

**'Era mejor cuando éramos ilegales' (it was better when we were illegals):  
Indigenous people, the State and 'public interest' indigenous radio stations in  
Colombia**

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the intervention of the Colombian State in the development of indigenous radio stations, focusing on the case of the Misak and Nasa communities. As shown, these radio stations have had different contributions in these indigenous communities, such as forging a new generation of leaders, promoting their languages, and encouraging political mobilisation. However, these media projects have also brought new challenges for these communities, calling for a more careful consideration of the complexities of state intervention in community radio projects. This article contributes to a better understanding of the impact of state intervention in indigenous media, by focusing on three main features that illustrate some of the unintended consequences of these projects: 1) contradictory state legislation that, instead of empowering indigenous media projects, tamed their political potential; 2) the 'natural' role of radio stations as a 'modern disruptors' (Appadurai, 1996) that may have positives as well as negative consequence in the changes they generate in indigenous communities; and 3) the internal political struggles within these indigenous communities.

**Keywords**

Multiculturalism, indigenous radio stations, Colombia, Programa Comunidad

**Introduction**

Since the 1970s, the success of alternative media projects such as miners' radio stations in Bolivia and developmental Catholic educational programs such as Acción Cultural Popular (ACPO) in Colombia have inspired the proliferation of indigenous radio stations throughout Latin America and other parts of the world (Beltrán and Reyes, 1993; Salazar, 2002)<sup>1</sup>. With a few exceptions, such as the state-sponsored radio stations of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista in México (Castells I Talens, 2011), governments throughout the region initially repressed indigenous and other popular sector radio stations, which were regarded as an anti-establishment platform of political struggle (Kaplún, 2007). Since the 1990s, however, many states, including Colombia (Rodríguez & El Gazí, 2007), Venezuela (Schiller, 2013), Argentina (Segura, 2013) and Bolivia (Villarreal, 2017), have become enthusiastic promoters of these types of media projects (Hintz, 2011). In recent years, many media scholars have celebrated the expansion of indigenous media around the world, focusing mainly on indigenous peoples' appropriation and use of media technology as a means of empowerment, development, and social change. However, fewer have considered the

complexities of state intervention in community radio projects, particularly new challenges they might raise for local indigenous communities and political mobilisation.

This article contributes to a better understanding of the impact of state intervention in indigenous media through analysis of indigenous radio stations of the Misak and Nasa communities in Cauca, Colombia, one of the most historically rebellious sectors against the power of the state in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Founders of the first indigenous organisation in Colombia in 1971, the Misak and Nasa have a long history of different types of community-oriented radio projects, ranging from unlicensed radio stations to developmental-based Catholic and Evangelical supported programs. As I will discuss, these programs, while initially restricted by the Colombian government, became a central focus of state intervention following the multicultural reforms of the 1990s. As this essay shows, even though these radio stations have contributed in different aspects to the Misak and Nasa people – forging new generations of indigenous leaders, promoting the use of indigenous languages, and encouraging political organisation and mobilisation in times of unrest – they have also produced new challenges for these communities. For instance, these media projects created new economic burdens for their community's already weak finances, fostered new dependencies on external donors, undermined horizontal communication methods, and evidenced power conflicts within these communities.

These results, I argue, call for more thorough consideration of the empowering effects of indigenous media, particularly when these programs are closely linked to State sponsored programs. After brief discussion of predominant approaches to indigenous media, the remainder of the article analyses a shift in government policy toward indigenous media, tracing the emergence of Colombia's first national state sponsored program for indigenous radio stations, Programa Comunidad, followed by a specific discussion on the Misak and Nasa radio projects in the Cauca region. I focus on three main features that were relevant in this case: 1) contradictory state legislation that, instead of empowering indigenous media projects, tamed their political potential; 2) the 'natural' role of radio stations as a 'modern disruptors' (Appadurai, 1996) that may have positives as well as negative consequence in the changes they generate in indigenous communities; and 3) the internal political struggles within these indigenous communities.

