

International Cooperation, Foreign Aid and Changes in Media Agenda: The Case of *Voces*

Cooperación internacional, ayuda exterior y la alteración de la agenda mediática: el caso de *Voces*

Cooperação internacional, ajuda externa e alteração da agenda da mídia: o casos *Voces*

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Abstract: Back in 2011, the Spanish government decided to fund the creation of the newspaper *Voces* in El Salvador within the wider context of public diplomacy and a favorable political atmosphere. This article examines the implications of this aid in the frame of news media plurality in that nation. We suggest that thanks to it the Salvadorian public was offered a news agenda that reflected alternative worldview. However, we also argue, the intervention itself possess a series of ethical issues and challenges that merit further study in order to inform present and future discussions around foreign aid, media and journalism.

Keywords:

el salvador; media agenda; international cooperation; democracy.

Resumen: En 2011, el gobierno español financió la creación del periódico *Voces* en El Salvador en el contexto más amplio de la diplomacia pública y con una situación política favorable. Este artículo examina las implicaciones de esta ayuda en el marco de la pluralidad de los medios en el país. Sostenemos que, gracias a ello, se le ofreció al público

salvadoreño una agenda de noticias que reflejaba una cosmovisión alternativa. Asimismo, argumentamos que la propuesta plantea una serie de problemas y cuestiones éticas que merecen un mayor estudio para informar acerca de las discusiones presentes y futuras sobre la ayuda externa, los medios y el periodismo.

Palabras clave:

el salvador; agenda medios; cooperación internacional; democracia.

Resumo: Em 2011, o governo espanhol decidiu financiar a criação do jornal Voces em El Salvador no contexto mais amplo da diplomacia pública e com uma situação política favorável. Este artigo examina as implicações dessa ajuda no contexto da pluralidade de mídia e jornalismo naquela nação. Sustentamos que, graças a essa proposta, foi oferecido ao público uma agenda de notícias que refletisse uma visão de mundo alternativa. No entanto, também argumentamos que a intervenção em si tem uma série de problemas e questões éticas que merecem um estudo mais aprofundado para informar sobre as discussões atuais e futuras sobre ajuda externa, mídia e jornalismo.

Palavras-chave:

el salvador; agenda da mídia; cooperação internacional; democracia.

1. Introduction

Until recently most International Cooperation efforts from nation-states in the area of communication avoided allocating resources to projects that were perceived to be ‘too political’. This mainly due to past experiences around the world in which foreign aid was used to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries (Achtenberg, 2015; Economist, 2014; Saunders, 2000), which lead to some governments perceiving that these resources were being used for propaganda efforts to overthrow democratically-elected governments in the developing world (Immerman, 2010; Miller, Dinan, 2008). This is the case of those countries in which International Cooperation tends to be seen through the lenses of post-colonialism (IRIN, 2009; UNOHCHR, 2016).

Despite this, in 2011 both the national government of Spain and the regional authority of Andalusia took the decision to fund a news media in El Salvador. This is why the case of *Voces* in El Salvador presents such a paradox for initial observers; as it was set precisely after the election of left-wing President, Mauricio Funes in 2009, who came to power as the candidate for the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)* in a progressive anti-interventionist platform. His electoral success was very significant in the context of a traditionally conservative political and unequal access to public debates (Rockwell, Janus; Wolf, 2009).

This article examines how the donors reached this decision, the outcomes of the financial support and the implications of this in the wider context of media development and public diplomacy. As it is argued in this work, the decision to allocate resources for the creation of a news media to promote independent journalism can be explained by a series of contextual aspects of the current state of journalism in El Salvador and by the fact that final outcomes are not necessarily linked to the original expected outcomes of the donors.

The central question asks whether this International Cooperation sponsored journalistic project helped to promote more social and plural information agendas, therefore breaking trends of traditional Salvadoran media outlets. In so doing, we want to assess the strengths and weaknesses of *Voces* in relation to the creation of new media spaces within a media ecology that has been traditionally characterized by the lack of plurality.

2. International cooperation and communication

As Martín-Barbero (1993; 1988) has suggested, when referring to Latin America, the paradigm of modernization and development together with its associated policies and practices could have not been implemented without the facilitation provided by communication and cultural hegemony. In this context, ‘foreign aid’ for ‘media development’ is therefore quintessentially strategically towards public diplomacy efforts to influence the public of other states and establish cultural hegemony. Because of this, both terms are problematic and remain widely contested; as they are often associated with foreign government interference and closely linked to efforts to impose Western political and cultural models.

