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RADIO CARIBBEAN PEARL - THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY RADIOS IN THE NICARAGUAN AUTONOMOUS REGION OF THE SOUTHERN ATLANTIC

ABSTRACT

Established in 1998 the community radio stations *Radio Caribbean Pearl* is carrying on Nicaragua's strong tradition of community radio broadcasting, dating back to the Sandinista revolution in 1970's and 1980's. The station is characterized best by its remote location on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast and the variety of indigenous ethnicities in its reach. This paper investigates the role of the community radio station for the empowerment of the inhabitants of *Pearl Lagoon*. It gives insights to the content broadcasted, the station management, the achievement and struggles, and puts a strong focus on the social impacts on the community it serves. All of the findings are discussed in the specific context of the current social and political situation of the *Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur (RAAS)*, since this context is crucial to the station's role and purpose. In the course of this qualitative case study, six problem-centered interviews with radio producers and representatives from development NGOs were carried out during two field research trips to the *Pearl Lagoon* in May 2014 and February 2015.

KEYWORDS

Nicaragua; community radio; empowerment; indigenous people

INTRODUCTION

There is strong evidence from a number of research projects that community radios play a crucial role in community-based development efforts. Although community radios have quite a long tradition in Nicaragua dating back to the Sandinista revolution in the 1970s and 1980s (Crabtree, 1996), so far there is a lack of scientific investigations in this area, especially in the very remote Caribbean regions of the country, an area characterised

by strong tensions between the mestizo population and the indigenous people. Therefore, this paper aims at closing this gap by investigating the community radio *Radio Caribbean Pearl* in the autonomous region RAAS (*Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur*).

The research is guided by the central research question: What role do community radios play for the empowerment of rural communities in RAAS? Thereby, a special emphasis was put on the function of community radios for young adults, becoming manifest in the sub-research question: What challenges and opportunities emerge for young adults through the production of radio programs? In order to find answers to these questions, a qualitative case study consisting out of six problem-centered interviews with radio producers and representatives from development NGO were carried out during two field research trips to *Pearl Lagoon* in May 2014 and February 2015.

Initially a general overview of community radios and their role for development will be given, followed by a brief description of the political tensions between the Pacific and the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. After introducing the community radio *Radio Caribbean Pearl* the main findings will be presented and some concluding thoughts will be drawn.

COMMUNITY RADIO: DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

The concept of community broadcasting, despite the various forms it can assume, has very strict criteria that have to be met. Torres (2011, p. 3) argues that only about 10% of the radio stations, which consider themselves communitarian, “authentically” are. In the African Charter of Broadcasting 2001 the Unesco therefore has defined community broadcasting as follows: “Community broadcasting is broadcasting which is for, by and about the community, whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursues a social development agenda, and which is non-profit”¹

The very core of every community radio station should be the involvement of the community in all levels of organization. That goes along with tailoring the content to the specific needs of the community in which the radio station operates. The strong social agenda, the community involvement as well as the non-profit objective are aspects that distinguish community radio from other forms of (hyper-) local radio or public broadcasting. It is

¹ See http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/5628/10343523830african_charter.pdf/african%2Bcharter.pdf

media designed for participation and democratization. (Mezghani, 2014; Torres, 2011; Elliot, 2010; AMARC, 2007) The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (Association Mondiale Des Radiodiffuseurs Communautaires) AMARC (2015), with its close to 4000 registered member stations in 150 countries, is adding a global perspective to all the aspects mentioned above.

a community radio station is a station that responds to the needs of the community, which it serves and contributes to its development in a progressive manner by promoting social change. It promotes the democratization of communication by facilitating community participation in communication. This participation may vary according to the context in which the radio operates. (AMARC, 2015)

Therefore there is no prototype community radio station. They may take various forms, focus on different aspects, vary in organization, goals and content structure according to their cultural context and needs of the community operating the station. In case of the radio station Pearl Radio from Pearl Lagoon the last definition by Tucker (2013, p. 393) is very fitting, since it highlights the crucial role community radio plays for publics with a very diverse ethnical and social structure.

