From community to communal media: Lessons for the sustainability of community media from the Bolivarian experience

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Abstract

This article seeks lessons for the sustainability of community media by looking at its role in Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution. It draws on recent theorization to define community media as an articulating mechanism of a maximally democratic civil society. It then situates this understanding in relation to the Gramscian notion of a 'civil state', which has increasingly informed Latin American socialism and in which the state's role is to maximise participatory governance within civil society. The article then analyses the weaknesses of the Venezuelan community media sector under a liberal framework, and attempts to establish a new legal structure that would integrate participatory media with civil society and the Bolivarian 'commune' system. These efforts demonstrate that heterarchical institutional structures may best integrate community media with civil society in a manner that assures sustainability and autonomy.

Keywords

sustainability, autonomy, community media, participatory media, Latin America, Venezuela, socialism, civil society, civil state, heterarchy

Introduction

How one proposes to sustain community media depends on one's answer to a simple and fundamental question: What exactly is community media? That question has long bedeviled and embarrassed the subfield of community media studies, which has found considerable difficulty in defining its object of study with both precision and concision. This article, drawing on recent theorisation, takes another stab at it by defining community media as an articulating mechanism of a maximally democratic civil society.[1] We will carry that conception into a discussion of socialism in Latin America, which has increasingly embraced the Gramscian notion of a 'civil state' and, concomitantly, sought to institutionalise a system of participatory media capable of displacing hegemonic commercial and state apparatuses. These efforts have relied on state support and, as a result, produced considerable tension between the goals of sustainability and autonomy.

Our examination of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution will explore that tension in relation to the evolving legal framework that has governed the community and alternative media sector. As a practical matter, the Bolivarians have not resolved the issue of sustainability. Nonetheless, they have drafted a unique legal framework designed to integrate participatory communications with a robust structure of civil governance. Although incomplete, imperfect, and untested, this

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framework merits the consideration of scholars and practitioners interested in fortifying democratic governance with a sustainable system of participatory media.

Community media as an articulating mechanism of civil society

Rodríguez's (2001) widely influential conception of 'citizens' media' represents the beginning of a shift in focus that has enabled clearer thinking about issues of sustainability within community media studies. During the 1990s, the literature of the subfield had been primarily concerned with participatory development communications and thus emphasised ephemeral projects designed to supplement non-communicative goals (such as health awareness campaigns) and/or empower participants at the local level via dialogue. To be sure, Rodríguez reproduced this emphasis, as in her claim that 'what makes citizens' media fascinating is how they stir power *in kaleidoscopic movements which fade soon after they emerge, like movements in a dance toward empowerment*' (2001: 21, my emphasis). Nonetheless, she focused on the production of media content and its relationship to a wider context of social relations. For Rodríguez, 'referring to "citizens' media" implies first that a collectivity is *enacting* its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations' (2001: 20, original emphasis). In brief, Rodríguez's emphasis on citizenship re-situated community media as a mechanism for open-ended public participation within a democratic (or democratising) society, as opposed to merely servicing narrower goals. Even so, her theorisation included no explicit analysis of the political economic context in which community media operate and thus left aside questions of sustainability.

Howley (2005) picked up on the value of citizenship as a framing concept when he noted that, 'by treating community members as citizens, not as consumers, community media foster a greater awareness of the interdependent nature of social relations and shared environments both locally and globally' (268). He theorises this interdependence by utilizing Stuart Hall's notion of 'articulation', which

> refers at once to 'speaking' or 'uttering' as well as to a 'connection' or 'linkage' between disparate elements and 'offers a way to conceptualize community as a unity of differences[,] (…) [and serves as] an organizing strategy for progressive social change' (2005: 6).

While Howley's case studies valuably traced a range of strategic and tactical uses of community media to articulate varying levels of community, his conceptualisation of 'articulation' remained too thin to deliver a replicable model for sustaining community media.

Rennie (2006) took the notion of citizenship a step further by identifying community media as a component of civil society. This allowed her to follow Rodríguez in understanding community media first and foremost as a mechanism for enabling fundamental democratic activity: 'Community media, being a media that is produced by civil society groups, has a unique relationship to the types of citizen participation that occur through civil society engagement' (2006: 34). Crucially, Rennie's civil society framework facilitated greater definitional precision than Rodríguez and Howley: 'Community media should therefore be seen as a means to the maintenance and extension of civil society by civil society itself' (2006: 36). We might hang Howley's terminology on Rennie's framework and say that community media is an articulating mechanism of civil society.

This understanding of community media facilitates greater clarity around issues of sustainability. We can begin with the basic observation that the sustainability of community media must be understood as a component of the sustainability of civil society. This means, for instance, thinking about the relationship of community media to not only state and commercial media

systems, but to the state and market more generally. Rennie notes, for example, that civil society 'requires a relationship with the state in order to exist' and thus points to 'the positive role that the state can play towards the development of community media' (2006: 37). Indeed, one primary component of community media sustainability is the legal legitimation that only the state can confer. Another primary component is, of course, a sufficiency of resources, including but not limited to finances. The legal framework established by the state plays a determinative role in the provenance (or lack thereof) of those resources.

