



De-westernizing Alternative Media Studies: Latin American Versus Anglo-Saxon Approaches from a Comparative Communication Research Perspective

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Abstract

This chapter reviews and compares the historical grounds of alternative media in Latin America and in the Anglo-Saxon world. A number of theoretical works and case studies have been summarized in order to present a comparison between both academic communities from the perspective of communication for development and social change. What is the origin and evolution of theory and practice within both contexts? Are there differences between them? What are the basic features of Latin American approaches to citizen communication? The answers to these questions will be critically developed in order to shed light on a number of issues regarding communication processes made by, from, and for the people. Furthermore, we will try to build bridges between both academic communities from a comparative media perspective.

Keywords

Community communication · Alternative media · Communication for social change · Comparative studies · Communication theory

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Introduction

In recent years, academic and activist literature in communication for development and social change is expanding and gaining in complexity and diversity (Tufté 2017). Furthermore, the last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the specific field of community media, in special from 2001, when three relevant publications laid solid foundations for further research (Atton 2001; Downing 2001; Rodríguez 2001). On the other hand, the concern for media and communication repertoires has gained importance in the field of social movement studies, where many academics have started to understand research from the perspective of a deeper collaboration with activists (Hinz and Milan 2010: 842).

This chapter reviews and compares the historical grounds of alternative media theories and practices both in Latin America and in the Anglo-Saxon context. We will first approach the field of community communication and its main academic debates. Then, we will compare knowledge and practices that emerged in both contexts, underlining the main continuities and differences and showing up a few limitations in recent literature on digital activism. Finally, a de-westernizing perspective will be adopted in order to encourage for the progressive incorporation of Latin American and Southern approaches in the Anglo-Saxon literature.

Debates and Dilemmas in Alternative Communication Research

Communication studies have historically centered their attention either in public or in private commercial media. Therefore, research on alternative media has been frequently dismissed as ephemeral and irrelevant (Downing 2010: 12), becoming thus “a blind spot in media historiography” (Howley 2010: 4). This neglect can be traced back to the very early origins of media studies in the USA and Europe, which systematically undervalued the transformative role of media and communication processes made by, from, and for the people. This disregard is also evident in the field of social movements’ studies which has habitually focused either on the media framing of social movements or on their tactics they use to draw the attention of mainstream media in hope of winning adepts and political success.

Despite this oblivion, alternative media have historically operated at the margins of the dominant media system, and this represents “a dizzying variety of formats and experiences, far greater than mainstream commercial, public, or state media” (Downing 2010: xxv). To interpret this complexity, community media research is strictly interwoven with practice, and alternative communication is, in fact, not a model (Gumucio 2011: 36), but the result of reflection about situated and local practices. This is perceivable in the multiple definitions generated along history to name the field: radical media (Downing 2001), popular media (Kaplún 1985), citizen media (Rodríguez 2001), community media (Rennie 2006), social movements’ media (Downing 2010), etc.

Although creative and nuanced, the burgeoning of labels has also become a matter of controversies and even pit the different experiences against each other,

especially at the moment of building citizen coalitions to advocate for the right to communicate. Besides, the Northern and Southern academic communities have developed separate bodies of knowledge which have rarely interacted, although dialogues have started to be undertaken in recent times. This is the case of a few ambitious compendia in the area, such as “Making waves” (Gumucio 2001), a systematization of 50 experiences along the world, and the more theoretical “Anthology” (Gumucio and Tufte 2006) and “Handbook” (Wilkins et al. 2014) of communication for social change. These efforts have been also taken on in the specific field of alternative and civic media (Atton 2015; Gordon and Mihalidis 2016), in particular after the publication of the first *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, which included 250 essays on diverse media experiences over the planet (Downing 2010).

The introductory chapters of all the former anthologies demonstrate that there is an emerging interest to advance toward comparative communication research, which is a way to compare macro-units of knowledge (regions, language areas, social milieus, etc.) beyond the traditional borders of the nation-states (Esser and Hanitzsch 2012: 5). Nevertheless, cross-territorial comparisons have been far more recurrent in the field of communication for development (e.g., Servaes 1999; Manyozo 2012; Melkote and Steeves 2001) than in the embedded area of community communication, with a few recent exceptions (Cammaerts 2009; Hamilton and Atton 2001; Harlow and Harp 2013). The following lines attempt to initiate this dialogue between Latin American and Anglo-Saxon traditions in the field of alternative media.