In response to this, some scholars have moved their own research agendas to focus instead towards Communication for Social Change (Gumucio-Dragon, Tufte, 2008), Communication for Empowerment or Eco-social Communication (Barranquero, 2012; Chaparro, 2009) and other similar approaches. Meanwhile, although practitioners have continued to embrace ‘foreign aid’, they have done so by adding the qualifying it as ‘for media development’. These discussions are far from just being a ‘semantic’ issue as in adopting notions these scholars and practitioners also embrace a variety of different meanings and ideologies.

However, at the core of all these lexical and ideological choices remains the fact that in the case to which we refer here, the resources were being allocated by a state to develop a particular media initiative by a private actor performing as recipient within another state in the context of North-South relations. Moreover, given that this allocation of resources was coordinated between donor and recipient and that both parties were active participants in developing the policy and the agenda, we have therefore embraced the term International Communication. We believe that as a term is far more suitable to describe the particular relation between donor and recipient countries that took place in this case: a relation in which the recipient was not an official actor and to whom the donor country gave far more independence and flexibility in regards to how aid was used.

We are aware that International Cooperation (from now IC) cannot –and should not- be disassociated from the notion of foreign aid in any analysis as it refers to the ability to coordinate diplomatic and military policies and actions among different nation-states in order to achieve specific goals in the international relation arena (Lipson, 1984; Riddell, 1987). Therefore, despite its consultative and more participative nature, as a set of policies it consists in using resources to orchestrate responses to specific situations that affect mostly developing countries (Alesina, Dollar, 2000, p. 33) and as such it remains in the realm of ‘intervention’ (Lugo-Ocando, Nguyen, 2017).

Nevertheless, IC design and implementation focuses in coordinating efforts to provide aid from the first world towards the developing countries, so it not only refers to political practices that are overall embedded in foreign policy (Lancaster, 2008) but also is closely aligned to humanitarianism and solidarity. Moreover, we adhere to the convention that IC not only incorporates all types of aid efforts and allocation of resources to support

development but that to be defined as such this aid must be allocated in coordination with the recipients. Hence, demanding a more active participation and engagement of the recipients from the moment of formulating the policy to the point of delivery and use. Consequently, in the context of IC, policy-makers and recipients need beforehand to agree on an agenda and negotiate the set of policies and allocation of resources that follow. In the case of *Voces*, this meant using aid resources to develop communication projects that encompassed a new media outlet with the aim of fostering greater plurality in the Salvadorian public sphere by breaking the oligopoly of private-commercial media conglomerates and setting a distinctive news agenda. In this sense, the project distanced itself from previous ones that aimed just at breaking the monopoly of state-controlled media in these countries (Lerner, Schramm, 1967; Shahzad, Bokhari, 2014; Schramm, 1964).

3. Research aims and methodology

The research aimed at understanding if communication projects within the framework of IC can promote distinctive informative agendas. In so doing, we aimed at examining the challenges faced by communication projects funded by these types of programs. Ultimately, we aimed at understanding how foreign aid can be used to foster diversity and re-balance power relations, social and political post-conflict scenarios.

To achieve these aims, we designed a methodology that incorporated qualitative and quantitative research strategies, allowing us to triangulate a variety of data. We performed a content analysis using the front pages of *Voces* and contrasted this against the most influential newspaper in El Salvador, *La Prensa Gráfica (LPG)* founded on 1915. This in order to assess if there are distinctive features in relation to the focus in the information they offer to the public. Our sample included 16 front pages of *Voces*, which correspond to four non-consecutive months -February, April, June and August of 2010- as it was then a weekly newspaper (averages were calculated considering that one was a daily newspaper and the other a weekly one). On the other hand, we had 97 front page of LPG -as it is a daily newspaper, which excluded Mondays as it only reports sports those days- during the same period of time in which the newspaper *Voces* still had a print edition, because after that moment (2010), it became an online newspaper.

We concentrated on the front pages as previous research has indicated that it is there where editors and publishers display what they consider to be the key issues of the day (Bridges & Bridges, 1997), allowing the researchers to explore what the news media want to prioritize to their audiences (Kress, Van Leeuwen, 1998). Indeed, the front pages tend to ‘reflect the worldview of the dominant class’ that control and influence the mainstream media (Mattelart, Mattelart, Piccini, 1970); this despite occasional deviations from the norm (Conboy, 2013).

