

## Communicative sovereignty in Latin America: The case of *Radio Mundo Real*

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### Abstract

Communicative sovereignty is emerging as an anchoring concept for community and alternative media in Latin America. The usage of the term is often unclear, however, especially as it relates to the current historical juncture. This article therefore presents a detailed analysis of the work of RadioMundoReal.fm (RMR), a regional alternative news production and distribution service that supplies content to local community media outlets. Findings show that RMR makes national struggles and regional events more visible, but users feel it should support the construction of alternative ways of living and communicating. This suggests that the concept of communicative sovereignty, as it is evolving in Latin America, reflects shifting approaches to both expressions of authority and alternative media work. The challenge is to develop media strategies that support emerging goals.

### Keywords

Communicative sovereignty, constituent power, regionalisation, Latin America, UNASUR, ALBA

### Introduction

Sovereignty has emerged as a significant concept for social movement actors in Latin America over recent years, especially as the region has confronted the global power shifts and geopolitical upheaval of the past decade. Popular movements are seeking energy sovereignty, (Perreault and Valdivia, 2010), for example, while food sovereignty has become a central concept for *campesino* movements (Wittman, 2011). The idea of communicative sovereignty also circulates in alternative and community media discourses in Latin America; however, very little scholarly work has addressed the concept, and its meaning or intention is often unclear in the declarations of social movement actors. This creates an opportunity to investigate the historically and contextually specific meaning of communicative sovereignty in contemporary Latin America; we can come to know communicative sovereignty as an artefact of contemporary efforts to reshape community in the region.

To this end, this study presents a case study of [www.RadioMundoReal.fm](http://www.RadioMundoReal.fm) (Radio Real World, or RMR). RMR is an alternative news production and distribution service located in Montevideo, Uruguay. It was established in 2003 by Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) to support social movement protests against the World Trade Organization's Fifth Ministerial Conference, which was held in Cancun, Mexico. RMR's beginnings were propitious: not only was the Ministerial considered a failure because of its inability to address developing country demands, but it also offered a taste of the then emerging policies of Latin America's wave of left-leaning 'Pink Tide' governments. Today, RMR produces and distributes content to alternative

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media outlets, primarily in Latin America, and also translates its coverage into multiple languages with the aim of achieving broader circulation. Working with a regional network of FoEI offices, as well as a broad range of regional social movements, the RMR team produces stories about local issues as well as special coverage of regional events. It then makes those stories available on its website in a variety of formats (print, video, audio) for free and open use by local media outlets. In addition, it offers capacity-building and mentorship guidance to journalists, alternative media producers and local media outlets.

RMR's international connections, regional character and grassroots activism make it an interesting case for a study about communicative sovereignty. Data from RMR's website was analysed using Google Analytics in order to identify the 50 stories with the most unique visits during 2013, and a specialised approach was developed to study the circulation of these stories in the region. In addition, NVivo was used to analyse the content of the stories. The results of this work were analysed against the experiences and desires of RMR's main collaborators and users. This analysis provides answers to a central question: How is RMR contributing to or constitutive of communicative sovereignty? Answers to this question reveal how media activists and practitioners are thinking about and enacting communicative sovereignty in Latin America at this time, as well as the kinds of work that could be done to bring alternative communications activities more in line with the vision of those who desire greater communicative sovereignty in the region.

### **Defining communicative sovereignty**

Communicative sovereignty is not a new concept, but it has taken on special meaning in relation to contemporary political efforts to reshape Latin America. This section discusses three clusters of ideas that illuminate the meaning of communicative sovereignty in the region today. The first deals with the relationship between communicational or cultural autonomy and the expression of meaningful democracy within nation states. The second considers the relationship between communications activities and struggles over the locus of authority in Latin America. There has been a gradual increase in popular sovereignty in the region; however, it runs up against the geopolitically sensitive resource-exploitation strategies of national executive powers and regional political bodies. Finally, the third addresses radical counter-hegemonic projects that search for alternatives beyond the sovereign state system and its particular epistemological heritage.

The idea of communicative sovereignty was given new life in contemporary Latin America with the rise of twenty-first-century socialism and the election of the Pink Tide governments. When Chávez came to power in Venezuela in 1999, he adopted the theses of Heinz Dieterich, who emphasised popular democracy as a foundation for a socialist economic transition. Setting this new model in motion required autonomy from external economic influences. For example, Chávez (2012) needed to take on the entrenched power of transnational capital and its domestic oligarchic partners in key sectors, such as hydrocarbon production. In order to do this, Chávez needed to limit the power of Venezuela's media conglomerates, which he did by reforming national media laws in 2000 and 2004 (Castillo, 2003).

Throughout the region, these types of processes are discussed in terms of sovereignty – hydrocarbon sovereignty, food sovereignty, communicative sovereignty and so on – to denote the search for autonomy from external constraints on decision-making about 'the national patrimony'. With this in mind, communications projects that increase domestic autonomy and capacity are also portrayed as bids for communicative sovereignty. Examples include the launch of communications satellites by Venezuela, Bolivia<sup>2</sup> and Argentina<sup>3</sup> in recent years, and projects that aim to fortify endogenous development, such as efforts to repatriate scientific capacity (Pigna, 2014) or build domestic media capacity.