The above observations, being commonplace in the literature, do not demonstrate the importance of conceptualising community media as an articulating mechanism of civil society. The untapped power of that formulation lies not in its recognition of a relationship between community media, the state and the market, but in its insistence that we conceptualise community media as nodes in a larger network of civil society organizations dedicated to maximal democratic governance. We must therefore pay closer attention to the relationships between community media and other civil society entities,[2] and we must evaluate factors of sustainability, such as legal frameworks and funding sources, by the degree to which they enable community media organisations to not merely endure, but to facilitate democratic participation. Mapping these (potential) interactions and the value (potentially) generated therein may well lead us to new ways of thinking about and generating the sustenance of community media. In order to illustrate this advantage via an examination of community media in Venezuela's Bolivarian revolution, we must first consider the role of civil society within Latin American socialism.

Civil society in Latin American socialism

Gouldner's (1980) analysis of Marxist theory provides a useful entry point for considering the role of civil society in Latin American socialism. He identifies 'two boundaried subsystems of elaborated theory' (1980: 8) that he calls Scientific Marxism and Critical Marxism. Scientific Marxism situates itself in the tradition of the natural sciences and posits a set of ineluctable laws that determine social history. Marx presented it as historical materialism, which sees political and cultural facets of human society (the superstructure) as overdetermined by the mode of production and other material economic conditions (the base and infrastructure). Critical Marxism, on the other hand, understands itself not as science but philosophical critique. It posits a dialectical political economy in which political and cultural facets both determine and are determined by the mode of production and other material economic conditions.

Scientific Marxism views civil society in negative terms. This results from Marx's historical analysis of the rise of the bourgeoisie from within the feudal state, which posits civil society as a corruption of society's 'natural bonds' (1980: 357) and a 'transmission belt for ruling-class values (ibid: 346). From this perspective, Marx envisioned a communist state that would be entirely representative of the proletariat and thus have no use for (a manipulative) civil society. Rather, civil society would be subsumed within the state, which supposedly 'becomes a fully public realm devoid of its own special exploitative interests'. For Gouldner – and any casual observer of the Soviet Union – this 'profoundly underestimat[es] the dangers to human emancipation inherent in the state bureaucracy and its capacity to be a new ruling class' (1980: 345).

Critical Marxists see civil society as more than a mere tool of the ruling class. Indeed, Marx's professional work as a journalist demonstrates, and some of his earliest writings emphasise, the value of a free and robust press in checking the power of the state. Nonetheless, Marx never attempted to describe the structure of an autonomous civil sector in a socialist society. For Gouldner, addressing this lacuna is the primary task of contemporary Marxist theorisation:

> a central and increasingly urgent problem is how may persons avoid dependence on the state; how may patterns of mutual and self-help – and of the self-management that is part of this – be strengthened; how may society resist the enveloping superintendence by the

state? From a Marxist standpoint, the growing question is how may civil society be fortified, so that Marxism's own liberative aspirations can be realized? (1980: 371)

Latin American socialist administrations have grappled with precisely this question. Cuba's revolutionary leaders, for example, shared with the Soviet Union a distrust of free civil society. At the same time, however, their disgust for repressive regimes like the one they had overthrown, as well as their desire to maintain legitimacy both at home and abroad, led them to seek methods for fomenting a civil society that was somehow both free and reliably aligned with socialist ideology. Socialist administrations in Chile (1970 - 1973) and Nicaragua (1978 - 1989) engaged in similar endeavors, albeit within rather distinct contexts.

These attempts found only limited success. Cuba can point to vibrant artistic production in various fields, as well as a significant degree of academic debate, but not to a critical press, much less a sphere of adversarial political engagement. In Chile, the Allende administration's commitment to a free civil society in the liberal mould limited the circulation of socialist ideas and enabled conditions that allowed for a violent *coup d'etat*. Nicaragua's Sandinistas tried to walk a fine line between those two models, leading to varying degrees of press freedom and, ultimately, their electoral defeat. The latter cases arguably confirmed the Cuban government's fears regarding the dangers of a free civil society in the liberal mould, but they also underscored the urgent need to resolve the problem that Gouldner identified: What is the structure of an independent socialist civil society?

Gramsci made significant contributions to this project. 'Civil society, in Gramsci's thinking, is the realm in which the existing social order is grounded; and it can also be the realm in which a new social order can be founded' (Cox, 1999: 4). He believed, in other words, that the space created in civil society can be used to propagate, from the 'bottom-up', a counter-hegemonic ideology; this is the understanding of civil society embraced by Critical Marxism. The Gramscian notion of 'bottom-up', counter-hegemonic ideological work, however, should not be confused with the Leninist conception of vanguardism. Lenin cast vanguardism as agitational work to be carried out as ideological preparation for a revolutionary takeover of the state. Gramsci (1999: 16) referred to this as a 'war of manoeuvre' and opposed it as a revolutionary strategy. He proposed, instead, a 'war of position', which 'is a strategy for the long-term construction of self-conscious social groups into a concerted emancipatory bloc within society'.

Clearly, then, within Critical Marxism there are at least two paths to revolution. The first relies on an ideological call to revolutionary action, whereas the second relies on an ideological call to civic action. Both stress the importance of communicating ideology, but only the latter is explicitly concerned with constructing a counter-hegemonic bloc within civil society. As a result, the first path – the war of manoeuvre – can easily bend back around to the Scientific Marxist framework in which civil society is subsumed by the socialist state, a tendency exhibited within Cuba's vanguardist revolution. The second path – the war of position – necessarily avoids this tendency. It leads, rather, to the opposite scenario, in which the state is subsumed by an ever-expanding civil society: 'The society without a state, which Gramsci calls regulated society, comes from the enlarging of civil society and, therefore, of the moment of hegemony, until it eliminates all the space which is occupied by political society' (Bobbio, 1988: 94).