We have analyzed headlines and content from *Voces* and *LPG*, attending a proportional correlation considering the covers of each one. In order to carry out this analysis and get the objectives, we have established identification fields linked to International Cooperation, based on programs designed by the Spanish national agency, taking into consideration individual and collective aspects such as poverty, vulnerable population (or people at risk of destitution), rights and community intervention. Every category has a different variable, which focuses on the study object:

Table 1. Data collection tool

Poverty	Exclusion
	Inequality
	Violence
	Insecurity
Vulnerable poblacion	Woman
	Young
	Sexual excluded groups
	Seniors
Rights	Peace
	Justice
	Rights (human rights & others)
	Freedom of expression
Community intervention	Groups/Association
	Civic organization/Civic Participation
	Transparency
	Community

Source: Prepared by the authors

We have measured the frequency of the appearance of these variables in the cover information, proportionally to the periodicity of its publication.

Overall, we combined qualitative approaches with quantitative ones such as the close-reading of official documents, bibliographic review and semi-structured interviews with three key stakeholders such as Manuel Chaparro, head of Association of Municipal Radio and Citizen Radio and Television of Andalusia (EMA-RTV), Óscar Pérez, director of

Voces and president of Fundación Comunicándonos (the umbrella organization that oversees the project), and Leticia Macua, head of communications at the Technical Office of the Spanish Cooperation (OTC) in El Salvador. The criteria considered are the experience and knowledge of the whole process by Óscar Pérez and Manuel Chaparro, both of them are the motor to create the project while in the case of Leticia Macua, head of communications at the Technical Office of the Spanish Cooperation (OTC) in El Salvador, we intend to offer an official and external look of an agent of the cooperation and get an objective and evaluator analysis.

The questions asked to Óscar Pérez and Manuel Chaparro have followed the same script: current status of the organization; context that motivated the project; main difficulties of the initiative; role of the main actors; expected and unexpected accomplishments; political and social reactions; and learnings. The interview made to Leticia Macua, on the other hand, was addressed to the following aspects: analysis of communication projects in the programs of the Spanish International Cooperation; the reasons to support the *Voces* project; main obstacles encountered; strengths and weaknesses, and balance.

The interviews have been made in the period 2013-2015. The overall data was triangulated, contextualize and critically analyzed. However, before we analyze the data, we need to provide some background to the project.

4. Results

4.1 Building *Voces*

Voces, as a project, is part of a larger tradition of IC cooperation in that country that has tried to improve media plurality. This project was driven by two organizations: The Consortium for New Communication (CNC), which is formed by the Foundation for the Study of Applied Law (FESPAD), the Foundation of Development Communication (Comunicándonos) in El Salvador and the Association of Municipal and Citizen Radio and Television of Andalusia (EMA-RTV) in Spain.

The central idea was for *Voces* to redefine the media landscape, favoring the demands of civil society by means of investigative reporting in key areas and influencing the overall news agenda for all media outlets in their multiple platforms as Pérez explained¹.

¹ Interview with Óscar Pérez, director of *Voces* on February 22nd 2015.

The most important reasons were the ideological affinity between the Spanish and Salvadorian administrations at the time and the fact that the person leading the project, Oscar Pérez, was also professionally and ideologically very close to the then Salvadorian President, Mauricio Funes (2009-2014). Indeed, Pérez found ‘an open door’ in the new left-wing Salvadorian government for this proposal and was apparently keen to incentivize media plurality² in the face of business and political media gag, characterized by corporate/structural censorship (Martín Baro, 1989; Rockwell, Janus, 2003) and media ownership concentration, which left significant social movement actors ignored while setting distorted informative agendas in favor of political and commercial sectors (Cristancho, Iglesias, 2013).

It was precisely these imbalances in the media landscape that led Funes, who himself had struggled as an independent journalist against the media oligopolies in that country³, to be more receptive to an initiative such as this. For Chaparro⁴, setting *Voces* involved “an alternative proposal to a landscape marked by a conservative press and right-wing ideology”. Accordingly, the idea was to develop a critical yet positive media space that could foster a ‘democratizing media dynamic’, something that El Salvador lacked at the time. For that, says Chaparro, it was necessary to support a type of independent media that showed commitment towards a different dynamic; one characterized by inclusiveness of a diversity of voices and that focus on those news agendas that were being neglected by the mainstream media. In this sense, Leticia Macua⁵, argues that *Voces* “was inscribed as a communication project within a wider strategic aim”. One, according to her, that could “allow participation and empowerment and that could include the vulnerable and victimized, who normally get ignored or bypassed by the other news media outlets”.