### **Reconsidering Approaches to Indigenous Media**

In recent years, the explosion of indigenous media around the world has attracted the attention of media anthropologists and media studies scholars. Media anthropologists, on one hand, have focused their analyses on forms of empowerment as a result of new forms of indigenous media. For instance, these studies have centered on the reproduction and transformation of indigenous cultural identities (Ginsburg, 1991), mediation and self-representation (Turner, 1991; Ginsburg, 1995; Alia, 2010), challenges to dominant representations of the indigenous 'Other' (Shohat & Stam, 2002), appropriation and use of media technology by indigenous people (Meadows & Molnar, 2010), and indigenous active audiences and mass media (Tacchi, 2003). These approaches, however, have paid little attention to the political and economic constraints that indigenous media endure (Howley, 2010). Media scholars, on the other hand, have focused on the potential of indigenous media in offering new instruments for development and/or social change. Yet this research has also received various criticisms, especially for its predominantly uncritical views around media projects and a lack of strong empirical evidence (Cleaver, 2001; Dutta, 2011). Focusing on similar projects that emphasise 'sports for development and social change', Spaaji (2011) suggests that one problem stems from the fact that many academic studies on areas related to 'development/social change' tend to be financed by parties which benefit from the promotion of these projects, such as international aid agencies, state offices, and NGOs. Also, many of these studies have been carried out by researchers that also worked as 'media development' consultants for these same organisations (Spaaji, 2011).

In recent years, scholars focusing on the involvement of the state in grassroots media projects in Latin America have contributed to the enrichment of traditionally uncritical views from media anthropology and media studies. These works discuss, among other topics, the role of state controlled *indigenista* radios in the push for – and resistance to – indigenous integration in México (Castells I Talens, 2011); the problematic crafting and implementation of a 2009 Communication Law in Argentina, which provided 33 percent of the radio frequencies to the ‘third sector’ – or non-commercial and non-public sectors such as the indigenous, working class, and feminist organisations (Segura & Waisbord, 2016); and the political advantages and contradictions of the intervention of the state in the development of radio and television stations in indigenous and other disenfranchised communities in Bolivia and Venezuela (Schiller, 2013; Villarreal, 2017) .

Before this more recent interest in indigenous media and the State, the Colombian case called the attention of a few scholars who were already reporting on different aspects of this phenomenon. These scholars emphasised the role of state sponsored indigenous radio stations in the invigoration of indigenous languages (Uribe-Jongbloed & Peña Sarmiento, 2008), the intervention of the Colombian Ministry of Culture in the development of indigenous radio stations (Rodríguez & El Gazí, 2007), and the agency of indigenous people to use radio to contest the power of the right-wing government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2000-2008) (Murillo, 2008). However, even though Rodríguez and El Gazí (2007) explain some of the limitations of the communication law on indigenous radio stations, they published their article just a few years after the state intervention in the development of these media outlets. As a result, it presents projections of the state’s policies and programs on indigenous radio stations, rather than final analysis of tangible outcomes.

This article seeks to update the information published more than ten years ago by discussing the consequences of state intervention on indigenous radio stations. To offer a more conclusive view on the results of indigenous radio stations after more than twenty years of state intervention, the following sections analyse the emergence of contradictory legislation toward indigenous radio stations and new challenges to community organising in the implementation of the ‘Programa Comunidad’, the first Colombian state sponsored program for indigenous radio stations.

### **State Intervention in Community Radio: The Limits of ‘Empowerment’**

In the 1960s, the arrival of the Catholic developmental educational radio project, ACPO Radio Sutatenza, in Cauca marked the beginning of the Nasa and Misak people’s experience with non-commercial radio stations. Based on self-organised local ‘radio schools’ and directed at a large variety of multimedia products that included a newspaper, booklets, music records, among other media, ACPO Radio Sutatenza provided a free ‘Integral Fundamental Education’ (Nitsch, 1964) to millions of Colombia’s rural population, including indigenous people, focusing on five essential areas: spirituality, health, literacy, math, and work and economy. Similar to other indigenous radio stations, this modernist program resulted in very paradoxical results for indigenous communities. On the one hand, it provided educational tools and networks that contributed to the formation of the regional and national indigenous movement in the 1970s. On the other hand, it promoted the incorporation of controversial agro-industrial techniques that affected indigenous food production, belittled indigenous identities, and encouraged the abandonment of indigenous languages and religious practices, among other problems (Cortés, 2019).

In the 1970s, the Misaks and the Nasas, supported by Catholic and Evangelical organisations, started to develop their own radio stations. According to Henry Tunubalá, a former Misak governor and current leader of an evangelical organisation in Guambia, an iconic Misak territory, he and other evangelicals founded a small unlicensed community radio station with the support of external evangelical organisations in 1975. This radio project, however, only lasted a short time, due to technical problems and electricity costs they were unable to cover. Since the 1990s,

other evangelical Misaks have taken up the idea, launching other unlicensed evangelical radio stations (Cortés, 2017). In 1979, in the municipality of Pàez, Cauca, the Catholic Vincentian Missionaries and Nasa leaders of the area decided to organise the first licensed radio station broadcasting in an indigenous language in Colombia. After eight years of fighting against harsh bureaucratic and legal obstacles to grassroots radio stations, they launched Radio Eucha – meaning ‘good morning’ in the Nasa language, Nasa Yuwe (Alba, 1993).

