padres de Familia), community kitchens, the 'Glass of Milk' programme, minority associations, and trade unions. The authorities contacted by the radio include the chief of the police, town councillors, officials of the local municipal agency, and headteachers of the public schools. The news team is also often in contact with professionals, such as doctors from the local hospital and religious and secular representatives of the Catholic chapels within the community. Consequently, the sources of information are diverse and the issues presented in the programmes cover many social fields within the public life of this community.

As a way of making it manageable, I will group the issues presented in the radio news under the following headings: (a) *democratic processes within associations and the municipal council* (such as elections, regulations, and law, as well as keeping an eye on public works and fulfilment of promises); (b) *securing basic needs*; (c) *citizens' security*; (d) *youth problems*; and (e) issues related to the *health* of the population. These topics appear frequently and in differentiated ways in the news, and provide perspectives on citizens' rights and democracy in general.

Since most of the participants in the programme are local leaders or representatives, one might think that the programme would not have a popular appeal among ordinary people and the community. However, since there are many types of voluntary associations in Huaycan and almost anyone can act as a representative, it is difficult to distinguish between leaders (non-popular actors) and ordinary people (popular actors). In addition, it is important to point out that collaborating with the radio has helped local leaders to improve their speaking skills and their self-awareness of their position as representatives. The radio, and most especially the radio news, played an important role during the many years when CUAH was accused of corruption and division, by giving voice to critics and opponents, and denouncing the abuse of authority. Finally in 2007, CUAH was able to find some solutions to its problems, and this was partly due to the mediation of the church and the work of the radio.

Monitoring democratic processes

Every morning during municipal elections in November 2006, a candidate came to the radio from one of the 17 parties competing for the office of mayor of Ate to be interviewed live by the press chief. Candidates for the post of town councillor also came along, though some were interviewed by telephone during the programme. Even the mayor in office of the Lima region, Luis Castañeda, who was standing for re-election (and won the re-election with 70 per cent of the votes), had scheduled a call in order to be interviewed by RE. Among the other candidates who visited was Juan Enrique Dupuy, then town councillor, who had changed party and was running as candidate for Castañeda's party in Ate (he also won the elections, with 20 per cent of the votes). The morning he came to the radio, several local leaders were also there, waiting their turn to be interviewed. During the interview, everyone listened to what Dupuy had to say and afterwards many of the leaders talked to him. I observed this kind of situation many times and concluded that the lobby of the radio station (not just the programme on air) had become a space for dialogue and negotiation, where conflicting parties could meet and talk.

In relation to the revitalisation and transformation of public space, the radio supports face-to-face forums by arranging public meetings. For example, the radio invited public debate held at the church's sports field. Most of the candidates attended (except for the mayor of Ate, who had been criticised by RE for corruption). Another public event was the Youth Forum for the Governability of Huaycan arranged together with NGOs working in the area, the aim of which was to open up a debate on how the youth of Huaycan could take part in Ate's participatory budget's discussion. Thus RE, as other civil-society-driven media, plays a key role in articulating democratic process (Gumucio Dagron and Tufte 2006).

Taking up the hurts and abuses of everyday life

Ordinary people frequently use the radio to raise instances of hurt and abuse. This is illustrated by the following story, where a woman complained to the radio about her treatment by the local judicial authority. It exemplifies how an ordinary person can present an issue through the agenda of the radio, which is a fundamental condition for a deliberative public sphere. On the radio, she told the reporter she had been waiting at the local court for her case to come up; she was suing her husband for unpaid alimony. She was visibly distressed and said she was sick of not being treated with dignity by the judicial authorities. Her case had been delayed many times and she could not afford to miss another day as she had to travel from a distant part of Huaycan. In addition, her daughter, who was with her, had to hurry back to secondary school in order to present a project and pass the term. The judge in charge of her

case had been ill-mannered with her and told her that she had to leave since he was going to lunch. When she mentioned the letter with the appointment time and that she could not afford to wait any longer, he told her she should have thought of that instead of having so many children. The radio-reporter decided to conduct the interview outside the courtroom. During the interview, through the fence, she could see the judge who was still there. After the broadcast, the woman was invited inside, gently this time, by a security man.

This is an example of how alternative radio can influence the outcome of events that are fundamental in people's lives. But it probably does not signify any permanent change of attitude on the part of the authorities. RE usually helps people with their grievances by transmitting them on the air. However, RE staff give priority to informing the audience about the responsible bodies to which people can make complaints. In this way, the radio assists in ensuring that the institutions fulfil their roles and in the growing awareness of the citizens.

Challenging limits and taboos

As the last example, I shall show how the programme 'Paradero 100.5' set about confronting established structures and rules by adding new issues to the debate agenda in Huaycan. It is also an example of a way of enabling local-actor interventions and of 'giving the microphone' to different voices. The programme is aimed at young people and is also produced by young people. In one sequence, a reporter walks around the streets of central Huaycan asking different people about their experiences with controversial or taboo issues that concern everyday life.

