MEDIA CULTURE &SOCIETY

The poetics of indigenous radio in Colombia

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In 2002, 14 indigenous radio stations began operating in Colombia, reaching 78.6 percent of the national indigenous population (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 10). In this article we intend to shed light on the complex relationships and interactions behind Colombian indigenous radio stations. Colombian indigenous radio can only be understood as a product of intricate relationships between indigenous social movements, armed conflict, the state and media activism. In the following pages we will explain how Colombian indigenous peoples articulate a strong and highly developed response toward the presence of media technologies among their communities. This response is framed by new legislative frameworks made possible by the constitutional reform of 1991, by indigenous peoples' critique of Colombian mainstream media and, finally, by discussions among indigenous peoples about the adoption of radio – what we call a poetics of radio. The data for this article comes mostly from unpublished documents, archives and recordings kept at the Ministry of Culture (Unidad de Radio/Office of Radio).

The Colombian indigenous population is 708,000; despite the fact that they constitute less than 2 percent of the national population and include more than 80 different ethnic groups with their corresponding languages, widely scattered across a rough terrain, indigenous people have both captured and represented some of the most significant notions in Colombia's modern political arena.[2] Colombian indigenous people have played a remarkable role in the political consciousness and imaginaries in contemporary Colombia. First and foremost, decades-long indigenous struggles to reclaim ancestral lands in some areas of the Andean regions captured the attention and the imagination of the country. Second, the effort to maintain their languages, cultures, beliefs and

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religions in the face of deep-rooted discrimination became symbols for a nation that during the 1980s engaged, for the first time ever, in a public conversation about the acceptance of cultural and religious differences, the need to embrace plurality, and the urgency of creating a solid participatory democracy. Indigenous struggles became representative icons of the agendas of other social movements, which proposed a new model of democracy anchored in local government, direct citizen participation, transparency and accountability. During the 1980s, indigenous struggles both inspired others and were in turn enriched by the support and attention they received from others. Thus, indigenous movements became very active and visible political subjects in the process leading up to the formulation of the new Constitution of 1991, and helped to shape some of its foundations.

The constitutional reform of 1991 is an appropriate historical moment to begin this journey. The constitutional reform is without doubt the most important transformation in the Colombian legal and political framework in recent times. As a turning point in Colombia's contemporary history, the new Constitution embodies major accomplishments on the part of Colombian progressive social movements. Under pressure from social justice movements and guerrilla organizations waging armed conflict,[3] the Colombian political elites gave way, allowing for constitutional reform in 1991. Years of grassroots organizing and mobilizing since the 1960s and 1970s led to Colombia's new social contract as embodied by the 1991 Constitution.[4]

Although a thorough analysis of the Constitution of 1991 is beyond the scope of this article, we want to emphasize the features that affect Colombian indigenous media. Foremost, the Constitution of 1991 left behind the idea of 'nation' as a monolithic entity founded in one language, one religion, one identity and one culture, and espoused an idea of 'nation' as a dialogue among diverse ethnic and cultural identities (Gomez Albarello, 2000: 272). As a result, the Constitution of 1991 repeatedly recognizes the right to cultural, ethnic, religious and gender differences, among others, and the notion that Colombia is a nation constituted by many different identities, interests and dreams for a future. For instance, Article 70 of the new Constitution states that: 'Culture, in all its different manifestations, is a foundation of nationality. The state recognizes the dignity and equality of all the cultures that coexist in the country.'[5]

More specifically, the Constitution of 1991 opened up unprecedented political spaces for indigenous peoples. Previous legal arrangements placed Colombian indigenous peoples under special control of the Catholic Church and the Colombian state; this alliance between Church and state, known as *El Concordato*, dated from 1886 and was the result of an agreement signed by the Colombian government and the Vatican.[6] Thus, until 1991, the administration of all education, health and community development issues within indigenous territories was governed by the *Concordato* and controlled by Catholic priests, nuns or government officials (Padilla, 1996: 81–2). Indigenous peoples had resisted this control for a long time. The 1970s, for instance,

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had seen a widespread – courageous and ingenious – process of land recuperation by indigenous communities in southern Colombia that had suffered centuries of expropriation by powerful local landowners.[7] Not surprisingly, the Colombian indigenous movement was one of the most conspicuous protagonists in the campaign for constitutional reform. The pressure of indigenous social movements and grassroots organizations led to the inclusion of two indigenous leaders in the national Constitutional Assembly. Lorenzo Muelas (of the Guambiano people) and Francisco Rojas Birry (of the Emberá Katio people) played a key role in making sure that indigenous issues were central in all constitutional reform discussions (Londoño, 2002). As a result, the Constitution of 1991 gave territorial and administrative control to indigenous authorities;[8] recognized indigenous law as legitimate within indigenous territories (Asociación Latinoamericana para los Derechos Humanos, 2004: 40); declared indigenous languages official languages; and guaranteed two seats in the National Senate for indigenous representatives.[9]

On the basis of three arguments, the Constitution of 1991 recognized that Colombian indigenous peoples deserve differential treatment from the Colombian state: their different cultural identity, their different needs and the historical debt of the Colombian state toward indigenous communities; these served as a framework for a series of legal mechanisms favoring Colombian indigenous peoples. As part of this differential and favorable treatment sanctioned by the new Constitution, the Colombian state was to provide indigenous communities with access to the mass media.[10] In 1996, five years after the new Constitution came into effect, law 335 mandated the Colombian government to guarantee indigenous access to media; the law specifically says:

