

## From Pirates to Partners: The Legalization of Community Radio in Uruguay

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**ABSTRACT** Community radio began in Uruguay in the post-dictatorship years of the 1980s. Until December 2007, however, these stations were pirate broadcasters that had been excluded from the country's broadcasting system. Today, not only have these stations gained legal status, they have become active partners in the regulation of Uruguay's broadcasting system. This article documents the development of community broadcasting, the role of civil society in bringing about regulatory change, and innovative approaches to policymaking.

**KEYWORDS** Broadcasting policy; Community radio; Law/legislation; Uruguay; Participation

**RÉSUMÉ** La radiodiffusion communautaire en Uruguay a commencé durant les années 1980 après une longue période de dictature. Cependant, jusqu'en décembre 2007, ces radios étaient des radios pirates qui opéraient en dehors du système national de radiodiffusion. Aujourd'hui, ces radios communautaires ont obtenu un statut légal en plus de devenir des interlocuteurs dans leur propre réglementation. Cet article porte sur le développement de la radiodiffusion communautaire en Uruguay, le rôle de la société civile dans le changement de la réglementation, et des approches innovatrices envers les politiques sur la communication.

**MOTS CLÉS** Politiques de la radiodiffusion; Radio communautaire; Loi/legislation; Uruguay; Participation

Media play a fundamental and pervasive role in our individual lives and in the manner by which we are represented within society. They are a tool of social protagonism, providing access to knowledge and contributing to the formation of opinions while enabling us to disseminate this information to others by various means and to various ends. We live in a world that is overwhelmingly and inescapably mediatized. This is both a common fact of life and a social framework that permeates throughout the developed and developing worlds, albeit to a greater extent in urban centres. To be present in the media is to be represented within the greater whole of society, to be present in the greater imagination. In our contemporary world, such representation is often carried out by others—largely by media professionals such as journalists who serve as our proxy. This representation-by-proxy is predominantly exhibited in a relationship of inequality that privileges the professional communicator to certain information and thus to the power inherent in the possession of this information. Although

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the professional communicator attains and retains a privileged state of power, the individual is confined to the status of consumer, a problem compounded by the dominance and concentration of commercial mass media (Martin-Barbero, 2004). This arrangement has become a template for the popular understanding of successful media and successful social communication. Accordingly, the popular comprehension of society's larger role in media use and communication has been reduced to that of a consuming mass, a passively receptive audience rather than an active partner in dialogue. Yet even if the audience is one that is critical and engaged, to what extent can it directly and immediately affect the media that represents it to the world?

Known by a great diversity of names (community media, citizens' media, alternative media, radical media, and many others), there are forms of media creation and expression that operate according to power schema distinct from that of commercial mass media. The term "alternative media" is often used as a general term and for the sake of simplicity I will use it here. Some characterizations of alternative media refer to "counter-information institutions" and "agents of developmental power" (Haas, 2004). From this perspective, alternative media enable communities that are not represented or are under-represented in the mainstream media to express themselves directly through some sort of media production and diffusion. Participation in media production helps to overcome the barriers that typically exist between media creators and their audiences. By facilitating community participation in media creation, alternative media democratize access to resources as well as access to, creation of, and dissemination of knowledge.

The concept of participation is central to much of the scholarship on alternative media—participation being the active involvement of non-professional community members in media production, often in institutions of varying formality. Within the field of alternative media research, these sorts of media institutions are often understood to be composed of diverse communities with ties to various social, political, and cultural movements within the larger community. Kevin Howley (2005) presents community media as "grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity" (p. 2). For Howley, alternative media are central to the prospect of creating and maintaining participatory democracy on local, national, and international scales. Another formulation of media participation that is often used in North American and European contexts focuses on forms of expression mobilized by non-mainstream or "subaltern" communities (Atton, 2002), in which individuals and their respective communities exercise media power within a society where such power is largely monopolized by corporate actors. Participation in alternative media production has also been identified as a tool for social and economic development (Rennie, 2006). Looking beyond the immediate effects, James Hamilton suggests that alternative media may be the beginning of a profound process of social transformation toward a broad system of democratic communication (Hamilton, 2008). The works noted here have examined a large diversity of different media, among them radio, video, television, print media, and online publishing. The research

presented here looks at the specific case of community radio in Uruguay: its origins and history, and the process through which it has gained legal legitimacy.