These changes can be read as the fulfilment of the New World Information and Communication Order's argument that cultural and communicative sovereignty is a necessary prerequisite for meaningful democracy (Hackett and Carroll, 2006: 95). Indeed, the vision of communicative sovereignty associated with twenty-first-century socialism is closely tied to domestic media reforms that are meant to improve the quality of democracy. In Venezuela, new legal frameworks and financial supports allowed for new expressions of community media (Migliorelli and McNulty, 2009). This new approach influenced media reforms across Latin America, which shifted authority away from market players and towards popular sectors by reallocating media spectrum among a wider range of media producers (Hall, 2012).

Communicative sovereignty as democracy can take on different meanings. For example, it is sometimes presented in terms of basic communications rights:

The COMMUNICATIVE SOVEREIGNTY of the 21-C guarantees: 1) the right of everyone who lives in Venezuela to be informed in a timely, sufficient and truthful manner, 2) the establishment of legal barriers against the unilateral management of information by managers of technologies or media, 3) the opportunity for the majority to freely express themselves by way of diverse and novel communications and social media, and 4) the right to administer social media. (Marin, 2007 (trans.); see also Fernandez, 2015).

But other formulations go further, echoing Habermas's ideas about the foundations of political community. Marback (2012: 12) captures Habermasian communicative sovereignty in this passage: 'through uses of rhetoric – through expressing the desire for inclusion and exercising communicative sovereignty – democratic citizens come to share the burden and risk of belonging'. We see this type of thinking in the following statement by Cynthia Ottaviano, Argentina's Public Defender of Audiovisual Communications Services:

a society that doesn't have the human right to communication does not live in a true democracy. We live in a mediatized society where we need information to make decisions, and if this information is biased or responds to the interests of a privileged few, evidently, we have a manipulated reality rather than a mediated one. And this has very serious consequences for any society. There is no viable country if it does not have communicative sovereignty. (in Abelleira, 2015 (trans.); see also Villafaña in Sierra, 2010)

These democratic process conceptions of communicative sovereignty open the door, in turn, to discussions about the cultural foundations of national identity and nationalism – that is, 'a common culture based in a standardised language and cultural institutions in making a common people' (Schlesinger, 2001: 29). For example, in discussing representations of Argentina on television during periods of both dictatorship and democracy, television writer Ana Montes (in *El Tiempo Argentino*, 2015 (trans.)) argues that 'we need to construct a communicative sovereignty in order to recuperate the screen'. She states that this is a 'defense of our rights and our identity'.

But this, of course, is a complicated proposition. As Kronert and Hepp (2011: 102) point out, for some actors (in this case, religious groups), engaging the media can come at the expense of their own communicative sovereignty. Also, the 'always on' media, and the breakdown of the division between the public and private spheres, destabilise our experience of communicative sovereignty at the individual level (Laermans, 2010).

Ultimately, discussions about the domestic foundations of communicative sovereignty culminate in the problem of organising media in ways that contribute to the creation of meaningful community, which raises the question of how authority is rendered in the constitution of a sovereign body. This is not an easy question to resolve. Critics of populism often accuse left-leaning regimes of pursuing sovereignty in the media at the cost of constituent voice-power (see, for example, Moyo, 2004: 27) – an accusation that has certainly been levelled at the Chávez regime (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Munoz 2014), among others in the region

(Peruzzotti, 2013; Weyland, 2013). Agamban scholars, meanwhile, worry that – whether through populism or liberalism – the public opinions expressed in the public sphere are ‘banal, empty and impotent’, and as a result the public sphere functions to mask the pre-constituted nature of power (Zartaloudis, 2010: 123). This creates the conditions necessary for the exceptionality of state power – for states to put themselves beyond and outside of the law, and to use the law to deprive individuals of their citizenship even as they continue to have a voice.

This problem of how constituents are incorporated into spaces of authority is fundamental for a second cluster of ideas, which has to do with ongoing struggles over the redefinition of the locus of authority in the region – particularly in South America. Of course, globalisation (resulting from structural adjustment in the case of Latin America) has created new expressions of transnationalism that challenge the authority of states. In particular, global information and communications networks, together with transnational media industries, pose a threat to communicative sovereignty (Coleman, 2015: 378). But at the same time, recent decades have seen an upsurge in popular sovereignty in Latin America, and this force has exceeded state boundaries in significant ways (Roniger and Sznajder, 2013). The growth of popular sovereignty in the region can be explained in large part because of the rise of the internet (León, Burch and Tamayo, 2005) and its contributions to activist spaces such as the World Social Forum (Patomaki and Teivainen, 2004). It is also a result of the national media reforms discussed above, which aim to support community and alternative media (Gómez García, 2013). For example, in a clause about legal and just social democracy, Chávez’s June 2012 electoral platform pledged to ‘strengthen communicative sovereignty by disseminating our cultural patrimony ... with a view to strengthening processes of Latin American and Caribbean integration and unity’, implemented through support for the communicative efforts of *nuestros pueblos* (our communities) (Chávez, 2012: clause 2.5.7.1 (trans.)).