> … the state will guarantee that ethnic groups can have continuous access to use the electromagnetic spectrum and the telecommunication services and public mass media; that they can develop their own media according to their own specificities; and that they can realize their own development plans.[11]

The result was the emergence of Colombian legal indigenous radio. Indigenous radio stations fall under the regulations for 'public interest radio', a status reserved for radio station licenses assigned to public entities such as municipal governments or public universities. Indigenous peoples had requested a different legal framework especially formulated for indigenous radio stations; indigenous peoples wanted their radio licenses to be assigned to indigenous authorities as 'indigenous radio', not as 'public interest radio' nor as 'community radio'.[12] They wanted to avoid the 'public interest' status because it prohibits advertisements, a potential source of income to guarantee the economic sustainability of the radio stations. On the other hand, indigenous peoples wanted to avoid 'community' status because it restricts transmission power and therefore territorial coverage. However, the government rejected the proposal to design a new legal category for 'indigenous radio' and decided to assign the licenses as 'public interest radio'; the licenses are assigned to the

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Cabildos Gobernadores (Indigenous Councils), which are legal indigenous authorities recognized by the central government. However, this status prevents indigenous peoples from funding their stations through local advertising, forcing them to depend on grant monies and sponsorships. Also, as with community radio, Colombian legislation does not allow indigenous radio stations to operate as networks. Is there a fear that numerous small indigenous radio stations will connect to form a unified indigenous voice? (And that this voice will speak in languages that outsiders cannot understand.) Or are commercial radio stations being protected from a competing medium that could reach large audiences?

Indigenous people respond to Colombian mass media

Central to the agenda of Colombian indigenous social movements is indigenous access to media. This demand has to be understood within a wider indigenous critique of Colombian mainstream media. Positioned at the vanguard of social movements since the 1970s, Colombian indigenous leaders have their own very clear ideas about how the mass media play a significant role in the marginalization of indigenous peoples and cultures. Perhaps the most visible protagonist of this critique is the Guambiano leader Jeremías Tunubalá.[13]

Speaking at the OURMedia annual conference in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Tunubalá presented this critique. Tunubalá said that 'through the folklorization, the exoticization and the banalization of indigenous people, the media normalize and sanction exclusion and erase differences among various indigenous cultures' (2004: 2).[14] He also emphasized how – in trying to respond to the perceived audiences' need for drama and spectacle – the Colombian mass media conflate discourses of violence with indigenous issues. In Tunubalá's words:

> … in Colombia, the mass media focus primarily on those indigenous issues that can be easily associated with violence and war, such as social protest, demonstrations, and marches; the coverage focuses on the immediacy of these events. The coverage privileges frames of conflict, struggle, being-on-the-verge-of-war. This type of coverage ignores the legitimacy of indigenous demands, the long-term dimension of indigenous struggles, and the complexity of indigenous mobilizations. (2004: 2)

According to Tunubalá, Colombian mass media articulate two time frames that, combined, encode indigenous issues as irrelevant or as threatening. In their coverage of indigenous issues, Colombian mass media use either a time frame that locks indigenous peoples in an archaic past, romanticizes them as a historical relic and thus denies them control over their present and their future; or, they employ a time frame that emphasizes indigenous peoples as protagonists of social unrest and therefore partly responsible for the violence that plagues the country.

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The information media tend to simplify the plight of indigenous communities in regions of armed conflict by framing it in terms of indigenous resistance to guerrilla organizations. While this is partly the case, Tunubalá explains, indigenous communities are resisting much more than guerrilla organizations; they are resisting the imposition of a foreign social order; they are demanding their right to implement the *Derecho Mayor* (or Higher Law). *Derecho Mayor* is a term used by the Guambiano community to refer to the code of Guambiano laws sanctioned by Guambiano ancestors, passed on by Guambiano elders and defended by Guambiano leaders as the main guide to shape Guambiano society. Thus, indigenous communities are rejecting not just guerrilla organizations, but other related issues, including the militarization of life, the violent resolution of conflict and the intrusion of foreign social orders – including the central state and its army – into their territories and communities (Tunubalá, 2004: 3).

Tunubalá concludes: 'in the first case, indigenous subject are objectified as exotic, an element of Colombian folk culture, as entertainment. In the second case, indigenous subjects are violent, threatening, and dangerous' (2004: 4).[15] Tunubalá ends with a critique of these types of binary narratives by saying:

> … these binary narratives (development/backwardness; civilized/savage; traditional/modern; *Derecho Mayor*/Colombian Constitution; past/present) are nothing more than comfortable and soothing formulas to elude the complexity of current social life. Not much can be comprehended when operating from this binary logic. (2004: 5)

In Australia, a similar indigenous critique of mainstream media portrayals and coverage of indigenous issues has led Aboriginal peoples to confront media marginalization and misrepresentation with two parallel strategies; on one hand, 'demanding a positive and creative presence on state-run national television such as Australia's ABC and its alternative multicultural channel, the Special Broadcast Service (SBC)' (Ginsburg, 2002: 47); and, on the other hand, strengthening Aboriginal media and thus Aboriginal-produced and controlled media content. In Colombia, however, indigenous movements have not demanded that government authorities provide better indigenous content in state-controlled media, but instead have focused their energy on developing local indigenous media systems, and especially indigenous radio.