Latin American Alternative Communications During the Twentieth Century

In Latin America, the early precedents of alternative communication can be traced back to Pre-Columbian times (Beltrán et al. 2008). Nevertheless, these forms gained consistency during the anti-colonial struggles of the twenty-first century, which typically took the form of partisan press and seditious satirical posters (Vinelli 2010: 28). Later on, during the second half of the twentieth century, many grassroots media projects were conceived as an education and liberation tools (Freire 1970) against the historical dependency of local oligarchies and US imperialism. The pioneering initiatives were basically fueled by two major agents: the reformist sectors of the Catholic Church – also called liberation theology – and workers’ unions and associations in both urban and rural areas (Vinelli 2010: 28). Theology of liberation was behind many radio schools along the region. These experiences combined radio broadcasts, workshops, and other teaching materials with the aim of promoting distant and face-to-face education. On the other hand, the Bolivian miners’ radio stations – such as *Radio La Voz del Minero* (1947), *Radio Sucre* (1947), and others – were integrally conceived, financed, and managed by the miners themselves as a way to challenge the mining oligarchies and offer an autonomous programming in local languages (O’Connor 2004).

Beside these landmarks, there is also a vast amount of pioneering initiatives which combined education and political claims. Many of them were influenced by

the revolutionary and reformist cycles of the second half of the twentieth century, exemplified by the Cuban revolution (1959) and Chilean Salvador Allende's reforms (1970–1973). Among these projects, we can quote the experience of militant and guerrilla radios in Central America during the 1980s, which broadcasted from hidden environments not to be discovered by the governments. Other projects took the form of video and cinema, such as the so-called third cinema and many other community video projects (Gumucio 2014). In particular, third cinema aimed at representing groups which have been traditionally marginalized in the mainstream media (popular classes, indigenous people, etc.), and opposed the traditional patterns of Hollywood in order to make emerge the voice of the third world.

Despite their differences, many of the forerunning experiences aimed at gaining both cultural recognition and material values such as the improvement of labor conditions, housing, and education (Inglehart 1990). Within a context dominated by private broadcasters and weak public media systems, Latin American community media accomplished the public service functions neglected by the states, in particular by providing citizen access and participation in the media (Madriz 1988). In other cases, they helped to raise the voice of dissident groups that defied dictatorships or corrupted governments, although these kinds of experiences had to work underground or in the limits of censorship. The following table provides an overview of a number of projects developed in Latin America along the second half of the twentieth century (Table 1).

From the early 1970s, alternative media inspired a vast tradition of essays and empirical works. This task was led by a generation of thinkers who combined reflection and activism (Díaz Bordenave 1976; Kaplún 1985; Prieto 1980) and proposed to reconsider communication theory by approaching the concepts of dialogue (Freire 1970) and horizontal communication (Beltrán 1979). These studies were early qualified as “liberation communicology” since they aimed at building an autonomous communication science for Latin America, adapted to the necessities of the region and explicitly committed to social change (Beltrán 1974). Compared to the more empirical and theoretical academic traditions of, respectively, the USA and Europe, the importance of praxis – or theories emanated for and from practice – was at the core of many alternative media approaches (Freire 1970). This idea also shaped the features of the so-called Latin American (Critical) Communication School. This denomination was used by the Brazilian pioneer José Marques de Melo (2009) to highlight that the region had contributed to a synthesis of both US administrative and European critical theories from the perspective of hybridization, attention to local problems, and search for social change.

