Chapter 11

The Agencia Informativa Púlsar

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The first major initiative to link independent radio stations via the Internet was the *Agencia Informativa Púlsar*, a Spanish-language Internet-based news and information agency specialised in providing services for local, independent and community radio stations in Latin America.

Púlsar had a humble beginning in 1996, sending a daily news summary of 10-12 stories via email to forty-eight subscribers in Latin America. The main sources of information at the time were the websites of the few Latin American newspapers on the Internet and daily dispatches from Inter Press Service (IPS). A selection of news from these sources was rewritten in radio style and from the perspective of Latin American civil society and then emailed as a "rip and read" service. News staff at the stations were free to select the stories they wanted to use and even to edit them for language or local context.

Five years later, just before it suspended its service, *Púlsar's* expanded services were being emailed to more than 2,500 subscribers, including some 800 radio stations and broadcast organisations, in over fifty countries and were freely available for download from the web. The agency had diversified its news sources, adding, among others, a network of more than twenty correspondents and commentators. It had also added a variety of new services, including special thematic services, a indigenous Quechua-language service, digital audio clips, a complete audio newscast and a web portal. For the first time, millions of listeners of Latin American local and community-based radio stations had access to a non-commercial independent news and commentary service that was rooted in the social, political and geographic reality of the region.

Regional news and radio networking in Latin America

Radio has long been the most prevalent and the most dynamic mass medium in Latin America. For most people, especially those in marginalised urban areas and rural communities, it is often the only mass medium available and usually the most important source of news and information. While African and Asian broadcast systems were heavily influenced by the centralised State-dominated traditions of their European colonisers, Latin American countries tended to adopt more liberal ownership structures and, with a few notable exceptions, the region has a diverse radio landscape. Most countries have one or more large commercial networks alongside hundreds of small independent commercial stations and non-commercial stations owned by churches, trade unions, municipalities, indigenous people's organisations and a wide variety of NGOs. State radio broadcasters are generally either cultural or official and in either case relatively minor players.

Despite the recent growth of national commercial networks, which usually consist of a number of transmitters broadcasting centrally-produced programming to the provinces, radio continues to be the most local mass medium. Even in small towns it is common to find independent stations that produce all or most of their own programmes. Radio speaks in the language and with the accent of its community. Its programming is about its community, involves community members, reflects local interests and contributes to both the heritage and the development of the cultures, economies and communities that surround it. This contrasts

sharply with television – only 30 percent of Latin American television programming comes from the region; with 62 percent produced in the United States.[1]

However, while independent radio has a long history of informing about local events and stimulating local democracy, coverage of regional and international debates and events, increasingly important in the light of globalisation and efforts at regional integration, is generally abysmal. Few radio journalists are trained at analysing international news and even if they were, there are few sources of international news available to them.

This lack of appropriate international news sources for radio has long been recognised in Latin America. As long ago as 1962 radio news directors and managers at a meeting organised by CIESPAL[2] called for the establishment of a radio news agency and a few international radio news exchange initiatives have been established over the years. One of them was Informativo Tercer Mundo (ITM). Based largely on news bulletins from Inter Press Service (IPS) a leading independent global news agency, ITM's weekly programme was distributed on cassette to some one hundred radio stations. Its production values and its analysis were good, but delivery was by the post. By the time ITM programmes aired on local stations the news was at least two weeks old; often as much as six.[3] The Internet, still new in Latin America, was about to open up a new range of possibilities.

In 1995 a study was conducted with the support of the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) and the cooperation of the Ecuadorian NGO, CEDEP (Centro de Educación Popular) and the Latin American office of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) to identify ways the Internet could be used to support independent and community-based radio in Latin America. The study focused on three areas: (i) international news sources and practices among Latin America's independent and community radio stations; (ii) a trend towards greater concentration of ownership and control of radio broadcasting at the national level; and (iii) how the Internet could be harnessed to improve international news coverage and support efforts to promote diversity and pluralism of the region's radio stations.

International news

The research showed that for small independent radio stations, newspapers were the most important source of international news. For rural stations, these were often yesterday's newspapers from the capital. Other sources included foreign short-wave radio and, in urban areas, foreign cable and satellite television stations. While the major North American and European news agencies were only used by larger urban stations, they were influential since they are a primary source for the newspapers.

The predictable result of this was that international news, including news from neighbouring Latin American countries, usually reflected North American and European priorities rather than Latin American ones. For a Latin American outside Colombia, for example, news about that country rarely dealt with the its internal tensions, its relations with its South American neighbours, or even its economy. News was more likely to be concerned with the relation between Colombia and the USA's domestic drug problem.

