Milestones of Communication and Democracy in Latin American Thought

Andrés Cañizález
Universidad Católica Andrés Bello (Venezuela)
acanizalez@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article deals with the tight relationship between communication and democracy elaborated by communicational thinking in Latin America in the past few decades with some emphasis on the specific contributions of Venezuela. This way several topics, such as national policies on communication are reviewed along with the debate for a New World Order of Information and Communication to finish in the democratic challenges posed to the Latin American region by the boom of information and communication new technologies. This review concludes that there has always been a constant among communication thinkers and scholars to link communication with the democratic development of the region.

1. The beginnings

A classic Latin American author of communication studies for development, the Bolivian Luis Ramiro Beltrán goes back to the contribution of the Brazilian Paulo Freire at the end of the seventies when he tries to reconstruct a history of democratic communication in Latin America. Even though Freire's reflections were originally aimed at educative processes, his pedagogic proposal rapidly had echo in the scholars of communication in de 70´s decade as is the case of the Paraguayan Juan Díaz Bordenave and the Chilean Fernando Reyes Matta. In short, these authors take from Freire the idea that "a genuine communication is given in a horizontal relationship" and which was supported thanks to the "free dialogue and not to the vertical and manipulative transmission of knowledge" (Beltrán, 2004:83). When these statements are taken to the communicative arena, one starts to talk about the need to democratize communication by connecting it to development.

The first half of the seventies in Latin America is a time of a critical look at communication. Under this democratizing lens several adjective are introduced to qualify democratic communication: "dialogic", "participative", "popular" and "alternative". According to Beltrán in that moment the notions of access, dialogue and participation are emphasized and the slogan that every human being has the right to communication (Beltrán, 2004:84). It is also worth mentioning that the slogan had different ranges because other authors highlight the right to information (Reyes Matta, 1978:98); nevertheless all defend a horizontal, joint (between transmitter and receptor) and dialogic communicative model as a synonym of democracy in the communication arena. as stated by Jesús María Aguirre (1988:33), even though there was a consensus in the need of establishing a right to communication this had to face a battle with much disagreement within the UNESCO during the seventies. There was a definition, provisionally stated, which resulted from the work team from Canada which is important to keep in mind: "All individuals have the right to communicate.

Communication is an important social process which allows individuals and communities to develop an exchange of information and op

inion. This is a basic human need and the core of any social organization (Fisher, 1984: 42). Meanwhile, as synthesized the Peruvian Rosa María Alfaro, a great part of the communicative experiences that were looking for democracy in Latin America embraced the " proposal for an articulated popular and democratic organization" and work was developed in popular sectors as they were understood as the "authentic developers of social change" (Alfaro, 2004: 13).

2. The decade of the policies

Latin America was a pioneer region in many aspects when we revise the debates on democratization of communication, which marked the seventies to a great extent. It is advisable to consider two significant facts which took place in the region which help to understand the context experienced by the field of communication studies. On the one hand, in 1974 the first meeting of experts in communication policies took place in Bogotá under the sponsorship of UNESCO. This event helped to consolidate a Latin American proposal in these matters. This was the first time in history that an event of this nature took place in the world. In Bogotá, as stated by Beltrán (2004: 84), a series of conclusions and recommendations were drawn. For example, the following definition of Communication National Policy is adopted: "A national policy on communication is an integrated, explicit and lasting set of partial communication policies harmonized in a coherent body of principles and norms aimed at guiding the behavior of institutions specialized in the management of the general process of communication in a country" (Beltrán, 2004: 84). This would end up as the starting point for the development of the First Intergovernmental Conference on National Policies on Communication in Latin America and the Caribbean, sponsored by UNESCO in San Jose de Costa Rica in 1976. It marked a milestone because it was the first time that all those responsible of communications in a region gathered to debate how to democratize communications. The vision of those days included a previous step to reach democratization: the reevaluation of the role of the state; this is stated by Luis Anibal Gómez, a participant of

those days: "The Intergovernmental Conference became an unprecedented success with regard to the revalorization of the communication-information system by the Latin American and Caribbean states and the important role it must represent for the public sector. since the Costa Rica Conference there is no discussion regarding the relevance of communication-information in the national and international politics ant the role of the state" (Gómez, 1976: 40).

