

Constructing Civil Society, Supporting Local Development

A Case Study of Community Radio in Postwar El Salvador

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The rural community radios created in El Salvador at the end of the long civil war in the early 1990s have facilitated the growth of what is defined locally as civil society, influenced by a range of international discourses. This paper explores the particular meanings that “civil society” took on in these regions. It focuses on local organizations that represented many sectors of the public which had been invisible or marginalized from the public sphere in the past--campesinos, women, rural small business. These participatory radios provided crucial ways for these organizations to reach their constituencies, enlarge them through promotion and educate and inform them in ways that reinforced and catalyzed their other efforts. The broadcasts strengthened civil society by helping these new social actors to emerge, bringing their views and issues to the forefront of the local public sphere and introducing them into national debates.

This article concerns community radios¹ created by resettled refugee communities in the first decade after El Salvador's civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992. Much like the low-power radios in the United States, promoted in part by the Prometheus Radio Project, these radio stations are grassroots efforts to serve the social, cultural and political needs of small communities that are not served by highly consolidated and elite-controlled mass media. Their contexts are different in many ways, but both serve rural and urban, primarily poor, politically marginalized populations. With a participatory ethos, the radios in both countries have struggled for legality, and seek to create and strengthen a counter-public sphere. Their very existence has become something of a political movement in itself in both countries, with resonance and roots in other contemporary social movements.

The communities which created the community radios that are the subjects of this article were highly organized when they came back from the refugee camps in Honduras to the mountains of northern El Salvador. But the harsh economic conditions and difficult political and social challenges have taken their toll in subsequent years. Some recently published research explores how people have dealt with their disillusionment after high expectations for peacetime. (See, for example, Kowalchuk 2004, Silber 2004, and McElhinny 2004). In this paper, however, I will focus on the ways the community radios continue to do their modest but significant work of helping the communities rebuild and survive through constructing civil society. From their perspective, this work includes respect for human rights, participation as citizens, and engagement with a broad range of organizations, advocacy groups and other non-governmental organizations as well as small businesses.

There have been few studies of the role of participatory media in the development of civil society. A study of post-war Croatia (Taylor and Napoli 2005) found, as in El Salvador, that non-governmental organizations had a large presence in media reports in the early transition, and it underlined the importance of democratic media in its traditional roles of providing information, setting public agendas, and leading public opinion. But the data for this research was thin: rather than in-depth ethnography, it was based on a survey with a few broad, extremely general questions administered to a large number of people. In addition it was concerned with national-level civil society only and not at all with local development. Another recent study concerned the involvement of two radio stations in Los Angeles with community issues (Hardyk et al 2005), analyzing how their “storytelling” practices “foster[ed] civic engagement and the experience of ‘belonging’” (156). With limited local news coverage, these stations created awareness of local issues and perspectives and helped involve people in debate and action, activating conversations on shared issues. The work provides a useful perspective on effective programming, but in the U.S. context of commercial or National Public Radio-affiliated radios, the research also demonstrates that this kind of programming is, unfortunately, quite ephemeral, subject to the whims of station marketing interests.

The research presented in this paper differs from the examples above in several ways. First, it is ethnographic, that is, the data was collected through participant observation of several months each at three separate research sites. The rather loose and abstract concept of civil society is grounded in concrete, empirical data. Second, through this research I attempt to understand the targeted phenomena (the role of the radio station in local post-war communities) in a broader context – political, cultural, social and historical. I conclude that the central role of the participatory community radios is to help create a viable civil society both locally and nationally in El Salvador. This process of creating civil society has emerged from its particular historical and contemporary conditions and is part of constructing and asserting the political agency and cultural identities of the communities that created these radios, and of transforming post-war political and social culture.

Let me share an anecdote. When I first began to study the rural radios’ programming, I was disappointed. While they broadcast a mix of music, news, children’s, agricultural, religious and event-based programming, most people told me that the most important programming on these radios was the announcements, or

avisos; basically notes dropped off by different members of the community and read on air. This seemed rather underwhelming. I was looking for programs that were creative, that engaged their listeners in multiple ways, that encouraged different types of interaction among disparate parts of the listening community, or at least some *sociodramas*.²

But I was repeatedly told that the announcements were what everyone listened for. Here's an example of one day's announcements at Radio Segundo Montes, from December 1997:

- ... a meeting in the departmental capital for people with family members in the United States,
- ... announcements of two different *fiestas patronales*, or town patron-saint festivals,
- ... someone looking for lost license plates,
- ... someone calling on someone else to pay a debt,
- ... the opening of a new cattle market in the community,
- ... the vigil commemorating the El Mozote massacre, one of the major tragedies of the war, which involved family members of many in the community,
- ... eye examinations available at the Rehabilitation center,
- ... a concert at the Cultural Center,
- ... a trip to a religious shrine sponsored by the local pastoral group, to raise funds for the community's new church,
- ... second announcement about the vigil commemorating the massacre.