What, though, should be the relationship between civil society and a socialist state in the period prior to the stateless, 'regulated' society? Gramsci's preference was for a 'civil state' that is legitimated by the same civil society that it (at least in part) nurtures.[3] In other words, Gramsci 'suggests that the State should rest upon the support of an active, self-conscious and variegated civil society and should, in turn, sustain and promote the development of the constructive forces in that society' (Cox, 1999: 7). The party, meanwhile, 'must always seek to carry out its function in civil society, even if, or when, it accedes to government power' (Buttigieg, 1995: 29). This, of course, is easier said than done, as Latin America's twentieth century socialist administrations

learned. Their attempts, however, provided lessons that, in conjunction with Gramsci's theorisation, impelled the further development of socialist thought in the region.

By the late 1990s, mainstream Latin American socialism had largely 'reject[ed] the purported role of a vanguard party' and come to question 'the preeminent role attributed to the working class [by twentieth century Marxism] to the exclusion of broad segments of the population including the urban poor, the informal sector, religious communities, the indigenous, the Afro-descendent, and women' (Ellner, 2012: 106). Twenty-first century socialism, as this position has come to be known, is one 'in which the majorities have the greatest historically possible degree of decision-making power in the economic, political, cultural, and military institutions that govern their lives' (Marcano & Dieterich, 2007). Its fundamental component, in other words, is a maximisation of democratic participation in governance.

Of particular interest to the present discussion is Moulian's (2000) call for twenty-first century socialism 'to recuperate in a new form [Marx's] original idea of the disappearance of the state'.[4] Though he does not invoke Gramsci explicitly, Moulian (2000: 111) – a Chilean sociologist and historian who draws on an intimate knowledge of the Allende administration – clearly endorses the notion of a civil state: 'The best State is that from within which the State itself can be combatted, developing the collaboration of citizens, workers, producers'. The construction of such a state will be the result of neither revolution nor reform, but a 'transformation' predicated on the creation of 'socialist institutions at a realistic scale (often microsocial) inside of capitalism itself' (ibid: 113). Twenty-first century socialism therefore requires the 'fragmentation and scattering of political power' alongside 'open and plural public space, compatible with a deliberative society' (ibid: 123).

Here, then, is where this long digression into socialist theory returns us to a consideration of community media, which we have defined as an articulating mechanism of a maximally democratic civil society. As Moulian (2000: 132) makes clear, a media sector anchored in civil society is a necessary component of any viable path toward the implementation of twenty-first century socialism:

> A deliberative society must be an informed society. Fundamental to this is pluralist access to the property and management of communication media, for persons, parties, or social organizations. Here *a regulatory role belongs to a public, not state, entity* that reflects social and cultural pluralities. (my emphasis)

Community media, in other words, is the media of the civil state. As we shall see, this belief is widely held among Venezuela's alternative and community media movement.

Toward a Bolivarian civil state

Venezuelan community media cannot be understood apart from the Bolivarian movement that emerged in the 1990s and was led by Hugo Chávez until his death in 2013; our review will emphasise Bolivarian efforts to envision and implement a civil state.

As is well known, Chávez rose to prominence by leading a failed coup attempt in 1992, as a decade of economic crisis began to dissolve a two-party, corporatist political system. Once released from prison, Chávez grew his formerly clandestine 'civil-military alliance', the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200 (*Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200*/MBR-200) into a national political force whose Bolivarian Alternative Agenda MBR-200 (*Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana MBR-200*) 'included a vague proposal to stimulate what was defined as a "humanist self-managing economy"' (Parker, 2005: 67). In advance of the 1998 elections, the MBR-200 created a parallel structure called the 'Fifth Republic Movement' (*Movimiento Quinta Republica* / MVR); by invoking a transition from a fourth to a fifth republic, the MVR name reinforced the movement's call for a 'refounding' of Venezuela's political order via a constituent assembly and

new constitution (López Maya, 2003: 82-3). Capitalising on widespread disgust with traditional parties, Chávez won the presidency.

In December 1999, voters approved a new constitution that changed the country's name to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (*República Bolivariana de Venezuela*) and opened up space for greater popular participation in governance, although it nonetheless primarily instantiated a liberal conception of representative democracy. The government's 'Guidelines of the National Social and Economic Development Plan 2001–2007', released in September 2001, recognised that the 'process of democratic control of the instruments of power' was still in construction and thus defined the period in question as one 'of transition toward the Bolivarian revolution' which it characterised primarily in economistic terms.[5] Its presentation of 'social equilibrium', however, argued that efforts to overcome inequality should be seen not as a form of welfare 'to cure the wounds of those excluded from the market', but the creation of 'conditions to achieve citizenship' based on political, economic, and social rights (2001: 18) and the document identified four 'orienting principles' for achieving social equilibrium as 'universality, equity, participation, and co-responsibility' (2001: 91). It also called for reconstituting:

> [t]he public … as a space guaranteeing the collective interest [and thus] … an instrument of civic power, not understood as power transferred or ceded, but as the creation of a new power capable of legitimately valuing the participation of society, communities and families in the formulation, execution, and evaluation of public decisions, and in accountability and public oversight (2001: 92).