In 1990, the Colombian state started replacing strict restrictions against community media with policies that promoted the establishment of such projects. That year, the government of Cesar Gaviria (1990-1994) recognised communication as a basic citizen’s right (Decree 1900 of 1990) and established the Direction of Social Communication and the Division of Social Development at the Ministry of Communication (Decree 1901 of 1990), which had as a mission to support the establishment of non-commercial regional and local media projects. The following year in 1991, Colombia promulgated its ‘multicultural’ constitution that, in addition to advancing indigenous rights, formally recognised the ‘right to communication,’ which implied freedom of expression, the right to receive truthful information, and the power of developing people’s communication outlets (Article 20; see also Saffon, 2007). Colombia also signed the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 196, which established the right of indigenous people to have their media outlets (Leger, 1994). These proclamations became the basis for a series of State initiatives that sought the development of indigenous radio stations throughout the nation. Importantly, in 2000, the Colombian government partnered with the Agencia Española de Cooperación para el Desarrollo (AECID) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to launch the Programa Comunidad, which I will discuss in detail in the next section. First, it is necessary to give a more thorough consideration to the historical juncture that shaped the emergence of such programs, to better understand the contradictory nature of legislation in favor of indigenous media projects.

Importantly, why did the Colombian State, and later many other Latin American nations, radically change their political position towards grassroots radio stations? According to Pulleiro (2012), the radical political changes that happened throughout the region in the 1980s (the return to democracy following an era of military dictatorships; the delegitimation of left-wing alternatives after the collapse of the Soviet Union; and the rise of new social movements and identity-based politics) transformed the conception of alternative radio stations as popular instruments for anti-establishment leftist political mobilisation to less radical, more cultural, ethnic orientated tools of local development. Due to the transformation of the conception of alternative radio stations, Pulleiro explains, Latin American States became more receptive towards indigenous radio stations (Pulleiro, 2012).

The de-politicisation of alternative radio stations is significant when considering the history of indigenous movements in Colombia. By the 1990s, indigenous peoples, especially from the Cauca region, had become a significant political voice in Colombia. Since the 1960s, they organised their first cooperatives, such as the Cooperativa las Delicias and the Sindicato del Oriente Caucaño, which helped indigenous groups extend collective land rights and directly trade their products, without the intervention of intermediaries (Sánchez Montenegro, 2015). These groups also founded the first regional and national indigenous organisations – the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC) and the Organización Indígena de Colombia (ONIC) (Rappaport, 2007) – and participated in the crafting of Colombia’s 1991 Multicultural Constitution (Herrán Pinzón, 2009). As a result, indigenous people acquired the political power to successfully claim legal recognition and special rights, including more participation in media production via community media.

Yet special legislation and programs for indigenous radio stations, were not only the product of the indigenous political mobilisation. Rather, other factors such as the relatively small

indigenous population in Colombia, estimated in the 1990s to be less than three per cent of the total national population, would permit the state to accommodate such demands without radically challenging the status quo (Hale, 2004). According to Agudelo (2005), due to its small population indigenous people have received these benefits, but not the Black community, another historically marginalised group, which counts more than 20 per cent of the total Colombian population.

In addition, legislation supposedly crafted to fulfill indigenous peoples' 'right to communication' paradoxically restrained indigenous radio stations. For instance, Decree 1446 of 1995, which established the regulatory framework for the coming years, placed indigenous radio stations in the category of 'public interest radio stations',<sup>2</sup> along with radio stations from other territorial entities of the nation,<sup>3</sup> such as the national police, the military forces, and universities. According to the law, as 'public interest' radio stations, these types of stations cannot go beyond the promotion of indigenous languages and the civic values of the nation. As a result, they may broadcast news, but are not allowed to provide analysis or political commentary (Decree 348 of 1997).

Moreover, while state legislation advanced indigenous radio stations as instruments to provide indigenous people with some participation in the media, it clearly did so without threatening the oligopoly that dominated the media landscape in Colombia.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the restrictions mentioned before, Decree 2805 of 2008 prohibited public interest radios from broadcasting or networking (Article 54), relying on international aid organisations for economic support (Article 25), broadcasting commercial advertising beyond a five minute recognition per hour broadcasted to radio station's sponsors (Article 25), or transmitting any type of political or electoral propaganda – even that strictly pertaining to indigenous candidates (Article 30). Similar to Cusicanqui's and Hale's concept of '*indio permitido*' (Hale, 2004), here we see how multicultural reforms, rather than promoting the full participation of indigenous people in national political and cultural processes, act to tame the potential of indigenous people as agents of resistance and transformation against the power of the Neoliberal State.