In opposition the critical look on the hegemonic power of the enterprise communication -as a handicap to reach communicative democracy- was not only developed in Latin America, although with justice one must acknowledge the great role played by regional intellectuals. To reach a real democratization of communication at national level one had to refer to supranational strategies which is in short what the San Jose Conference proposes. The Venezuelan Antonio Pasquali, in that context triggers the debate and starts to develop a critical reading of the globalizing process as it is controlled by oligopoly groups. Pasquali presents three issues which were already controversial four decades ago (Gómez, 1976: 37-38)

1) The power centers of authority and decision making are migrating de facto from their traditional poles to condense in the new oligarchies of communication-information which act as super powers
2) This super power acts many times in a legal vacuum produced by a juridical liberalism from pre-communicative times, which gives it an incalculable margin of movement.
3) The "quaternary sector" (as Paquali calls it) of information-communication is producing more aggregated value than any other economic activity.

A foreign author with a great influence in Latin America's readings was the American Herbert Schiller for whom there was a clear relation between economic dependency and informational dependency, enhanced by the centers of power towards the less developed countries (Reyes Matta, 1978). According to him "the struggles to overcome economic dependence (in Latin America, for example), national independence and social transformation have been blocked in the sense that communication systems are under

the control of, or represent the dominant class, with internal or external support" (Gómez, 1976: 38).

In that same direction is inscribed the controversial report of the Mac Bride Commission which chronologically was made public in 1980, for practical reasons its content clearly reflects the debate of the previous decade: the need to establish a New World Order in Communication and Information (NOMIC). The report sponsored by UNESCO, according to Reyes Matta, had as the main contribution "to define the structural and systematic aspect of communications and at the same time to determine how democracy is played in that area". (Reyes Matta, 1984: 66). In short, the report was able to group the contemporary problems of communication in six large topic axes: a) freedom of information; b) inequalities in the circulation of information; c) national sovereignty; d) state and people interdependency; e) content of information; Journalists formation and professional ethics (Bisbal, 1981: 50). After the conjugation and analysis of these topics, the conclusion is the need to implement a NOMIC, an initiative that was assumed by the UNESCO due to informative and communicational inequalities denounced in the report in relation of the need of a free flow of information whose urgent character became evident as it was clear that: "80% percent of the news emitted by the press, radio and television of the developing countries come from a monopoly of 4 international news agencies: AFP (France), AP and UPI (United States) and Reuters (United Kingdom)", while 70% of the television programs in the third world" are controlled by those same countries and especially by the United States (Bisbal, 1981: 41). It cannot be left out that the report of the Mac Bride Commission and its probable implementation by the UNESO after being presented to the organization assembly in 1980, led the United States and the United Kingdom to leave the organization in 1984.

The critical posture against the existence of monopolies in communication matters was in essence, the intellectual North of the Latin American reflections in the decade of the 70s. The oligopoly dominance of the communicative scenario by private entities as de facto has occurred historically in the region or the establishment of an absolute state model (as had been the case of Cube since the beginning of the 60s after the victory of the revolution) were discarded as they denied the possibility of a democratic and plural aperture in communication and information matters. Under that vision, Venezuela

contributed to the international debate about how communication can help in the construction of democracy since in 1977 the Project RATELVE is socialized which was "The design for s new policy for broadcasting in the Venezuelan State", whose eminent responsible was Antonio Pasquali. Among other contributions of the RATELVE Project, two main aspects are worth mentioning n our opinion: the conception of broadcasting as a public service and the role of the state "not in a monopolistic sense but that of an agreement of media and goals between the public and the private sector" (Aguirre, 1978: 70).Both axes will be retaken years later, by some Latin American experiences of democratic communication as has been the case of TVN in Chile especially at the beginning of the former decade (Fuenzalida, 2006). Finally it constituted a precursor turn that already in the seventies the public issue was identified with the interest of society and not exclusively with the state or stat issues. Starting the 21st century the Argentinean Nestor García Canclim, who developed his academic career in Mexico, acknowledged the need to review the state role in communication and mass culture: "Today we conceive the state as the place of articulation of the governments with entrepreneurial initiatives and those of the other sectors of the civil societies" (García Canclini, 2000: 55); from our point of view this concept is part of the adjustment policies that implied a reordering of the functions of the state in the 80's, but also – and it should not be ignored – it was due to the pressure that have been exerted from different organized social sectors in order to influence state policies regulating society in order to rethink the state as a public interest agent, as stated by García Canclini. Similarly the Venezuelan Jose Ignacio Rey in the recently issued journal *Comunicación* in the mid seventies stated the need to have public policies in communication n that they were only possible "in a democratic state" and therefore, they should be developed from the state but looking for the "highest margin possible of consensus" with the different actors (Rey, 1976: 10).