Community radio is properly realized when a radio station broadcasts for a diverse geographic community, understanding that variety of different ethnic and social groups live in that geographical area, that there may be imbalances of power within that 'community' and that the airwaves on a community radio station should be opened to those members of communities who are not heard on other media. (Tucker 2013, 393)

Therefore the station broadcasts in all the local languages and dialects spoken in the lagoon, while trying to create a sense of unity among the inhabitants.

The implementation should be a grassroots initiative and the stations should be community owned. But in reality a lot of the radio stations are installed by NGOs or attached to organizations e.g. churches as so called "associative radios" (Mezghani, 2014, p. 686; Medrado, 2013). This has to do with funding as well as a problematic licensing situation for these third tier media outlets (Mendel, 2013; Scarone & Sanchez, 2003). A grassroots effort as well as a strong community involvement (e.g. volunteer workers) in the programming and management make for a strong sustainable

environment and legitimize the station among the members of the community, therefore enhancing its ability to fertilize social change (Jallov, 2012, p. 15ff.). Mezghani (2014, p. 685) even argues that the success of community radio stations should solely be measured by the level of community participation and not by its reach.

COMMUNITY RADIOS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Radio as a medium is predestined to serve the interests of community broadcasters. It's cheap in production as well as reception, functions without steady power grids or any technical infrastructure and it doesn't exclude social groups with a low level of literacy (da Costa, 2012, p. 138; Bailur, 2012, p. 92). "For these reasons, community radio is considered a critical medium for development and social change" (Bailur, 2012, p. 92).

In the context of development aid community radio plays a crucial role, especially for those people in disperse rural areas, who are marginalized in the main stream media. The main purpose of community radios still remains. As stated above they should be a tool for democratization and political participation – giving voice to the voiceless. (Glynn & Cupples, 2010; Forde, Foxwell & Meadows, 2010). "In marginalized communities people all have their individual perceptions about their situation, but what is required for change and development is a collective perception of the local reality and of the options for improving it" (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada, 2002, p. 71).

Community radios provide these platforms for debates. But those stations set up by development agencies or other types of NGO have a broader social agenda.

They usually provide educational programming and run information campaigns. The topics range from public health, anti-violence programs, gender as well sexual education (Tucker, 2013; Medeossi, Stadler & Delany-Moretlwe, 2014). In some areas there is a strong focus on environmental preservation and farming (Nyareza & Dick, 2012). A common theme as well is the goal, to not only strengthen the community as a whole, but to empower marginalized groups within the communities such as women and youngsters. Because of that the community radio stations are providing technical training to enable participation for those groups, drawing them closer to the stations, enhancing their acceptance of the programming and therefore involving them more into the community life (Torres, 2011; Manyozo, Nas-sanga & Lopes, 2012; Rodríguez, 2005). In case of the young adults, this can avert the very common gap between the generations, which is often

found in rural areas. Making the youngster care, can create a bigger sense of unity within the community (Mezghani 2014, p. 686). Another aspect is especially relevant for coastal regions like in the case of Pearl Radio in Pearl Lagoon. The radio stations are used to manage natural disaster situations e.g. hurricanes. During quiet times they provide information, educate and prepare the community for the case of the natural disaster happening. In case of the emergency they are usually the first, if not the only, to warn the population about the crisis approaching. After the disaster situation – if necessary – they help organizing the community’s efforts in rebuilding, rescue and so on. This so called “rapid response radio” is sometimes even accomplished with the use of small mobile radio devices (Romo-Murphy, James & Adams, 2011).