The airwaves have been alternately appropriated and reserved for public use since the early days of radio. In North America, the concept of listener-sponsored radio began with the founding of radio station KPFA and its accompanying Pacifica Radio Foundation in San Francisco, California, in 1949 (Fairchild, 2001). Community-based radio stations in Latin America generally originate from two traditions. In 1947, Radio Sutatenza was founded in Colombia and set the stage for the development of what is now a substantial network of educational radio stations throughout Latin America, embodied in the organization of the Latin-American Radio Education Association (ALER). Then, in 1952, 26 mining community radio stations in Bolivia formed a network as a functional and fundamental part of labour organizing and social resistance (Robledo, 1998). Pirate radio stations—unlicensed and often clandestine—broadcast across Europe during the 1970s and 1980s in an effort to provide alternatives to state-monopoly broadcasters (Collectif Radios Libres Populaires, 1978), ultimately resulting in the official authorization of local radio stations (UNESCO, 2003).

### **From pirates to partners**

Like many countries in Latin America, Uruguay experienced an extended period of dictatorship, in this case from 1973 to 1984. A country of 3.4 million people, Uruguay is closely tied to Argentina and has experienced corresponding economic crises since the end of its dictatorship, the most recent occurring in 2002. Democracy, however, is a serious tradition in this country. From 1951 to 1966, the presidency was replaced with a nine-person council to prevent a concentration of power. It is obligatory to vote. One can submit a blank ballot, but this is rarely done and seen as a demonstration of extreme disaccord with the electoral scenario. In 2004, Uruguay elected its first left-wing government—a broad coalition of non-traditional parties called the Frente Amplio or “Broad Front.” This was the first non-traditional party to ever take power and was re-elected to a second five-year mandate on November 29, 2009. As in many other Latin American countries that have recently elected progressive governments, in Uruguay social and labour movements are highly active throughout many sectors of society. The recent political transition has been accompanied by the hopeful possibility of the masses to take part in the frank and democratic reconstruction of society and the examination of all its parts—including the media.

Use of telegraph and telephone developed in Uruguay between 1878 and 1915. In 1915, the General Administration of Mail, Telegraph and Telephones was created and was Uruguay’s first radio spectrum regulator. In 1931, jurisdiction over the spectrum was given to the General Administration of Dams and Telephones. The state telecommunications company, Antel, was founded in 1974 (ANTEL, n.d.). In 1978, five years into the dictatorship, the Department of Communications was created within the Ministry of Defence and granted control of the spectrum (Government of Uruguay, 1978). Finally, URSEC,<sup>1</sup> the communications regulator, was created in 2001, and authority over the spectrum was transferred to it along with the individuals charged with managing it. URSEC deals exclusively with the technical aspects of broadcasting and telecommunications and also regulates the postal service (interview with Hector Budé,

head of radio-electric frequencies, URSEC, 2010; Government of Uruguay, 2001). The president has direct authority to grant radio and television broadcast licences and tends to do so on recommendation of the Minister of Industry. At the time of writing, there exist licensing procedures and criteria for community broadcasters, but there are no such procedures or criteria for commercial broadcasters. The Ministry of Industry began to develop commercial radio licensing criteria in 2008, but no official policy has been made (interview with Daniel Martinez, Member of Parliament, former Minister of Industry, 2010). Uruguay's commercial media system is highly monopolized with the ownership of almost all print and electronic media concentrated in the hands of five families (Barreiro, Lima, Romano, & Stolovich, 2004). During previous governments, broadcast licences were often granted to political allies or in exchange for political favours (interview with Edison Lanza, Member of Asociacion de la Prensa Uruguaya, professor at the Universidad Catolica del Uruguay, member of Consejo Honoraria de Radiodifusion Comunitaria, 2010).

It is hard to pin down exactly when community radio began in Uruguay. It may have begun in the working-class neighbourhoods of Montevideo with union-supported radio stations in the 1950s (interview with Daniel and Victoria, Emisora de la Villa, 2005). However, no verifiable documentation of these stations exists. The roots of today's community radios can more concretely be traced to efforts to reorganize post-dictatorship Uruguayan society (Bouissa, Curuchet, & Orcajo, 1998; Curuchet, Girola, & Orcajo, 2006; Light, 2007; Robledo, 1998). Growing out of various post-dictatorship social movements in the 1980s, community radio stations remained largely clandestine and without any formal organizational structure linking them to one another. In 1996, ECOS—the Coordinator of Uruguayan Community Radios—was founded and the movement began to coalesce. Two years later, the community radio movement splintered into two organizations that still exist today. ECOS carried on, developing into a coordinating group for their member stations and associated social movements. Historically, it has been the more radical of the two organizations and until recently was opposed to any regulation of community broadcasting, arguing that the entire media system should be re-examined. AMARC-Uruguay is the second organization, with ties to the World Association of Community Broadcasting (AMARC). The less radical of the two, it has sought to have community radio recognized legally and has been at the forefront of the fight to gain this recognition. A third organization, the Association of Community Radios, filed for incorporation on May 22, 2010. A group of eight stations, it aims to represent its members in regulatory debates, coordinate content sharing, improve infrastructure, and help new stations get on the air (thus far, all stations that have been licensed previously existed outside the law) (Santos, 2010).