As a result, much of contemporary Latin American political life can be read as a struggle to establish new loci of political authority that leverage or assert control over newly emerged transnational forces. Most prominently, over the past decade, Latin American states have pursued a series of regionalisation processes, including the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our Americas (ALBA), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). A significant debate has emerged over whether these processes have created new sovereignty regimes that shift the locus of authority upwards, or merely extend the reach of executive authority beyond the reach of local politics (Legler, 2013: 342). In either case, regionalisation can be read as an effort to better control capitalist insertion in a post-neoliberal or post-hegemonic era, but at stake in this debate is the nature of capitalist insertion, as well as the ability of constituents to hold their leaders accountable in the design and implementation of economic policy. This is important, given the region’s shift towards extraction-led growth, which has significant environmental and social impacts.

In this context, communicative sovereignty refers to *regional* infrastructure and media projects that reduce reliance on transnational data cables (Coca, 2014; Equipo Editorial APC, 2012; Zibechi, 2012) or transnational cultural influences (Burch, 2007). The relationship of this new regional communicative sovereignty with popular sovereignty is especially unclear. Regional communications infrastructure projects, such as the regional fibre optic ring being pursued by the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), can help to lower data pricing, which could support communicative activities that help citizens hold executives to account. However, the benefits of these projects have not yet arrived, and meanwhile there is the very real possibility that communications infrastructure will support further integration into global production circuits, against the immediate interests of significant groups of citizens (Reilly, 2015). Meanwhile, regional media initiatives such as ALBA’s Telesur network aim to generate regional cultural integration and sovereignty. Venezuela and/or ALBA also provide funding for

regional community media organisations, including RMR, and regional civil society summits, at which RMR is a frequent participant. These groups have moved away from the dispersed and carnivalesque communications strategies of the World Social Forums, and towards a more coordinated and targeted approach, which was formally negotiated at the Cumbre de los Pueblos (Community Summit) in Santiago de Chile in January 2013 (Cirio, 2013) and further coordinated at the Forum on Communication for the Integration of Our America, organised by the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información (Latin American Information Agency, or ALAI) and the Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica (Latin American Association for Radio Education, or ALER) in Quito in November 2013. The objective of these initiatives is to coordinate regional mediation of popular sovereignty so that local voices can be transmitted to regional political bodies. This work is coordinated through a web portal located at <http://www.integracion-lac.info>.

Many social movement groups worry about being co-opted by these processes, however, particularly where they constrain local abilities to protest projects supported by executive powers, including resource development initiatives that can result in environmental damage and community displacement. These groups recognise that national community media programs can represent an effort to repatriate popular sovereignty, while regional community media efforts can constrain spaces for political manoeuvre (Chaguaceda, Córdova Jaimes and León Alvarez, 2013; Prevost, Campos and Vanden 2010; Waisbord, 2011). It is true that the authority of political community is a two-way street – officials who are more connected to constituents are also more beholden to their interests. However, the relationship between domestic interests and foreign policy is not necessarily one to one, especially if regionalism happens through the extension of executive authority beyond the remit of local politics. As a result, many citizen groups have remained wary of the potential for co-optation by state interests through newly created community media programs.

With this in mind, we arrive at a third cluster of ideas. Some groups look upon the nation-state strategically as just one of many possible tools in a larger battle against the power of transnational production regimes. As McMichael (2008: 28) explains, the bigger goal is to gain 'control over the means of reproduction *and* representation in an integrated world'. This vision of 'multiple sovereignties' recognises that while people around the world experience power and transnational production regimes in similar ways, their responses will necessarily be localised. Communicative sovereignty in this case implies respect for cognitive justice and epistemological diversity (Santos, 2007). Hernandez and Garabito (2012: n.p. (trans.)) argue, for example, that 'community media should continually reconstruct and reformulate identities given the contradictions and antagonisms of collective representations ... Local actors will be, in this way, those who conduct their own future, which will be, to be sure, different and in many cases, contradictory.' This approach is particularly popular within transnational networks of localised civil society or social movement organisations, in particular indigenous communities in Latin America, which have a contentious relationship with the hegemonic European concept of sovereignty, and which, coincidentally, often find themselves in the path of environmentally destructive development projects.

