Not just surviving but thriving: Practices that sustain a new generation of Latin American community media makers

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Abstract
Over ten years ago, two community media initiatives were founded by young people in their early twenties in Bogota, Colombia and Quito, Ecuador. While the Colombia-based collective, Ojo al Sancocho, has struggled to build bridges among urban and migratory communities uprooted by an entrenched, decades-old armed conflict, the Ecuadorian group, El Churo Comunicación, has fostered audiovisual autonomy and resistance among indigenous, feminist and ecological social movements that have had to defend their rights even though they were supposedly guaranteed by a so-called progressive government. Despite formidable challenges, each has fulfilled a long-held dream - a community movie theater, and the expansion of a radio-based practice to a multiplicity of practices that include community filmmaking, cyberfeminism and capacity-building of communities across Ecuador and Latin America. Together with other collectives, Ojo al Sancocho and El Churo are building a network of community filmmakers across Latin America. Using each organization’s 2017 annual gathering as a point of departure, and subsequent meetings in 2018-2019, this article analyzes the characteristics that have led to innovation and sustainability in diverse contexts. It also indicates key challenges they face. This is an engaged, ethnographically-based, scholarly work.

Keywords
Alternative media, citizens’ media, community filmmaking, community media, cultural organizing, Latin American community media, sustainability

Introduction
Hacer cine es un acto de amor.
Making films is an act of love.
Cine en Movimiento (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Latin America has always been a rich and vibrant site of alternative, citizens and community media practice and theory. Scholars such as Alfonso Gumicio Dagrón, Jesus Martin-Barbero, Clemencia Rodríguez and many others, have enriched media scholarship with their theoretical insights and have contributed to an understanding of media practices in Latin American contexts. Still, Latin American community media remains underrepresented in English-language literature, even as new generations of practitioners create and sustain vibrant organisations. Without in-depth analysis, practitioners and theorists alike miss opportunities to learn from these innovative projects. One of the aims of this text is to share experiences with individuals and groups outside

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of Latin America, as a point of reference for reflecting on their own dreams, histories, successes and challenges.

Over ten years ago, two community media initiatives were founded by young people in their early twenties in Bogota, Colombia, and Quito, Ecuador. The Colombia-based group Ojo al Sancocho began to work together in 2005 and eventually established a community film festival in 2008. They also started a community film school and though intertwined, this text focuses on the festival. It has laboured to build bridges among urban and migratory communities uprooted by an entrenched, decades-old armed conflict. The Ecuadorian group, El Churo Comunicación, founded in 2006, has fostered audiovisual autonomy among indigenous, feminist and ecological social movements that have had to defend their rights even though they were supposedly guaranteed by a so-called progressive government. Despite challenging social and political contexts, each collective has not only managed to survive for over a decade, but they have also expanded and innovated their practice well beyond their original goals. Ojo al Sancocho has built a community movie theatre that allows it to offer a crucial gathering space for community dialogue; El Churo has grown its radio-based practice into a multiplicity of approaches that include community radio, journalism, community filmmaking, cyberfeminism and capacity-building of communities that are defending their territories. Their radio presence has grown into a digital portal where all their work can be accessed from an online platform. Both groups, now legally constituted organisations, are internationally known and have become important references and leaders regionally and internationally. Together with other Latin American collectives and organisations, they are key social actors among a network of community filmmakers across Latin America and advocates for communication rights and the democratisation of media. Each has maintained its vision and, equally as important, its autonomy. Using each organisation’s 2017 annual gathering as a point of departure, and documents from internal meetings held in 2018 and 2019, this article analyses the characteristics of each group, and the relationships and practices that have led to innovative media praxis and sustainability in diverse settings.

Gumicio Dagrón (2005) has observed in his years of engaging with community media projects that sustainability is not limited to financial viability. He argues that social and institutional sustainability are integral aspects of a community media organisation’s ability to stay alive. His concept of social sustainability speaks to the quality of relationships, practices and processes that an organisation must attend to, if it is to remain relevant to the communities with whom it works. Related to the question of relevance, Clemencia Rodríguez (2016:36) proposes that ‘each context triggers specific communication and information needs’, and from that space spring a plethora of practices and usages. She urges us to privilege an analysis of the connection among needs, practices and contexts, over the kinds of media and technology that a group uses. Although Rodríguez was not specifically addressing the issue of sustainability, I would argue that organisations whose practices are responsive to their context and to the needs of the communities with whom they work, have a much greater chance to sustain their work over the long haul.