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[1] *UNDP Human Development Report*, 1999, p. 34. Of the 30 percent of television programming that is from the region, very little is local. Much of it comes from regional production centres in Mexico, Argentina and Brazil.

[2] The Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación para América Latina – CIESPAL – is a research, training and production centre specialising in media and communication in Latin America.

[3] Initiated by Chasqui-Huasi in Chile, ITM production later moved to ALER in Ecuador. Its name was later changed to La Ronda Informativa and it is now distributed by ALER's ALRED satellite service.

Station representatives surveyed were generally aware of the poor quality of their international news in general and their news from Latin America in particular. Most were interested in improving this, but there was no obvious appropriate and affordable news source available to them.

Liberalisation and technology: The precarious position of local radio

The study also looked at some of the major changes that were taking place in Latin American radio as a result of liberalisation of broadcasting and of the deployment of relatively inexpensive satellite technologies to form national networks.

Liberalisation and deregulation of the sector had been successful in bringing about a dramatic increase in the number of radio stations in many countries, but this was not accompanied by a comparable increase in revenue for the sector. The result was fatal for many radio news departments. In Quito, Ecuador, for example, the number of radio stations increased by 300 percent between 1991 and 1996, but the amount spent on radio advertising increased by less than twenty percent in the same period – forty radio stations were operating with only marginally more advertising revenue than was formerly shared by ten stations. Competition was fierce and in order to survive new stations invested as little as possible in programming, using inexpensive automated formats and becoming little more than on-air jukeboxes. Established stations with a commitment to local news and information were under pressure to cut costs. News is expensive and in hard times it is often the first department to suffer budget cuts. Even after cuts, most radio stations remained in precarious financial positions.

At the same time, new and relatively inexpensive digital satellite technologies were becoming available and were beginning to have a dramatic effect on the nature of radio in the region. National multimedia groups, with holdings in print, television, Internet and radio were setting up networks consisting of a single production centre and many repeater stations throughout the country. These networks were expanding rapidly, with the national groups purchasing or leasing stations in smaller cities and towns, shutting down their production facilities, and converting them into repeater stations with little more than a satellite receiving dish, a transmitter, and sometimes an office to sell local advertising.

While the network stations had no local content, they enjoyed economies of scale and could invest large sums of money in production. They offered the latest music, popular talk shows, gossip, and political commentary that proved popular, especially with the young urban dwellers that most interested advertisers. The remaining independent stations were left struggling to compete or going out of business entirely. In many secondary cities and towns people knew the news, commentary, weather, traffic reports, music, and gossip from the capital, but had less information from their own communities and fewer opportunities to have their own voices heard.

Radio was undergoing a rapid transformation. No longer an exclusively local medium, it was on the road to becoming a predominantly distant one. In Peru in 1995 three Lima-based networks had more listeners in the provinces than the fifty largest provincial stations combined.

Local stations were in a precarious position. They were in a unique position to serve their communities and to contribute to media diversity, but in order to do so they needed to produce expensive local programming and to significantly improve their global and Latin American news and information. And they had to do this with fewer resources.

Enter the Internet

In 1995 the Internet was just beginning the leap from a primarily academic network to a predominantly commercial one. It was the year AOL began offering Internet access, the

number of web servers in the world increased tenfold from 10,000 to 100,000, Netscape went public with the largest NASDAQ initial public offering in history, Internet Explorer was not yet available, and Real Audio made its debut.

In Latin America the 1995 Internet frenzy went largely unnoticed. At the beginning of the year, seven of the eighteen Spanish-speaking countries still did not have direct access to the Internet.[4] In the countries that were connected, service providers were located in major urban centres and long distance telephone lines were not of good enough quality to sustain a connection to the Internet.

A second barrier to Internet use was that there was very little Latin American content on the Internet – perhaps a dozen mainstream newspapers and a few alternative sources dealing with particular countries or themes. Few people were convinced of the value of being connected to an Internet that had so little information in their language and about their reality.

Not surprisingly, the survey and interviews of local independent broadcasters showed that only a small minority of them had access to the Internet and, of those that did, most of them used it for email only.

Despite the difficulties, the Internet did seem to offer some promise for linking the region's radio stations. While its use was expensive compared with North America, it was still far less expensive than satellites and faster than the postal system. Connectivity, while still a problem, was a declining one. Many countries had recently privatised telecommunications and facilities were rapidly being extended and improved. The biggest drawback was the lack of content – there was little in Spanish, not much from Latin America and nothing that could be used on the radio without significant processing.