The initial project contemplated modern design and to be printed in weekly editions of 24 pages in full color. The sponsors estimated an initial weekly circulation of 50,000 in the

² Interview with Óscar Pérez, director of *Voces* on February 22nd 2015.

³ In 1994 when still an active journalist Mauricio Funes was awarded the Maria Moors Cabot prize from Columbia University for promoting press freedom and inter-American understanding.

⁴ Interview with Manuel Chaparro, head of Association of Municipal and Citizen Radio and Television of Andalusia (EMA-RTV) on February 3rd, 2015.

⁵ Interview with Leticia Macua, head of communications at the Technical Office of the Spanish Cooperation (OTC) in El Salvador on February 12th 2013.

first year. It was expected to reach a readership of three million, while achieving a great impact on opinion leaders as well as young adults. The printed edition was entirely funded by Spanish IC resources and a total of 64 numbers were published. It started in 2010 with a circulation of 50,000 copies of 32 pages and ended with a circulation at the end of 10,000 copies.

The team decided to outsource the printing but set a very clear contract in order to ensure strict enforcement to avoid pressures of the country's media oligopolies and elites in case they tried to derail the project⁶.

Despite these additional resources, nevertheless *Voces* had to stop publishing its print edition and displace all its content to its online version. According to the minutes, memos and notes, high returns of copies and issues around distribution nation-wide accounted mostly for this decision⁷.

One of the reasons for this was the 'perhaps misplaced expectations' upon the possible support from the government in terms of official advertisement investment: "we were wrong, and this did not happen. Instead, he -Funes- continued favoring the traditional media sectors with a very unbalanced distribution of state advertising"⁸.

Additionally, Pérez argues, there were additional problems around their relations with the mainstream media. On the one hand, there was almost a boycott by the commercial media, which tried to make *Voces* and other alternative media 'invisible'.

On top of this, the IC funding itself became an issue as the traditional media started to claim foul play. Pérez, points out that,

When we printed the first copy many in the Spanish Cooperation agency (AECID) asked that their logo should be removed because the private sector could claim unfair competition." (Pérez, 2015)⁹.

⁶ Review of official documents and notes.

⁷We have not made emphasis on numbers because we mainly found estimates. No studies have been carried out around audience and consumption of *Voces*, something that is perhaps telling about the lack of evaluation and assessment mechanism when implementing IC projects.

⁸ Interview with Óscar Pérez, director of *Voces* on February 22nd 2015.

⁹ Interview with Óscar Pérez, director of *Voces* on February 22nd 2015.

Nevertheless, all the interviewees recognized that there were additional issues related to sustainability that went beyond the official funding and resistance by the traditional media conglomerates. Given all these issues, *Voces* board decided to continue but only as a daily digital edition.

4.2 Voces, is it an open door for plurality?

The other strand of our research looked at the content published by the newspaper in order to explore –as we explained earlier- distinctive features in relation to the news agenda and news coverage. This because one of the driving reasons in justifying the project was its potential to set a distinctive agenda, one that could be more alternative and committed towards social issues in El Salvador while incorporating a variety of voices (one of the reasons behind its name). In that sense, our findings indicate that *Voces* performed differently from the traditional press. It is important to note that in the pages of the newspapers there was in fact another type of construction of social reality in which in average -during the period studied here- there was an alternative social perspective, one that tended to highlight another collective imaginary.

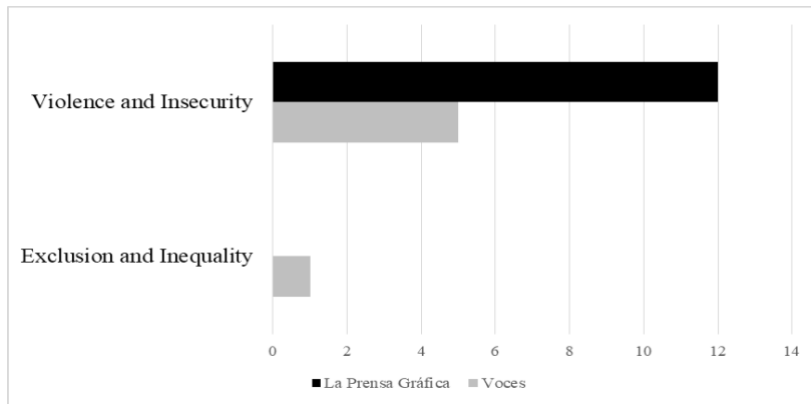
Table 2. Results of frequency

Categories	Voces (average per copy)	LPG (average per copy)
Poverty	0,37	0,06
Population at risk of destitution (vulnerable population)	0,68	0,11
Rights	1,4	0,07
Community Intervention	0,62	0,01
Total	3,07	0,25