The perspectives described above provide a point of departure from which to think about innovation and sustainability in contemporary community media projects in Latin America. This article first analyses the emergence, evolution, and relevance of a potent cohort of young community media makers. These makers consciously stand on the shoulders of Latin America’s community media pioneers, at the same time that they innovate with transmedia pedagogies that position community communication front and centre (and ‘from below and to the left’, as El Churo’s motto proclaims). The article then seeks to foreground some of the commonalities that these organisations share across the distinct contexts and challenges they face. Such exploration leads to a conclusion that the vibrant community media praxis and innovation that each one has cultivated for more than a decade is due, in part, to the quality and pertinence of their practices
and relationships, characteristics that ultimately have helped them sustain their work. It is well-known and much-discussed that financial solvency is a great challenge, but a sole focus on raising funds can obscure the richness of practice that ultimately sustains the organisation.

This is an engaged, ethnographically-based, scholarly work that has involved interviews, co-theorising and collaborative work with members of the organisations.¹

Ojo al Sancocho: dreams, camera, action!
Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, Colombia
7 October 2017

Figure 1: Festival screening. Photo: Ojo al Sancocho.

Three van loads of national and international community media makers pull up in front of Potocine, an impressive structure made with bamboo. Built in 2016, this community theatre is located in Barrio Potosí, one of Ciudad Bolivar’s 300-plus neighbourhoods that have been largely settled by Afro, indigenous and mestizo families displaced due to Colombia’s decades-old armed conflict. The theatre is nearly filled to capacity with community residents that have come for the opening night of Ojo al Sancocho’s 10th edition of its International Festival of Alternative and Community Film and Video. Luckily for us, instead of individual seats, each row’s bamboo frame supports a flexible yet sturdy hammock-like material that invites us to move closer to our neighbours. As members of Ojo al Sancocho remind us, the theatre seats 80 comfortably, but up to 100 apretadito (tightly).

The inaugural film is 500 Years (Pamela Yates and Paco de Onis, 2017), the award-winning documentary about Mayan Guatemalans’ struggles for reparations and justice. Two young women, protagonists of the film, lead a conversation about prospects for peace in Guatemala and Colombia, with an audience of children, teenagers, elders, artists and community leaders. I am impressed by the level of impassioned discourse, empathy and understanding shared by the
speakers and audience. Afterwards, the festivities continue a few hundred feet away in the courtyard that Potocine shares with a school, also built and managed by the community. Even though it is quite cold here at 4,000 metres high in the Andes, indigenous Wounan youth don traditional dress meant for another climate for their dance presentation. Throughout the evening, several local bands entertain us with a wide range of Colombian musical genres. An intergenerational group of neighbours, international guests and festival-goers dance and sing well past midnight.

For Ojo al Sancocho, Potosí and the wider community, this is an extraordinary occasion to celebrate and also to reflect on how it came to be. Arguably the only cultural space of its kind in a marginalised district of more than one million people, Potocine was built by many hands, but led by Ojo al Sancocho, a community media organisation whose work has been centred in Ciudad Bolívar for over ten years. In 2008, I met two of the co-founders, Daniel Bejarano and Alexander Yosa, at an Our Media/Nuestros Medios gathering in Rio Negro, Colombia. They were just about to launch their first festival, which was to be held in a little-visited, much-feared district in the south of Bogotá. They recounted that one of their biggest challenges was convincing cultural agencies and Ciudad Bolívar residents alike that this was a viable project. Who would willingly go to Ciudad Bolívar? Who makes films here, or who would want to? Where would the invitees stay, given there are no hotels? Despite the odds, their goal was, and remains, to make visible the vibrant individuals and communities that inhabit Ciudad Bolívar. In an interview years later, Daniel Bejarano reflected on one of their beliefs that fueled the project:

We poor people produce culture, art ... that is to say, the rest of society – we are protagonists of history. Our histories need to be visible. (Daniel Bejarano, personal communication, 2014).