Indeed, these restrictions brought a series of unexpected consequences. First, to secure a source of income, many indigenous radio stations were forced to infringe the restriction on advertising, risking fines that would diminish their already slim budgets. Second, and perhaps more problematic, these radio stations might avoid penalisation for such infractions, unveiling the weakness of public institutions and damaging the already low legitimacy and credibility of the state among indigenous populations. Third, legislation has failed to consider any salary or economic compensation for those who work in these radio stations. Lack of state support and the impossibility of selling advertising has had negative consequences regarding the living standards of media practitioners, the continuity of the radio staff, and the quality of the media productions. Finally, the Colombian state transferred all the radio station's technical requirements (access to electromagnetic spectrum, licenses, electricity, maintenance and equipment upgrading) and administrative costs to the indigenous communities (Article 25, Decree 2805 of 2008). In fact, one of the conditions for indigenous communities to participate in state programs sponsoring public interest indigenous radio stations was that they provide the physical space for the radio station's infrastructure and to assume its operational costs. Envisioning the financial burdens that these radio stations involved, 35 out of the 61 initially projected participants in the first state program for the development of indigenous radio stations withdrew from the program.

### **The unintended consequences of state-sponsored indigenous radio programs**

In 2000 the Colombian government launched Programa Comunidad, a national program that sponsored public interest indigenous radio stations. This program was part of the social agenda of the US-sponsored Plan Colombia,<sup>5</sup> which provided equipment and media training to a production center and 25 unlicensed radio stations, two of which were already established.

During subsequent years, these new indigenous radio stations also benefited from Radios Ciudadanas: Espacios para la Democracia (Citizen Radios: Spaces for Democracy) (2001-2010), a program organised by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and sponsored by USAID, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UN Development Program. Radio Ciudadanas invested a total of four million dollars supporting 'local democratic processes through the production and broadcast of radio programs designed to build citizen awareness and increase citizen participation in local governance' in more than 200 Colombian municipalities (USAID, 2005). However, as mentioned before, the 26 beneficiaries by this program had provide locations and assume the cost of the station's operations – electricity, the use of the electromagnetic spectrum, and the maintenance of equipment and installations (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002).

In 2000, government agencies and program sponsors organised the International Summit of Indigenous Radio of América (ISIRA), an event to promote Programa Comunidad. During the event, functionaries of different state institutions, academics, members of international agencies, and some indigenous leaders with experience in community radio met to discuss the goals of the program. As Minister of Culture Juan Luis Mejía explained:

We felt a great satisfaction when [we] began to contemplate the idea of providing radio stations to indigenous people to enable them to express themselves in their languages. We comply with the Constitutional mandate of ensuring the citizen's cultural rights and the protection of diversity. And we answered the wishes of many communities requesting access to radio stations as a medium of self-expression and self-determination (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 20).

This declaration marked a radical departure from the prohibitionist approach that was dominant before the 1991, toward a state policy openly supporting self-produced indigenous radio stations. Despite the importance of this step, it is equally important to pay attention to the overly optimistic tone of the declaration. State functionaries promoted community media as the solution for ensuring indigenous rights to self-determination and cultural diversity, as well as their rights as citizens to participate in the public sphere.

Mejía represented one of the many hyper-optimistic voices at the ISIRA event. Many other State functionaries, academics and indigenous leaders also shared this positive outlook regarding the potential of indigenous radio stations as affordable instruments for improving intercultural communication between indigenous people and the rest of the country (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 36-37); counteracting the exclusionary practices of dominant forms of mass media (2002: 68,84); strengthening the communities' developmental plans (*Planes de Vida*); and recovering indigenous oral traditions and languages (2002: 75,78).

Yet reflections on the program were not only celebratory. Some participants in the event also mentioned a few challenges and difficulties, including possible reprisals from armed illegal groups against indigenous communicators (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 82), the use of the radio stations for individualistic political purposes or to promote non-indigenous traditions (2002: 83-84), and the lack of resources to administer them (2002: 121). Interestingly, some participants also expressed concern regarding the transformative nature of the radio medium for indigenous communities. For instance, the Misak leader Jeremías Tunubalá explained that Guambia Stereo, the community radio station adjudicated to his community in 1998, had transformed the way in which leaders related with their community, especially in the case of the *alguaciles*.<sup>6</sup>

This new communication has suddenly changed the role of the leaders, the cabildos, and the *alguaciles*. Their mission was to dialogue directly with the community. Since the arrival of the community radio station, the *alguaciles* prefer to use this medium rather than talking directly to people (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 105).