NICARAGUA: ONE COUNTRY TWO WORLDS

Strong tensions characterise the relation between the Pacific- and the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, which are rooted in hegemonic tendencies of the mestizo population living mainly in the West of the country, towards the primarily indigenous communities in the East. Since the Sandinista revolution conflicts intensify and the central government in Managua more or less openly practices a colonialization process, which inter alia becomes manifest in land expropriations, a continuously increasing number of mestizo settlers and the propagation of Spanish as the dominant language including a purely Spanish language media landscape. At the same time the Caribbean region is economically disadvantaged and a large proportion of its inhabitants lives in absolute poverty. Deborah, an employee of the Nicaraguan NGO FADCANIC (Fundación para la Autonomía y Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua / Foundation for the Autonomy and Development of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua) summarised the current situation in the following way: “In real terms it just means that the people of the Pacific side of Nicaragua consider this part as a reserve and we consider those from the Pacific as invaders and colonisers.” (Deborah, FADCANIC, Interview) George, the manager of *Radio Caribbean Pearl* argues in the same vein:

There is still this imaginary front there. [...] The government is putting more interest to invest money where the Spanish-speaking people live then invest in social projects where the English people live. All what the government wanna do, is exploit the natural resources and leave us without nothing. [...] They [the mestizos] are not interested

in educating the Black and the Miskito people here, the more illiterate they keep, is better for them. (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview)

This estimation is also shared by an Austrian NGO employee, who is working in the Caribbean regions in the field of media education: “Some people say there is no racism in Nicaragua, but I say there is racism against the *costeños* [coastal population at the Caribbean side of Nicaragua]” (Klaus, HORIZONTAL3000, Interview). Luciano Baracco (2012) gives a detailed historical overview of the tensions between the two coasts in his article “From British colonialism to revolutionary developmentalism: The ‘re-birth’ of autonomy in Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast”.

PEARL LAGOON: RADIO CARIBBEAN PEARL

Community radios have quite a long tradition in Nicaragua dating back to the Sandinista revolution in the 1970s and 1980s (Crabtree, 1996) and can be found all over the country. Especially in the Caribbean region “the pre-dominant media is radio. So radio reaches everywhere, every community and most of the municipalities along the coast have, like Pearl Lagoon has, its own community radio station” (Deborah, FADCANIC, Interview). The station was founded in 1998 by the Norwegian development organisation NPA (Norwegian People’s Aid) and received another donation after the devastating hurricane Ida in 2009 to rebuild the radio mast. The Nicaraguan NGO Accion Medica Cristiana and the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense, abbreviated URACCAN) also supported the set-up of the station. URACCAN furthermore co-operated with NPA, due to the fact that at that time there was no legal framework for the community media sector and formal institutions were the only legal entities to operate a radio station. Up until today URACCAN acts as the official licence holder, but does not interfere in the daily operations (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview). The operation of the radio is mainly based on volunteer work; five people get a financial compensation in which two people get 500 Córdoba (=17 Euro) and another three people receive 700 Córdoba (=24 Euro) per month. The station broadcasts 11 hours daily between 9 am and 8 pm with longer broadcasting times during emergency situations (e.g. prior, during and after hurricanes) covering the whole municipality of Pearl Lagoon including

the very remote communities of Orinoco (Garifuna community), Kakabila (Miskito community), Marshall Point (Creole community) and others. Radio Caribbean Pearl broadcasts in three different, local languages (Creole, Miskito and Garifuna) as well as in Spanish. The station is also member of AMARC.

Currently the financing is a big concern: “Economically the radio station is in a critical situation” (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview). The monthly regular expenses include electricity (2.000 - 3.000 Córdoba = 69 Euro - 103 Euro), telephone (n. s.) and the compensation of five volunteers (3.100 Córdoba = 107 Euro). At the moment the station does not obtain funding from domestic or international NGO and depends officially solely on the advertising revenues and paid airtime from the Mayor’s office, the churches and two private persons. In private conversations the possibility was mentioned that drug cartels might support the radio financially. These intimations couldn’t be tested during the field study.