Source: Prepared by the authors

As Table No. 2 shows, the key categories/nodes chosen - linked to social issues- are far more present in *Voces* than in *LPG*. Particularly in relation to issues around citizens’ rights, which in the analysis became strikingly more present in *Voces*. We underline this, given that this category/node encompassed issues such as peace, justice, human rights, freedom of expression, among others, which are not only pivotal in the context of current Salvadorian politics but also inherent to journalism agenda as such (so the evermore strange that they are so invisible in the mainstream media’s agenda).

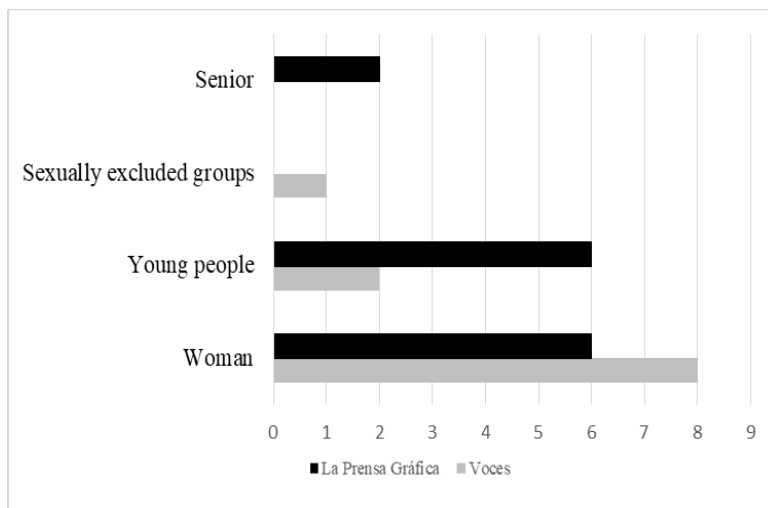
Graph 1. Category of Poverty



Source: Prepared by the authors

It was also very interesting to notice that *LPG* tended to emphasize on issues such as violence and made almost no reference (Graph No. 1) to exclusion and inequality, presumably the causes of violence. Nevertheless, both newspapers gave attention to ‘violence and insecurity’ as central themes of the news agenda.

Graph 2. Category of Vulnerable population



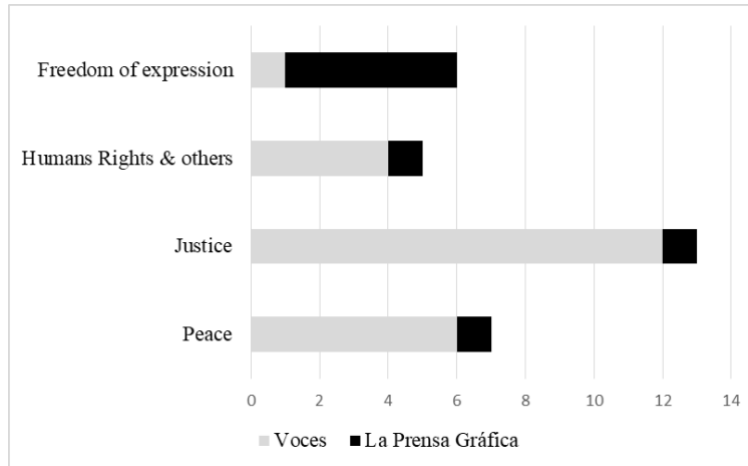
Source: Prepared by the authors

Graph 2 tells us who speaks, who gets interview and who can articulate their points of views as a news source. In this graphic we can see that *Voces* tends to give far more coverage to women, young people and sexually excluded groups (lesbian, gays, transgender, etc.), the last ones not getting any coverage at all in *LPG*. Instead, this last newspaper tends to disproportionately present the points of view of senior males, reflecting

both the structure of power of that country and the dominant patriarchal hierarchy in that society.

Graph 3.