Research in alternative media peaked during the 1980s. At this period, many scholars shifted their attention to small-scale media projects (Reyes Matta 1983; Simpson 1986), considering the difficulties to implement the recommendations of the UNESCO McBride Report (1980), which encouraged the states to promote communication policies in order to control media monopolies (Madriz 1988). Nevertheless, during the 1980s, the debate ended up trapped into a too simplistic position that observed alternative media as spaces of alleged purity and goodness at the margins of mainstream media (Huesca and Dervin 1994). In fact, many scholars

Table 1 Paradigmatic community media experiences in the twentieth century

Radio	Video and cinema	Press and news agencies	Other cultural expressions
The Bolivian miners' radio station (1950s–1980s)	Community cinema, participatory video, and the so-called third cinema (<i>Tercer Cine</i>) (1970s onward)	Brazilian <i>nanica</i> press (<i>imprensa nanica</i>) (1970s)	Distant literacy projects based on the use of radio schools and radio forums (e.g., <i>Radio Sutatenza</i> , 1947–1989 in Colombia)
Militant radios in Central America: <i>Radio Rebelde</i> in the Cuban revolution (from 1958), <i>Radio Venceremos</i> & <i>Radio Farabundo Martí</i> , Salvadorian guerrilla radios (1980s)	Manuel Calvelo's Massive Audiovisual Pedagogy (<i>Pedagogía Masiva Audiovisual</i>) addressed to rural environments (1970s–1990s)	The industrial zone newspapers in Santiago de Chile, during Salvador Allende's government (1970–1973)	Grassroots edu-communication projects inspired by Paulo Freire & Orlando Fals Borda's participatory-action research
Community radios in impoverished urban environments such as <i>Radio Favela</i> in Brazil (1980s–...)	Indigenous video in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Guatemala, México, Colombia, Brazil, etc. (e.g., <i>CRIC</i> , <i>Tejido de Comunicación</i> , <i>CLACPI</i> , <i>Ojo de Agua</i> , <i>Video nas Aldeias</i> , etc.)	The Nicaraguan political press along the Sandinist revolution (1980s)	Edu-tainment programs and methods developed by Mexican Miguel Sabido (e.g., soap operas for social change) and by Uruguayan Mario Kaplún (e.g., cassette forum)
Educational (catholic) radios integrated in networks such as the Latin American Association for Radiophonic Education (ALER)	Brazil's Worker's TV (<i>TV dos Trabalhadores</i>) and participatory video experiences in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile) before and after dictatorships	Rodolfo Walsh's <i>Agencia clandestina de Noticias</i> -ANCLA (1976–1977) and <i>Agencia Latinoamericana de Información</i> (ALAI) (1977–...)	Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed in Brazil

Own elaboration based on Beltrán (2005), Vinelli (2010), Gumucio (2001), and Downing (2010)

at the period were concerned with how to construct alternatives from small media projects, neglecting structural constraints (such as regulation and policies) and sharing a certain “small is beautiful” mentality.

The solution to this theoretical impasse was partly proposed by Spanish-Colombian Jesús Martín Barbero (1987) who suggested to transit from “media” to “mediations” as a way to explore the multiple and reciprocal “interpenetrations” between the mainstream and popular cultures. In other words, Martín Barbero stated that popular cultures are influenced by mass media and “a major reason for the success of commercially produced mass culture” is the cooptation of “numerous

elements of popular culture expressions” (Downing 2001: 4). His work was very influential, and it even inspired the widespread concept of “citizen media,” by Colombian scholar Clemencia Rodríguez (2001). Her notion invited alternativist thinkers and practitioners to detach from the too simplistic and essentialist positions we have already described. Instead, she claimed that citizen media are perfectly able to be elitist, racist, or misogynist and they are not directly connected to democratization and social change. To face this complexity, Rodríguez invited scholars to concentrate not just on the realm of alternative contents or media outlets themselves but rather on the cultural processes that trigger when local communities appropriate information technologies to “create one’s own images of self and environment” (Rodríguez 2001: 3).

An Overview of Alternative Media Research and Experiences in the Northern Countries

In the European context, a number of scholars have studied the long history of pre-modern popular communication forms, marked by oral or handwritten songs and ballads, almanacs, and other cultural expressions such as the satiric theater and the carnival (Bakhtin 1968; Burke 1978). Along the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Reformation in Germany and English Civil War (1642–1651) demonstrated the potentials of the printing press to disseminate oppositional ideas, especially “in the language of the ordinary people which could take on the weight of a material force for change” (Conboy 2002: 28). The Enlightenment ideals were also widely spread thanks to a vast web of underground printers and publishers, who disseminated clandestine books, pamphlets, and seditious papers and set the grounds of the French and American Revolutions (Hesse 2007: 374). The concept of “public sphere,” originally proposed by Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989), shed light on the reading of newspapers and public discussions as the origin of a bourgeois public sphere during the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, his approach became a matter of controversy because it undervalued other historical dissident forms by marginalized groups such as women (Fraser 1992) and the working classes (Kluge and Negt 1993; Thompson 1963/1980).