FINDINGS

Based on the interviews we found that Radio Caribbean Pearl potentially fosters the empowerment of the community of Pearl Lagoon in eight distinct areas:

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

The radio plays a relevant role in the awareness building for soil contamination, recycling of garbage and the protection of resources. The manager of the radio stresses that

[the] people did not know at that time [before the introduction of the radio] maybe to chop the mangos from the edge of the lagoon is damaging the whole eco-system there. So this where the radio come and people stop doing this.
(George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview)

HEALTH AND SEXUAL EDUCATION

Radio Caribbean Pearl also provides information concerning sexual and health related issues, focusing on malaria, dengue fever, diarrhoea and reproductive health education. Especially among young people at the Caribbean coast drug abuse and teenage pregnancy are widespread problems.

Therefore the radio broaches these issues with programmes that put an emphasis on the prevention of drug abuse and on awareness training in the area of sexual education and parenthood (Kemny, Radio Moderator, Interview/George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview).

EARLY WARNING AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Like in similar studies (e.g. Romo-Murphy, James & Adams, 2011) we also found in the case of Radio Caribbean Pearl that community radios play an important role in crisis situations. Since the Caribbean is regularly hit by hurricanes the radio station is an essential instrument for the community of Pearl Lagoon to cope with these natural disasters. It is providing weather reports prior and during hurricanes and is used as an organisational tool during the cleanup and rebuilding efforts. “Any time hurricane season is up, we keep the people informed and try our best to save life. [...] I think this community would have it hard to survive a hurricane season without this radio station” (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview).

(TECHNICAL) EDUCATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Particularly for young people working at the radio station offers the possibility to acquire new skills. They get to know the whole production process from the conceptual design to the practical realisation of a radio programme. In the wake of the autonomy process Radio Caribbean Pearl also contributes to the identity formation of the community by enhancing their understanding of democracy, providing a forum for resistance against the hegemonic tendencies of the mestizo population as well as a platform for cultural self-representation. As George states: “I do believe the radio played an import role up to this day inside the community. Due the fact of the imposes of this autonomy process and the cultural identity” (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview). The given fact that the radio station also broadcasts in three different, local languages seems to be a crucial factor: “The language is very important, you know the local people/ villagers feel more identify with the radio because of the language issue” (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview).

COMMUNICATION TOOL WITHIN COMMUNITIES

Radio Caribbean Pearl does not only function as a one-to-many communication channel but also as a communication tool within the region. As

an alternative to the telephone the medium is used for sending personal messages. The radio has people calling in to say: “You know, grandmother is going to Bluefields on the Panga [small boat], please go and pick her up” (Deborah, FADCANIC, Interview). Hence, the radio station simplifies the daily routines of the inhabitants: From greeting relatives and friends to the ordering of groceries in the next bigger town and everything in between. This phenomenon can be observed in other parts of Nicaragua as well.

FEEL OF CONNECTEDNESS TO THE OUTER WORLD

Due to the facts that newspapers in indigenous languages (Creole, Miskito and Garifuna) are nonexistent, cable TV programs are very limitedly available and the weak telephone signal coverage, the radio station reduces the people’s feel of isolation in this remote area.

Community radios are very important. Especially here at the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and especially here in our communities, where our dialects and our tongue that we speak is English Creole and it’s a radio where we usually speak in our own language. The newspaper is in Spanish, so this is completely difficult. [...] It is much more better to talk in our ethnic Creole language, [...] so the people get the complete information. (Kemny, Radio Moderator, Interview)

LOCAL NEWS

Parallel to the feel of connectedness to the outer world the radio station also facilitates the interconnectedness within the area by providing relevant local news.

Of course people like news, like reports, but if you always read what is taking place in other places and you don’t know what the heck is going on in your region, then why would you gonna buy a media that does not say nothing about what is taking place on around you. [...] The Spanish media only talks about Managua and the Pacific region. (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview)

BASEBALL, MUSIC AND RELIGION

Music and religion are essential parts of everyday life at the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Therefore a large number of Radio Caribbean Pearl’s

air time is on the one hand dedicated to religious programmes and on the other hand to *Punta*, *Soca*, *Reggaeton* and *Reggae*. Kemny summarised the importance of music in the following way: “Music is the fruit of love” (Kemny, Radio Moderator, Interview). A unique feature of the radio station is the regular live broadcasting of baseball games. The moderators report in Creole language live via mobile phones from various venues around the Caribbean region.