Multiple sovereignties radically challenge unitary or meshed forms of legal community. For McMichael (2008: 29), multiple sovereignties are cosmopolitan in nature, in that they work to localise universal human rights frameworks – a practice to which he refers as 'engaged universals'. As he explains, 'contemporary networks of sovereignty movements represent a tactical intervention on the path toward global citizenship, marking the deepening of transboundary issues' (2008: 29). Some might argue that his approach shuts down the potential for fundamental alternatives to currently existing practices. Whether or not one agrees with his position will depend on the boundaries placed on the expression of cognitive justice. Thus, for

Gies (2014: 106), communicative sovereignty is the more radical project of imagining meaningful alternatives to state-centricity and territoriality, and new ways of organising social, political and economic relations. Similarly, the Argentinean blog *Soberanía Comunicacional* talks about the concept in this way:

The deepening of the Regional Political process is intimately related to the capacity to reconstruct the common sentiment, to dispute the meaning of words. The battle for Communicative Sovereignty ... is the battle for hegemony, for the re-signification of history, for the present and the future that we envision. (2012 (trans.), emphasis added)

In all, the term 'communicative sovereignty' captures a moment of change in Latin America, but the goal of its work is not always clear. Detailed examination of one regional alternative media producer and distributor, RMR, offers an opportunity to reflect on how these issues manifest in the work of alternative media actors in the region.

## **Method**

Analysis of RMR's activities was carried out in consultation with the organisation using a mixed methods approach. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out in Spring 2014. A list of known collaborators was provided by RMR, and additional interviewees were identified from Google Analytics data (see below). These individuals were approached via email, resulting in a reply rate of approximately one in three. The resulting 12 interviews were carried out via Skype. Interviewees were broadly representative of both the region and a variety of large and small organisations, including regional networks, nodes within networks and local community radio stations.

Privacy was not promised as part of the informed consent process for these interviews, given that interviewees were public figures and the subject of the interview was low risk. Interview responses were used to develop frameworks for the evaluation of RMR's activities to ensure that the research responded to the categories and concerns of people engaged in practice – Santos (2011) refers to this as 'rearguard theorizing'. The results of this analysis were published as a Spanish-language report, which was circulated to interviewees for verification and comment (Reilly and Febres Cordero, 2015). This report was also published prominently on the RMR website, and discussed during one of its radio programs.

RMR facilitated analysis of its communications activities by providing access to the Google Analytics dashboard of its website. This made it possible to identify the 50 stories produced or distributed by RMR in 2013 that received the most unique website visits. The content of these stories was analysed using NVivo, and this analysis was complemented, deepened and verified through the use of manual techniques including visual analysis, word searches and web searches. In particular, findings about the alternative content produced by RMR were compared with mainstream content produced by the top five mainstream newspapers in Latin America with regional distribution.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, a special approach was developed to study the circulation of the 50 most visited stories from 2013. RMR does not track users or usage by asking its audience to open an account before downloading material, since this would introduce barriers to use. Meanwhile, asking often-clandestine or resource-strapped community radio stations whether they have broadcast or reprinted RMR's open content would be arduous, and the accuracy of this kind of survey would be difficult to guarantee. This made it impossible to know the extent to which audio content was being downloaded from RMR's site, and who was doing the downloading.

However, since RMR publishes print versions of its audio material, and audio content can be downloaded from the page on which its text version is posted, the number of hits on a print version of a story offers an approximation of audio uptake. With this in mind, we tracked the circulation of print stories using commercial plagiarism software; this software is normally used

by bloggers to track reprints of their work, and by content buyers to ensure the originality of their purchases. In this case, Copyscape (<http://www.copyscape.com>) was used – not to track plagiarism, since RMR’s contents are openly published, but rather to discover who was publishing content similar to that being produced by RMR, as well as the degree of similarity in their content, and also the degree of circulation of popular stories. While far from perfect, this approach offered an approximation of RMR’s linkages and influence. This analysis was done in January 2014.<sup>5</sup>

### **Evaluating Radiomundoreal.fm’s activities**

RMR has three main lines of work. First and foremost, it produces and distributes audiovisual and written articles, reports, interviews, testimonials and chronicles through its web platform, <http://www.radiomundoreal.fm>. The works, written from an alternative point of view, address issues related to water, neoliberalism, forests and biodiversity, human rights, gender, extractive industries, climate and energy justice, and food sovereignty. RMR also produces special coverage of regional congresses, summits, marches and events that are of broad interest to social movement audiences in Latin America and beyond. Its materials are translated into English, Spanish and Portuguese, and they are made available in both audio and print format. Through these activities, RMR aspires to generate connections between different constituencies within the region, including local communities, social movement actors, users of different types of media and speakers of different languages.

RMR also considers it important to develop the capacity of the local media producers and distributors with whom it works. It collaborates with alternative media and social movement actors locally, regionally and internationally. These include FoEI’s network of country-level partners throughout Latin America, which collaborate with RMR to identify local stories and produce content, as well as other alternative media networks such as ALER, and other social movement networks like Via Campesina. Finally, it also offers capacity-building support to local media producers and distributors.

Interviewees recognised RMR’s many contributions to social movement activities in the region. They highlighted RMR’s efforts to provide coverage of regional social movement events, and to provide access to news about local struggles and abuses not covered in the mainstream press. They also highlighted the importance of this kind of work in creating linkages between social movements by making local groups and movements aware of what is happening elsewhere in the region – in particular, by translating news for Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking Latin Americans. In short, users felt that the most important work of RMR was to (1) produce alternative content, (2) circulate that content at a regional level, and (3) create linkages between groups and movements. Thus interviewee opinions about RMR’s current activities approximate what Western scholarship variously calls ‘social movement media’ (Stein, 2009), ‘communication in movement’ (Della Porta, 2011) or ‘global media activism’ (de Jong, Shaw and Stammers, 2005).