In the first half of the twentieth century, a few seminal works contributed to the understanding of the immigrant and popular press in US urban environments (Park 1922; Janowitz 1952/1967), while in Europe, Bertold Brecht had started to describe the emancipatory potentials of the first radio transmissions (Brecht 1927/2006). However, academic interest in alternative media was scarce until the 1970s. Within a context of youth upheavals (e.g., May 68) and post-material values – feminism, pacifism, etc. (Inglehart 1990) – this decade witnessed an explosion of critical art ensembles, culture jamming actions, and underground publishing. The 1970s is also the period when the first free radios started to operate in France, Italy, and the UK. The latter radios claimed for a citizen space in the radio-electric spectrum, and they were normally driven by cultural and political groups aiming at different vindications. Paradigmatic examples are British pirate radios – *Radio Caroline*, *Radio City*,

Radio Veronica, etc. – and, in special, the free stations influenced by the May 68 spirit: Italian *Radio Alice* and *Radio Popolare* and French *Radio Verte*, among others.

The 1960s and 1970s were also prolific in counterculture and underground media experiences in the USA. Magazines, movies, arts, and other popular expressions gave voice to the demands of youngsters, feminists, pacifist, and environmentalists. They also helped to canalize the claims for cultural rights by the emergent Black and Latino movements (Hamilton and Atton 2001). Free and low-power radio stations also mushroomed in different regions of the USA, with pioneering landmarks such as *Pacifica Radio*, *Dale City Television*, *WTRA radio*, *Paper Tiger*, and the larger *Prometheus Radio Project* network. Accompanying these developments, the first systematizations of experiences were published in both sides of the Atlantic during the 1980s (Downing 1984; Lewis and Booth 1989; Siegelaub and Mattelart 1983; Soley and Nichols 1986) and, in special, along the 1990s, when institutions such as AMARC and UNESCO commissioned a few large-scale studies (Berrigan 1977; Díaz Bordenave 1977; Girard 1992; Lewis 1984, 1993). According to this overview, the following table summarizes the main differences between Latin America and Anglo-Saxon approaches to community media (Table 2).

Along the twenty-first century, community communication has exponentially expanded and gradually institutionalized as a research area (Coyer et al. 2007; Downing 2010; Rodríguez 2009). This development is closely connected with the ever-growing academic interest in the potential of ICTs for activism in globalized societies. In fact, the anti-globalization movement from 1999 (i.e., *Indymedia*) and

Table 2 Academic traditions in alternative media along the twentieth century

	USA and Western Europe	Latin America
Birth of the field	Anecdotic academic studies since the 1920s (Park 1922; Brecht 1927)	Precursors in the 1970s (Freire 1970)
Institutionalization	2001 onward	Mid-1980s
Promoters and values of the first alternative media experiences	Social movements guided by post-material values: critical art collectives, youngsters, university students (May 68), women, immigrants, environmentalists, etc.	Civic organizations aiming at material values (unions, theology of liberation) and progressive presence of post-material demands (e.g., indigenous and feminist media)
Demands	Counterculture movements, fights to recognize identity and cultural rights and struggles to construct a community media sector beyond public and commercial media	Educate and empower marginalized groups; fight against oligarchies and colonial powers; community projects to alleviate the absence or the weak presence of public media
Most popular concepts	Alternative, community, citizen, radical	Alternative, popular, horizontal, participatory, media for development and for social change

Source: Own elaboration

the 2011 protest cycles – Spanish 15-M, Occupy, Arab Spring, etc. – demonstrated how digital media and social networks can be tactically used to expand protests and gain new participants. Furthermore, community media started to associate and construct large-scale networks from the end of the twenty century, and organizations such as the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) have extensively contributed to strengthen the sector and lobby for favorable policies in international and national regulations.