Community radio stations have historically been identified by the authorities as “pirate” or “low power” radio stations and until recently operated in a state of legal fiction. No law permitted their existence nor did any outlaw them directly. Some governments have persecuted these stations, raiding their studios and destroying or taking equipment, while others, notably the government of Jorge Batlle during the second half of his mandate from 2000 to 2005, turned a blind eye. In 2002, URSEC presented legislation recommending the regulation of low-power and university radio. It would

have limited community broadcasters to a 1.5-kilometre broadcast range but was ultimately not passed.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in 2003, Decree 114/003 was passed and provided, for the first time, a concrete framework for the administration and control of the national radio spectrum and hinted at the inclusion of community radio in the future of radio spectrum administration.

Since the creation of URSEC, civil society groups in the country have been advocating for legal recognition, protection, and regulation of community radio. The strategy employed demonstrates, in the Uruguayan context, the effectiveness of a two-pronged approach to policy advocacy. While working locally to build a strong coalition of civil society organizations, the World Association of Community Broadcasters—Latin America and Caribbean (AMARC-ALC) also worked internationally to both attract attention to the local situation and to create an advocacy tool that could be used elsewhere. Before the presidential elections of October 2004 that would see the Frente Amplio gain power for the first time, members of this party stated that legalizing community radio was on their immediate agenda (interview with Gabriel Kaplun, Professor, Universidad de la Republica del Uruguay, 2005). With the entry of the Frente Amplio in March 2005, a sustained campaign for legalization commenced. AMARC-ALC, the Uruguayan Press Association (APU), and the Grupo Medios y Sociedad (GMS) held regular public forums and conferences on community radio legislation in Latin America and the right to information and communication. Rather than limit participation to policy experts or NGO professionals, these events were meant to attract broad participation from the community radio sector, the general population, the broader media community, and the country's politicians. Several of these events were held in Uruguay's parliament building, demonstrating cooperation and interest on the part of the government. Indeed, speaking at a UNESCO/AMARC seminar in October 2005, vice-president Rodolfo Nin Novoa announced that his recently elected government would legalize community radio (Curuchet et al., 2006). Despite the initial intentions of this government, it would take two more years of advocacy to make community radio a legal reality.

In 2006, AMARC-ALC assembled a team of 25 researchers from the Americas and Europe to conduct a comparative study of community broadcasting legislation in 15 countries.<sup>3</sup> The goal was to design a model framework—entitled “Principles for a Democratic Legislation on Community Broadcasting”—that could be provided to Latin America's new progressive leaders and to civil society groups in their countries (AMARC-ALC, 2008). Although many of these governments officially supported the idea of community broadcasting, most have had little practice in designing communications regulation, and their political systems have been historically influenced by powerful domestic and international corporations. With this tool in hand, both governments and advocates would know exactly what sort of laws they would need to craft to create a secure and nurturing environment for community broadcasting. The framework was presented to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission by Gustavo Gomez, then of AMARC-ALC, on July 18, 2007, in an effort to create a recognized standard for best regulatory practices in the Americas (Corral Jorado, 2008).

Uruguay was both the staging ground and the test case for the “Principles for a

Democratic Legislation” advocacy tool, and a five-day-long meeting of the research team behind it was held in the capital of Montevideo in April 2006.<sup>4</sup> In August 2006, AMARC-ALC, the Social and Legal Studies Institute (IELSUR), the communications faculty of the Universidad de la República, and APU presented draft legislation to the Uruguayan parliament (Robaina, 2006). After a year of negotiations and further development of the legislation, the Community Broadcasting Law was passed in 2007 and a dedicated regulatory body for community radio, the Honorary Commission on Community Broadcasting (CHARC), was created between April and June 2008. Unique in the world, this dedicated body is composed of representatives from constituencies rather than appointed commissioners.<sup>5</sup> It includes representatives from the Ministry of Industry, Energy and Minerals; Ministry of Education and Culture; the Universidad de la Republica;<sup>6</sup> the private university sector; the two central community radio associations—AMARC-Uruguay and ECOS—IELSUR, and APU (Government of Uruguay, 2008a, 2008b).