Figure 2: Matinee screening at Potocine. Photo: Ojo al Sancocho.

The name Ojo al Sancocho is inspired by the popular Colombian dish of the same name, a wonderful stew made up of diverse ingredients, that is prepared collectively. The organisation came of age during an incredibly difficult, national context of armed conflict. Locally, in Ciudad Bolívar, paramilitary groups have engaged in so-called limpias sociales (social cleansings), in which marginalised young people have been targeted and assassinated. One of Ojo al Sancocho’s co-productions, Desde la memoria germina la esperanza (Hope grows from memory, Sueños
Films, 2014) tells the story of some of the youth who were targeted and killed, and the community organising efforts to advocate for justice. Even now, with a peace accord in effect, deeply entrenched patterns of violence continue. This context has fostered an acute awareness in Colombia of the important work that community media initiatives do to repair the social fabric that has been fractured. Specifically speaking about situations of armed conflict, Clemencia Rodríguez argues:

> When grassroots communication media are deeply embedded in their communities, truly open to collective participation, and responsive to immediate and long-term local communication needs, they strengthen the agency of the community as it responds to armed violence (2016:3).

Paradoxically, although Colombia has a right-wing national government, there are progressive forces within the state that seek out active social agents that perform this crucial reparative work. These include municipal and regional cultural and arts funding agencies that have long understood the need to support organisations such as Ojo al Sancocho. The deep, long-term commitment that Ojo al Sancocho carries out has resulted in recognition and support from several of these agencies.

**El Churo: Communicating from below and to the left**

Quito, Ecuador
26 October 2017

![Figure 3: Mural created by the Sublevo Collective at the 4th National Gathering of Community Communication in October 2017. Photo: Jorge Cano Cañizares, El Churo Comunicación.](image)

Two weeks after Ojo al Sancocho’s festival, El Churo Comunicación held its Fourth National Gathering of Community Communication. The first morning of the four-day event, held in various venues in Quito and the Amazonian town of Puyo, we gathered in an auditorium of the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar. The audience was largely made up of young indigenous participants representing a dozen or so pueblos and nationalities, Afro-Ecuadorian and mestizo students, activists, policymakers, educators and community media makers. An international contingent, including the Network of Amazonian Communicators, were among the invited speakers. The opening panel that welcomed the crowd indicated El Churo’s community capital and its penchant for bringing together diverse sectors of the left: the president of CONAIE (one of the oldest indigenous social movements in Latin America), the Dean of the Faculty of
Communication of Universidad Central, a union leader and a member of El Churo. El Churo works at the intersection of several pressing issues: communication rights; the defence of territories threatened by oil and mining; and gender-based rights including reproductive rights, cyberfeminism, and community feminism. Co-founder Ana Acosta explains the local, Andean significance of El Churo and how it encompasses its practices and concerns:

The churo is a shell that emits a sound; it is an instrument of communication. In indigenous uprisings here in Ecuador this instrument announces the march and leads the way. It is also an instrument that begins the fiesta, the Inti Raymi celebration. It was a traditional means of communication used mainly in the Sierra although it is a seashell. We took its name because it signifies collectivity and calls people to work together and organize. It is also a potent symbol visually and philosophically. It has the shape of a spiral, of a dialectic process, and as a feminine symbol it has a lot to do with fertility. (Anita Acosta, personal communication, 2014)

Like Ojo al Sancocho, El Churo had recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. However, the youth collective came of age in 2005 during citizen uprisings that led to the democratic ouster of Lucio Gutierrez (the third president in the span of a decade to be deposed in popular uprisings against neoliberal governments). The radio station where they had a youth program, Radio La Luna, was one of the main protagonists of this particular rebellion; it kept citizens informed while mainstream media remained silently complicit with the government. When they left Radio La Luna due to its adult-centric attitudes towards them, they founded El Churo Comunicación. They focused on youth activism, politics and culture. A decade later, while the founders are now in their early thirties, their commitment to young people is evident, by their ongoing efforts to recruit younger people to work with them. One of their most important projects is Wambra Radio (wambra means youth in Kichwa, an Indigenous language), an on-line community radio program that trains, hosts, and enables dozens of community groups to produce radio shows. Though they have been advocating for a radio frequency for years for them and other organisations, Wambra has been an important online space. It has recently undergone an expansion to a digital platform that brings all of Churo's activities together under one virtual space (radio, community filmmaking, research, journalism, and many special projects).