It took me a while to realize that these announcements were, in fact, central to the radios' work. Why? The announcements expressed everyday, domestic concerns: lost belongings, planned meetings with family members, births and deaths. They provided information about local, national and sometimes international organizations' programs and services, and announced opportunities to participate in local or national government processes. This could allow them to attend meetings, to vote, to receive information, or to participate in crucial programs like land distribution, health care, schooling, or social security. The announcements publicized events and activities where people could share in the cultural life of the community and commemorate their particular histories.

What this meant was that cumulatively, through these announcements, the radios were helping to build "civil society." This was the term people used to describe this wide range of organizational and associational life, and the community radios functioned as this sector's key communications media.

What Does "Civil Society" Mean?

People working with the post-war radios I studied used the concept of civil society to describe their role for their community and for Salvadoran society as a whole.³ But what they meant by civil society was in some ways particular to the Salvadoran

context. It is not surprising that a particular meaning would develop for a concept that has been so widely criticized for its vagueness.⁴

The turn to a discourse of civil society in Latin America came about in part because it began to be seen, particularly by leftists, as a way to continue to work towards social and political transformation begun as struggles against dictatorships and great inequalities, but through democratic processes, rather than through unified social movements or a people's revolution. These social movements of the 1980s, which often coalesced around issues of identity, influenced Salvadoran activists and intellectuals into the 1990s. So the meaning of civil society which emerged not only included building a vibrant range of associations, but also efforts to redefine who is a citizen and what citizenship means: who has rights, what rights, and what political processes should include. As in so many places, activists struggled to overcome, "... a complete lack of recognition as poor people, as subjects, as bearers of rights" (Dagnino 1998, 48). The organizations of civil society would provide channels to influence the state; civil society activists also sought to strengthen the rule of law against the backdrop of its arbitrary application in the past. In addition, the idea of civil society began to imply a place where citizenship is redefined not just in relation to the state but also in terms of the rights and responsibilities of citizens to each other; thus hastening a culture of rights and responsibilities throughout society (Dagnino 1998, 38-41, 47-48).

In this Salvadoran context, the organizations of civil society were distinguished from dominant power holders, whether economic or political. For example, Salvadoran radio director Carlos Ayala Ramírez⁵ (1997, 43) wrote, echoing the "critical" perspective described by Macdonald (1994), that civil society included "women and men who do not form part of established power, that is, neither of economic power, political power, military power, religious power, nor of the power of the large media of social communication."

This conception of civil society has been labeled critical or neo-Marxist.⁶ It is to some extent a Gramscian view of civil society as an internally diverse and conflictive arena of interaction and association, through which the hegemony of the state can be opposed and new hegemonic alliances constructed. But since economic interests are generally excluded (Macdonald 1994, 272-273) it is a view of civil society as counter-hegemonic, continuing the power struggle underlying the civil war not as battle to control the state, but to change the perspectives and alliances of society (Dagnino 1998, 37).

Civil society is about the power of citizens. One aspect of the concept centers on the meaning of "civil," what is a citizen's relationship to the state, or, more broadly, the roles that citizens, as legitimate members of the constituency of the state, are allowed to play in structuring and constraining the state through voting, effective political representation, public meetings and demonstrations, and other expressions of opinion (Hearn 2001, 345; Schneider and Schneider 2001). In El Salvador, these aspects of civil society could not emerge until the power of the state was constrained through the 1992 Peace Accords and their implementation under United Nations supervision and other internal and international pressures. Pre-civil war repression had been too great and society too politically and economically unequal. Consequently, one of the hard-won victories of the civil war was a sense of

entitlement based on the right to have rights, which was institutionalized in the creation of the Ombudspersons Office for the Defense of Human Rights (*Procuraduría para la Defensa de Derechos Humanos*, PDDH), a kind of national prosecutor and advocate for human rights. The PDDH intervened on issues ranging from workplace representation and domestic violence to the legalization of the community radios.

Another aspect is respect for law. The rule of law rather than privilege is still weak in El Salvador and, consequently, “civil society” is not an abstract concept. For example, after two massive banking scandals in the 1990s in which thousands of depositors, including government agencies, lost tens of millions of dollars, convicted banking officials served less than a year of their sentences and only one of the government officials responsible was forced to resign (*Prensa Gráfica*, January 1, 1998; *Diario de Hoy*, October 22, 1997:10). Only a few of those responsible for the violence of the war – such as the assassination of Archbishop Romero – have been brought to justice.

Finally, during the post-war transition, civil society among the returned refugee communities also came to refer the ways that their concerns, both persistent and new, were taken up in the political sphere by formal political actors, rather than through the violence and disruption to which the wartime social movements had been forced to turn by the repression of those years. The former opposition coalition became the FMLN political party; the autonomous self-governments created during the years in refugee camps became integrated into the municipal government.