With the battle for legalization won, next on the agenda was determining the number of community radio stations operating in Uruguay and initiating a licensing process. In March 2008, URSEC launched a census, asking that all self-identified community radio stations respond. While AMARC-Uruguay had estimated 250 stations operating in the country, 413 stations ultimately responded. In the year following, the CHARC determined that 100 of these stations were ineligible for licensing because they were expressly attached to religious or political movements, and a presidential decree was issued in June 2009 identifying these 100 stations and rejecting their applications. (Government of Uruguay, 2009; RadioWorld, 2009). Of the 313 remaining stations, 84 were approved but only 38 were granted licences due to administrative restrictions. The remaining approved stations would be granted licences within the months following the seating of the new president (interview with Gustavo Gomez, National Director of Telecommunication—Ministry of Industry, Energy and Mining, 2010). In Uruguay, the president issues licences by decree. An election took place in October followed by a runoff election in November 2009, and regulations forbid the president from issuing licences of any sort within two months of the election. Finally, in September 2009, URSEC held public consultations on specific regulations pertaining to community radio (Unidad Reguladora de Servicios de Comunicaciones, 2009). The results of this process are expected to be used for the eventual development of a community radio policy.

### **Community radio in Uruguay: Four cases**

In 2005, long-time members of the Uruguayan community radio movement estimated that there are 60 to 80 community broadcasters in the country, 30 to 40 of them in the Montevideo area. As noted above, this estimate increased to 250 by 2008, and 413 stations responded to a census in 2009. Most of these broadcasters are “low power” (20 watts and less) and can usually be heard only in their immediate neighbourhoods. Presented here are four Montevideo-based stations that were initially visited in 2005. The portraits aim to demonstrate some of the unique traits of community radio in the Uruguayan context, and the scale and focus of their operations. They have been selected from an original corpus of 12 stations to provide a diversity of subjects. Stations

are identified by name, frequency, and neighbourhood. In each case, direct testimony from station members is presented as a means of illustrating 1) the role state repression has played in the choice to use the medium of radio; 2) the complex theoretical foundations that underpin many of these stations; and 3) different ways in which these stations are oriented toward their communities.

#### *Alternativa FM—105.5—Nuevo Paris*

Alternativa FM began broadcasting on February 4, 1995. Today their studio is located in an converted underground olive oil storage container, part of the cultural centre of a soccer league housing co-operative. They have one of the most well-constructed studios and antennas of the stations in Montevideo and can be heard in a few different neighbourhoods. The station began as the project of three friends who wanted to create an alternative to commercial radio. The history of Alternativa FM was recounted to us by a number of station members after one of their broadcasts. At the time of the interview in 2005, members were not identified due to the illegality and precarity of their broadcasting activity.

Within the first couple months there were problems. Mainly because the first government raid occurred about 10 months after we began broadcasting. We were receiving threats by telephone. Since we were three blocks from the police station, we suddenly began getting calls from a supposed policeman telling us to stop broadcasting ... but of course it [the station] was illegal and all... And then in December 1995, the Dirección Nacional de Comunicaciones<sup>7</sup> came and raided us for the first time. I'm pretty sure they took all of our equipment. This happened one month after Radio FEUU [the student federation station] began broadcasting. This was the first year of the second mandate of President Sanguinetti and he eventually gained the support of the university and the students' federation to officially evict Radio FEUU from the Hospital de Clínicas... The presence of Radio FEUU was a catalyst and when they started broadcasting we all got shut down. During this period, we were broadcasting from Adrian's house. The original idea was to play music that you couldn't hear anywhere else. You might say it was pirate radio. (Interview with members of Alternativa FM, 2005)

In 1999, the owner of the house where Alternativa FM was located asked them to leave. Eventually they joined with another station called Sudestada that was broadcasting from a nearby housing co-operative. With this fusion, the project became bigger and better connected with the broader community. They moved to their current location in 2000-01 but have always been located in the same neighbourhood (Alternativa FM interview, 2005).

Alternativa FM is entirely independent of other organizations, and their membership is composed of any and all active members. Although the individuals involved in the station may come and go, most stations, including Alternativa FM, tend to have 20 to 50 members. Management decisions such as the days the station will broadcast are decided collectively and committees are struck for ongoing projects. A programming committee evaluates program applications, and final decisions are collectively made by the station body. "There is a 'virtual' boss—the neighbours who come and

say they want to make a complaint, and the radio belongs to them, too” (Curuchet et al., 2006, pp. 74-75).