Another pivotal moment for El Churo Comunicación began in 2007, during Latin America’s and Ecuador’s left turn, when Rafael Correa became Ecuador’s president. El Churo formed part of a cohort of advocates that organised support for a progressive communications framework, which included the division of the broadcast spectrum (allocating 34% to community media and 33% each to public and private media). The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution reflects such efforts. However, it soon became apparent that the government intended to build its own media empire while suppressing the communication rights of community and private media (Coryat, 2015). El Churo has remained at the forefront of a struggle to hold the government accountable to its pledges to provide radio and television frequencies to community media groups. El Churo has also worked with CONAIE and human rights groups to contest the criminalisation of social movements.

Community radio and social movement actors have grown frustrated with the government’s repressive practices, and their inability to obtain radio frequencies. They have increasingly felt the need to communicate by other means that do not involve government bureaucracies. El Churo turned its attention to procuring the knowledge, skills and equipment to become community filmmakers. It then started an itinerant community film school, Ojo Semilla (Eye-Seed). Ojo Semilla works mainly with indigenous youth, community leaders and women that are defending their territories to make community films. In September 2018 they produced an all-women residency that brought together diverse feminists and women defending their territories.
Distinct national contexts

As the first few sections of this article suggest, El Churo and Ojo al Sancocho have innovated on their base activities and have achieved a substantive level of recognition in the field of community media over the past decade, and still counting. This article proposes that these successes have been forged at the intersection of their relationships and practices. Before exploring some of their commonalities, I will return to the distinct contexts that have shaped their practices and relationships.

While part of the mission of Ojo al Sancocho is to make visible the incredible people and dynamic communities that inhabit Ciudad Bolívar, one of the key factors that has indelibly shaped the organisation has been operating within a context of armed conflict. Furthermore, the conflict is acutely felt in Ciudad Bolívar, more so than in many other parts of Bogotá and other cities. In this regard, safety is a huge concern and shapes practices and relationships, from where and how to run workshops, and the need to build trust in the communities in which they work, to the cultivation of strong allies and community leaders.

On the flip side of this, funders, community leaders and other allies all recognise that community media is an important strategy and practice that can help to repair the social fabric that has been torn apart. There is an infrastructure for supporting groups like Ojo al Sancocho, and support in general for culture and film within Colombia. As Daniel Bejarano recounts, when they produced their first festival there were 10–15 film festivals in Colombia, and now there are more than 90. Such recognition of the value of arts and culture, and the related infrastructure that supports it, has also helped to foster exchanges between festivals and community media actors across Colombia and beyond. Many other community media organisations regularly attend Ojo al Sancocho and have learned how to produce their own festivals. Ojo al Sancocho has played the role of mentor for a few of them. Within this array of events, community media festivals are collaborative, in that they seek to establish a schedule that allows them to visit each other’s festivals and to also take advantage of international invitees.

El Churo, on the other hand, does not face the same degree of conflict as their Colombian counterparts. However, questions of safety, security and trust-building are tantamount, particularly as the communities with whom El Churo works actively need to defend their territories against resource extraction. Since 2008, El Churo has operated within a context of mistrust between social movements and the state, and even among social organisations. The concerted effort on the part of the Correa administration to delegitimise and criminalise social organisations, and its efforts to shut down organisations that openly opposed its policies, have also put El Churo at risk. With respect to the perceived value of what El Churo contributes, unlike in Colombia, where film, arts and cultural work constitute activities that are recognised and supported, Ecuador’s film and community media sectors are nascent. The government has barely moved forward on its promise to develop community radio and television initiatives. Additionally, the fledgling film sector prioritises films that are poised to garner international recognition in the international film festival circuit, while community filmmakers fight for recognition and funding opportunities.