Australian and Colombian indigenous people exemplify two different trends. One is a demand for better coverage of indigenous issues in central media because '[m]any First Nations people believe that it is crucial that public broadcasters undertake indigenous cultural programming on a large scale in order to help redress the imbalance and save indigenous languages' (Buchholtzer, 2005: 25). While this option limits indigenous people to the role of media consumers, this type of media content can contribute to the dismantling of erroneous, stereotypical and over-simplified conceptions of indigenous peoples held by non-indigenous audiences. The second trend is evident when other indigenous peoples opt for a different strategy, concentrating all their

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energy and resources on developing and strengthening local indigenous media. D'Arcy Basil-Blakeman of the Secwepemc First Nation says:

> I believe that as alternative forms of multimedia such as Web television, local cable access, digital video, three-dimensional animation, and radio become more affordable and user-friendly, a transition to local media production can create local interest-based programming that will truly reflect issues such as language preservation, cultural identity, local success stories, unbiased historical event recreation, and local current events. (Buchholtzer, 2005: 25)

Each of these strategies has potential to realize different goals; local media can help transform indigenous peoples from consumers of media into producers of their own media content (Rodriguez, 2001). This opens the opportunity for indigenous people to find their own ways of appropriating information and communication technologies, and to learn to use them to strengthen their own articulations of reality.

If two decades ago Latin American indigenous peoples' critique of the mass media remained at the level of denunciation, today indigenous communities are developing their own proposals for indigenous media systems and networks (Salazar, 2002). As Salazar observes: 'indigenous demands of today have moved from mere complaint to compound proposals. In other words they have stepped forward from complaint and objection to the proposal for a world of decentralized but coordinated autonomies' (in press: 4). As part of this move toward propositional discourses, and standing on the new opportunities for autonomy allowed by the Constitution of 1991, Colombian indigenous movements seem to be turning their backs on mainstream media as they strengthen their own national media networks.

Indigenous people and the poetics of radio

Ironically, an important protagonist of this story is the Colombian Ministry of Culture. Part of this Ministry, the Unidad de Radio (Office for Radio), has played a central role in supporting a nascent movement of citizens' media in the country. Since 1995 the Unidad de Radio has launched a series of initiatives to strengthen Colombian citizens' media. In a rare case of a government supporting citizens' media, the Unidad de Radio has provided guidance and training in technical and legal aspects, and, more important, it established a favorable environment in which different grassroots collectives were able to debate crucial citizens' media issues, such as regulation, sustainability, programming and audiences. In other words, the Unidad de Radio facilitated the conditions for a national and regional dialogue about the role(s) and potential of citizens' media in the Colombian context.

Indigenous leaders from different parts of the country quickly took advantage of this opportunity for dialogue offered by the Unidad de Radio. The

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Unidad de Radio's coordinating role – which included setting up meeting dates, coordinating traveling logistics for indigenous leaders and, more important, providing the funding to cover the costs of travel for the leaders coming from all corners of the country – was essential to facilitate the discussion among indigenous peoples about what to do with the state's offer for indigenous radio. Thus, in Colombia, indigenous leaders had a rare opportunity to discuss if and how their communities would welcome radio *before* this technology was simply dumped in their territories. This resonates with the demands of indigenous leaders at the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS). In December of 2005 at the WSIS Plenary in Geneva, Ole Henrik Magga, then-president of the United Nations (UN) Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, stated that '[Indigenous peoples] do not seek inclusion at the expense of their rights, cultural identities, traditional territories or resources. It must be indigenous peoples themselves who decide on how and when they access and use new technologies' (Brown and Tidwell Cullen, 2005: 13).

Conversely, in the 1970s in Canada, for example, 'the government placed [satellite] receiving dishes in nearly every northern community, with no thought to or provision for aboriginal content or local broadcast' (Ginsburg, 2002: 41). Similarly, in the mid 1980s the Australian government decided to launch a satellite over Central Australia that would dump mainstream television content onto Aboriginal communities (Ginsburg, 2002: 45). Thus, Inuit and Walpiri-speaking Aborigines, respectively, never had the opportunity to discuss whether they wanted these technologies in their territories, much less how they wanted to use them. The Colombian case, in which indigenous leaders were invited to have this discussion *before* media technologies were implemented, can only be explained by the opportune intervention of the Unidad de Radio.