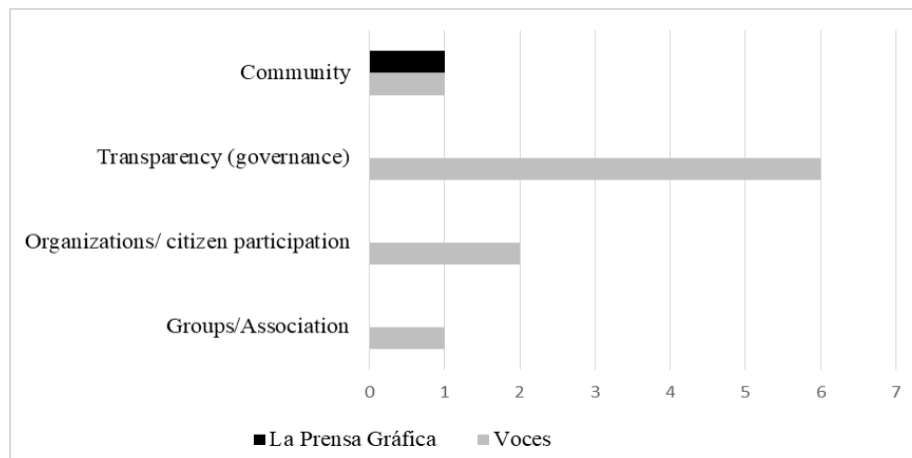
Category of Rights



Source: Prepared by the authors

One of the most interesting findings was in relation to the emphasis upon ‘rights’ in the news coverage. In this sense, while *Voces* overall gave far more attention to issues around citizens’ rights in general, there was a clear dichotomy between the types of rights that got media attention. *LPG* gave far more coverage to freedom of expression, something that has been a constant subject of tension between left-wing governments in Latin America and the private news media (Boas, 2005; Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Matos, 2012).

Graph 4. Category of Community intervention



Source: Prepared by the authors

Finally, the data in Graph No. 4 indicates a significant gap between the two newspapers in relation to the coverage of community issues. While both newspapers dedicated similar coverage to the topic of community, issues around community participation, government accountability and civic engagement were very present in *Voces* while almost absent in *LPG*. This last, to us is one of the most interesting aspects in relation to the initial IC funding aims and the final outcomes of the project.

5. Conclusions

What does all this data tell us about foreign aid towards media development? To start with, it suggests that IC can make a difference in terms of improving media plurality in developing countries, mostly in places lacking the capital and political will to diversify the existing media landscape; therefore, supporting efforts to make them more plural and receptive to other voices and stories. This is of particular importance given both the authoritarian tradition in the region –where the legacy media played a role in supporting past dictatorships (Alvear, Lugo-Ocando, 2016)- as well as the rapid deterioration of freedom of speech, where there are increasing tensions between different political sectors and the news media.

However, as also noticed in this piece, there are key weaknesses in these IC efforts particularly in relation to sustainability and evaluation, something that has also been highlighted by previous research around foreign aid towards media development (Requejo-Alemán, 2014; Olmedo Salar, 2013). In terms of sustainability, there is no doubt an inherent economic weakness among these projects, something that is aggravated by the absence of alliances with other sectors, limited resources, lack of technical skills and issues around ownership. One option to deal with this weakness would be to network with other media, whether in the field of international cooperation or alternative media, something that does seem to be happening in other countries such as the case of CIPER in Chile (Requejo-Aleman, Lugo-Ocando, 2014).

Nevertheless, the issue of ‘assessment and evaluation’ of IC remains largely unresolved. This is partly because these types of IC-sponsored media projects- are mostly evaluated by means of quantitative indicators that generate feedback about their performance. For Macua, although the current criteria of feasibility, relevance, impact, effectiveness and efficiency “are valid criteria” it should nevertheless be combined with other qualitative

indicators. She argues that this possibility could allow to measure behavioral and social change generated by distinctive levels of participation, shared knowledge acquired (individuals or groups involved) or political dialogue. This would require, however, detailed and in-depth audience research, something that should guide the direction of future investigations into this area.

But beyond these instrumentalist considerations, it is important to highlight that *Voces* needs to be considered within the larger controversies around the concept of communication for development, communicative action, geo-politics and public diplomacy. If well the newspaper was created to improve plurality and widen the media space as to incorporate alternative voices that were often ignored by the mainstream media, the fact remains that it was also a project with close links to a new political leaders that are now part of the Salvadorian establishment, that has not had the courage to break the media oligopolies.

Seeing things from that perspective, IC planners then need to consider that any future allocation of resources should focus more to ensure editorial independence, both in terms of journalism practice and in relation to how people perceives that editorial independence. However, that would presumably bring about a whole new set of priorities and agendas for organizations, researchers, practitioners and recipients dealing with foreign aid and media development and, that is a very different ball game.

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