Commonalities in creative practice and relationship-building

Across their different national contexts, their work is driven by a measure of urgency because they collaborate with historically marginalised communities. Their work with diverse communities has led to some common creative practices, although particularities exist given each one’s needs and contexts. This section analyses those practices. Certainly, practices and relationships are intrinsically bound together. A few brief examples help to ground the categories.
1 Alternative, interdisciplinary, transnational and collaborative praxis

Both organisations’ methodologies and educational philosophies are grounded in popular education. In brief, popular education is a critical educational practice, with deep roots in Latin America (Freire, 1970, among others), that starts with the premise that education can and should be a democratic, non-oppressive, liberatory practice. It assumes that each person, whether a ‘student’ or ‘teacher’, has knowledge, skills and perspectives to contribute to the group. Popular education practices also point towards dialogic and playful methodologies that seek to engage participants in developing their voice, creative thinking and collaborative work. It is crucial to note, and cannot be overstated, that a key quality of both Ojo al Sancocho and El Churo is that they go about their work with an impressive amount of joy and love for what they do, and for the communities with whom they work.

Their practice is interdisciplinary, in that they are sociologists, anthropologists, social workers and media makers. Also, both put community communication front and centre, not media. Communicative practices involve many forms of media making, such as fiction, animation and documentary forms, but also include storytelling, dialogue, poetry, dance, music, performance, and cultural work of all kinds. Technologically, each organisation uses, mixes and incorporates a diversity of tools, formats and approaches. This leads to open, flexible pedagogies, often based on the strengths and skills of the facilitators. Though this is a strength most of the time, it also makes it difficult to perfect one genre or to develop systematic approaches to the work.

In Ojo al Sancocho’s case, the community-based nature of the festival, including its location in a marginalised district, its international scope, as well as its popular education principles, are just some of the elements that shape festival practices. For example, festival invitees are not housed in hotels, rather they live with local families. In the interest of building community together across the cities, regions and nations that are represented at the festival, invitees are expected to stay for most of the eight days of the festival, to live, eat family-style with the community, and work together. They are also expected to collaborate on making the festival happen by leading workshops, acting as jurors, introducing films, speaking with the press, and so on. Regarding the relationship between invitees and community members, their equal standing in the eyes of the festival organisers is always emphasized.

The second day of the festival is always spent travelling around the territory, La Ruta del Sancocho (The Sancocho tour). It is a full day dedicated to bringing all the invitees to different sites around Ciudad Bolivar where communities are organising territories they have settled. In 2017 the group visited Estancia de los Altos, a rural territory that was populated in the 1990s. It met with community leaders, youth and women, and got to see their communal vegetable gardens, agricultural and cultural projects. This day is crucial to the festival, an opportunity to understand the complex community dynamics and struggles up close. This festival pedagogy has lent itself to the building of a community media network, which is discussed later in this article.

El Churo Comunicación’s pedagogical practice originated in radio. Radio practice, combined with a focus on urban youth, and cultural organising around the need for community radio, led it to produce large music events for several years. At the same time, it has adapted practices rooted in Andean and Amazonian traditions. The name of the organisation, as described earlier, symbolically acknowledges this. Though most founding members are working class urban mestizos (as are founders of Ojo al Sancocho), their close collaboration with ancestral Indigenous communities and the social movement, CONAIE, has led them to incorporate an Indigenous understanding of the concepts of Community and Nature. The relationships they have built with Indigenous communities have led them to extend their work to rural communities and the diversity of pueblos and nacionalidades within Ecuador:
El Churo is a communication organisation of the left, but within the left there are many tendencies and meanings. We are not dogmatic. Actually, we see ourselves as learning about what is popular and community communication. Our intent is to strengthen all spaces from a communicational framework. We are attached to Andean philosophy, the ancestral pueblos, and communities. And in those spaces, lo comunitario, is a political posture. Lo comunitario gives life. And we assume this as our life work. (Jorge Cano, El Churo, personal communication).

With regard to their continual innovation, El Churo has recently incorporated community filmmaking into their practices and hosts an itinerant film school for defenders of ancestral territories. A relatively new practice brings together gender and technology. The filmmaking component focuses on community feminisms while the Internet-based practice has brought together cyberfeminists from across Latin America to share and exchange how their feminist practices shape their Internet-based work.

Ojo al Sancocho has also expanded its focus on gender. For example, it now works with women in Ciudad Bolívar to make films. Several of their videos were shown at the 2017 festival, with the participants present to discuss the impact the project has had on their lives. Both organisations have also increased their work with LGBTQ communities. Such openness, flexibility and fluidity, anchored by solid missions, are key features of each organisation. They undoubtedly keep their work vibrant and focus on the needs and contexts that also change over time.