The Unidad de Radio was committed to facilitate this discussion and to act on the decisions of indigenous leaders. In May 2000, the Unidad de Radio convened the first International Meeting on Indigenous Radio in the Americas. With international guests such as a Shuar-speaker from Ecuador, a Mapuche-speaker from Chile and a Hopi from the United States, this event laid the groundwork for unprecedented dialogue among American indigenous leaders around their experiences with citizens' media. The meeting also included 28 Colombian indigenous leaders who spent two days discussing the ins and outs of welcoming these media technologies into their communities.[16]

After the meeting, indigenous leaders went back to their territories and organized community-wide discussions in which the Colombian government's offer was presented and the community could express its views around welcoming (or not) radio technology to indigenous territories. In northern Colombia, the Wayuu implemented one of these consultation processes that serves as an illustrative example.[17] Under the coordination of Wayuu leader Remedios Nicolasa Fajardo, a team traveled across the Wayuu territory for six months, stopping in those Wayuu communities that would be covered by the new radio signals. On every occasion, a meeting with community leaders and community

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members was convened; once people had gathered, Remedios made a presentation about the offer of the central state to equip indigenous councils with public interest radio stations. Each meeting produced a document that expressed the community's ideas about how to use radio in their specific context; for example, a member of the community of San Francisco (southern Guajira) stated that a Wayuu radio station could be used to denounce and put pressure on the non-Indian owners of a nearby meat-processing plant that was attracting thousands of flies to San Francisco; this Wayuu was already imagining how a radio station could be used to disseminate health information and to explain the cause and the effects of the meat-processing plant and its flies on the health of Wayuu children (Fajardo et al., 2001b: 2). At another meeting, in the community of Zaino (southern Guajira), a participant expressed the possibility of using a radio station to transmit information about important clan events, such as wakes and funerals, among far-away relatives of the same clan (Fajardo et al., 2001c: 2). And at a community meeting held in Siapana (northern Guajira), participants said a radio station could be used to maintain communication with Venezuelan clan relatives (Fajardo et al., 2001a: 2).[18]

The result of these processes of grassroots consultation was a complex discussion among indigenous peoples about the potential, impact or threat that radio could bring if adopted by indigenous peoples. Once the Colombian government confirmed that each indigenous community could have its own radio station, the questions emerged. What is indigenous radio? Why do indigenous peoples need modern media? What is indigenous radio for? Central to these discussions was the debate around how media technologies would interact with each specific social, cultural and political context. In other words, indigenous communities examined the potential of radio as it would play out in each specific situation, according to the cultural specificities of each community, its geographical location, its social relations within and with other neighboring communities, and also with the mobilization needs of each specific indigenous people. More than examining media technologies – in this case radio – in themselves, indigenous peoples explored the specific sets of social, cultural and political relations in which each radio station would exist if brought into their territories. That is, Colombian indigenous leaders embarked in what Salazar calls the poetics of information and communication technology (ICT), explained as follows:

> … a poetics of ICT is therefore concerned with the way media comes into being and functions in a given community, group or culture through its practice, or poiesis. It is concerned with the way social practices of technology are grounded in cultural politics and social action, generally rooted in local social solidarities. This poiesis or making of communication technologies is both a process and product of cultural representation. (Salazar, in press: 9–10)

In these discussions and decisions, Colombian indigenous peoples have found what Ginsburg calls the 'double set of possibilities' of media technologies:

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> They can be seductive conduits for imposing the values and language of the dominant culture on minoritized people, what some indigenous activists have called a potential cultural 'neutron bomb,' the kind that kills people and leaves inanimate structures intact.… These technologies – unlike most others – also offer possibilities for 'talking back' to and through the categories that have been created to contain indigenous people. *It is not the technologies themselves, of course, that produce the latter possibility, but the timing and social location of their arrival*. (Ginsburg, 2002: 51, my emphasis)[19]

Indigenous people articulate the poetics of radio

Colombian indigenous peoples did not produce a unified attitude toward radio.[20] Their approaches to media are as diverse as their own particular cultural identities. Indigenous communities from the Colombian Amazon, for example, defined their communication and information needs in terms of distance and the lack of efficient transportation. In the words of one Amazon indigenous leader:

> For us, moving 5 kilometers costs 6,000 pesos [approx US $3]. Distant communities have to buy a tank of gas and rent a motorboat, and the tank lasts no more than 10 minutes. Land transportation is impossible in our territory, you have to travel by water or air, so some type of communication is extremely necessary. (Unidad de Radio, 2000: 70)

After much internal consultation and discussion, Colombian Amazon indigenous communities decided that, more than radio stations, what they most needed was rural telephony. The Colombian government responded with a regional Program for Rural Telephony and Telecenters.[21]

The Kogi people, living deep in the Sierra Nevada, an isolated mountain range with very high elevations in northern Colombia, had a different perspective.[22] According to Kogi leader Arregocés, to introduce a radio station in the middle of a Kogi community would be like stabbing the motherland with a weapon directly connected to processes of globalization and Westernization. The Kogi perceive a radio station as an undesirable conduit toward questionable West-led processes of globalization. For the Kogi, a radio antenna is a knife-like weapon that aggressively binds their territory and culture to global capitalism. Thus the Kogi decided to decline having their own indigenous radio. The geographic isolation allowed by the remoteness of the Sierra Nevada has allowed the Kogi to stay fairly secluded. This geographic privilege framed their discussions and determined their decision to not welcome media technologies. Furthermore, Kogi indigenous leaders are suspicious – and with good reason – of a central state that decides to introduce modern media in indigenous territories right at the time of free trade agreements negotiations in which culture and communication issues are not yet resolved.[23]

Northern Colombia is also home to the Arhuaco indigenous people.[24] As a result of their internal discussions on the role of media technologies, the

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Arhuacos decided that radio would be used, not as a communications medium for their community, but as a tool for Arhuacos to communicate with the rest of the world. Arhuacos saw community radio as a means to talk to non-Indians. The Arhuaco people consider that they have much to teach and to communicate to non-Arhuacos, in particular to the newly arrived *mestizo colonos* coming to the Sierra Nevada in search for new agricultural lands. However, for the Arhuaco it is clear that the introduction of radio into their lives has to follow a traditional process of consultation with the *mamos* (Arhuaco traditional religious leaders); these consultations advance at their own Arhuaco pace, not at Western speed and, for this reason, without any hesitation or rush. So, despite the offer of the Colombian government to equip them with a radio station, the Arhuaco have not yet made a definite decision to implement, or not implement, community radio in their territories.