Bringing it all together: The *Agencia Informativa Púlsar*

Based on the interviews and surveys, the study concluded that local, independent and community radio stations both wanted and needed to improve the quality of their news and information, that there was need for more diversity of sources of news from the region, and that the Internet offered possibilities for accessing news about the region, for setting up and maintaining a network of correspondents, and for distributing news and information to radio stations. Building on these conclusions, AMARC and CEDEP decided to support the establishment of the *Agencia Informativa Púlsar*, an independent radio news agency making use of the Internet as a distribution mechanism, as a source of news, and as a two-way channel for communicating with correspondents.

The agency's main activities were:

- Identifying appropriate sources of accurate and high quality news and information on the Internet. These included both "mainstream" sources, such as online newspapers, and "alternative" sources, such as specialised news services directed at human rights or environmental networks.
- On a daily basis, searching out international news and editing it in radio style for distribution to radio stations via the Internet, prioritising news from Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Establishing a regional network of correspondents who feed news into a news pool available to all community radio broadcasters.
- Providing training and support to community radio broadcasters wishing to receive the service and/or to make full use of the Internet in their programming.

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[4] Bolivia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Guatemala got their first host computers in 1995. Cuba, Honduras and Paraguay followed in 1996.

Púlsar began in March 1996, sending a daily news summary via email to forty-eight subscribers in Latin America. The main sources of information at the time were websites of the few Latin American newspapers on the Internet and daily dispatches from Inter Press Service (IPS). Two part-time researcher/editors daily sifted through the news on the Internet, coming up with a selection that included both the main news items of the day as well as news items that were not on the international agendas. The key criteria were that the news be from Latin America and that it be selected and presented in a way that emphasised regional perspectives and the concerns of civil society. News staff at subscribing stations were free to select the stories they wanted to use and to edit them.

The agency quickly expanded. The number of subscribers to the basic service increased from forty-eight in 1996 to nearly 2,000 in 1999. By the time the service was suspended in 2001 radio stations and independent radio production groups were the largest subscriber category, accounting for about one third of the 2,500 subscribers. Non-governmental organisations and universities also subscribed to *Púlsar's* free services, as did a few hundred individuals. Significantly, more than one third of subscribers were from outside Latin America. Many of these were community radio stations in North America and Europe with programming for local Latin American immigrant communities.

The agency also added a number of new services. By the end of 1996 the monthly *Comunicado*, a newsletter for *Púlsar* subscribers with tips on how to make better use of the Internet in their programming, was added. The daily digest of news stories was renamed *Compendio* and a new service, *En Línea*, made news stories available throughout the day as they became available. *En Línea* was added to better serve stations with more frequent email access. *Compendio* and *En Línea* subscribers could also choose an optional audio service which offered short clips sent in by correspondents – the voice of a woman in the market commenting on new economic measures, for example. The clips were sent by email as compressed (mp3 format) files. *Ciberbrujas*, produced in collaboration with RedADA, a Bolivian NGO, was a weekly service featuring news and information about Latin American women. *Ñuqanchik*, was a daily news service in Quechua, the main indigenous language in the region, spoken by some eight million people (see Box 1).

As connectivity improved in Latin American cities, Púlsar added more high-bandwidth services, such as a website updated several times each day and downloadable news bulletins. However, the basic emailed text service, accessible to any station with an email account, was maintained. The goal was to provide service at a number of levels: from emailed text, through audio clips and up to web-based full audio. The additional cost of producing and distributing extra levels of service was minimal. By offering these different levels of service *Púlsar* could ensure that subscribers with limited access would not be left behind. New subscribers could adopt the service at their current capability, and then request new services as their own access and expertise permitted.

Púlsar also expanded its themes and sources. While in the beginning most of the news came from websites of mainstream newspapers, alternative sources were cultivated, including specialised press agencies, and a network of correspondents in Latin America and Europe.

Finally, *Púlsar* expanded its network and improved its services by focusing on training, including training of its in-house editors, its correspondents and its users.

The agency's first training activity was a *Viaje Virtual* (Virtual Voyage). It was a website on a diskette that was distributed to hundreds of stations just before the agency's launch. The diskette contained a manual about Internet use, instructions for how to get connected to the network, and information about *Púlsar* and how to receive the service, all in the web's HTML format. Mixing old and new technologies from the start, *Púlsar* distributed the diskette by mail to hundreds of stations in the region with simple instructions for how to use it. Even a compact offline browser was included on the diskette, since in early 1996 most computers in Latin America did not have browsers installed.