These practices lend themselves to an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition, which is another practice and posture of both organisations. One of the most interesting, ongoing instances of transnational collaboration has been the collective founding of the Red de Cine Comunitario de América Latina y El Caribe (the Network of Community Cinema of Latin America and the Caribbean). Given Ojo al Sancocho’s Festival as an annual meeting place for community media makers and organisations, over the past several years the Network has used the space that the festival affords to theorise their practice and to plan collaborative work. After three years of discussion, in 2014, over 100 local and international participants worked together for several days to discuss the practice and theory of cine comunitario (community filmmaking). They came up with a core definition that unites a wide spectrum of organisations, and the Network was officially launched:

The Network of community filmmaking of Latin America and the Caribbean conceptualizes community filmmaking as:

- A practice in which the same community appropriates audiovisual tools to self-represent and make visible its realities;
- A mode of horizontal and collective production that generates and values local knowledges and identities;
- An integral audiovisual process of coordination (gestión), production, exhibition, circulation and consumption that actively includes the community in each of these stages.

Therefore, community filmmaking is a process that permits change, transformation, social and political incidence, in the context of production, for the well-being of the community and its audiovisual sovereignty.

A cinema that connects being and doing, a living and lively cinema.

(La Red de Cine Comunitario de América Latina y El Caribe).

While the Network remains a loosely organised transnational assemblage of a few dozen organisations, it is committed to continuing to meet and collaborate on diverse projects over time.
Several of the founding organisations involved (including El Churo, Ojo al Sancocho, Cine en Movimiento (Argentina), FESDA (Cali, Colombia) and Grupo Chasqui (Lima, Peru) regularly invite members to attend its festivals and events. Organisations have also hosted individuals from other organisations to encourage pedagogical exchanges. There are several individuals involved in the Network that have travelled widely to work in each of these and other organisations across Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Peru. In this way, a cross-fertilisation of ideas and actions occurs. El Churo and Ojo al Sancocho have visited each other on numerous occasions, made possible by mutual interest as well as the relative proximity of their cities by bus or plane. There are several WhatsApp groups that keep the Network in touch on a weekly basis. This is a highly mobile, technologically savvy (but not media-centric) heterogeneous group of practitioners whose work is shaped by popular communication traditions, multiple kinds of media and technology, open software and an array of social movements.

Several members of the Network have also been or are currently enrolled in post-graduate programs that have provided them with the space to document and theorise their practices. Indeed, this new generation of community filmmakers are aware of the histories and shoulders they stand on, and are highly motivated to adapt historical work to contemporary practice (see Molfetta, 2017 for recent work on cine comunitario in Argentina).

2 Collective study, self-education and mentorship

Both organisations have had to actively seek out the skills they wanted to learn. When they started, few if any members had attended college and none had studied media or filmmaking. In interviews, members of each organisation recount how they had to find individuals and organisations that would teach them what they wanted to learn, whether that was scriptwriting, camera work, digital photography, editing, and Internet skills for online radio broadcasting. This search for knowledge and skills has led each organisation to focus on continuous training for themselves and their communities as a core activity. Both emphasise the building of skills and knowledge of younger members of their organisation, ensuring that they have ample opportunities to be mentored, to attend classes, and to travel to events nationally and internationally to learn and represent their organisation. This focus inward also extends outwards, as each shares practice and theorising about the work among other organisations. This general approach has led to rich intra-organisational exchanges, innovations in practice and collective theory-building.

While each organisation is youth-driven, they seek out intergenerational relationships. Each has identified mentors in their midst. For example, El Churo has worked closely with legendary community radio producers such as Jose Ignacio López Vigil, transnational community media organisations like ALER (Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica, the Latin American Association of Radiophonic Education), social movement-allied filmmakers such as Pocho Alvarez and important indigenous leaders such as Domingo Ankwash (Shuar). For Ojo al Sancocho, its festival is its greatest laboratory, attracting makers and thinkers from across the globe. Locally, it has interacted with some of Colombia’s theorists such as Jesus Martin-Barbero and Clemencia Rodríguez, among others. It has also worked with Stefan Kaspar, founder of Chasqui Comunicación in Peru, before his untimely death. Importantly, the relationships forged through collaborative work and common interests have tended to be long term. The community leaders present at both organisations’ annual events have been allies for years. Finally, given ongoing exchanges of ideas, methodologies and experiences, both groups are also sites of continual reflection.