In the late 1990s, a German foundation provided ECOS with funding to outfit a number of its stations, including Alternativa FM, with studio equipment. However, this equipment was seized by authorities in 1998. Then, in 1999 a ferry carrying a group of station members to Argentina sunk. Although nobody was injured, each of these individuals donated a portion of their insurance settlement toward purchasing new equipment for the station. To fund general station upkeep and payment of bills, each program pays a monthly fee (Alternativa FM interview, 2005).

*El Puente—103.3 FM—La Teja— [www.lateja.org.uy/elpuente2.html](http://www.lateja.org.uy/elpuente2.html)*

The community radio station El Puente was founded in a neighbourhood that had already recognized the importance of local independent media. As we will see in other cases, there is a notable tendency for Uruguayan community stations to grow out of broader community movements.

Members of El Puente’s steering committee explained to us the history of the station and commented on the broader place of community radio in Latin America.

In 1989, a community newspaper was created that had links with various youth movements—anti-racist, anti state oppression. It was created because there was no local print media in the neighbourhood in which the residents could present their opinion and their way of seeing the world. In 1994, these same people saw a need to involve more youth. Youth culture in Latin America, just as much of the rest of the world, isn’t drawn to periodicals much. We saw other examples such as La Tribu<sup>8</sup> in Buenos Aires and how we could have an easily accessible electronic media. (Interview with members of El Puente steering committee, 2005)

The founders of El Puente assembled members from various parts of the community in order to understand exactly what the neighbourhood needed from a radio station. Finally, they began broadcasting on July 19, 1994, airing only on the weekends. In 1995, “raids of our radio stations began, persecution on the part of the government” (El Puente interview, 2005). They were raided three times, sometimes saving their equipment, sometimes losing it. Until 1997, the station had no fixed address, and from 1997 to 2002, they were hidden in the garage of a community member. From 2003 to 2007, they rented the top floor of a building and created a physically permanent and accessible location. At the time of writing, they were transitioning to a new location.

El Puente is the oldest community station in Uruguay and a founding member of both ECOS and AMARC-Uruguay. The founders of El Puente chose the medium of radio due to its cheap and easy accessibility. The station is also very well received by a youth population otherwise under-served by commercial media. Alex, a member of the station’s steering committee in 2005, explained his experience in these words: “This is a neighbourhood on the periphery of Montevideo, a zone of conflict that is in the conventional media a lot but is only characterized by deaths, robberies, drugs, etc.” (El Puente interview, 2005). Describing his early involvement with El Puente, he further stated:



When I began at this radio, I was 15-16 years old and if somebody had told me at that time that it was a television and that I would have had to show my face at a time when the illegality of this activity was made very clear by the government through very strong repression ... it would have been a very big risk. Television requires a different type of production, language, and convention that makes it inaccessible to people. (El Puente interview, 2005)

El Puente's operations are organized around a steering committee of seven people. In 2005, these individuals functioned as staff members and were paid a small wage. The committee regularly appoints individuals to organize programmers, supervise technical operations, and manage everyday station operations. Station membership is open to all interested community members. In recent years, the station has suffered from some major setbacks, including relocation. As with other stations, financial resources come from raffles, dances, and funding campaigns. They occasionally rent their studio to local bands for recording. Like *Alternativa FM*, programs are asked to contribute financially, in this case 30 pesos per person per month or 15 pesos per program per month. They also receive money from local businesses in exchange for casual verbal advertising—a practice known as “underwriting” that is also used extensively by community radio stations in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Barriada FM—107.1—Villa Española*

Barriada FM is located in the working-class neighbourhood of Villa Española. It grew out of a community centre called El Galpón de Corrales. A community kitchen was founded first, followed by the radio in 1999. Today, the centre serves as a safe meeting place for residents to gather and offers many series of free courses on various subjects. Members of the Barriada radio collective explained the history and ongoing work of the station during a group interview in 2005.

The objective was to have a media at the service of the neighbourhood. It also started as a response to economic crisis and social problems of this liberated [from dictatorship] country. It's a form of expression for the people of the neighbourhood who don't have access to communications media and a form of media where neighbours can participate directly. It functions according to the particularities of our immediate community so that social organizations and the audience can communicate in a double sense. The radio station transmits to the neighbourhood while people in the neighbourhood work to generate participation in the radio station. It's not just anything that goes on the air here, it's representative of the people and the difficulties and problems they may have. (Interview with members of Barriada FM radio collective, 2005)

Commenting on the utility of community radio stations, the collective explained: “We believe that community radios should be inserted in larger projects that address broader social issues, where there are community kitchens and community libraries. Communications media are sources of power, thus we need to socialize them and distribute this power” (Barriada FM interview, 2005).