Box 1 – Ñuqanchik, ourselves

Probably the most important indigenous language in Latin America, Quechua was the language of the Incan empire and is today spoken by seven to ten million people in the region, the majority of them in Peru. Radio is by far the most important medium for the Quechua-speaking community, not least because it is primarily an oral language.* According to a 1996 estimate, some 180 Peruvian radio stations regularly offer programs in Quechua. Most of these stations are isolated from one another and their communities have few opportunities to develop common perspectives on national and regional issues.

Between August 1997 and April 1998, *Púlsar*, the Centro Peruano de Estudios Sociales (CEPES) and the Red Científica Peruana (RCP) collaborated in a joint experiment to produce and deliver daily Quechua-language micro-programmes to a network of mostly Peruvian stations. The service was called Ñuqanchik, a Quechua word meaning both we and ourselves, and received financial support from UNESCO.

The project faced two hurdles from the beginning:

1) Quechua radio stations are among the least likely to have access to the Internet. Indigenous people are among the poorest in Peru and their communities are often without electricity and running water, let alone telephone service.

2) A Quechua-language service would have to be an audio service and the larger file size necessitated a better Internet connection than a text-based service did.

While the stations did not have the necessary equipment to receive audio via the Internet, *cabinas públicas* (community Internet access points) and cyber cafés were beginning to appear in many market towns and it was hoped that stations could get to them at least once per week with a cassette tape to record the programs for later broadcast. It was even technically possible for the stations to send their own news, commentaries, and programmes via the same channel, turning an informational service into a low-cost participatory network in which everyone could be both correspondent and recipient.

At the end of the experimental period the service was suspended. The main reason for its failure was the inadequate telecom infrastructure in rural Peru. Since then Peru has made substantial investment in basic rural telecom services, with the goal of having telephone and basic Internet service in every community.

Ñuqanchik was ahead of its time, but valuable lessons were learned for how to produce and distribute Quechua-language programming at low-cost. The infrastructure might soon catch up with the ideas.

It is common to say that new communication technologies are going to lead us to a world in which we all share the same culture of "cyberspace" and speak the same language. The Ñuqanchik experience showed us that this homogenised world does not have to be the only option. Applied imaginatively, new technologies can also offer possibilities for pluralism and cultural diversity.

* Following the conquest, missionaries introduced a written form of the language based on the Roman alphabet. However, Peru's formal education system shunned the language and even educated Quechua-speakers were unlikely to be able to read and write in the language, since their education was in Spanish only.

More traditional training sessions were conducted for users throughout the region, usually in partnership with local broadcast networks. Since the Internet and email were new to the region, the training sessions focused on demystifying the new technologies in terms of access and cost and training in basic email skills. Training sessions were always used to evaluate *Púlsar's* service.

For correspondents, guides were produced to supplement annual training sessions and as aids for distance training and evaluation. The *Cartilla para Corresponsales*, for example, provided detailed style guidelines for themes, formats and language. Another correspondents' guide focused on the inclusion of audio in correspondent reports, covering both technical and format questions.

Challenges

In June 2001, after five years of operation, *Púlsar's* services were suspended. The reasons for shutting it down stemmed from financial and political problems in the Latin American office of AMARC, the organisation that managed the agency during the previous three years, and were unrelated to *Púlsar*. AMARC has since announced its intention to start the service again, and as of October 2002 a weekly bulletin is being distributed.

The challenges *Púlsar* took on during its first five years were *journalistic*, providing radio stations with a Latin American source of regional news; *political*, supporting independent and community radio; and *experimental*, examining and testing the opportunities presented by the combination of broadcast radio and the Internet.

As a journalistic project *Púlsar* demonstrated that it was possible to use the Internet to provide a low-cost news service tailored to the needs of independent and local radio stations. While there was much room for improvement, the steady increase in subscribers and an analysis of feedback received indicates that the journalistic quality and editorial line of the agency were appreciated.

As a political project the agency sought to contribute to the diversity of voices on the airwaves and to amplify independent and critical voices from Latin America. *Púlsar* made an important contribution to the diversity of perspectives on radio in Latin America, although this was counter-balanced by the increasing centralisation of ownership in the sector that we have already discussed.

As an experimental project *Púlsar* enjoyed its greatest success. As the first major initiative to link radio and the Internet it demonstrated a range of possibilities for combining the two media to support pluralistic and independent media, an essential prerequisite for democratic development. In so doing it also became a model for many other initiatives in Latin America and elsewhere.

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