3 Connecting practice to public policy

Both organisations integrate policy advocacy initiatives, projects and activities into their organisational work. El Churo has been one of the main social actors in Ecuador involved in
advocating for communication rights and the democratisation of media. Specifically, they have fought for radio frequencies for community radio – not just for their own frequency but also for hundreds of community groups and indigenous organisations. The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution pledged to equitably divide the broadcast spectrum, with 34% going to community radio, and they have tirelessly fought for that dream to come about, though the government has lacked the will to fulfil this pledge. Now, it is also one of the recognised leaders in cine comunitario and works with other community and Indigenous media actors to get the film sector to recognise and fund the work. Ojo al Sancocho’s core vision is to affect public policy related to education, audiovisual culture and the democratisation of media. It uses its annual festival as a platform to visibilize community filmmaking. Like El Churo, it proactively invites the media and policymakers to its events in order to engage them in dialogue about communication rights and the value of community media.

Another arena in which both groups seek to make an impact is related to ecological awareness and resistance to extractivism. This a growing crisis in Latin America and these groups, and the communities they work with, are facing unparalleled ecological devastation and territorial eviction, such as urban mining projects, deforestation, oil drilling and monocultural agro-industries. While Ojo al Sancocho regularly features in its festival the work of community-based audiovisual projects that are defending their territories, El Churo trains communities to use audiovisual tools to communicate what is happening in their regions, and reports on anti-extractivist social movement activity.

**Challenges going forward**

There are many challenges that Ojo al Sancocho and El Churo confront as they move through their second decade. This section foregrounds just a few issues that they face as organisations that have not only survived many obstacles but have grown and thrived.

**Tensions between individual and group needs**

One of the ongoing challenges that these and similar organisations confront is self-care and relatedly, maintaining healthy group dynamics. Because of a demanding schedule that includes numerous projects, frequent invitations to present their work nationally and internationally, and the urgency of the work itself, founding members and other long-term staff enjoy little down time. This pertains to daily schedules, as well as periodically making room for each individual’s projects and passions. At El Churo, staff members have collectively sought to ameliorate the issue by attempting to leave the office in the early evenings instead of staying late into the night, though as an organisation that runs an online digital platform this is not always possible. With regard to negotiating time for other pursuits, one of the ways that both organisations have dealt with this issue has been to build in a measure of flexibility to accommodate the needs of each member to pursue full-time study, travel, or engage in other projects. Probably because of this flexibility, founding members and long-term staff members have remained active in each organization. Of course, there is an implicit tension between the demands of the collective work and the needs of each individual.

**Tensions between sustainability and growth**

Even though both organisations have increased in size and scope, they still operate as lean, tight-knit groups. This is positive in that they have been able to stay afloat financially, while remaining responsive to shifts in political contexts and community needs. However, success brings growth and the need to incorporate new members. Given the kind of work they carry out, each new member should possess the passion, commitment, energy, and multiple skills and competencies needed to work in these complex, dynamic environments. These positions go to young people
mainly in their twenties, who, due to the precarity of many of their and their families’ lives, or due to their own creative needs to explore other geographies, cannot always commit to the organisation on a long-term basis. Expansion is also a funding issue; it is not always possible to procure the funds for adding additional members, beyond what their budgets already support. That being said, both groups have been successful in incorporating and retaining core members that have committed to the organisations for several years. However, it is certainly an ongoing challenge and tension to expand beyond the core group in a sustained fashion.