Our analysis demonstrated the extent to which RMR’s work corresponded with the categories suggested by its users. RMR does indeed produce alternative media content, which can be divided into two broad categories: news items and areas of special coverage. The most popular and circulated news items of 2013 addressed megaprojects in Guatemala (with seven stories among the top 50) and the criminalisation of the Consejo de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH) (six stories among the top 50). Both of these were recurring issues that received ongoing coverage from RMR, and neither received coverage in mainstream press with regional circulation. Discursively, these stories emphasised *resistencia* (resistance) and community struggle against corporations and projects. These articles also denounced injustices or human rights abuses against communities, or against the social movements fighting

against abuses. Finally, they called for solidarity and participation in efforts to create change, and offered links to the organisations directly involved in the conflict.

Of the 16 items given special coverage by RMR in 2013, only six appeared in the top 50 list (see Table 1). These articles served either to promote upcoming regional events or to inform people about events as they unfolded, often through interviews with participants or reports about key speakers. Again, none of these events was covered by the mainstream press with regional circulation in Latin America, despite the fact that many of these events were of regional importance.

**Table 1: Special Coverage by RMR in 2013**

<b>Special coverage among the top 50 articles of 2013 (no. stories)</b>	<b>Special coverage not included in top 50 articles of 2013</b>
Community Summit in Santiago de Chile (5)	Hugo Chávez Thinking and Doing Meeting
National Peace Summit in Colombia (2)	Venezuelan Elections 2013
Founding Assembly of ALBA Movements ALBA (2)	Sixth <i>Via Campesina</i> International Conference
5th Festival of Local Seeds (2)	Southern Cone Seminar on Transgenic Crops
9th International Meeting of the World March of Women (2)	Southern Cone Seminar on Agrotoxins
Fifth Meeting of the Latin American Network Against Dams (REDLAR) (1)	Assembly of the Food Sovereignty Alliance of Latin America and the Caribbean
	National Meeting of People Affected by Dams
	ATI Solidarity Mission in Palestine
	Legal Seminar on Seeds
	International Seminar on Water, Sustenance and Energy

The issues covered by RMR circulated widely throughout the region. Again, it is important to note the inherent difficulty in studying the circulation of alternative media content. Alternative media outlets republish each other's open web-based content in an effort to increase circulation, especially when trying to spread the word about a significant issue throughout dispersed social networks. Using Copyscape, however, it was possible to see which of the top 50 articles published by RMR in 2013 were circulating the most, and also which domains were active in republishing similar content.

The results demonstrate the number of articles found on web pages or web-based blogs with similar content, and the degree of similarity in that content. So, for example, the content of a 24 May 2013 article titled 'Se estructuró la articulación de movimientos sociales hacia el ALBA' (Social movement articulation is being structured around ALBA) was 80 per cent similar to 104 other websites in January 2014. This particular article includes the Declaration that was issued at the closing of the First Continental Assembly of Social Movements for ALBA, so it is not unexpected that other websites would share this content. On the other hand, the content of an article from 19 September 2013 titled 'Matan a integrante de Movimientos Ríos Vivos en Colombia: entrevista a una de sus compañeras' (Member of the Ríos Vivos Movement in Colombia killed: Interview with one of her colleagues) was 38 per cent similar to 87 other web pages in January 2014.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that these stories are circulating widely in the region, but not necessarily that RMR is *causing* them to circulate, or that RMR's version of the story is in circulation. We do know from this, however, that RMR is circulating stories that are being widely written about and observed in the region, and that in this way RMR is contributing to an active discussion about these issues.



It is also possible to demonstrate that this circulation reflects both thematic and real linkages between social movements and alternative media outlets in the region. Using Copyscape, it is possible to identify domains that publish material similar to RMR, and the degree to which the material they publish is similar. RMR shares coverage with regional news production and distribution agencies such as ALAI, ALER and Púlsar News Agency, regional movements like the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones Campesinas (CLOC), regional meeting spaces such as the Community Summit in Santiago de Chile, national-level alternative media actors such as Radio Temblor and Radio Kabudari, local social movements and alternative bloggers. In other words, RMR finds itself in certain company in the region, and there is evidence to suggest that its 'partner' organisations are making use of RMR's content in their work. Of special interest in these findings, in 2013 <http://www.albatv.org> included 60 domains that were 97 per cent similar to RMR content. Albatv is a platform that gathers community radio and social movement content from across the region with the objective of creating a regional community media 'channel' on the internet.

These findings are in line with what interviewees told us about the work of RMR. For example, Olmedo Carraquilla of Radio Temblor said:

Latin America is in struggle, and communities strengthen themselves through the voices of the resistances of others. Therefore, for us, RMR is a library of information that helps us to puzzle out proposals, resistances, new forms of life.