La Barriada FM is organized horizontally and based on direct democracy—all

members have equal voice and equal opportunity for participation. Members of the station compose a radio committee that represents the radio within the larger workings of the community centre in which they operate. Other committees with which they work are a general community centre committee, community kitchen committee, and cultural committee. The radio committee makes all programming decisions. Unlike most other stations presented here, La Barriada's financial resources are addressed in the larger scope of the community centre. Members of La Barriada have been central actors in ECOS.

*Emisora de la Villa—104.9—Cerro*

A neighbourhood historically reliant on the manufacturing sector, Villa Cerro was severely affected by multiple economic crises, the first occurring in the late 1990s and the second in 2002. The neighbourhood is located on the periphery of the city, and it was hit hard by unemployment and poverty as its factories closed. In reaction to the first crisis, residents started a community kitchen programme as well as a program to provide schoolchildren with morning meals. As explained by Victoria, one of the key organizers of the station, members of this project then began to consider the role that media could play in their community.

When I tell you today that we did not understand media I mean that we did not know how to speak about the freedom each individual can exercise in order to express themselves, to express their worries and problems, their cultural, social and political propositions, questions of ethnicity and gender. There's an infinitude of questions. We implemented the radio as a tool for the neighbourhood to maintain life and stimulate everything related to social happenings. (Emisora de la Villa interview, 2005)

Emisora de la Villa was one of the founders of ECOS. The group organized the community radio stations but also coordinated various sorts of direct action protest. Radio was employed as one tool of activism among many others. "We believe that community radio and alternative media are closely linked to popular direct action. They are a decision to create a different source of information. ... People can represent themselves and reproduce what is close to them in life, shapes their behaviour and is their unique and total thought" (Emisora de la Villa interview, 2005). While members of other stations alluded to the political nature of their stations, Victoria explained how her station is a place where politics are purposefully constructed and put into action. From this perspective, we can see how the *raison d'être* of this station closely resembles that of post-dictatorship community radios of the 1980s by helping to reconstruct or reinforce the social fabric of the community in response to the effects of economic crisis.

I'd have to say that the principal values of this centre have to do with solidarity—with the recovery, revalorization and practice of solidarity. Besides that there are other fundamental themes that have to do with class independence and a reaffirmation of the independence of social and union movements that are excluded from politics. We believe this independence is crucial to be able to take adequate participatory action. The autonomy of the social space must

eventually become a legitimate question that the state will need to address. Autonomy is a broad concept. It has nothing to do with the apolitical. To the contrary, we believe that as social organizations we play a political role by facilitating and defining our own politics. All of this has to do with why and how we do radio. (Emisora de la Villa interview, 2005)

Neighbourhood-based social groups have close relationships with these stations, most of which broadcast to little more than their immediate neighbourhood. Groups differ from location to location but include a diversity of interests, such as housing co-operatives, unions associated with local factories, feminist organizations, adult education projects, and artisan collectives. At Emisora de la Villa, programming priority is given to the many social groups in its immediate community.

Emisora de la Villa began broadcasting April 21, 1996 (Robledo, 1998). In 1996, the station was shut down by the government three times, luckily never losing their transmitter. For the following few years, they would broadcast from various homes to avoid detection. In 2002, Emisora de la Villa was raided by the authorities at the same time as La Voz, El Puente, and Alternativa FM (Emisora de la Villa interview, 2005). As with La Barriada, Emisora de la Villa was located in a community centre and their studio equipment came from the same German foundation funding as that of Alternativa FM. While they were broadcasting regularly throughout 2005, Emisora de la Villa stopped transmitting in 2006 for unknown reasons (interview with G. Fernandez and other members of ECOS Federacion de las radios comunitarias, 2010). Today, however, there is another licensed community broadcaster (La Cotorra FM) and at least one unlicensed broadcaster operating in Villa Cerro (interview with J. Imaz, representative of AMARC-Uruguay, 2010).