**Tensions between building a legacy and planning for the future**

While both El Churo and Ojo al Sancocho have written and produced audio and video documentation of their events and projects, it is vital that each one engages in deeper reflection about their histories, methodologies and experiences so they can share their accumulated wisdom, which is considerable. At the same time, they need to spend time to engage in visioning and strategic planning for the future. All of these activities require dedicated time and energy, which is exceedingly difficult to carve out, given the demands on each organisation. But they are essential for building their own legacies while sharing knowledge; for integrating new members; and also to prepare for possible transitions. Indeed, in 2018 and 2019, both organisations have engaged in these activities. While there are no changes in the immediate future, the viability and strength of an organisation rests on how well it is prepared for possible transitions. Of course, most collectives and small organisations in Latin America that I am familiar with have remained founder-led, so this is not an inevitable event. It is quite impressive how the founders and long-term staff members of each organisation have remained committed through multiple personal and political life transitions, throughout their twenties and now into their thirties. While each began as a small, fledgling collective that did not know what the future would bring, they are now vitally important organisations.

**Concluding thoughts**

Community media practitioners and scholars that came of age in the 20th century often wondered what new media technologies would signify for the field. At the same time, they knew that the best, most relevant organisations would continue to keep the communities with whom they work at the front and centre of their mission.

A new generation of community media makers and organisations have come of age at a highly complex time in Latin America and globally. Whether they have had to deal with the difficulties of peacebuilding in a context of armed conflict, rapacious neo-extractivism, or both, there is greater inequality and precarity in their communities. The organisations discussed in this article have become part of the legacy of past generations of Latin American community communication pioneers and traditions, while they freely create, adapt, mix and share transmedia pedagogies and technologies. While they are tech-savvy, they are not media-centric. They each use an array of educational and media strategies to engage their peers, collaborators and audiences.

This article utilised ethnographically-based description and analysis to capture a few moments in each organisation’s practice. These moments hopefully communicate what makes them special, unique and vital. The text then sought to examine each organisation’s context, history, trajectory, goals and ultimately, the qualities and practices that helped them to sustain their work over the long term. It explored the characteristics that each possesses that make them relevant to their communities and help them not just survive, but thrive. It then searched for commonalities, and found that the interconnected, dual pillars of creative practice and relationship-building were key ingredients. In studying these elements, they elicited three broad categories: the alternative, interdisciplinary and collaborative praxis that is forged out of practice;
their mutual dedication to collective study, education and mentorship; and their goal to move beyond their own experiences, to affect social change on a greater scale, through ongoing advocacy. In each of these arenas, both organisations have fostered long-term relationships with a wide array of communities, allies, political actors and cultural organisers. In this way, they have sustained their work as they continued to grow.

While this article has emphasised practices that have led to vibrant longevity, it has also indicated some of the challenges and tensions implicit in the work. They include self-care; balancing individual and group needs; and recruiting new members that can bring their passions and skills to the demanding work. These issues have arisen for the most part as the initial years of high-intensity and experimentation transformed them into established leaders in the field. Through it all, both organisations continue to innovate their practice, privilege community-building, and forge much-needed dialogic spaces. These have provided the essential ingredients to sustainability.

References

Notes
1 The author has worked with these organisations and the Red de Cine Comunitario de Latinoamérica y el Caribe, and has participated in many of the events and activities over several years.
2 Ojo al Sancocho speaks to diversity; it literally means ‘eye on the soup’, with the sancocho being a popular Colombian soup made of a mix of different vegetable and meats.
Daniel Bejarano, Alba Yaneth Gallego Betancur, and Alexander Yosa, are founders of Ojo al Sancocho and Sueño Films.

In Ecuador, the state legally recognises 18 pueblos and nationalities, which are ancestral communities.

Both groups have been engaged in community media work since 2005, though under different names.

One of the campaigns, Resistir es mi derecho (Resistance is my right) was a web-based project that ‘sought to visibilize the stories, faces, and voices of indigenous, women, farmers, young people, students and defenders of human rights during the mobilization of the uprising and national strike in August 2015’ (resistiresmiderecho.org).

A topic not covered in this article is the cooptation and fragmentation of social movements that, while they began before Correa became president in 2007, were exacerbated under his administration.

Ojo al Sancocho/Sueños Films has published Sueños, Cámara, Acción (Dreams, Camera, Action), a collectively written document about the history of their Escuela Popular de Cine Comunitario de Ciudad Bolívar, and how the work has contributed to a culture of peace, and peacebuilding efforts (2019). El Churo has published Compartir la Palabra (Share the Word), a manual about their pedagogy of community communication for defending social rights.