3. The 80s

When revising the communication and democracy axis in the decade of the 80s in Latin America there is an inflexion point. On the one side, along the decade there was a

significant growth of the communicative expression of popular and alternative movements which as we said before found mainly in the radio a means of expression, but at the same time, from the reflection the path was uncertain: It was difficult to defend the role of the state in a region dominated by military dictatorships and in many researcher of communication there existed some kind of sorrow for the weakening of the UNESCO in those years as a consequence of the proposal for a New World Order for Information and Communication (NOMIC) which had come from the report of the Mac Bride Commission. In relation with the communicative practices of the social and alternative movements Rosa María Alfaro claims in a self critical tone "the communicative participation was valued and overvalued", the overvaluation of popular in an "excessive and broad way" ended up producing a standstill in terms of production because of the excessive use of interviews and life testimonies (Alfaro, 2004: 14). Nevertheless from her point of view the decade of the 80s contributes to the field of democratic communication as the "dialogues between peers" were promoted which implied the valuation of "popular subjects in their abilities to communicate" (Alfaro, 2004: 14); this new scenario led to think in democratic models and exercises of communication.

In his particular balance of the decade of the 80's, Tulio Hernandez acknowledges the significant role of the communicative expressions of the popular and alternative movements which basically devoted to the creation of new media in those years although mostly with limited influence in geographical and population terms. Nevertheless from his perspective it was necessary the relation with this citizens' turmoil with the "big press" not only in terms of a punctual coverage but also in terms of its communicative conception (Hernández, 1991). For the Venezuelan sociologist there was a need for a "management of participation" which would imply some level of professionalization of the communicative practices of social organizations with the aim of influencing in the management of communicational policies and therefore really deal deep into democracy (Hernández, 1991: 21-22). It was necessary to come out from a limited space and look at the mass media not only as the enemies of class but as scenarios for the public debate with their own limitations. Hernandez denounces the existence of three limitations for the massive participation of society in the media; the first one is of a "structural" nature due to enterprise dominance of the communicational

space in the countries of Latin America; the second one is of a "technical" character since because of the nature of the mass media, we have to think in ways to guarantee a participation which directly can only be at a reduced scale; while the third limitation is located in the nature of the social movement as they do not include the communicative logic as an essence of their strategy (Hernández, 1991). In his opinion, José Alejandro Rey with a critical tone against the mass media stated the need that alternative communication should not limit to the "micro media" "(Rey, 1980: 28) since a restricted expression would mean the end of any possibility of communication and therefore of political incidence to genuinely strengthen democracy with the popular participation through communicative practices.

During the 80´s there was an important focus in the Institute for Latin America (IPAL) founded by the Peruvian Rafael Roncagliolo to continue with the reflections about communication and democracy. It is just the IPAL which at the end of that decade decides to re launch the debate about the communication political need when stating the enforcement of NOMIC facing the 21st century (Roncagliolo, 1991). When making a balance of the 80s the IPAL proposes as a significant fact of that time "the strong development of popular and basic communication" (IPAL, 1991: 131), along with the launching of regional initiatives to confront informative inequalities with an impact in the democratic quality which had already mention the Mac Bride Report. But Jesús María Aguirre when checking the regional informative scenario of that time especially in the field of press agencies pointed out a series of financial as well as political and ideological obstacles in order to make effective the role of for example, the newly founded Latin American Agency of Information Special Services (ALASEI), sponsored by UNESCO (Aguirre, 1981). The logic to have regional informative agencies pointed at consolidated an information flow which would even allow a greater recognition between neighboring countries and that would support the economic and political integration processes. In the end a critical view on the entrepreneurial practices which considered "information as a mere merchandise" was shared (Ramonet, 2001: 26). As the Venezuelan Eleazar Díaz Rangel has been saying, the spirit of the Mac Bride Commission Report defended the existence of "solid national agencies for improving the way the national and international press give information of each country" (Díaz Rangel, 2003: 36), along with the articulation of the national initiatives as were the

already mentioned ALASEI or the Action of National Informative Services (ASIN) or the News Agency of the Organization of Oil Producing Countries (OPECNA)

It is important to highlight that the debate about the relation between communication and democracy had an echo beyond the Latin American space. For example, two of the congresses celebrated by the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), one in Caracas in 1980 and the other one in Paris in 1982 were devoted to debate the complexity of this relation focusing on the role of the state as the regulation entity of communications and the role of society en terms of participation and access. In general there was a sustained criticism against the communicative power of private and transnational corporations.