### **Conclusions: Democratizing communication—More than speaking louder**

No longer a clandestine movement, community radio stations in Uruguay have become increasingly visible and vocal. What they are saying, however, is far from uniform. While participation of AMARC-Uruguay and ECOS within the community radio regulatory body may signal a certain level of cooperation, the reality on the ground is still very complex. Historically, ECOS was resistant to any effort to regulate community use of the radio spectrum. Their current involvement in regulation has coincided with a withdrawal of long-time members from ECOS' activities. At least two stations, each operating for over 10 years, decided to ignore the census launched by URSEC in 2008. Broadcasting from Carnival in February 2010, a member of Contonía FM explained how the station was now located in a housing co-operative for single mothers and that community members had collected over \$2,000 for the station to buy a new transmitter. "Why," he asked, "do we need any more legitimacy than that?" (informal interviews with members of Contonía FM, 2010). Another station passively resisting "regularization" efforts for the same reason is La Klasista, which has been operating out of the offices of the taxi union since 2000 (interview with Aldo at La Klassista, 2010). Finally, ECOS recently changed their name from the Coordinator of Community Radios to the "Federation" of Community Radios, signalling an operational change from coordination of activist activities through community radio stations to represen-

tation of these stations (casual interview with members of ECOS, 2010) and perhaps a co-opting or weakening of a radical movement previously working for broad change in the media system.

Further complicating matters is an unknown number of unlicensed radio broadcasters, most of whom do not identify as community radio stations. These tend to be commercial or religious in nature; an estimated 300 operate in Montevideo, plus an unknown quantity throughout the interior of the country (Aldo interview, 2010). While regulatory authorities admit that these stations may exist (Gomez interview, 2010), they do not have adequate resources to document or enforce such widespread unlicensed broadcasting and have only two trucks with which to police the entire country (interview with Adriana Riccardi, manager of Planning and Research, URSEC, 2010). Amplifying the situation is the fact that Uruguay has never had adequate resources for regulating communications in an active way, meaning that the very idea of regulation of communication is completely absent from the public sphere (Riccardi interview, 2010). Faced with the prospect of over 300 unlicensed radio stations using the airwaves, Gustavo Gomez—now National Director of Telecommunications and the individual largely credited with the successful campaign for legalizing community radio—insists that any station operating outside the law must be shut down (Gomez interview, 2010).

While the current status of community radio in Uruguay is complex, this unique situation presents unique prospects not only for this form of media but for the entire national media system. Once operating as a movement on the margins, members of the community radio movement have not only begun to influence policy but have also become important actors in the entirety of the communications policymaking process. However, in order for members of the community radio movement to become sustainable long-term partners in policy, both this movement and the state must make an effort to break away from their traditional roles and to collaboratively address common obstacles. One of the most serious obstacles is the relationship between these two sides.

Community radio stations in Uruguay have developed in two waves, responding to two distinct crises and a corresponding absence of social policy on the part of the state. The first wave emerged following Uruguay's dictatorship and served to help address the social exclusion and the destruction of the public sphere brought on by years of government repression. The second wave emerged following economic crises in 1998 and 2002 that shattered the country's historically strong middle class and created new strata of poverty. It is a movement accustomed to autonomy but unaccustomed to interaction with the state aside from repression and punishment. State mechanisms, although they are evolving, are unaccustomed to having a collaborative relationship with community radio stations. Profound collaboration on both communication and social policy is one way in which these stations and the state can perhaps move beyond their traditional roles and interactions. Such collaboration could make use of the unique relationship between community radio stations and their immediate communities and the State's and its desire to utilize communication technologies for social change.

Since 2005, the Uruguayan government has made enormous advances in rebuilding a welfare state, encouraging union movements and rolling out broad programs of technological and creative innovation. In October 2009, outgoing president Tabaré Vazquez handed out the last of almost 400,000 free laptops, making Uruguay the first country to distribute laptops from the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) program to 100% of the nation's primary school children (OLPC, n.d.). At the same time, the government is developing the Plan Cardales, an effort to extend affordable Internet access to all. Similarly, the Minister of Education and Culture has developed a network of cultural access points throughout the country in order to help foment arts and culture while also providing Internet access and computing courses (interview with Maria Simon, vice-minister of Education and Culture, 2010). Rather than authorities mirroring the regulatory footsteps of other nations by castigating the "illegitimate" use of the airwaves, the outpouring of interest in free expression demonstrated in 700-plus unlicensed broadcasters could perhaps be combined with the government's dreams of bolstering social equality through connectivity. Nevertheless, policy that aims to bridge these disparate media, forms of communication, social movements, and government is largely uncharted territory.

Such policy could be developed in a number of ways. At the time of writing, both civil society organizations and the government are engaging in serious reflection and debate over the content of new media, broadcasting, and telecommunications legislation (Asociacion de la Prensa del Uruguay, 2010; Uruguay, Ministerio de Industria, Energia y Minería, 2010). Lacking a telecommunications act and working with a broadcasting act dating to the dictatorship (Government of Uruguay, 1977), Uruguay has great potential to radically alter the orientation of the country's communication system. Should such collaborative change fail, Uruguay has a formidable history of popular referendums, often used when the state acts contrary to the wishes of the electorate. In 1989, through a plebiscite, a law granting amnesty to military personnel involved in the dictatorship was revoked by 57% of the voting population (Gallardo, 2006).

