

THE RIGHT TO COMMUNICATE, NOT YET FOR ALL

RAÚL TREJO DELARBRE

Rosa Cruz is an indigenous woman who lives in Ocumicho, a little town in the northern part of the Mexican state of Michoacán. She barely speaks Spanish but she likes to participate in Radio Uekakua (Radio The Favorite), established by the community eight years ago. Rosa Cruz became a radio hostess and used to greet her neighbours in the Purepecha language, she used to receive their messages and answer them in a service oriented manner. On 29 January 29th, 2009 the radio station was raided by a hundred Agencia Federal de Investigación (Federal Investigation Agency) officers. They dismantled and seized the technical equipment and threatened the people present, all of whom were women. When she noticed that all of the town's streets were closed by the police, Rosa Cruz ran to the radio station; she was worried about two of her daughters-in-law who also work there. The police arrested her and without any explanation held her responsible for Radio Uekakua operations.

Today, Rosa faces charges for taking possession of Mexican national property—the radio-electric spectrum—and faces a possible 12-year sentence in prison. Radio Uekakua commenced its legal regularisation process in 2002 but the Mexican government—which legalised a dozen other community stations three years prior to this incident—did not pay attention to this particular radio station. Radio Uekakua had a transmission power of five watts that barely allowed it to reach the nearest towns.

The intolerance suffered by Rosa Cruz and other people who like her face persecution for exercising their communication rights stand in contrast to the expansion of communicational resources and their accessibility in the world. We are, in this 21st century, at the threshold of a fascinating information society, where the combination of digitalisation and telecommunications means more messages,

ubiquitous and global connections and unprecedented yet promising possibilities for interaction. However, in some areas of communication, we come across limitations and patrimonialisms worthy of the 19th century.

Unequal access to communicational options is a source of additional stress, in the performance as well as in the study of the media. Bound by commercial, corporate, political, union interests and other restrictions, the contemporary media tend to resist societal demands and participation. Thus, it seems appropriate yet paradoxical that the subject of the annual Conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research be human rights and communication. While specific issues such as international communication, sports and media, communication and AIDS or Islam and the media are being analysed, the general context of this Conference is the problematisation of human rights.

Many colleagues at this Conference have analysed on previous days the background of this articulation. The freedom promulgated since the French Revolution, more than two centuries ago and the human rights granted by the Universal Declaration 61 years ago are included in almost every democratic constitution and in the predominant common sense of our societies. Today it is almost unthinkable for a political or social leader to declare himself against freedom of speech. However, the recognition of such a right has encountered important obstacles, ranging from the persecution of communicators to the preservation of legal regimes and practices that nourish or favour the performance of authoritarian communication. It is communication in the hands of a few and addressed to the many more who do not have the means to significantly influence its contents.

The use of communication as a commercial battering ram or in other cases as a political propaganda tool creates messages that are schematic, repetitive and of poor content. The concentration of many media in few hands prevents society from being anything other than the sole consumer of such messages.

Technological development and corporate consolidation combine themselves to favour such a situation. Even if they provide options for participation and expression that supersede conventional media, the new technologies have also been used to strengthen the communicative capabilities of private corporations. At the same time, the concentration of business which fuses capital and infrastructure and pretends to do the same with audiences and content results in a reduction of the communication options that could otherwise be available to our societies. The interests of the political class, who will usually do anything to profit with media acquiescence, favour limitations on communication and rights to expression.

The media are formidable resources to reach consensus and mobilise entire societies but also to confuse and promote or strengthen the subjugation of citizens to authoritarian regimes. Media populism which reproduces old client-based habits is currently taking root in the media and in some cases openly subordinating them to its interests; this is becoming a new obstacle for contemporary democracies. The monopolisation of media resources that Berlusconi has achieved in Italy, the subjugation of dissident media set forth by Putin in Russia, the control of the information network sustained by the Chinese government, the usual persecution of dissident journalists in Cuba controlled by the Castro brothers, the use of public and private media to spread the autocratic project perpetrated by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela - all are different expressions of the arbitrary use that political power makes of the media, damaging the rights to expression and information.

In Mexico two companies, Televisa and TV Azteca, hold 93% of the commercial frequencies used by private television. Only three out of every 10 Mexican homes have subscription based television service. Therefore, 70% of the Mexican audience does not have access to other television services than those provided by these two companies. In the case of radio, most frequencies are controlled by around ten communicational groups. The press is also seeing a process of concentration.

None of those media have efficient rules for exercising the right to reply, which is one of the most elementary forms of the freedom of speech. The most influential corporations in radio and television regard themselves as owners of the radio-electric spectrum—which formally is national property—and the government acts as if this is the case. In Mexico, the media syndicates have prevented the incorporation of new competitors in television and they demand of the state a persecution policy towards the scarce social groups who try to implement other forms of radio broadcasting. Héctor Camero, the promoter of the Tierra y Libertad (Land and Freedom) radio station in Monterrey, Nuevo León, faces prosecution like Rosa Díaz, the Purepecha woman of Radio Uekakua.

Media legislation in Mexico does not stipulate limits on the concentration of communication resources, it does not favour diversity, it does not limit misleading advertising, it does not protect the rights of children nor does it promote high-quality content. In Mexican legislation television viewers and radio listeners are not acknowledged as citizens, only as consumers—using the differentiation emphasized by Néstor García Canclini. Freedom of speech is subjected to the discretion of media corporations. True public media is non-existent in Mexico. Television and radio stations under federal and local government control face severe restrictions, including their use as political propaganda tools.

A veritable paradox of the contemporary world is that we have a communication infrastructure and data flow that would indeed allow us to call ourselves the Information Society; but at the same time in many of our countries we suffer financial and commercial interests, political selfishness, ideological fundamentalisms, obsolete legal regimes, digital and cultural gaps, all of which hinder or simply prevent us from exercising our rights to communication and freedom of speech.

Media research is essential to documenting and explaining the conditions under which communication is exercised. Without serious and systematic work on the circumstances and content of the media, taking into account its languages and practices, capable of understanding them in their social contexts, conceiving of them as tributaries of popular culture but also as political power resources, studying their audiences inasmuch as their production modes, considering their juridical, technological and historical implications among other disciplinary aspects, we would not be able to understand the media itself and it would be impossible to design public policies capable of promoting communications interested in the communication rights of their corresponding societies.

Whichever commitment is reached, it will never replace the academic rigour demanded by media research to make it truly useful. The seriousness demanded of its methodological frameworks, the mandatory verifiability of the data provided and the possibility to discuss and compare its results and reflections in a broader sense require that media and communication research be subjected to the broadest and most open scrutiny.

Hence, such research will allow us to understand the media and its effects to contribute to designing communication capable of building a community or, in other words, capable of being a space to create and solidify citizenship.