Tunubalá's comments illustrated that the radio station's vertical and depersonalised communication replaced a more intimate and interpersonal traditional contact between leaders and the rest of the Misak community. Jeremías Torres, a radio producer from the indigenous Arhuaco community – another community pioneer in the development of indigenous radio stations in Colombia – exposed another disruption brought by the inclusion of community radio within his indigenous territory:

The difficulties we had were related to our cultural traditions. Unfortunately, people do not value radio stations yet. When we started, the elders told us that radio was like a death wish, a harbinger of something bad. Traditionally, we interpreted noise as if death were coming. That is why our elders do not accept radio. But, other people think differently. We work with people who want community radio (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 99).

Torres' testimony unveils a very paradoxical situation related to the promotion of community radio as an instrument for enviroing indigenous cultures: while elders reject community radio stations as harming their indigenous beliefs, younger communication practitioners embrace community radio stations for their potential to become an instrument to safeguard their culture. The paradox between these two opposite views on indigenous radio stations (as instruments for conservation versus as instruments for disruption) was even more evident when Torres explained that their radio programming sought to preserve Arhuaco culture and territory: 'Our goal is to survive, not to promote development or the exploitation of natural resources, but to continue protecting our territory and our culture as always has been (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 98).

As the interventions by Tunubalá and Torres both show, radio stations have represented an instrument of disruption for those communities that have adopted it. This analysis coincides with the discussion of electronic media by Appadurai (1996), who considers it to be one of the most important tools for disenfranchised populations to become included in the process of globalisation. The globalisation process, he adds, should not be understood as synonymous with homogenisation, but rather as an opportunity for historically poor populations to establish communicative interconnections that would increase their political and cultural agency. While Appadurai's tone regarding globalisation is more positive (Menon, 1999), his view on electronic media calls attention to its disruptive nature in linking isolated communities to regional and global networks. From this perspective, it is important to understand that the adoption of community radio stations always bring consequences and changes – sometimes positive, as Appadurai envisioned, but that can also be detrimental to the well-being of the interviewed communities.

### **Indigenous radio stations in Cauca**

As stated, the involvement of indigenous people from Cauca with Evangelical and Catholic supported developmental, self-organised and unlicensed radio stations started years before the Colombian state's intervention in these types of programs. During the 1990s, attraction for self-produced radio projects increased following the ratification of the 1991 Constitution and the 'right of communication.' In 1994, for instance, the Misak's 'Plan de Vida' – a document containing the Misak's political, cultural and economic plan over a ten-year period – explains:

The installation of a radio station would speed up the spread of ideas needed for agricultural production, administration, marketing, medicine, and the political plan in general. This plan needs to include those who can read and write as well as those illiterate who only communicate in our native language (DPVPM, 1994, author's translation).

In 1998, the Cabildo de Guambia launched *89.4 Guambia Estereo*, after receiving equipment, radio licenses and infrastructure from the state program Plan Nacional de Desarrollo Alternativo, known as PNDA or PLANTE, and the AECID. This aid was part of a package of alternative development programs that the Misak community received in exchange for engaging in actions

of self-eradication and future prevention of coca production (Villaveces, 2001). The Misak projected this radio station as part of a video, newspaper, and graphic design multimedia initiative that would contribute to the development of the economy and political agenda stipulated by the 'Plan de Vida.' To carry out the plan, the Misak *cabildo* (the Misak's internal government body) and the Department of Social Communication of the University of Valle organised a political and technical training program called *Comunicación para la Movilización Social (CPMS)*, which trained 30 Misak youth interested in participating in radio production. In 1999, the Programa Comunidad selected the Misak community as one of the beneficiaries of the adjudication of a new indigenous radio station in the Cauca region.<sup>7</sup> This new radio station, named *Namuy Wam*, replaced *Guambia Stereo*, which was closed by Misak leaders for its massive debts from the electromagnetic spectrum fee, electricity bills, and *Sayco y Acimpro* – a mandatory music copyright tax charged on behalf of artists to radio stations and commercial entities. Since its inception, every January the Misak *cabildo* selects between five and six people to work as radio station staff, who are in charge of maintaining the radio station on air from 4:30 am to 10 pm and coordinating the radio programming, which includes mainly talk radio and music as well as broadcasting community events and sponsored programs.