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, according to the evaluation developed by the expert Alejandro Alfonso in the field of communication policies a clear stagnation during the 80s is evident after the boom experienced in the former decade. In his opinion, between 1970 and 1983 there was a "time of frequent arguments between the state and the private radio and television broadcasting groups due to the moderate regulatory measures of the first over the seconds" (Alfonso, 1992: 53). The role of the state within the frame of the dispositions to advance towards a democratic model of a public service was and continues being a crucial aspect to strengthen the democratic model from communication. Nevertheless for Alfonso, starting since 1983 and the rest of the decade the Venezuelan state adopted a role of a "calm prosecutor" and contrary to what has been the previous period "there is negotiation and agreement with the television sector and the state television adopts the language and the style of the commercial sector" (1992: 53). one cannot deny that this backward movement was inscribed in a highly neoliberal regional trend which was experienced in that decade from which the Mexican Javier Estenou Madrid synthesizes: legal deregularization, financial pragmatism, commercial aperture, privatization of public enterprises, less state participation, globalization of the economy (1992:10). It is also impossible to deny that at the end of that decade there was a kind of democratic flowering with the end of most dictatorships, for example in the Southern cone. The words of the Brazilian Regina Festa will help to summarize those 80s which ended up being times of utopias and rationality (Festa, 1995).

4. Reinventing the public sphere

Most of the Latin American communicative reflection concerning the relation between communication and information during the 90s was focused in the construction of the public in societies where the mass media have had a historical weight as articulators of public discussion. During the 90s it was also noticeable the backward movement experienced by the traditional instances of political mediation in terms of credibility (in most surveys, the Parliament, Unions and Political parties were placed in the lowest ranks of citizens's credibility). At the same time media credibility increased.

For Jesús Martin Barbero whose intellectual production has been developed mostly in Colombia there is a new focus to understand the public sphere: "The public, in short is articulated between the common interest, the citizens' space and communicative interaction" (Martín Barbero, 2001b: 76). We agree with the idea that the media are not the only political socialization agents, but the media are the ones that carry political information more effectively and faster to our homes. What they disseminate and how they do it influence the beliefs of the public about what politics is and what it should be (Álvarez, 1995). This media centrality the political life has in Latin America is related with institutional deficiencies and this has a great impact on the quality of democracy. This dynamic is not strange to the Latin America social experience since we are in societies where traditional actors like the state, church and political parties are not able to give it support any more and there is a massive presence of the mass media industry with which "the public is each day more identified with what is being performed in the media" (Martín Barbero, 2001a: 75-77).

From the media an idea of public opinion as a base of the democratic system is constructed using surveys and polls which have increasingly less citizens' debate and criticism and more simulation (Martín Barbero, 2002). This agrees with what was stated by Elda Morales and Ana Irene Mendez: With the scarcity of political and institutional mediation experienced in Latin America the response is "an excess of mediatization" (2005: 129), and the media comment cannot substitute the essence of democracy which is nothing else than citizen participation.

in a process where there has been an adaptation of the society to the fact that the media are present in many scenarios and it is not strange that they are viewed as integrants of the social essence. The impact of their action is not on their direct influence on attitudes and behaviors, it goes farther, it goes to the creation of meanings which lead to the formation of a reality (Benedicto, 2002: 34). Nevertheless, in a general sense the media construction of politics is not exclusive of Latin America and the particular times lived by the region in the 90s. The trend points at the practices in different national environment and realities:"now politics is a matter of mass communications" (Bisbal, 2003: 125). With some exceptions we are in societies where there are not solid institutions and this weakness manifests in the actions of those who pretend to act as mediators; this turning point permits the media intervention in the definition of the political agenda leaving it at the service of the other. This way what should be a practice ends up being a chimera: locating communication as another strategy in the set of actions and not becoming the central axis of the political exercise. The political-institutional weakness and its dependence on the media decrease in a large measure the possibility of exercise democracy from communications.