On the other side of the spectrum are the Awá and the Guambiano indigenous peoples, who have their own radio stations up and running.[25] Along with the Nasa[26] these two indigenous peoples have led the process of carving out a space for indigenous autonomy within the nation-state. When the Colombian government asked indigenous peoples to design their own local development programs, indigenous peoples responded by saying that they had no intention of 'developing', which implies for them changing into something you are not. Colombian indigenous peoples then proposed their own Life Plans (*Planes de Vida*), laying out a blueprint for the present and the future of each of their communities. Life Plans are fundamental to the future of indigenous peoples because they embody the collective discussions and decisions about their communities' future.

In this context, the Awá, the Nasa and the Guambiano have a very clear idea of what to do with modern media: these media should be welcome if and only if they contribute to the Life Plans' fulfillment. The Life Plan defines the parameters for thinking about the role(s) of citizens' media in each community. The Awá, for example, used their Life Plan to address the communication needs of two Awá communities that have developed very different relationships to Awá tradition and language. The result is two radio stations especially designed to respond to two very different sets of communication and information needs. One is an AM station entirely in indigenous language for the more rural and less acculturated Awá in the territory; the other is an FM station in Spanish for the more *mestizo* Awá living in the regional urban centers.

In Colombia it is well known that the most politically active in historical indigenous struggles are the Guambiano and the Nasa peoples in the south of the country. It is not surprising, then, that the Guambiano and the Nasa have welcomed modern media into their political project as an important tool for mobilization. First, these indigenous peoples see radio as a technology that fascinates indigenous youths; thus, through radio, older Guambiano and Nasa can communicate tradition, language, music, and local wisdom and memory to younger members of their communities. Second, radio can serve as a means to disseminate and fortify local indigenous languages, extending them

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to border territories in order to counter intruding languages and cultures. Third, given the dispersion of their indigenous communities in an enormous territory, Guambiano and Nasa see radio as a tool that can help overcome long distances, allowing them to transmit information, generate debate and discussions around key issues, and mobilize their communities when necessary. Currently, the Nasa have three radio stations; the Guambiano have one radio station and recently implemented a radio production training project for 8500 young members from all the indigenous communities in southern Colombia (Jeremías Tunubalá, personal communication, 18 December 2004). Their goal is to cultivate indigenous radio production collectives throughout southern Colombia; these collectives will feed the stations with local programming produced from many different viewpoints, thus contributing to the polyvocality of Guambiano and Nasa radio stations.

The Awá, Nasa and Guambiano cases – in which several full-time radio stations entirely controlled by indigenous peoples are being shaped and used to respond to indigenous needs and demands – should be interpreted as clever strategies to construct strong counter-publics (Fraser, 1993) that have the potential to become loud protagonists in the national public arena.[27] In this sense, Awá, Nasa and Guambiano media have to be understood as emerging at the intersection between Awá, Nasa and Guambiano Life Plans, and Nasa/Guambiano-led social movements.

The case of the Wayuu people is also significant. Among all Colombian indigenous discussions around indigenous radio, the Wayuu process is unique in that it is led by indigenous women. With Remedios Nicolasa Fajardo leading the process of discussion and decision-making, the Wayuu have obtained licenses for two radio stations in their territory. At the time of writing, the Wayuu are in the process of designing how these two stations will be used; in the meantime, local community members are being trained in different aspects of radio production and media management. But, more significantly, the Wayuu have advanced an elaborate articulation of what a Wayuu radio station is, based on their own cultural constructions of communication and information.

The Wayuu have articulated their radio stations as new incarnations of *laülayuu* and *pütchimajachi*, two foundational Wayuu notions meaning, respectively, 'elder Wayuu, or uncle-on-the-mother-side who possesses the information' and 'one who travels with the word-news'. Also, traditional notions of 'everyday communication system' (*anüiki*) and 'daily message deliverer' (*chercha*) are brought in as pivotal markers that shape how the station will be used. Furthermore, the Wayuu are beginning to design the goals and objectives of their radio stations. One of these goals, for example, calls for *sükua 'ipa wanüiki*, or an investigation of the sounds of the Wayuu culture; thus, the stations are envisioned as facilitators of 'an investigative process that will reveal the main sounds of the Wayuu culture and bring them into the stations' programming' (Fajardo et al., 2000: 10). In other words, the Wayuu are looking at their ancestral communication and information modes

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and systems and 'plugging in' the newly arriving radio technology. As they welcome this new technology into their lives and their territories, the Wayuu people are colonizing it every step of the way by encoding their own goals and uses of radio according to Wayuu tradition.