During their years of operation, *Namuy Wam* and many other radio stations supported by the State, have contributed to their communities in different ways. The Misak radio station, for instance, has served as a place for fostering community leadership. A significant number of those who participated in the initial training organised by UniValle have occupied leadership positions within their community and beyond. This was the case with Luis Enrique Ullune, who was secretary of the Misak *cabildo* for two terms, Didier Chirimuscay, who was general secretary of the *cabildo* and currently works as a journalist in the national media, and Jeremías Tunubalá, who was one of the organisers of the training provided for the opening of *Guambia Estereo* in 1997. After graduating as Social Communicator from the UniValle, Tunubalá worked in the PCM for several years as radio producer and general coordinator. In 2010, he left the radio station to occupy the seat as Misak's governor – the youngest in the recorded history of this community at that moment. After his successful year as governor, he became director of the Misak hospital *Mama Dominga*, and he later was elected as Vice-Governor in 2014 and reelected in 2015.

Another remarkable contribution of *Namuy Wam* to the Misak culture has been the high use of the Misak language – *Nam Trick* – in their programming. A low percentage of *Namuy Wam* programming is in Spanish, with the exception of some sponsorships, shorts translations of important announcements, and programs produced by external actors, the Ministry of Culture, and paid-programs. However, this is not the case with most indigenous radio stations. A 2009 study of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), for example, found that the use of indigenous languages in public interest indigenous radio stations was weak (ONIC, 2009).

Despite the legal restrictions mentioned before, some public interest indigenous radio stations have nonetheless become an instrument of resistance, particularly against the traditional exclusion and misrepresentation in mass media of indigenous issues, the violence of armed groups, the power of transnational mining corporations, and the abuses of the state, among other situations. The public interest radio station of the Nasa's Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN), *Radio Payumat*, became one of the most emblematic radio projects for indigenous resistance. This radio station, which is part of a multimedia apparatus that includes video and website production known as the ACIN's 'Communication Quilt,' played a critical role reporting on political events that affect the Nasa people, to both internal and external audiences. For instance, *Radio Payumat* has reported on the violent actions of armed groups – the national army, leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups – that have a presence in their territory; the community's political mobilisations, including the 2008 Social and Communitarian *Minga*, one of the longest and largest political mobilisations against neoliberalism and rural violence in

Colombian history; their actions against illegal mining within their territory; as well as the Nasa's 'Liberation of Mother Earth' campaign that called for the seizure of land from agro-industrial companies around their territory (Archilla & García, 2015; Murillo, 2008;). Due to the importance of its work, the Communication Quilt has won prestigious awards, such as the Spanish Bartolomé de las Casas and the national Revista Semana community journalism in 2010 (Linares Sánchez, 2015).

The longtime involvement of the Nasa and Misak people with different community-oriented radio projects is not the only reason for the relative success of their radio stations. These radio projects are also the result of political processes initiated by the Nasas and the Misaks, which I mentioned before. Without this political history, which owes credit to the support of external sympathisers and Liberation Theology influenced Catholic priests (Alvarado & Patiño López, 2012), Nasa and Misak public interest indigenous radio stations would have merely replicated the practices of commercial radio stations: broadcasting entirely in Spanish, relying on mainstream music, and basing the programming on 'hot talk' rather than political or cultural topics, as happens to other unlicensed and 'public oriented' indigenous radio stations from communities with a lesser tradition in political mobilisation (Organización Indígena de Colombia, 2009). In addition to forging community leaders, strengthening indigenous languages, and helping in moments of political crisis, these public interest indigenous radio stations have also contributed to indigenous communities by increasing women's participation in traditionally patriarchal societies, supporting young musicians, finding innovative forms of financing, and fostering relationships with other indigenous cultures and social sectors (Cortés, 2017). However, along with these positive contributions, these radio stations have had unintended consequences that led to new challenges in the communities.

### **Problems endured by the Misak and Nasa radio stations**

In addition to the 'modernist disruption' that radio stations, in general, have represented in the lives of indigenous communities, discussed before, public interest indigenous radio stations have brought new challenges for the Misak and Nasa communities, in particular by introducing new economic obligations for their upkeep. This contradicts the initial promotion of radio stations as 'affordable' tools of communication. As, Carlos Guillermo Páramo, a member of the Ministry of Culture who worked in the Programa Comunidad, explained during the 2001 Villa de Leyva summit:

Radio has characteristics that make it particularly attractive as a means of communication. It is extremely economical. For a country like Colombia, it can resolve handily the communication problems involved in its historical process of nation construction (Ministerio de Cultura, 2002: 35).