5. Digital citizenships

The advent of the so called Information Society had a great impact in the Latin American discussion about communication and democracy. Before new technologies were extensively used in the first decade of the 21st century, some authors of the region started to wonder about the implications of these new devices in the Latin American context where it had prevailed what has been previously described and which can be summarized in information inequalities and absence of the total exercise of the right to communicate by citizens. The Venezuelan Migdalia Pineda, for example, predicted "the opening of ambiguous and contradictory paths for the development of communicative democracy" (1996: 45), with the introduction of new technologies. in her opinion, these could contribute with democratic models of communication as they facilitate "decentralized and participative communication and communication experiences": but at the same time she warned about "the appearance of new and modern devices for

authoritarian centralization" (Pineda, 1996: 45). On the other hand if we take one of the crucial topics of the debate of the 70s, which we have already exposed in this paper and that is the information misbalance between the North and the South, this inequality would tend to become greater, as it has certainly happened with time because we are not only talking about a flow of news but also of the technological capacity in which Latin America was (and continues being) in a clear disadvantage: "we are not only talking about information imbalances, but also of economical and social imbalances which will tend to increase as the globalization processes of the markets increase" (Pineda, 1996: 46). The irruption and extension of new technologies in the communication field, then "forces us to restate the problems of the democratization of communications from another dimension, where they are considered the new imbalances" (Pineda, 1996: 46). Time seems to have given reason to Latin American authors from the 90s. A clear expression of the international transcendence of this regional debate took place in 2003 when the World Summit of the Information Society took place in Genève under the sponsorship of the Organization of the United Nations.

A crucial aspect of this summit which is connected to what we have stated deals with the so called digital gap which was described as " the unequal distribution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the lack of access to information of great part of the world population" (Pellegrino, 2004: 32). An emblematic aspect of the debate on democratization of communication that appeared in Genève has to do with the question of inequalities not only as a global confrontation between rich and poor countries which still persists but also to point out other gaps; for example those gaps existing within the interior of each country Rich/poor, men/women, country side/cities) which generate an unequal access to information and the use of new technologies. The possibilities of total social participation in this Information Society are closely linked with the use and appropriation of all the diverse social sectors of these new devices.

Meanwhile, despite the digital gap we are witnessing a significant extension of the use of new technologies by citizens in Latin America. It is quite interesting the explosion represented by Internet in the opening of possibilities for interconnection with its different tools, not only for the massive circulation of information (web pages, blogs)

but also to strengthen new communicative experiences of the so called virtual communities or social nets (twitter, facebook). Without forgetting the lack of access that still characterizes most of the Latin American population at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, it is important to keep an eye on the debate that takes place with this expansion of the use of internet among the scholars of democratic communication in Latin America. When the democratizing potential of Internet communication is considered there are at least two opposing opinions among the scholars (Corredor, 2003: 9), these confronting visions are also expressed in Latin America. Those who see it as positive consider that Internet enhances the circulation of public interest information and therefore it feeds citizen's debate and therefore strengthen democracy; but those who question the democratic potential of the net point out at an over representation on Internet of certain topics that are not always linked to citizens' interest and an atomized access which does not favor public discussion.

From the point of view of citizen's participation and with a rather skeptical view there is a double combination of factors which would turn difficult the consolidation of internet as the expected public agora of our times. On the one side, the number of citizens who actually participate in the spaces of public and citizen's debate is reduced; it is really a minority, while the increasing number of people who join the virtual world, do it mainly for entertaining reasons, that is, they are not looking for participation in political debates (Canelón, 2003: 14). In spite of these objections, the development of ICTs applied to experiences of electronic government, for example, have led to authors, as is the case of the Spanish José Luis Dader, to claim that there are conditions to talk about a cyber democracy in our times (Dader, 2001).

6. Challenges of yesterday and today. As a closing

When we debate about the public sphere or space it is necessary to go back to Jürgen Habermas. As has been acknowledged by the French Eric Maigret, the German author, made a great contribution to the sociology of communication when introducing, as part of the theory of democracy, the notion of public space and therefore assuming this communicative dimension as an essential tool in the constitution of modern liberal

institutions (Maigret, 2005, 355). This enriched the sociology of communication and as we have claimed since the beginning, it had a great impact in Latin American thought which studied the relation between communication and democracy. The existence of a public space for plural debate is in the end a synonym of democracy. With Habermas we had a change of paradigm: "The public space is not only reserved for institutional and illustrated actors anymore; from now on it will be understood from the point of view of civil society and the mass media" (Maigret, 2005: 362).

When this topic is viewed from Latin America, the point of view of the Peruvian Rosa María Alfaro can be easily understood. She thinks that there still exists a clear challenge (2001: 31): the need to create a public sphere for which media are assigned the role of promoters making use of the freedom of expression and the deliberative debate. Nevertheless, the commitment of the Latin American media has been nearer the political power and farther from the citizens and for this reason the configuration of the public sphere "results in a extremely difficult task" if there is not a communicative empowerment of citizens to influence institutions and the existing powers. 2Without the presence of Latin Americans we will have a weak public and amorphous sphere, unable to influence the destinies of our countries" (Alfaro, 2001: 31).

7. References

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