In one programme, the question asked was: *have you ever felt discriminated against?* Discrimination is well documented and embedded within Peruvian social reality (see, for example, Oliart 1991). Despite this, it is very rarely discussed in public and not at all by the mainstream media. An old man with a strong Andean accent was interviewed and he said that people from the Andes are always discriminated against in Lima. He described how people treated him badly on the buses and he ended by declaring that discrimination should not be allowed to exist since all are equal.

After the interview, the presenter of the show (not the reporter) commented that the interviewee was right and that everybody was equal according to *the law*. By doing this, he strengthened the message and directed attention to the law existing in the country. The presenter then moved on to make several more arguments using strategies of persuasion, a fresh tone, and colloquial language, which helped get the message across to the youthful audience. He mentioned Peru's Constitution and how in other countries discrimination was punished. He recommended that listeners take up their claims about discrimination with the authorities. Finally, he addressed the authorities and demanded they took action. In this way, he underlined his message about rights, and steered clear of the messages a mainstream radio or a typical religious radio might have used – such as pity or shame – concerning this sensitive issue.

However, the young presenter was not an experienced rhetorician. He and other presenters/reporters may contradict themselves – a general problem within RE as in other local and alternative radios (both religious and secular). Those working in radio are only partly educated in communication and most of them are very young, have limited experience, and are poorly paid as their jobs are not permanent.

Final remarks

RE has considerable potential as a central actor in articulating a deliberative public sphere in Huaycan. RE's work reflects only one among other social actors that are necessary to

generate such a public sphere. Its work, however, is extensive, because it involves following everyday life in different social fields in the community and working with many associations and individual actors. Its work has a critical perspective, and can empower local leaders while also offering a channel for the voice of ordinary people. The radio also helps ensure that the institutions function by keeping a watch on democratic processes and the work of the authorities, as well as informing citizens of their rights. Finally, this radio's virtual broadcasting space *and* the physical space of its lobby embody public space for open discussion, though not necessarily for deliberation. As Huaycan is an organised community with a participatory history, this in some ways helps facilitate the participation of individuals in this public space.

However, one cannot argue that RE's public space has become fully deliberative, rather it is in the process of being transformed. In spite of the radio news broadcasts, discussions, and comments by opposing parties, the radio does not have a communication strategy that can help guide its decision making. The staff lack important fields of knowledge and familiarity with strategies that can strengthen the deliberative culture in the community. Despite the enthusiasm of the radio's staff to fulfil their objectives and focus on sensitive/political areas, they lack resources and know-how to improve their formats and strategies or add new ones to enable them to carry out their work more coherently and satisfactorily (Alfaro 2005).

Most importantly, the radio's position as part of the Catholic Church, even if committed to the community, means that the staff are not completely free to present all issues such as those related to sexuality, contraception, and abortion. These are *essential* for the empowerment of women and the greater social development of a community like Huaycan. Consequently, a radio like RE only partially contests established structures and transforms public space.

Finally, we return to the question of what term would be appropriate for a radio station such as RE. Although barred from addressing essential subjects, RE carries out fundamental work in the course of strengthening citizenship ideas and shows itself to be committed to the community – for example, (i) most of the staff live in or identify with Huaycan and are politically motivated rather than religiously; (ii) the radio monitors political processes, like the mayoral elections and the struggle to achieve basic needs; and (iii) the radio gives voice to the public in situations where no other conduit is present and so, in practice, channels people's 'voice'. Therefore, a radio like RE is neither a 'popular' nor a 'community' radio, it is a hybrid alternative radio. It is a hybrid that could evolve to become a fully *citizens' radio* by not having restrictions about essential subjects in order to completely empower the community. It is, borrowing Rosa María Alfaro's words, *the citizens' radio of the future*.

Notes

1. In a way the focus of this study is similar to the objective of 'La Práctica Inspira' (Geerts *et al.* 2004), where the cases were chosen primarily to inspire communication practices. However, I also delve critically into the construction of citizenship and participation, in which the local radio can be a fundamental actor.
2. Peruvian law recognises three types of radio – commercial, educational, and community. RE is an 'Educational radio', as are most alternative radio stations in Peru. Since its beginnings, RE has been associated with Coordinadora Nacional de Radio (CNR, National Radio Association), which brings together alternative radio in the country.
3. Official numbers estimate that the population of Huaycan plus two smaller settlements was about 189,856 people in 2004 (Municipalidad de Ate 2008).

4. The local Catholic church is run by the Monfortian congregation, known for its commitment to the poor. The missionary work of Huaycan's Catholic church has been inspired (at least for periods of time) by the Liberation Theology.
5. The staff of the radio comprises about 20 workers or collaborators as journalists, speakers, DJs, and others, most of whom are young people in their 20s and 30s.
6. According to the terminology used by Mata and Scarafía (1993), *popular actors* are actors who are situated in a subordinated position due to their social, economic, and cultural situation. Consequently, *non-popular actors* in my perspective are those who are in a dominant position, because of their social, economic, or political position.
7. It is also worth noting Rosa María Alfaro's (1999) use of the term 'citizens' radio'. She points out that citizens from these local media spaces can influence other social spaces. Thus, the citizen can make him- or herself a critical and responsible citizen who is emancipated and committed.
8. CUAH has a presidential committee and 26 subcommittees (one for each zone of Huaycan).

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