

Popular Participation in Communication as a Strategy for Enhancing the Exercise of Citizenship¹

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RIGHT TO COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION, POPULAR PARTICIPATION AND CITIZENSHIP

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It is community media that most empower direct Citizen participation in the sphere of public communication in contemporary Brazil. They are easily within the reach of the people, compared to the mass media. First, because they work within the people's own environment, they are familiar with the locale, and they are more approachable. This process is facilitated when communication occurs through organizations in which citizens participate directly, or whose actions directly affect them. Second, community media are a form of close-range communication; their source is the reality and events of the location itself. They are also aimed at people of the community, which allows for the construction of cultural identity. Indeed, familiarity is one of the defining features of such close-range media.

There are several ways of participating in the communication media. When you call a radio broadcaster to request a song or chat with the announcer, you are participating. When you give an interview to a newspaper, you are participating. If your image is "stolen" by a photographer or filmmaker and then shown in the media, you are participating in the content of the communication media. If you answer a phone call from an employee of some magazine to which you subscribe and respond to a survey, you are participating. If you have done something not worthed or committed a crime that resulted in a piece of news or article in the press, you are participating, and so forth. The types of participation mentioned above are common and important in the traditional media. However, when we speak of community communication, other forms participation are possible and desirable.

People participate in the popular communication media in Latin America at various levels, depending upon the strategies that have been laid out, which in turn are rooted in democratic principles that have been put into practice to a greater or lesser extent. From this perspective, people may participate in the following ways:

- a. As receivers of content, helping to build an audience, which is often used as a parameter to termine whether the communication medium "popular." This is passive participation that has an effect on content only indirectly.
- b. Participation in the messages: the basic level of participation, in which the person gives an interview, requests music etc. but does not have any say in decisions concerning editing and transmission.
- c. Participation in the production and dissemination of messages, materials and programs: this type of

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participation includes preparing, editing and transmitting content.

d. Participation in planning: involvement in setting the communication medium's policies, developing media and program format plans, developing management objectives and principles, etc.

e. Participation in management: involvement the process of administration and control of a community communication medium (Peruzzo 2004: 140-147).²

In sum, people's participation may range from a role as mere listeners or readers to involvement in processes of producing, planning and managing communication. The more advanced levels of citizen involvement assume the permeation of principles such as representiveness and co-responsibility, since they involve an exercise of power in a democratic or shared way (Peruzzo 2004: 59). They also assume that popular participation is carried out freely and autonomously, i.e., independently of pressure, manipulation and other forms of interference and control by leadership and institutions.³

Popular participation in more advanced experiences of community communication represents a significant advance in the democratization of communication. This is essential to popular organizations, because it may be the difference that helps to expand the exercise of citizenship. Community communication has the potential to contribute to the development of citizenship not only through the "content" - be it critical, accusatory, demanding or informative - of a new society, but through the very "process" of communicating. There is a dynamic relationship between communication and education that guarantees further scrutiny.

Some, though obviously not all,⁴ community communication media have the potential to be at once part of a process of popular organization⁵ - channels loaded with information and cultural content - and to make possible the practice of direct participation in the mechanisms of planning, producing messages/ programs and managing the organization of community communications. They therefore contribute in two ways to the development of citizenship: they offer educational potential both as a process and through the content of the messages they transmit.

Through their "content," they may contribute to the socialization of a historical legacy of knowledge, facilitate an understanding of social relations and the mechanisms of the power structure (enabling a better understanding of political issues) and of the country's public affairs, elucidate the rights of individuals, and foster discussion of local problems. For example, there are radio programs produced by slum dwellers, which air educational programming for children and young people to teach them the dangers of drug consumption and trafficking. They may also facilitate the embracing of cultural identities and roots by giving expression to, for example, manifestations of popular wisdom and culture: the history of their ancestors, from legends to natural herbs used to cure diseases. They may also serve as a channel of expression for local artists, who have difficulty penetrating the major regional and national media. Or they may provide information on how to prevent diseases, on consumer rights, on access to free public services (e.g., the birth registry or access to the public defender's office) and on many other issues of social interest (Peruzzo 2002: 5-6).

² The levels of participation mentioned here are based, **but broadened**, on concepts developed by Merino Utreras (1988), who systematized the principles of participation in communication approved at a meeting on self-management held in Belgrade in 1977, and at a seminar sponsored by the Latin American International Center for Advanced Communications Studies (CIESPAL) and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1978, on participation in production, planning and management.

³ The various forms of participation and their relationships with power (passive participation, controlled participation and co-management and self-management) are discussed in the book *Comunicação dos movimentos populares* [Communications in Popular Movements] (Peruzzo 2004).

⁴ **Being that** many participate in reproducing, on a local or community scale, the marketing structure and objectives of the major private media, or engage in political or religious proselytizing.

⁵ For example, engaging in collective interest movements such as a community movement, a group home-building project, a youth group, a service to care for needy children etc.

They are educational from a "process" standpoint because direct participation helps people to develop their abilities. Citizens who learn to write for a small newspaper; talk on the radio; perform a role in a popular video; create, produce and broadcast a radio or television program; discuss the objectives, editorial policies and management principles of the communications medium; select content etc., undergo a process of informal education that leads to an understanding of the media and the context in which they operate. This situation helps to demystify the media, which tend to be seen by ordinary citizens as something inaccessible, something that is the exclusive domain of specialists or of "educated people."