Wayuu, Awá, Nasa and Guambiano peoples have reflected on how these media technologies could take a specific form if adopted in certain ways according to their cultural codes, Life Plans and political agendas. In other words, Wayuu, Awá, Nasa and Guambiano have produced their own media poetics (Salazar, in press) as they re-design the role(s) that these media technologies have within their specific context. As Salazar states:

> [t]he increasing appropriation of ICTs by indigenous organizations and individuals in Latin America in the past decade can only be grounded in new processes of ethnic resurgence sweeping the region and has had to do with finding efficient ways for intra-communal communication, and ways to communicate and inform the broader societies within which indigenous nations live. (Salazar, in press: 4)

Wayuu, Awá, Nasa and Guambiano communities are leading the indigenization of radio in Colombia, understood as the process by which indigenous people re-center what media mean according to indigenous discourses, metaphors, codes and contexts (Molner and Meadows, 2001).

Conclusions

Instead of thinking about indigenous peoples' adoption of ICTs in terms of 'a Faustian dilemma' – which limits the discussion to either/or propositions – we propose two different conceptual moves. First, the term 'indigenous peoples' should not be equated with a subject in the singular. Indigenous peoples are as diverse and heterogeneous as non-indigenous human communities. In the same ways that non-Indians adopt, reject, resist, re-design, play with, re-appropriate or re-invent media technologies, so do indigenous communities. On this basis, we are growing more and more suspicious of studies and scholars that claim that indigenous peoples *are adopting* ICTs, or the opposite, that indigenous peoples *are resisting* the appropriation of media technologies. Each indigenous community merits its own discussion and there is no reason to think that what one indigenous community has decided to do can be generalized to other indigenous communities. They will do as they have so often done: provide their own specific cultural answer.

Second, Salazar's concept of media poetics provides an excellent conceptual tool to understand the encounter between indigenous peoples and ICTs (in fact, media poetics can be applied to *any* community and its encounters with media technologies). Each indigenous community presents a unique set of cultural politics and expressions, a specific position in terms of mobilization, political demands to central governments, a particular set of politically permeated

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relationships with neighboring communities, and a specific relationship with international and global arenas. It is in the middle of this mesh of cultural and political relations that information and communication needs and wants emerge; therefore, ICTs will take entirely different forms according to each case of communication and information needs and wants. Only a study of the poetics of ICTs, or the exercise of examining how ICTs are re-created in their interaction with these social and cultural relations – as proposed by Salazar – will allow us to see the specificities of each case.

In Colombia, as in many other parts of the world, the democratization of the airwaves in the form of more legitimate citizens' radio has emerged at the intersection of social movements and policy reform. For decades, Colombian progressive grassroots organizations and organized civil society collectives such as unions, indigenous organizations, teachers' organizations, neighborhood organizations and women's organizations have maintained continuous pressure on the government as they demand more access to the media. It is crucial to continue exploring the role played by social movements in the democratization of communication; in this day and age of podcasting and blogging, the availability of information and communication technologies can easily be confused with the democratization of ICTs. These two phenomena are entirely different. While the former is simply the extension of individuals' abilities to interact with other individuals, the latter involves processes of discussion and reflection in which collectives produce new meanings around how ICTs should be used in our societies.

In Colombia, however, the demands and pressure of social movements did not achieve significant results until a legislative framework was sanctioned, that forced the government to implement citizens' radio at the national level. The Constitution of 1991, although vague, has given media activists in general, and indigenous leaders in particular, a type of legitimacy in their communication and information demands they never had before.

The Constitution had an impact on two different fronts: first, it provided the necessary legal framework for indigenous leaders to demand equal access to information and communication technologies. Second, the Constitution of 1991 established an alternative notion of 'nation' for the country. With its emphasis on multiculturalism, the Constitution has begun to move the cultural imaginary of nation and Colombianness from notions founded on colonial hegemonies that looked toward Europe to find legitimacy and pride and toward the idea that difference means richness; in other words, that Colombia's richness resides in the multiple differences that inhabit it. The Constitution of 1991 allowed Colombians to initiate a move toward breaking away from the 19th- and 20th-century hegemonies that acknowledged a multicultural Colombia, yet established clear hierarchies among different ethnic and class groups. Thus, Colombians have become masters at designing strategies to resolve the multicultural-yet-hierarchical racial order. One such strategy is the common tactic of 'hiding' one's Indian or black ancestors while emphasizing one's European

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background. Another is the frequent segregation of Colombian racial features; according to this racial hegemony, Colombia is black in its folk music, but European in its arts, culture and government. When the Constitutional Assembly – the assembly responsible for designing the new Constitution – finally materialized, it included representatives from indigenous peoples, from Afro-Colombian communities and even from non-Catholic religious organizations. The entire country had to come to terms with the idea that these indigenous, Afro and non-Catholic Colombians were in charge of reinventing the most important foundational document of the nation, a move far from the usual notion that non-Europeans and non-Catholics contributed only to Colombian folklore, ancient history or 'the exotic' Colombia.