The Guidelines thus envision 'the state in all of its administrative levels and branches, *as the creator of conditions that make possible the empowerment of citizens*' (López Maya & Lander, 2011: 64, my emphasis) and express a Bolivarian commitment to the development of what we identified in the previous section as a Gramscian civil state.

From 2002 through 2005, opposition to the Bolivarian government produced a failed coup attempt, a general strike and petroleum sector lockout that significantly impaired the national economy, a failed recall referendum, and a boycott of National Assembly elections. These efforts largely backfired, not only ceding control of the legislature, but galvanising and further radicalising the Bolivarian movement. In 2005, with state revenues soaring alongside oil prices, an emboldened Chávez began publicly affirming that his Bolivarian Revolution was on a path to twenty-first century socialism (see Forero, 2005). Among the many initiatives launched by the Bolivarian government during these years were a series of extensive social programs referred to as 'missions' (*misiones*), as well as concerted efforts to facilitate the widespread establishment of worker cooperatives. Our concern, however, is the development of the Bolivarian 'commune' system, which has developed around an organisational entity called the communal council.

The 2006 Law of Communal Councils (*Ley de Consejos Comunales*) defines them as:

> instances of participation, articulation, and integration between diverse community organizations, social groups, and citizens, that permit the organized people to directly exercise the management of public policies and projects oriented toward responding to the necessities and aspirations of communities in the construction of an equal and socially just society.

The law specifies that in urban areas each council should represent between 200 and 400 families grouped into a citizens' assembly. The communal council itself is comprised of an executive council, a unit of financial management (the communal bank), and a unit of social oversight (*controloría social*). The executive council is comprised of spokespeople for the various working groups or committees created by the community. Examples of committees suggested in the law include those dedicated to health, education, land, housing, water, security, recreation and sports, and media. The citizens' assembly is the maximum authority for any decisions taken or projects

proposed by the executive council, which is expected to create a Community Development Plan, propose specific projects to be carried out or overseen by the working groups, and '[a]rticulate with the social organisations present in the community and promote the creation of new organisations where necessary, in defense of the collective interest and integral and sustainable development of the communities'. The duties of the communal bank include overseeing a participatory budget for the community and promoting the creation of cooperatives to carry out community projects. The unit of social oversight is expected to audit the activities of the executive council and the communal bank. Once established, communal councils may obtain resources from a number of sources, including the institutions of the municipal, state, and federal governments. The law established a National Communal Councils Fund and, while the onus for the formation of a community council lies on the community itself, this funding added practical incentive to ideological motivation. A national study carried out in 2008 concluded that 'this organisational form has been extended successfully in all of the country' (Machado, 2009: 115).

The communal councils were a departure from top-down and centralised institutions, such as the missions, as well as economistic organisational forms, such as the cooperatives, and they became the Bolivarian movement's organisational form of choice for instituting participatory civil governance. They were also the basis for a 'new geometry of power' that Chávez sought to institute via a package of constitutional reforms in 2007. The reforms proposed an additional co-equal branch of government, called the 'popular power', that involved a system of self-governance based on a federated structure of geographic areas in which 'communities' would be grouped into 'communes' that would, in turn, be grouped into the 'communal cities' that were envisioned as the 'primary political unit of the organisation of the national territory'. The communities envisioned as subcomponents of the communes would have been governed not only by the communal councils, but also by councils representing interest groups; examples listed in the proposal include workers, artisans, fishers, students, youth, athletes, the elderly, and people with disabilities. The reforms were voted down in a public referendum, but in 2010 the Bolivarian government passed a series of laws, including the Fundamental Law of Popular Power (*Ley Orgánica de Poder Popular*), the Fundamental Law of the Communes (*Ley Orgánica de las Comunas*), and the Fundamental Law of Social Oversight (*Ley Orgánica de Contraloría Social*), that enacted much of what had been earlier proposed.

Over the following years, rising crime rates, decelerating economic growth, a somewhat reunified opposition, and news of Chávez's battle with cancer all contributed to a loss of momentum for the Bolivarian movement. Chávez managed to win a third term in the 2012 presidential elections but passed away in 2013. Chávez's hand-picked successor, Francisco Maduro, won the presidency in April 2013 but has presided over an ever-deepening economic-cum-political crisis. In that context and despite the existing legal framework, the commune structure has hardly developed beyond the communal councils. Our analysis of Bolivarian community media, however, focuses on the evolution of its own legal framework and its relationship to the proposed new geometry of power. As such, the crucial points to carry forward are the structure of the communal council, as well as its role as the basis for a federated 'communal' system of participatory governance that would extend from the local to the national level.

The growth and stagnation of Bolivarian community media

As in many Latin American countries, Venezuela's community media sector emerged in the late 1960s and grew throughout the following decades in a context shaped by leftist theory. It therefore reflected the trend in Latin American socialism toward the prioritisation of a Gramscian civil state. An organised community and alternative media movement consolidated in Caracas during the

economic and political turmoil of the 1990s; by the late 1990s the movement began to cohere at a national level.

Many in the movement felt their support for Chávez and the MVR was rewarded with language in the 1999 constitution that legitimated community media. Nonetheless, the movement found it necessary to advocate aggressively for the inclusion of community media in a 2000 update to the Law of Telecommunications (LOT). Success in that endeavour demonstrated the movement's newfound power and resulted in an article declaring that '[t]he state will promote the existence of non-profit, public service community radio and television broadcasting stations as media for the plural and transparent communication and action of the organised communities in their respective area' (my translation).