Hugo Ramírez of ALER said:

We have crossed paths with RMR in different spaces and we've realized collaborations ... It's not just a case of sharing information, we also share a political project ... This is work *en minga* (as a community bee) where there's no agreement saying how things will be, but we know that there is agreement in our goals, which makes RMR's information similar to ours, and vice versa.

And Carlos Vicente of BiodiversidadLA said:

We feel that convergence in media is absolutely fundamental to articulate, join forces, for the same objective, even more so considering the limitations we face. The totality of our media is tiny compared with the dominant media, so convergence helps us to multiply our strength.

Interviewees were also asked how they defined communication in resistance, what they thought the role of alternative media platforms such as RMR should be and how RMR needed to change to accommodate the shifting global and Latin American political climate. Answers to these questions began to uncover a gap between the activities RMR was carrying out and the work that it could be doing, given the desires of its partners and users, and the changing regional context.

When asked how they defined communication in resistance, interviewees offered three different types of answers. Communication was variously characterized as (1) an instrument of resistance and visibilisation, (2) a vector for social change through the creation and practice of alternatives, or (3) an expression of communicative sovereignty. Bruno Pilón of the Movimiento de Pequeños Agricultores (MPA) of Brazil offered a particularly interesting answer, saying that communication in resistance is precisely, 'sovereignty in communication. When we speak of sovereignty we speak of the condition of communities that are autonomous from capital interference' and 'it means that we can produce what is necessary to support our own abilities, sustenance, music, culture.'

Questions about the shifting geopolitical reality of Latin America were interpreted in terms of the neo-developmental policies of Latin America's contemporary governments, and how spaces of regionalisation such as UNASUR serve to advance extractivism and natural resource

exploitation. For example, Deo Carrizo, a representative of the Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena (MNCI) of Argentina and a local representative of the CLOC, said:

There is a new geopolitical context of regionalization and it is being promoted as part of the economic agenda of the governments. We should intervene in these processes to represent the interests of communities.

Similarly, Carlos Vicente from BiodiversidadLA said:

The theme of integration is quite complicated because while we are in agreement with integration ... it is happening through government adherence to the extractivist model. While we believe that Latin America needs to be united, government's consensus about this mode of operation produces problems for processes of integration.

Taking the above two conversations together, when asked how RMR should adjust its activities to accommodate the shifting geopolitics of the region, interviewees said that RMR should do more than simply inform people about regional events or local issues; rather, it should interpret and analyse the shifting regional context to help build a critical consciousness among citizens. It should help people understand what is happening in the region, and give local actors a voice within regional spaces of decision-making. And RMR should strengthen the search for alternatives among communities.

In sum, while interviewees recognised that alternative media is advantageously mobilized as an instrument of visibilisation and resistance, in the current geopolitical context they saw a need to mobilise communications from the grassroots as a vector for the construction of alternatives, and as an expression of constituent or constitutive power. This alone is a significant finding, because it suggests that community and alternative media actors seek to create alternative spaces and expressions of power, and not the consummation of liberal politics and its public spheres at either the national or global levels.

Interviewees also offered guidance on how this work should be done. They felt that RMR could do more to help local groups contextualise their experience in the regional setting, and increase their knowledge of the initiatives and struggles of local groups in other parts of the region. They said that RMR should accompany local movements instead of reporting about their activities, and that RMR needed to develop a political project around the act of doing communications work. They also suggested that this type of work should provide a space for people to communicate and express themselves through their own eyes, their own language and their own ways of understanding the world, in ways that give rise to alternative discourses. These discourses should provide the basis for alternative ways of communicating and living. These contributions bring to mind, for example, the Andean concept of *sumak kawsay* (good living) (Balch, 2013), which orients media towards community well-being in balance with the natural environment (Contreras Baspineiro, 2014).

Overall, interviewees felt that RMR should (1) contextualise local news within the regional setting as a way of empowering local groups, (2) give local groups a voice at the regional level by being accompanied by regionalism from below, and (3) help in the construction, strengthening and circulation of alternative ways of life and alternative ways of communicating. The gaps identified by interviewees are consistent with findings from this study.

Analysis showed that RMR does indeed use communication primarily as an instrument for visibilisation and resistance, rather than as a vector for social construction or an expression of constitutive power. This is apparent in the many examples presented above. The discourses represented in RMR's news articles, plus the way in which materials circulate in the region, illustrate how RMR uses its media platform as a tool to make visible the struggles of communities in the face of forces that are impinging on their rights. This is likely a product of RMR's efforts to distinguish itself from the mainstream media in Latin America. None of the

16 topics that RMR selected for special coverage in 2013 was covered by mainstream newspapers with regional reach. Despite the fact that many of these events were large, of regional importance, organised by significant and internationally recognised organisations, brought together people from across the region and had political import, they received no coverage from mainstream media organisations with regional distribution.

Among news articles, there were a few exceptions, such as a story about Evo Morales being retained in Europe at the request of the US government. Usually, however, issues covered by RMR appeared in the mainstream press only when the story was sensationalist (as in the case of an apparent assassination), and then only in national-distribution newspapers. In this handful of cases, the tone of the coverage was very different; mainstream papers focused on events, while RMR's coverage focused on injustices and included a call for solidarity. Also, mainstream papers discussed incidents as isolated cases within a particular country context, while RMR's coverage situated national incidents in patterns of international injustice.