Indeed, radio production and broadcasting are cheaper than other mass media, such as television. But, in the context of indigenous communities that have insufficient budgets and urgent necessities in vital areas such as healthcare and education, radio represents a hefty expenditure. Such financial problems were evident a few years after the Misaks launched their first licensed radio station. In 2007, the Ministry of Communications sued the Cabildo of Guambia for a debt of 6,475,146 pesos<sup>8</sup> (4,989,000 principal and 1,489,000 in interest) resulting from the costs of concession rights, extensions, operating licenses, operating frequencies, and the modification of the technical parameters of the station. That same year, the Misak debt for the use of electromagnetic spectrum reached more than 17 million pesos.<sup>9</sup> These debts became even worse in subsequent years. In 2015 alone, the Misaks had to cover very high electricity bills, which alone reached a deficit of more than 30 million pesos,<sup>10</sup> salaries for the staff, the maintenance of the radio station equipment, and the acquisition of a new radio transmitter.

These economic problems brought different consequences for these radio stations. For instance, the Misak Namuy Wam and the Nasas have been out of service for months due to lack of resources for the maintenance of equipment. Even worse, indigenous media producers endured harsh working conditions. In the Misak case, I met very talented radio producers who, after battling for years to maintain these projects on air despite the scarcity of economic resources, decided to seek more stable income through pursuing other types of work such as agriculture, housekeeping, and factory work away from their territory. Some of those who decided to stay were forced to seek other sources of revenue – establishing small grocery stores from their houses, for example – or asking for economic support from by their relatives. In theory, Namuy Wam's staff received a salary and a *remesa* (groceries) – mostly rice, beans, pasta, bread and *panela* (unrefined whole cane sugar) to cook lunch at the radio station. However, the *cabildo* very frequently delayed their payment by months, due to lack of funding. It was common to hear media practitioners complaining of similar health problems, such as gastritis, high blood pressure, and constipation, which are the result of a poor diet.

Due to the legal restrictions on advertising, these radio stations relied on the support of external organisations and international donors. In addition to fostering a very complicated dependency culture among indigenous communities – contradicting the principle of autonomy trumpeted by indigenous organisations – finding external grants demanded time, expertise, and training among personnel, and created competition between different indigenous radio stations. These examples illustrate some of the unintended consequences of contradictory legislation and the role of radio stations as a 'modern disruptors' (Appadurai, 1996) that may have positive as well as negative consequences in the changes they generate in indigenous communities.

To such limits it is also important to consider how indigenous radio stations were affected by internal political constraints within the indigenous communities. As Dorado (2004) explains in the case of Nasa's Radio Payumat, Nasa leaders of the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN), had never fully assumed the economic, political, and administrative responsibility of having a radio station. One of the reasons for this lack of support was political differences between indigenous media practitioners and indigenous leaders. This division was due, in large part, to the critical position that members of the ACIN's Communication Quilt took against the process of bureaucratisation and cooptation by the State of some their leaders (Dorado, 2004).

The criticism from Radio Payumat staff of their leaders can be traced back to 2009, when the political agenda of the ACIN and other indigenous organizations radically changed. As Manuel Rozental, a former member of the ACIN's Communication Quilt, explained, the 2008 Social and Communitarian Minga proposed an anti-establishment political declaration that included the rejection of free trade policies, the denunciation of the militarization of indigenous territories, the refusal to accept laws that sought the eviction of indigenous people from their territories for the development of mining projects, the demand to honour previous commitments by the state to indigenous communities, and the promotion of unity among destitute sectors of Colombian society. Due to personal interests and political divergences, this declaration was transmuted into softer, pro-establishment positions one year later (Rozental, 2009). This softening of indigenous leaders towards the state was particularly evident in 2013, when indigenous organisations manifested their support for the reelection of right-center President Juan Manuel Santos, in exchange for more participation in the administration of public resources for indigenous communities, especially in the areas of education and health (Dorado, 2013). As a response to this political panorama, Radio Payumat staff have assumed a critical position against Santos' indigenous supporters, exacerbating political tensions with some indigenous authorities (Tejido de Comunicación de la ACIN, 2016).