For the community and alternative media movement, the next task was to push the National Telecommunications Commission (*Comisión Nacional de Telecomunicaciones*/CONATEL) to pass LOT subsidiary regulations that would govern the licensing and operation of community broadcasters. This process gave the movement an opportunity to formulate its vision for the sector, but the attempt to do so produced a sharp division. One faction, comprised primarily of groups from outside Caracas and organized as the Venezuelan Network of Community Media (*Red Venezolana de Medios Comunitarios*/RVMC), sought regulation along the lines of the traditional liberal model of civil society, with the state providing a licensing structure for outlets that operate as traditional non-profit entities. The other faction, composed primarily of groups from Caracas, some of which had faced violent state repression during the 1990s, opposed mandatory licensing as a mechanism of state domination; it sought instead guaranteed government funding, the distribution of which would be managed by the community media sector itself. The RVMC, being more conservative in its policy outlook and less confrontational in its attitude toward the government, became CONATEL's primary interlocutor (Manrique, 2011).

The regulations that went into effect in 2002 largely reflected the RVMC's liberal understanding of civil society and CONATEL's technocratic expectations, thus demonstrating the powerful inertia of the 'fourth republic', while some language – perhaps prodded by the more radical faction of the movement – inclined slightly toward the Bolivarian ideals of the 'fifth republic'. One example of the latter was the creation of a new legal entity, the 'community foundation', which became the requisite organisational platform for all community broadcasters and was required to adopt 'democratic, participatory and plural mechanisms' of internal governance (my translation).

The traditional liberal model of civil society manifested in the regulations' prohibition of 'partisan or proselytising messages of any nature', in an attempt to ensure the autonomy of outlets, as well as the positioning of broadcasters as financially independent non-profits within the private sector. As such, they would depend on 'contributions, donations, or grants' as well as 'income obtained through the offering of community radio and television broadcasting services' with the latter specified as: (a) up to five minutes of advertising per hour from 'natural persons', 'small and mid-size businesses' located in the community, and 'large industries' and 'natural persons' from other communities, so long as the latter two categories did not comprise more than fifty percent of the total; and (b) sponsorship of programming by 'natural or legal persons, domiciled or not within the area', who would be entitled to place a message of no longer than five seconds, up to four times per hour, that includes 'auditory or visual messages of the name or logo of such businesses or public entities'. The regulations thus compelled community broadcasters to compete in the commercial marketplace for publicity, even as they faced greater restrictions than commercial broadcasters in terms of their ability to serve ads.

The liberal model was also evident in the regulations' conception of community. In geographic terms, they limited community broadcasters to service areas no smaller than the broadcaster's parish but no larger than its municipality. This conception embraced boundaries

established by previous administrations that were sometimes determined with little regard for the shared interests of residents. Moreover, by assigning community broadcasters to fixed and limited areas, the regulations assumed that communities are static and merely local, and that they neither overlap nor scale.

Related limitations manifested in the regulations' elaboration of the role of community broadcasters, who were required to '[g]uarantee the transmission of messages directed toward public service that procure the solution of the community's problems'. The emphasis on the correction of 'problems' evidenced a paternalistic tendency that (echoing the modernisation paradigm of development communications) attributes an intrinsically 'problematic' character to local communities. Additionally, the emphasis on public service content suggested that community media is merely supplemental to the mainstream media that it should neither emulate nor aspire to displace.

Just months after this regulatory framework was established, alternative and community media played an important role in fomenting and documenting popular resistance to the attempted coup of April 2002, thus elevating the profile of the sector. One result was a significant increase in government support: CONATEL accelerated the licensing process; various government entities sponsored meetings, conferences, and workshops; the Ministry of Communications and Information (*Ministerio de Comunicación e Información*/MINCI) established a General Office of Alternative and Community Media (*Dirección General de Medios Alternativos y Comunitarios*/DGMAC); and in October 2003 Chávez announced a five billion bolívares ($2.3–3.1 million) fund for the sector. This led to explosive growth; to take just one measure, the number of broadcast licences (radio and TV) rose from 14 in 2002 to 61 in 2003, 157 in 2004, and eventually 283 by the end of 2008 (see Urribarrí, 2009; Villalobos, 2012)

A period of stagnation followed, however, as the sector's numerical growth had not been matched by its functional capacity. CONATEL stopped issuing licences and the number of licensees dropped to 280 by April 2011 (ibid). It made little sense to continue licensing when many existing licensees were not broadcasting, those that were on the air had difficulty producing original content, and the content produced found only an extremely limited audience. CONATEL was not alone in recognising these deficiencies, nor were the obstacles limited to broadcasters. Print and web outlets had also multiplied, but community media outlets of all types were experiencing a similar set of problems.

Many of these problems were linked to a lack of resources, which was, in turn, linked to the liberal framework that, for broadcasters, had been institutionalised by the regulations; for print and web outlets, the framework had carried over on what might be called societal or institutional inertia. Donations, and revenues from advertising and services, were mostly non-existent due to a conflux of factors. Venezuela's deep polarisation meant that community media organisations – which were widely seen as allies, if not appendages, of the Bolivarian government – could not count on support from the oppositional private sector, which held much of the country's wealth. Ideological preferences aside, most community media outlets were located in impoverished neighbourhoods that had little need for contracted services and little wealth to donate. As for advertising, community media outlets could barely survive, much less attract marketable audiences, without existing revenues and were therefore caught in a vicious cycle. Meanwhile, even if they had built a substantial audience, it was not one that advertisers particularly sought, nor one that they couldn't more easily reach via other media.