The tendency to make reference to *national* and *international* contexts is strong in RMR's writing, and this also raises questions about its contributions to the construction of alternative narratives or alternative realities. NVivo was used to produce word clusters within the top 50 stories in 2013 (Figure 1). The examples presented in Figure 1 are clusters of words that appear around three stories: the struggle of the Intibucá community and of activist Berta Cáceres of COPINH to stop the construction of the Agua Zarca dam over the Rio Blanco river in Honduras; stories about megaprojects in Guatemala that were produced as part of a November 2012 'Solidarity Tour' to communities affected by mining megaprojects in Central America; and the Peace Congress in Colombia. In each case we see a word related to struggle (examples include resistance, defence or front), a reference to a political or economic force (government, company or project) and a geo-location (Honduras, Colombia).

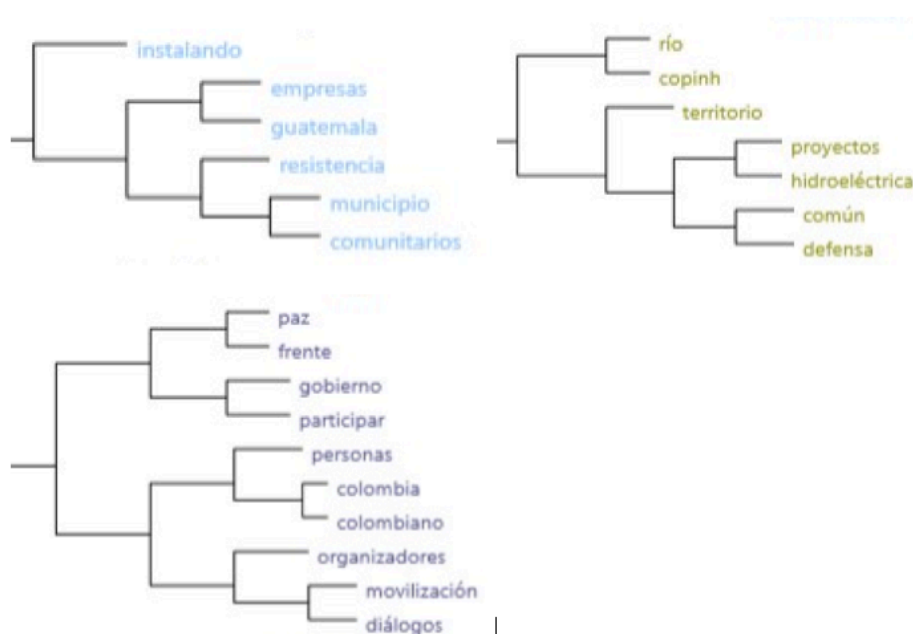


Figure 1: Word clusters in the 50 most visited RMR stories from 2013

NVivo can also be used to produce a list of words used in RMR articles rank-ordered by number of uses. Interestingly, the fourth most used word in the 50 most visited articles in 2013 was 'country'. This is not even counting references to specific countries in those same stories, such as Guatemala, Honduras or Colombia. This was followed by the use of the words 'community' (9), 'national' (10) and 'international' (19). In other words, RMR continues to use geo-political descriptors that reinforce a particular way of thinking about and relating to the locus of authority in Latin America, as well as its bearing on, or responsibility towards community. The word '*Latinoamérica*' ranked 41st, while 'region' ranked 57th. This would seem to suggest that in 2013, RMR's coverage was not focused on contextualising local issues in the regional setting, but rather portrayed local issues with regard to either international forces or national sovereignties.

Finally, on the subject of accompanying regionalism from below, and supporting the work of local communities to develop alternatives, it is important to recall that RMR does work directly with local groups. Indeed, Oscar Gálvez of the National Maya Convergence Waquib'Kej spoke highly of a solidarity tour during which RMR reporters visited his community:

RMR didn't just come to document and take photos, do a pair of interviews, and that's it. Rather, they have a closer relationship to the communities. These kinds of services are huge for us because not just any media outlet makes itself available for this. It's difficult to get an international media outlet of the calibre of RMR to come to Guatemala to hear, from the community's own voice, what they are suffering and what they are recommending.

This is well-deserved praise; however, it is important to pay careful attention to the target of the accolades. Gálvez is confirming the role of RMR in making visible realities that are otherwise ignored by the mainstream media. This is different from the expressed desire of interviewees to move away from a centrally run networked news *platform* and towards a program of communicative action from below that converges in alternative forms of expressing community.

Overall, this analysis shows that RMR makes the struggles of local communities and the activities of regional actors visible to interested actors throughout the region. It does this work in networked collaboration with other social movement and alternative media actors, and in this way helps to build awareness and strengthen connections. However, there is a call among social movement actors to leverage or transcend this kind of networked alternative media activism in ways that do not just create awareness, but also work to bring new realities into being. Inherent in these expressed desires are questions about how regional alternative media activities work with community or alternative media to enact particular kinds of regionalisms, and how they constitute expressions of authority. In reflecting on these issues, we can arrive at new thinking about the meaning of communicative sovereignty in Latin America today.