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the case of the Colombian public interest indigenous radio stations provides the opportunity to expand analysis of the complexities of state intervention in community media projects in Latin America. In the Colombian case, this study makes evident that state efforts to promote indigenous radio stations resulted, not in empowering, but in tightening control over these potentially 'problematic' tools for indigenous political organisation. In general terms, the state program for indigenous radio stations proved to be 1) superficial – it just provided the legal framework for its existence, but at the same time limited the scope of action and power of these radio stations; 2) rhetorical – it provided legal frameworks, some support and assistance, but it did not guarantee the financial viability of these projects; 3) paternalistic – it led to the dependency of radio projects on national and international external donors; 4) contradictory – it imposed restrictions that forced indigenous communicators to violate the law in order to survive, fueling a culture of illegality; 5) conflictive – it created a competitive environment between indigenous communities for funding; 6) insufficient – it did not challenge the structural constraints that have traditionally excluded indigenous people and other destitute sectors of the Colombian society from mass media participation, control, and ownership; and 7) overly idealistic – it deemed radio stations as an instrument 'to save' indigenous cultures from acculturation, even though the testimonies from the Arhuaco and Misak leaders evidence the cultural disruptions brought by these radio stations. Indeed, for the Misak, public interest radio stations have contributed to the erosion of horizontal forms of communication; for the Arhuacos these projects have fostered tensions between elders and younger generations.

This study has also shown that state legislation is not the only source of problems for public interest indigenous radio stations. These projects also endured the lack of support from their indigenous authorities. In the case of the ACIN's Communication Quilt, this was a consequence of the critical position of indigenous media producers against their indigenous authorities. The critical position of Nasa indigenous media producers was a result of the educational processes that contributed to the construction of a highly critical and militant indigenous movement in Cauca in the final years of the 20th century. Unfortunately, tensions between critical indigenous media producers and indigenous authorities are currently increasing, since the political position of indigenous organisations has become less insubordinate and more integrated into the administrative apparatus of the state. As consequence, Radio Payumant and all other public interest indigenous radio stations are projected, not to become political and critical instruments for indigenous resistance, but to transform into uncritical 'public relation' agents of some indigenous organisations that are quite integrated into the state bureaucratic apparatus.

Finally, despite these limitations, it is important to remark on the extraordinary work of indigenous media producers. Due to their effort to overcome the restrictions of the state, the lack of support of indigenous authorities, and the inherent complexities implied in the incorporation of radio stations, public interest indigenous radio stations have contributed in many ways to these communities: forging a new generation of leaders, strengthening indigenous languages, and enabling strategies for resistance, among other contributions. As result, the legitimacy of these projects is not based on possessing a legal licence, but in the daily work of these media producers who are committed to serving indigenous grassroots political projects, even at the cost of putting at risk their own health and physical integrity. Unsurprisingly, many of these Misak and Nasa media producers coincide with Dora Salas, an experienced Nasa radio producer, regarding the role of licensing for public interest indigenous radio stations in ending some of the anxieties of operating illegally, which brought the possibility of the confiscation of equipment, among other consequences. Considering all of the restrictions and difficulties brought by the law, she concluded that '*era mejor cuando éramos ilegales*' ('it was better when we were illegal').

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## NOTES

- 1 This article is based on more than two years of fieldwork (2013-2015) carried out in the in the Cauca region. During this time, I conducted multiple interviews as well as observed and documented interactions among indigenous leaders, state functionaries and academics. I have also consulted and analysed various primary sources, such as reports of several communication events and studies by indigenous organisations of state-supported indigenous radio stations.
- 2 The other two categories of the law are 'commercial radio stations' and 'community radio stations'.
- 3 Indigenous territories are part of the political-administrative jurisdictional division of the nation – along with municipalities, especial districts and departments.
- 4 This oligopoly is composed by three Colombian economic conglomerates – Grupo Aval, Acciones y Valores (Casa Editorial El Tiempo); Grupo Santo Domingo (El Espectador, Revista Cromos, Blu Radio); and Organización Ardilla Lulle (RCN Radio y Televisión) – and one Spanish group – Prisa (Caracol Radio), which dominates audience: 85 percent of the TV, 36 percent of radio, two of the national newspapers with larger circulation and the news websites with highest traffic circulation in the nation. These powerful groups, in turn, have strong political nexus and a large presence in various economic sectors, including banking, construction, agriculture, food production and sports (Cortés, 2016).
- 5 Plan Colombia was a controversial US-sponsored program that aimed to combat and eradicate drug trafficking.
- 6 *Alguaciles* are an elected position at the Misak *cabildo*. They have different missions, such as serving as a communicative bridge between the authorities and the community, organising events, and aiding higher authorities in their tasks.
- 7 In addition to the Misak, this program also beneficiated seven other locations in this region – 4 in different Nasa communities and one on each Totoroes, Coconuco, Yanacona communities.

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- 8 Worth an equivalent of 2,013 USD at that time.
  - 9 An amount worth more than 5,000 USD.
  - 10 An amount worth more than 9,000 USD.