What funding there was came primarily from government entities, on an irregular basis that depended to a great extent on who was in office, as even Bolivarian politicians tended to dismiss community media. The most substantial funding came from the federal level and was partially conditioned on an ability to work those networks, meaning that outlets unable to represent themselves in the capital were less likely to be included. Moreover, government funding was often

linked to a particular project (like a workshop for community members) that allowed for the acquisition of some equipment and perhaps the disbursement of meagre 'incentives' for committed members, but no reserve and certainly no sense of stability that might facilitate strategic execution. This led to difficulties maintaining equipment and consistently producing content, especially for technologically intensive media, with television stations facing the highest hurdles. Meanwhile, the inability to pay workers meant that most outlets depended on a core group of deeply committed participants, often linked by familial and friendship bonds, who went to great lengths and made considerable sacrifices just to keep the operation afloat, but were consequently restricted in their ability to integrate other members of the community.

Additionally, dependence on government funding fuelled criticism of the sector as lacking autonomy. Practitioners found it particularly difficult to respond to such criticism since, on one hand, they maintained a fierce commitment to autonomy that was rooted in the liberal framework of journalistic and artistic independence, as well as the proudly independent history of their own movement, while on the other hand, most were indeed supporters of the Bolivarian government and, though occasionally quite critical in their coverage of the state, felt themselves to be part of a media 'war' in which their side was vastly outgunned by a commercial apparatus backed by oligarchic and transnational political economic power. Even when not running government advertising, which was a relatively steady source of funds for some outlets, much of their content was explicitly pro-Bolivarian, sometimes even produced by the government. For broadcasters, this was arguably in violation of the regulation prohibiting partisan messages, as critics were quick to point out. Moreover, some Bolivarian officials did seem intent on exploiting the community media sector for propagandistic ends. Practitioners therefore found themselves torn between conflicting desires – on the one hand, to remain autonomous and, when need be, critical of the Bolivarian government; on the other, to offer maximal support to the Bolivarian revolution – with almost no resources with which to navigate such dire straits.[6] This knot of constraints led the Bolivarian alternative and community media movement to seek radical change.

Toward a law and practice of popular communication

In 2006, the Venezuelan Alternative Press Bloc (*Bloque Venezolano de Prensa Alternativa*/BVPA) issued a call for a 'Communication Mission' (*Misión Comunicación*), understood as 'the reconstruction of communication practice in such a manner that, literally, the entire people … gets involved in a new communicational social relation'.[7] Several elements of the proposal signalled a significant shift within the alternative and community media movement. First, the document offered a blunt critique of the government's response to:

> a situation that has been indicated on many occasions but never resolved. The limited or
> spasmodic support that is dispensed to [community media] is an emblematic expression
> … of the grave failure that is dragged along by the communicational policies of the
> Bolivarian Government.

Second, it highlighted the disconnect between community media and Bolivarian civil society:

> Despite the significance of … social movements in the present circumstances, almost in
> their entirety none … possess a communication medium that serves as a mouthpiece as
> much to the inside of the movement itself as to society as a whole ... The implementation
> of the Communication Mission is happening so that each social movement, at different
> levels, has its respective communication media whether print, radio, television, or digital.

Third, and most importantly, it recognized the vital role to be played by the integration of community media with the newly codified communal council system:

> The people, in the Communal Councils, will have the opportunity to re-appropriate the
> communicational act. To search for, to construct the truth … that will be possible in

> socialist society … The Communication Mission will have in the Communal Councils a
> natural, extraordinary space for its concretion and development.

While the document was vague in terms of action steps, it forcefully signalled a need for drastic change that would establish community media as an articulating element of a Bolivarian civil state.

Over the following years, as the movement continually expressed its frustrations and desires, it increasingly called on the government to address them via a new legal structure. In 2009, the Ministry of Popular Power of the Office of the President (*Ministerio del Poder Popular del Despacho de la Presidencia*) facilitated multiple regional and one national meeting through which practitioners produced a proposal for a new law. The National Assembly did not act on that proposal, but it became the starting point for another deliberative process, in 2011, that also involved a series of regional meetings, this time facilitated by Blanca Eekhout, a central figure in the alternative and community media movement who had become Second Vice President of the National Assembly. This process led to a bill for a Law of Popular Power Communication (*Ley de Comunicación del Poder Popular*/LCPP). For reasons that remain unclear, the bill was introduced in the assembly but never put to a vote.[8] No further action was taken by the Assembly until December 2015, when a revised LCPP was finally passed.

The 2011 bill would have established a National Council of Popular Communication (*Consejo Nacional de Comunicación Popular*) charged with developing policy for the sector, as well as Popular Communication Councils (*Consejos Popular de Comunicación*/CPC), 'whose object is to elaborate communicational and training policies in their geographic area or in social movements and organisations'. The National Council was to be composed of 15 members, eight of whom were to be state officials (representatives from the Office of the Vice Presidency, as well as seven different Ministries), and seven of whom were to be drawn from the popular communications sector (representatives from each of seven regional CPC).