Academics investigating violence in Colombia have reiterated the difficulty of embracing difference as one of the factors that contributes to the continuous reproduction of violence (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Pecaut, 2001). The absence of a central state capable of guaranteeing citizens' rights, the prevalence of patron–client relationships, and, in sum, the absence of a rule of law to solve conflicts among differing parties, has led to this inability to deal with difference. Within Colombian 'common sense', difference is something that has to be overpowered or marginalized at best, but never listened to or taken into consideration as a potential source of personal and/or collective growth. In this sense, this emerging alternative notion of nationhood in the form of a Colombianness that embraces difference as not just normal but desirable could have enormous implications in contributing to making non-aggressive conflict resolution part of a new hegemony.

We cannot forget that information and communication technologies are different from most other technologies in that they allow us to name the world. ICTs are instruments designed to produce signs, symbols and codes to articulate the universe around us and our place(s) in it. In this sense, indigenous media have to be understood as efforts to appropriate these technologies to name the world in indigenous terms, meaning indigenous codes, symbols and signs, as used in the production of radio, television, film or Internet content. Thus we agree with media anthropologist Faye Ginsburg when she states:

> From the remote experiments in low-power TV in native languages to feature films made to appeal to native viewers as well as a diversity of audiences world-wide, these works are all part of the efforts of indigenous people living in a variety of situations to claim a space that is theirs in the world of modernity's representational practices. (Ginsburg, 1999: 303)

It is true that most ICTs have been invented in Western cultures by non-indigenous people; also, these technologies contain immanent properties that shape a priori the signs and codes they are able to produce. For example, the work of Lorna Roth (2003) has shown clearly how photographic devices privilege photographing white subjects over subjects of color. Nevertheless, ICTs' coding potential does not end with the reification of the West. The multiplicity of

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strategies used by very different indigenous peoples to make ICTs tell the world in their own terms include, among others, bending, hybridizing and mixing genres; re-signifying established codes and conventions; re-inventing media institutions, organizations and even buildings; and designing new ways of technology convergence.

These strategies, and the resulting re-appropriation of ICTs by indigenous people, are contributing to 'thinking Otherwise', in Leela Ghandi's words (1998). In Colombia this 'other' version is – little by little – gaining a voice and reaching non-indigenous Colombians with alternative proposals, alternative goals for the future of the country, alternative ways of interaction that depart from the usual military proposals. If the Constitution of 1991 sanctioned the presence of indigenous peoples as equal (but different) protagonists in the process of nation construction, indigenous media are now allowing indigenous people to express to the rest of Colombia what they mean by a process of nation-building. Stephen Muecke finds similar developments in how indigenous media are having an impact on how the Aboriginal presence is being felt in Australia. Muecke says that Australian Aboriginal films:

> … mobilize new ways to position Aboriginal history, identity, and culture … in which Aboriginal Australians occupy a very different and very crucial site from which new postnational subjectivities can be constituted, in which new stories enable new 'structures of feeling' and of agency that in turn translate into a new politics of nation. (in Ginsburg, 2002: 50)

In the Colombian case, these new structures of feeling, emerging from the stronger presence of indigenous subjectivities in regional and national public spheres, are crucial, as they may contain less aggressive and conflict-driven styles of interacting with fellow human beings and with the environment.

To end, we are convinced that these are the voices we all need to hear at international ICTs policy arenas such as the World Summit of the Information Society. From the Kogi leaders who have very clear reasons to reject ICTs in their territories at this point in time, to Jeremías Tunubalá and the Guambiano people who embrace ICTs for different reasons, the deliberations of indigenous Colombians about ICTs are filled with new possibilities from which we could all learn and benefit. However, our own experience is a good example of why and how international policy forums are not doing enough to include and hear these voices. When we receive invitations to participate in international or regional policy forums, our response is generally to suggest someone like one of the indigenous leaders mentioned above, someone deeply involved with re-inventing the uses of ICTs in the global South. But then the barriers begin to pile up: our suggested speaker does not speak English; s/he does not have a Schengen or US visa; his/her travel arrangements (including visas) are more difficult and time-consuming; a plane ticket from somewhere in rural Colombia will cost much more. We are the 'easy' Latin American voice and organizers' commitment to include a diversity of voices generally

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is not strong enough to deal with these challenges. Thus policy forums are becoming encounters of the usual suspects and, as a result, the outcomes are more and more predictable.

Notes

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1. In general I do not find good things to say or to write about states when it comes to supporting citizens' media. However, if I see state initiatives that I think are commendable I don't have a problem acknowledging it and in the case of the Unidad de Radio I am impressed. All the text in this article praising the Unidad de Radio is my own more than Jeanine's.

2. Indigenous Colombians are scattered throughout the country among 83 different ethnic groups who administer 24 percent of the national territory; 30 distinct languages and 300 dialects are spoken across the national territory by indigenous Colombians (Padilla, 1996: 80). For a map of indigenous ethnic groups see: http://www.cdi.gob.mx/conadepi/iii/cletus/colombia.pdf

3. The idea for constitutional reform emerged from the student movement. In the late 1980s two guerrilla organizations – the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL; Popular Liberation Army) and the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M 19; 19 April Movement) – agreed to de-mobilize and give up the armed struggle on condition that the government agreed to the proposal for constitutional reform (Gomez Albarello, 2000: 261).