The communication media produced by organized sectors of subordinate classes, or closely linked to them, end up creating a favorable environment for the development of citizen education. The relationships between education and communication become explicit, as people involved in these processes develop their knowledge and change their way of seeing and relating to society and to the system of mass communication media itself. They take ownership of the techniques and technological instruments of communication and they acquire a more critical view, both through the information they receive and through what they learn through hands-on experience and practice. For example, the selection of news items that must be done in order to produce a community radio news program, as well as the other factors that shape the process of producing and transmitting the messages that we encounter every day, opens people's eyes to the strategies and possibilities for manipulation of messages by the major mass communications media. They become aware of opportunities for selecting messages, of the conflicts of interest that affect information or programming, of the dynamics of the advertising market and of the clout (power to give public visibility and to influence) of a communication medium, such as radio, newspaper, television, the Internet etc. (Peruzzo 2002: 6).

The scope of engagement in the local dynamic, the content of messages and participation in all phases of the communications process are interrelated and are seen as the ideal in terms of educational communication action among community movements. However, it is known that active participation by people in all the various phases of a community communication process is still limited⁶. Still, even experiences in which not all three components occur interrelatedly also have their value. Participation in content only, for example, even in isolation, offers a certain level of educational potential. A television or radio program, even if it is not produced with the active participation of the population (through its representatives) at whom the end product is aimed, but rather by a team of local residents, or even by the staff of a nongovernmental organization or a trade association, for example, has the potential to foster critical thinking and enhance the knowledge of both the broadcasters and the audience (Peruzzo 2002: 6).

As is known, education entails, among other things, educating oneself. As Kaplún points out (1999: 74), educating oneself involves a process of multiple flows of communication. The richer the range of communications interactions the system is able to open up and make available to those being educated, the more educational it will be.

Social movements have the potential to modify values and bring about changes in opinions. They help break through the "culture of silence" of the masses, as Paulo Freire (1981) puts it, or the culture of submission of the absent citizen, of the voiceless citizen, engendering a new citizenship. As Jesús Martín-Barbero (1999) points out:

to a great extent, those institutions, those spaces in which citizens are formed, are diluted, just when citizenship is exercised. In that moment, there is a multiplicity of movements, albeit somewhat tentative,

⁶ Broad active participation by the population is something that is built slowly within the social dynamic itself, depending on the prevailing conditions and the level of commitment of people to their own citizenship; see (Peruzzo 2004).

striving to overcome, to a certain extent, their silence. There is thus a lack of submission, a rebellion against the power of the Church, the State, the school-against many powers. Feminist movements, ecological movements, homosexual, ethnic, racial and black movements are all examples of this. These are elements of a new form of social behavior, a new agenda of issues that are important to people. When these movements, most of which are small and disconnected, begin to connect with one another and then connect to schools and to municipal and community communications media, they will create networks for the formation of citizens that will be highly effective, ensuring that those scattered voices begin to be heard in the regional sphere and even in the national sphere (Martín-Barbero 1999: 78-9).

As has been noted, in advanced participatory processes the recipients of messages from the communications media also become producers and transmitters, as well as managers of the communication process. The citizen becomes the "subject" of the communication media and tends to change his way of seeing the world and of relating to it and to the media.

For direct involvement in producing and managing community communication to occur, there must be open and unobstructed channels of participation. Indeed, participation needs to be facilitated. It is pointless to criticize nonparticipation or to issue vague invitations to participate without ensuring that real possibilities for participation exist.

There is also a need to be clear as to the importance of putting in place mechanisms that facilitate representation of the population and its organizations at the various operational levels of a communication medium or community council. To this end, local organizations need to be recognized and given real opportunities to participate in decision making. The formation of a local communication council or of representative community associations has helped to reduce a certain trend toward authoritarianism that is typical of our culture and perpetuated by the leadership.

At its root, participation implies making political decisions and employing appropriate methodologies for action. If a communications strategy is limited only to the practices of the major media and traditional community action organizations, it will be difficult to avoid reproducing patronizing styles and one-way programming and seeing the communication media merely "as an end in itself" (raising awareness, convincing, educating), rather than as a "means of facilitating" a process of citizen self-emancipation.

In an instrumental conception of the media - i.e., when seen as an end in itself-media are used to indoctrinate an audience that is considered ignorant. Sometimes they are presented as democratic, but ultimately they are vertical and one-sided.

The central issue is to make the human being the subject of the process of social change, which occurs as a result of communication, but also of other mechanisms of popular organization and action. In other words, the various processes emphasized here are not limited to the action of communication "media." The media may facilitate citizen action and they do play an important role, but the local social dynamic is broader and more complex. Thus, all areas of communication (public relations, advertising, journalism, publishing etc.) and other fields of knowledge have the potential for concrete action within their respective fields of specialization. What is most important is the coming together of principles that favor popular self-determination, respect for the broader social interest, and the involvement of people as stakeholders in popular communication and organizations.

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