### **Conclusions: Locating communicative sovereignty**

In her research about community radio in Ecuador, Febres-Cordero (2015) argues that the job of community media is not to give voice to the voiceless; rather, community media accompany people in the process of enacting community – something that communities are doing continuously. The question is how community media can do this work in Latin America, given both changing technologies and the shifting geopolitical context of the region. In conversation with José Miguel Jaramillo, the Ecuadoran representative to ALER, on 29 July 2014, I learned that communities and their radio stations face unique challenges from the changes currently sweeping through Latin America. Under conditions of resource-driven development and extractivist geopolitics, nation-states work to incorporate local leaders into national and regional development agendas, a project that often leaves communities divided and disempowered, so that regional or transnational initiatives can be implemented. Jaramillo argues that community media must locate new 'hooks' to draw communities in, and new ways to accompany

communities in their continual processes of enactment, so that they can *constitute* themselves as a proactive force in the management of development processes.

Realising this work requires reflection on the relationship between grassroots education (such as the Feria Pedagógica (learning fair) described by Mein, 2009), citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2010a) and transnational social movement media initiatives (Downing, 2005). With this in mind, the research suggests existing community or alternative frameworks have a lot to learn from performative perspectives. For Rodriguez (2010b), this approach is particularly important to *reclaiming* public space because it helps people to experience mediation, which in turn creates more peaceable relations between individuals who live in a conflict zone. In this, she is drawing on the self-reflective qualities of performance studies. I am more interested in the emphasis that these theories place on self-actualisation (Reilly, 2014), which I view as fundamental to resituating constituent power in communities, such that public spheres can be transformed into new expressions of authority. This, in turn, prompts us to reflect on the objectives of transnational social movement media, which, as has been shown in this article, builds connections and awareness. But how can these networks help to facilitate local knowledge production in ways that reshape local experiences of authority?

Ultimately, this is what is at stake with the vision of communicative sovereignty that circulates through alternative and community media discourses in Latin America. Local media want sufficient freedom, capacity and support to be able to insert themselves into cultural, economic and political circuits in ways that allow them to 'reproduce and represent' community *proactively*. It is only in this way that community can support the production of *constituents* that can enter productively into the work of *constituting* the multiple and overlapping loci of authority that make up the Latin American region. This includes the loci of authority that are mediated by regional communications platforms, including those that are produced by alternative media, such as the RMR platform. We are left with an urgent question: How can regional alternative news production and distribution platforms move from building networks, by informing a region about what is being done to a locality, to producing a region that becomes a platform?

The mediation that happens through alternative news-distribution networks needs to be conscious of how it incorporates people into regional spaces. It is clear from this study that community media understand the need to enact local community both *within* and also *through* these regional spaces. It is also clear that this means something much, much more than being subject to, included in or victimised by forces that exist on a different plain of power. It is easy to write about the sensational failure of states to protect local citizens from transnational capital-power. Much more difficult is the project of using the power of stories to help that community stay intact as it navigates the various sovereignties that determine its ecological, economic, cultural, political and familial fate. For alternative news-distribution platforms, working out how to tackle this challenge requires careful reflection on how to tell the story of local experiences with issues like mining or climate change, and also whether these stories are being mobilised in an ethical manner when they are leveraged to construct larger mediated spaces, both regionally and internationally.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Belen Febres Cordero for her assistance with the research presented in this article, and for her collaboration in producing a report that preceded this essay: *Radio Mundo Real (2003–2013): el rol de la comunicación en resistencia en la cambiante coyuntura geopolítica de América Latina*, which is available at: [http://radiomundoreal.fm/get.php?file=IMG/pdf/radio\\_mundo\\_real\\_reporte\\_final.pdf&a](http://radiomundoreal.fm/get.php?file=IMG/pdf/radio_mundo_real_reporte_final.pdf&a)

mp?type=application/pdf. Thank you also to Heather Gies, who inspired this project in the first place.

- <sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://abpnoticias.org/index.php/bolivia/368-bolivia-hacia-la-soberania-comunicacional-lanzamiento-del-satelite-tupac-katari>.
- <sup>3</sup> Available at: <http://posdataweb.com.ar/arsat-2-un-paso-mas-hacia-la-soberania-comunicacional>.
- <sup>4</sup> According to Top 100 Newspapers in Latin America (2006–13). *4International Media & Newspapers*. Available at <http://www.4imn.com>.
- <sup>5</sup> Full study details, including data, are available at: [http://radiomundoreal.fm/get.php?file=IMG/pdf/radio\\_mundo\\_real\\_reporte\\_final.pdf&type=application/pdf](http://radiomundoreal.fm/get.php?file=IMG/pdf/radio_mundo_real_reporte_final.pdf&type=application/pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Note that the header, footer and side-bar content of any given website will ensure that the similarity score is never 100 per cent between two different web pages.

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