In 1992, another plebiscite was successfully organized on the question of privatizing state services, making Uruguay "the only country in the world that has been consulted on full-scale privatization and which has rejected the possibility by referendum" (Barrett, Chavez, & Rodriguez-Garavito, 2008, p. 101). Most recently, a referendum to add an article to the constitution guaranteeing the human right to water, provided for by the state and co-managed with the public, passed in 2004, at the same time the Frente Amplio was elected to their first mandate (Santos & Villareal, 2005). The population of Uruguay is an estimated 3.4 million people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2010), and a total of 279 AM and FM commercial radio stations are licensed to operate in the country (Unidad Reguladora de Servicios de Comunicaciones, 2010), in addition to 84 approved community stations and potentially 600-plus unauthorized radio stations. Should these numbers be valid,<sup>10</sup> it would mean 963 radio broadcasters of some sort and an average of one radio broadcaster per 3,530 people. Comparatively, Canada, which created its first community radio policy in 1976, currently has 1,180 licensed AM and FM broadcasters (community, commercial, and public) serving a population of 34 million, or one radio broadcaster per 28.81 people. Once licensed and unauthorized

broadcasting is properly documented in Uruguay, it could be possible to illustrate a common link between them (use of the radio spectrum for communication) and for a broad social movement to emerge. While a narrowly radio-related plebiscite would be doubtful given the divergent interests within the existing groups of broadcasters and the unexamined nature of unlicensed broadcasters, questions regarding the country's communication and media system may find broad support.

Good intentions appear to be ever-present, but patience and creativity may be key to the realization of any proposal. While Uruguay has one of the most participatory structures in the world for regulating community radio, this honorary commission is honorary in the sense that its members are not paid and it has no operating budget. In the past year, it gained an office and telephone within URSEC. To say the least, this situation is not sustainable (interview with Oscar Orcajo, professor at Universidad de la Republica and member of Consejo Honoraria de Radiodifusion Comunitaria, 2010). Meanwhile, URSEC itself has had plans to expand its capacity as a regulator, but has been unable to find candidates with the required knowledge and experience (Riccardi interview, 2010). And although the government was given a mandate in 2004 to develop participatory mechanisms for water governance and to design and implement robust research and governance capabilities, the department charged with water regulation is faced with similar obstacles: lack of budget and lack of candidates with adequate technical knowledge (interview with José Luis Genta, director of Direccion Nacional de Aguas y Saneamiento, 2010). With these experiences in mind, we can see how expanding access to community media may succeed where other efforts to democratize access to state-based knowledge and power have been slow to evolve. By their very nature, community radio stations assure that the technical knowledge needed to make media is accessible, and by nature of their economic realities and their histories within neighbourhoods and social movements, these groups are accustomed to operating with minimal financial resources. If members of these stations can play a broader role in the development of Uruguay's communication regulation and in the way this regulation is put into practice, perhaps some of the typical pitfalls of bureaucracy can be avoided and policy, rather than being developed and imposed from above, can be cooperatively grown from below.

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### Notes

1. Unidad Reguladora de Servicios de Comunicaciones or "Regulatory Unit of Communication Services," <http://www.ursec.gub.uy>.
2. The limitation of community radio stations to broadcast to a 1.5-kilometre radius has been common in Latin America, for instance in Chile and Brazil.

3. The author was responsible for analyzing the Canadian broadcasting system.
4. Head researchers were professor Damian Loreti of the Universidad de Buenos Aires and Gustavo Gomez. Funded by the Soros Foundation, this study also attracted active interest from the World Bank Institute, which, at the time, was funding civil society efforts to develop community radio policy in Nigeria.
5. In many countries, the composition of the communications regulatory body is determined by the head of the federal government.
6. Universidad de la Republica is the public university in Uruguay. Tuition is free. There are also a number of small private universities in the country.
7. National Direction of Communications. Prior to the creation of URSEC, this division of the Ministry of Defence managed the radio spectrum.
8. La Tribu is the oldest community radio station in Argentina and serves as an important example of the potential for community radio in Latin America and elsewhere. URL: <http://www.fmlatribu.com/>.
9. With legal status, community radio stations will be able to sell advertising.
10. Estimates of unlicensed commercial and religious broadcasters were provided by a member of La Klasista FM who has been conducting his own census from 2009-2010.

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