Besides the positive developments of the radio station there is also a number of challenges. Based on the statements of the interview partners four main challenges could be identified:

POLITICS

The interview partners quite often mentioned the problematic relations between the Pacific- and the Atlantic coast of the country and therefore a lack of financial, administrative and technical support from the central government in Managua: “If a radio is not in the line of the government to multiply their interest, then you practically stay out of everything” (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview). Furthermore, the government’s current course of action in development politics was addressed. Georg identified this unclear course as one of the central hindering factors for the future development of Radio Caribbean Pearl: “With this actual government I have been observing a lot of NGOs are pulling out, so we are staying without support” (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview).

ECONOMY

Another enormous future challenge is the financing of the station. Due to the fact that there are hardly any local businesses, it is very difficult to attract advertisers and thus, with the absence of other funding sources, independently and sustainably operate the radio station. An employee of the Austrian NGO HORIZONT3000 summarized the problem: “It is very hard to find advertisers. If they advertise, they do it in Bluefields, because they also broadcast as far as Pearl Lagoon” (Klaus, HORIZONT3000, Interview – translated from German by the authors). Even if there are entrepreneurs willing to advertise, the value of air time is hard to measure: “This is a problem in general [...] there is no data, the coverage was never surveyed – nobody knows how many people listen to these radio stations [...] and what they listen to” (Klaus, HORIZONT3000, Interview – translated from German by the authors).

CULTURE

At present it seems that it's getting more and more difficult to motivate the members of the community to participate in the community radio station. "This generation is totally different [...]. The generation of today does not have within them to do social service for the community, to be an active volunteer" (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview). Including more women in the activities of the radio station also remains challenging:

Well, you know this thing about gender: We always try to have women involved in the radio station [...]. Some years ago we still had a lot of women participation in the radio station, but always you have more boys than girls. [...] Cultural issues and a lack of interest I do believe. (George, Manager Radio Caribbean Pearl, Interview)

TECHNOLOGY

Since Pearl Lagoon is situated in a very remote part of Nicaragua the maintenance of the station is a complex task. The restricted availability of spare parts, in combination with insufficient funds, delays necessary repairs and renovations. Moreover the station is not connected to the Internet and thus is limited to terrestrial broadcasting. In order to enhance the outreach and consequently the impact of Radio Caribbean Pearl making the programmes available on the Internet is a top priority for the future.

CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that the community radio Radio Caribbean Pearl potentially supports the preservation of ethnic identities, promotes technical education, raises the awareness for environmental conservation, serves as a communication tool within the communities and subsequently creates a feel of connectedness within the community and to the outer world. It strengthens the area, by providing a forum for politicization, which is crucial for the ongoing struggles of the region in the course of the autonomy process. Furthermore, it aims at enhancing the knowledge about general health as well as the understanding of sexual and reproductive health related issues. Especially during crisis situations, that are primarily prior, during and in the aftermath of hurricanes, the radio station supports the

community of Pearl Lagoon in handling the disaster. At any time the radio is the only medium, which broadcasts in the indigenous languages and dialects. Therefore the inhabitants rely on it as the only source for local news and information. The station additionally acts as a source of entertainment by putting a strong emphasis on locally favoured music, religious content and live broadcasting of baseball games via mobile phones.

Especially for young adults participation in the community radio offers the chance to learn new skills on the one hand and strengthen their autonomous identity on the other hand. But lately Radio Caribbean Pearl has to cope with a lack of involvement by the younger generation and female volunteers, who are highly underrepresented in the station management.

Despite severe economic challenges, the radio station, which is run by trained, young volunteers, is managing to hold up the basic concepts of community radio, providing education, information as well as entertainment suited specifically for the various ethnic communities of the Pearl Lagoon. Hence, the radio station plays a significant role in creating unity among them.

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