Three important organisational units would also have been established by the 2011 bill: Popular Power Communication Media (*Medios de Comunicación del Poder Popular*/MCPP), Units of Training and Production (*Unidades de Formación y Producción*/UFP), and Popular Power Communication Producers (*Productores y Productoras de la Comunicación del Poder Popular*/PCPP). MCPP were defined as non-profit 'providers of popular communication services … under the legal figure of communal direct social property enterprises'. Community broadcasters would have thus been freed from the geographic coverage limitation established in the LOT regulations and media outlets would no longer be expected to train content producers (a task that would belong to UFP), who could now (as PCPP) operate independently from media outlets.

The 2011 bill would have established a national Fund for the Development of Popular Power Communication (*Fondo para el Desarrollo de la Comunicación del Poder Popular*) that was to be financed by a one percent tax on the gross revenues of advertising enterprises with annual revenues above a defined minimum. The National Council was tasked with '[a]pproving the projects to be financed with resources from the [Fund], based on an evaluation of their viability and feasibility'; the possibility of distributing the Fund as block grants to the regional CPCs or other entities was not foreclosed. While other sources of revenue were not mentioned in the bill, they were not prohibited; assumedly other avenues were to be addressed in subsidiary regulations.

In sum, the 2011 LCPP bill offered a vision of a robust institutional structure of participatory communications that would integrate with both civil society and the communal system. Through the National Council, this system facilitated the articulation of a coherent national policy for popular communications with both state and civil society input. Policy implementation would have been facilitated by the CPCs and through the Council's control of the Fund.

Crucially, the institutional structure proposed by the bill was not purely hierarchical. The

CPC, MCPP, and PCPP were not simply controlled by the National Council. They were to be articulated with, or even embedded within, civil society and the communal system. For example, a civil society organisation or commune might establish a PCPP to produce content that serves its interests. This PCPP would have the option of applying to the National Fund, but it might also receive funding from its parent organisation. The same framework was to apply – though ostensibly at the regional or national level – for the creation of CPC and MCPP. In these ways, participatory media organisations would be simultaneously responsive to civil oversight (at various levels, by various interest groups), as well as national and regional communication policies. The bill would have established, in other words, a heterarchical structure offering practitioners multiple funding options and substantial autonomy vis-a-vis the government as they serve an articulating role within civil society and the communal system of participatory governance.

The LCPP enacted in 2015 accomplishes this same goal in a different manner. It establishes a federated system of Popular Communication Councils at the municipal, state and national levels (as defined by the 'new geometry of power'), with members of the higher councils elected by assemblies of representatives from the lower councils. At all levels, councils are composed of seven members serving two-year terms, with one representative from each of seven 'communicational aspects' (*vertientes comunicacionales*): radio, television, print media, murals or other communicational formats, Alternative and Community Media Committees of the communal councils or communes, and social movements. There are thus no government officials on any of the councils, though they are tasked with 'articulating policies and strategies that consolidate popular communication in accordance with the National Plan of Economic and Social Development'.

The LCPP establishes Popular, Alternative, and Community Media (*Medios de Comunicación Populares, Alternativos y Comunitarias*/MCPAC), which can make use of 'any non-profit legal personality'. It also establishes Popular Communication Training and Production Units (*Unidades de Formación y Producción para la Comunicación Popular*/UFPCP) (thus combining the UFP and PCPP of the 2011 bill), without specifying their legal personality. Although not prohibited from operating independently, both MCPAC and UFPCP may operate as subsidiaries of civil society organisations and units of the communal system (as in the 2011 bill). The national, state, and municipal councils are tasked with 'contributing to the functioning and oversight' of the UFPCP, suggesting that they will register such organisations; why the councils are not specifically tasked with oversight of the MCPAC is unclear.

Unlike the 2011 bill, the enacted LCPP does not establish a national fund. Rather, it guarantees that the state will provide popular communication organisations 'with the technical requirements, materials, equipment, and subsidies necessary for their function; and will guarantee self-management through the promotion and support of socio-productive projects that enable their sustainability over time'. It also guarantees that state advertising contracts will be determined 'according to criteria for equality of opportunity between public, private, and Popular Communication media' and guarantees 'preferential treatment' for 'alternative and community media domiciled in rural, indigenous, and frontier sectors'. In addition to these broad and vague assertions, the LCPP requires that one percent of all state funding for 'socio-productive projects' be assigned to 'their promotion and propaganda, designated to the fortification of existing Popular Communication media in their geographic area [sic]'. Other sources of funding might be addressed in subsidiary regulations.

The enacted LCPP has some potential advantages over the 2011 bill: the removal of government officials from the national council maximises civil society governance and safeguards the autonomy of the sector, while the federated council structure seems to provide a more evenly distributed system of representation than the CPC of the 2011 bill. At the same time, the LCPP has

several significant weaknesses. First, the selection of spokespersons according to media formats seems misguided, both because such distinctions do not hold for media outlets in today's converged environment (in which, for example, newspapers manage websites and produce podcasts) and because it provides no representation for content producers that do not work in a specified medium (such as a team of investigative journalists). Second, funding mechanisms are too vaguely identified and offer only limited opportunities. Whereas a national fund enables organizations (or consortiums) to propose all manner of original projects, the earmarking of one percent of previously determined budgets to publicise existing projects in defined areas places significant restrictions on the scope of media projects, in terms of content, budget, and geography. Additionally, state advertising revenue is only applicable to media outlets, meaning that independent content producers are disadvantaged.