4. Other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Peru and Bolivia have also experienced legislative reforms that move indigenous issues from the margin to the center (Salazar, 2004: 17).

5. All citations from the Constitution of 1991 are our translations from the Spanish version available on line at: http://www.georgetown.edu/pdba/Constitutions/Colombia/col91.html

6. Article 1 of Law 89 of 1890 states that 'savages' exist outside Colombian legislation and that the Colombian government and the Catholic Church authorities would determine the manner in which those 'incipient groups' would be governed (see: http://www.cdi.gob.mx/conadepi/iii/cletus/colombia.pdf).

7. The 1970s saw the emergence of the main indigenous organizations, such as the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC), Consejo Regional Indígena del Tolima (CRIT), UNDICH in Chocó, Consejo Nacional Indígena del Vaupés (CRIVA). In 1982, a national indigenous organization called Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC; Colombian National Indigenous Organization) was formed (Asociación Latinoamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2004: 51).

8. Indigenous territories have a special administrative/territorial status called *Cabildos Indígenas* (Indigenous Councils).

9. Conditions for candidates for these two Senate indigenous seats include having served as traditional authorities in Indigenous Councils or as leaders of one of the regional or national indigenous organizations (Asociación Latinoamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2004: 52).

10. In 2004, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues declared Colombia the number one nation in terms of establishing constitutional and legal rights for indigenous peoples (Foro Permanente para Cuestiones Indígenas de las Naciones Unidas, 2004).

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11. See http://www.secretariasenado.gov.co/leyes/L0335_96.HTM for the complete text of Law 335, 1996. The citation refers to Article 20, Paragraph 2 of Law 335.

12. Similarly, in the United States, the Oneida indigenous people proposed .sov (for 'sovereign') as a specific domain name for indigenous peoples' Internet pages (which do not correspond to neither of the currently available domain names: .com, .org, .edu); however, as in the Colombian case, the proposal was rejected (Armour Polly, 1998).

13. Approximately 20,700 Guambianos inhabit the highlands in Cauca and Huila (3 percent of the national indigenous population). The Guambiano language has been classified in the Chibcha linguistic family, in the Guambiano-Kokonuco group (Barie, 2003: 228).

14. All citations are our own translations from the Spanish original.

15. In his studies of indigenous peoples and media in Chile, Juan Salazar finds a similar frame, as Chilean mainstream media limit their coverage of the Mapuche to 'the Mapuche conflict', referring to Mapuche struggles for land rights and against pressures from corporations and the state (see Salazar, 2003, 2004: 2).

16. Fortunately, the Unidad de Radio recorded every discussion held. Unfortunately this important historical material is kept in audiotapes in the basement of the Ministry of Culture, which has zero resources for proper archiving.

17. The Wayuu represent 20.5 percent of the total Colombian indigenous population with 140,000 members. In the province of Guajira, the Wayuu represent 48 percent of the population. The Wayuu language has been classified as part of the Arawak linguistic family (Barie, 2003: 225).

18. The Wayuu territory goes beyond the Colombia-Venezuela border into Venezuela. Therefore many Wayuu clans have members in both countries.

19. For an interesting analysis of the pros and cons of Internet adoption by Inuit communities see Zellen (1998).

20. The following is based on recordings, transcripts and personal communication with Colombian indigenous leaders archived by the Unidad de Radio in Bogotá, Colombia.

21. Approximately 25 different indigenous peoples live in the Colombian Amazon; some of these are as small as the Yauna, with 95 members, or as large as the Ticuna, with 27,000 members, the Tucano, with 6837 members, or the Huitoto, with 6245 members (Barie, 2003: 224–36).

22. The Kogui community includes 6138 members; the community is located in the northern provinces of Magdalena and César. The Kogui language is part of the Chibcha language family (Barie, 2003: 225).

23. Currently the debate is driven by two opposite forces. On one hand, the United States advocates for free trade agreements that would include culture and communication products as if they were any other commodity. On the other hand, UNESCO is in the process of formulating a Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions that would set clear boundaries excluding communication and culture from free trade agreements' jurisdiction. The UNESCO Convention recognizes that cultural products not only have commercial value but also social value, therefore governments should be able to take the necessary measures to support and defend cultural expression, even if these measures contradict free trade agreements (for more information on the Convention see: http://www.crisinfo.org/content/view/full/77).

24. The Arhuaco community includes 14,300 members, who speak Ika, a language that belongs in the Chibcha linguistic family. The Arhuacos share parts of their territory with the Kogi, the Kankuamo and the Sánha (Barie, 2003: 225).

25. The Awá and Guambianos live in the Western Andean highlands. The Awá community has 13,000 members; the Guambianos represent 3 percent of the total Colombian indigenous population with 27,782 members (Barie, 2003: 228–9).

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26. The Nasa represent 16.9 percent of the national indigenous population with 118,800 members. The Nasa inhabit a large territory in the Cauca and Huila provinces predominantly and, to a lesser extent, in Putumayo and Caquetá (Barie, 2003: 227).

27. Molner and Meadows (2001) and Salazar (2004) have reached similar conclusions about the contribution of indigenous media to the formation of counter-publics among Australia's Aborigines and Chile's Mapuche communities.

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