Potentialities and Limits of the New Literature on Digital Alternative Media

From the 2000s, the unstoppable digital revolution has shaken the debates about the potentialities of ICTs to shape global transnational social movements. The uses and appropriations of Internet platforms by civil organizations have risen academic interest, especially from the birth of the so-called Web 2.0: blogs, social networks, wikis, etc. Within this new scenario, digital media have been interpreted as platforms for the birth of “participatory cultures” (Jenkins 2006), “mass-self communication” spaces for horizontal interchange of ideas (Castells 2012), and enhancers of new collective actors: “smart mobs” (Rheingold 2003) and “collective intelligence” (Lévy 1997). This emergence has led Jankowski (2006) to suggest the existence of a third wave of reflections in the field of alternative media, after a first and second waves, which respectively, focused on the press and on audiovisual media: radio, video, etc.

However, literature in digital resistance presents a few weaknesses that limit its potential to understand the new scenario. First, many studies show a too decontextualized, ahistorical, and presentist bias, since they are usually disconnected from historical reflections about non-digital media (Rennie 2006). Second, recent research in the Anglo-Saxon context surpasses in volume any other geographic community, but this literature is very Western in focus, and it systematically ignores the theoretical advancements of Latin America and the Global South. For example, there is a powerful research line on the so-called participatory cultures that emerge around the Internet (Jenkins 2006), but this literature neglects the prolific reflection about participatory communication developed in Latin America from the 1970s (Freire 1970/2000; Beltrán 1974; Díaz Bordenave 1976).

Third, the oblivion of historical research and Southern perspectives may have driven into an excess of technological determinism in recent alternative media studies, especially when they analyzed the role of the social networks within the new cycle of protests starting in 2011: Spanish *indignados* movement, Occupy Wall Street, revolts in Iran and in the Arab world, etc. Within this context, a few studies (such as Castells 2012; Juris 2012; Shirky 2008) partly revitalized the “modernizing” idea of media as “magic multipliers” of development (Lerner 1958). Luckily, this trend has started to be criticized by a new generation of scholars who warn about the

rampant techno-fascination in corporate, political, and media discourses (e.g., Fuchs 2014; Mosco 2004; Gerbaudo 2012; Morozov 2012).

Contemporary research in social movements and alternative media is currently insisting on the concepts of “media practices” and “mediatization” (Cammaerts et al. 2013) that help to “shift attention from the specific categories of media texts, outlets and technologies to what social movement actors do with the media at large, in order to grasp activist groups’ agency in relation to media flows” (Coudry 2006: 27). Nevertheless, it is important to warn that the already studied concepts of praxis, mediations and citizen media, were deeply elaborated by Latin American scholars, although just a limited number of Northern authors acknowledge this heritage (Coudry 2013; Mattoni and Treré 2014).

A Claim to De-westernize Alternative and Community Communication

In the last years, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives from critical scholarship, indigenous people, and social movements – feminism, environmentalism, etc. – are vindicating the need to articulate new epistemologies from the side of exclusion and from the voice of the invisible (Santos 2010). This calls have been also heard in the field of communication, where different scholars are claiming to de-westernize (Curran and Park 2000), decolonize (Dutta 2015; Torrico 2015), and internationalize media studies (Simonson and Park 2016), beyond the “self-absorption and parochialism of much Western media literature” (Curran and Park 2000: 3).

In the last years, recent anthologies (e.g., Downing 2010) have started to build bridges between different alternative media traditions. Furthermore, these works offer a fruitful path to compare the different media cultures that have developed in large areas beyond the boundaries of the nation-states (Esser and Hanitzsch 2012). In fact, despite the multiple differences, Latin America can be partly understood as an intellectual unit, at least until the end of the twentieth century (Waisbord 2014). As we exposed above, the region developed a set of fruitful concepts and theorizations that helped to understand alternative media, even before the Anglo-Saxon academia started to systematically research on the topic, and setting the grounds of the participatory approach to communication for social change (Gumucio and Tufte 2006).

Lastly, this chapter has tried to summarize a long period of critical research and practices. Although limited and incomplete, we hope that this summary has helped to understand alternative media from situated local perspectives and historical contexts. In fact, community media can have different origins and motivations – from political demands to cultural and educational claims. But, as we have demonstrated, many of them tend to expand under contexts of crisis, when mainstream media neglect their commitment with citizenship and public service.

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