Nonetheless, the enacted LCPP reproduces important innovations seen in the 2011 bill. First, allowing MCPAC and UFPCP to operate with any geographic and thematic scope frees participatory communications from the limits that its assumed localness and marginality so often incur (as was the case with the 2001 regulations). Second, by allowing MCPAC and UFPCP to operate either independently or as subsidiaries of civil society organisations or communal entities, and also by requiring that representatives from civil society and the communal system be included at all levels of the federated council system, the LCPP establishes a heterarchical structure that enables participatory communications practitioners to autonomously and democratically determine a sectoral policy framework with input from a broad array of civil society and civil governance organizations, at the same time as those practitioners play an articulating role within civil society and a robust system of civil governance. Multiple potential sources of funding, meanwhile, safeguard the autonomy of those practitioners.

With important differences, both the 2011 bill and the actual LCPP offer viable models for the sustained inclusion of community media within a civil state. The LCPP's subsidiary regulations have not yet been published, meaning the legal framework is unfinished and the law is far from being implemented. Given the economic and political obstacles presently facing the Bolivarian government, we may or may not get a chance to see how this legal structure plays out in practice. Nonetheless, we can draw lessons from the Bolivarian experience that address general issues of community media sustainability.

Some concluding remarks on heterarchy, autonomy, and sustainability

Certainly, community media facilitates empowerment. Certainly, it facilitates alternative expression. But a robust community media system will accomplish these and other beneficial ends *en route* to a larger goal, which is the facilitation of maximal self-governance. The Bolivarian experience supports an understanding of community media as an articulating mechanism for a democratic civil society. It also demonstrates that traditional (liberal) regulatory frameworks position community media as local and marginal, even as they require community media organisations to compete for audiences in the commercial marketplace as non-profit businesses. How do we correct for these problems?

The Bolivarian experience suggests that we should enable and incentivise strong relationships between community media and civil society at-large, so that each works in support of the other. This may involve a civil society organisation creating its own participatory media enterprise. Or it may involve a participatory media enterprise tailoring its work to a particular set of organisations, or just a type of organisation. On its own, however, this strategy will not be enough.

In addition to these 'horizontal' connections between community media and civil society, we should enable a 'vertical' organisation of the community media sector itself, so that disparate community media organisations are also engaged in mutually supportive relationships within one

or more overarching governance structures. These should involve the participation of civil society at-large; if non-media civil society organisations are 'horizontally' partnered with community media organisations, they deserve to be represented in 'vertical' structures that determine community media policy. This mesh of horizontal and vertical relationships is what I have referred to above as a *heterarchic* structure. Describing, theorising, and implementing heterarchy is complicated, yet such structure is, in fact, ubiquitous (see Crumley, 2008; Kontopoulos, 1993). We should learn to harness it.

The Bolivarian experience suggests that, as we construct heterarchic institutional frameworks that allow community media to serve as an articulating mechanism for democratic civil society, while simultaneously engaging in a process of sectoral self-governance in partnership with non-media civil society, we should enable both horizontal and vertical resource flows. We should facilitate, in other words, the funding of community media by non-media civil society (via ownership, on a contractual basis, or through grants, for example), as well as mechanisms of subsidy funding managed by the community media sector itself (such as centralised funds or resource sharing arrangements). All the better if governments are willing to contribute to these funding sources. Many governments already contribute in various ways to civil society at-large and such resources can be channelled horizontally to the community media sector. Should governments be willing to contribute directly to the community media sector, those resources might also be channelled through vertical structures, so long as governments are willing to leave policy decisions to the democratic decision-making processes embedded therein.

As we have seen in the Bolivarian experience, and as I have tried to suggest above, the existence of multiple funding sources, channelled both horizontally and vertically, safeguards both the survival and autonomy of community media organisations. In short, the heterarchic structuration of community media funding may resolve two of the most salient, long-standing, and perplexing issues of sustainability in community media.

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Notes

1   Along with similar constructions in this article, 'maximally democratic civil society' is a term of my own devise. It is not meant to signal any specific alignment with Menser (2018), who employs the term 'maximal democracy' to describe his view of participatory democracy.

2   This manner of thinking accords to a great degree with Gumucio Dagron's (2003) tripartite analysis of sustainability as economic, institutional, and social. I believe, however, that it enables a clearer understanding of the interdependence between these three aspects of sustainability. For example, Gumucio Dagron associates 'internal democracy, decision mechanisms, and managerial transparency' (6, my translation) with institutional sustainability, while social sustainability refers to the committed 'participation of the

community and audience' (5, my translation). Understanding community media as an articulating mechanism of a maximally democratic civil society allows for greater specificity in (a) conceptualising community and audience (in terms of specific civil society actors), as well as (b) the relationship between internal democracy/organisational transparency and community support.

3   I have adapted the term 'civil state' from Cox (1999: 11), who has expressed the same concept by using the term 'civic state', which he credits to Sakamoto.

4   All citations from Moulian are my translation.

5   All citations from the Guidelines are my translation.

6   For a valuable account of the issue of autonomy in Bolivarian community media, see Schiller (2011).

7   All citations from this text are my own translation.

8   The 2011 LCPP bill was revised between its first and second discussion in the Assembly; this article analyses the revised version. For an analysis of the deliberative processes, proposals, and 2011 bills, see chapter five of Potter (2014).