The other key part of civil society is the emergence and dynamism of all the activities and organizations that people create to fill their needs and desires, to some extent autonomous of and unobstructed by the state. Hundreds of new groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged at the end of the civil war, focusing on a huge range of issues – consumer rights, the environment, performing arts, indigenous culture, women’s rights, or services for veterans. But the vitality of this aspect of civil society appeared threatening to established powers. For example, when it became possible in the mid-1990s for these organizations to attain their *personería jurídica*, or legal registration, from local or national governments (Blair, Booth et al. 1995, 35), the right-wing controlled national legislature responded by passing a law in 1996 which extended the state’s control by requiring full membership lists and annual budget reports. And while the death squads and repression of the war years had mostly disappeared, attacks on civil society organizations at the time were increasing.

Community Radios as Part of Civil Society

The community radios were part of these efforts to create the organizations, associations, and the social, cultural and political processes that are associated with building civil society. This is clear in the rural areas; any association or group that wanted to publicize its work, events, opinions, or gather new members had few choices. There were no local newspapers--the only other way of reaching the popu-

lation was going door-to-door or driving around with a truck and a loudspeaker. Some local commercial radio stations did take announcements, but usually these were paid, and were inconsistently aired. But the relation between the radios and civil society organizations is more complex than this.

The community radio organizations themselves were mostly non-profit, non-governmental organizations. Some of the rural radios were created through the autonomous self-governments of returned refugee communities close to the war's end, and local officials still sat on their governing boards. Most of the radios sold advertising time to non-profit organizations and for-profit businesses; some were even incorporated as for-profit businesses in an attempt to avoid being labeled "clandestine" by national regulatory bodies. But they were operated as non-profits and management was independent of local governments.

The participatory community radios saw the new organizations as their constituency, and their core role as "mak[ing] public the feelings and thoughts of the citizens through participatory forms of programming" (Ayala Ramirez 1997, 46-8). They helped make these organizations more accountable through interviews and reports on their actions, and providing space for their activities, letting people know what they are doing, and sometimes a place to question or interact with them. The radios provided a space for visibility, interaction, expression of identity and collective memory for the members of their communities. As Mario Maida, the co-director of urban Radio Cabal, explained, "We are creating a reality, in which the radio can be a space for civil society, in which the radio can be a foundation in civil society" (interview with author, January 30, 1998).

While the community radios as organizations may be part of civil society, they are not simply channels to the state or to society. By providing public space for communicative interactions of civil society (Habermas 1989) they create a community of listeners, a new culture of what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say it. These public spaces are unlike those on commercial media. While media increasingly provide the principle spaces for representation and social interaction in Salvadoran society, commercial media are relatively closed to civil society's participation because of their strictly commercial orientation, concentration of ownership and close links to government power. In this way the community radios have changed the Salvadoran public sphere.

Habermas's concept of the public sphere is not a sufficient explanation of this reality. Critiques of his work are well-known: his focus on bourgeois locations and interaction, his exclusions of women's and working class public life, his distrust of mass media, his concern with rationality, and his nostalgia for a purportedly ideal lost era (Fraser 1992, Landes 1988, Brooke 1998, García Canclini 2001, Eley 1992, Ryan 1992). There are useful alternate perspectives on the role of communication media in shaping the public sphere. Fraser is correct when she notes that "the media that constitute the material support for the circulation of views are privately owned" and increasingly centralized (Fraser 1992, 120; see also Bagdikian 1990). Through the mass media, we participate in public life less as citizens and more as consumers in spectacles, leading García Canclini to muse that we are back to the eighteenth century with the concentration of decision making among economic and technical elites (2001, 25). But new media, like the internet, low-power radio, or digital video

production, have expanded the “plebian” public sphere into an effective stage for civil society. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s (1993) reformulated concept of the public sphere recognizes the possibilities inherent in alternative political economies and social organizations of media (see also Hansen 1993).

Indeed, Negt and Kluge’s concept of a more hybrid, conflictive, unstable public sphere recognizes a greater democratic potential. With a wider range of media and public spaces as sites of interaction among diverse and unequal participants, their conception leads to a more democratic dialog and negotiation of interests. Finally, this is not a single public sphere but many conflicting, parallel or overlapping spheres, each corresponding to or constituting particular publics. Subordinate groups create their own “counter-public spheres” for debate, in response to exclusions from the public spheres of more powerful groups (Hansen 1993, 126-8).

Salvadoran community radios create a comparable counter-public sphere. Through their collaborations with civil society organizations and with particular populations, they create a communicative arena – a public sphere – in which the constituents of civil society have individual and collective agency. They provide visibility for civil society organizations and the issues that concern them.

The list of announcements which began this paper illustrates what the particular public sphere that the community radios help create is like, the organizations and institutions involved, the everyday concerns, and the two-way flow of information. Creating a sphere of debate and expression involves not only a web of organizations – civil society – and arenas in which their expression can take place — public spaces such as cafes, newspapers, radio stations, plazas, and streets – but also the development of a communicative culture. In this way the public sphere is not just a shared space, but the sense of shared experience: political and economic conditions, social ties, and cultural traditions which make possible and at the same time limit these interactions.

A Glimpse at Conditions in Chalatenango and Morazán

El Salvador historically has been a poor country, but the regions of Chalatenango and Morazán, where these community radios are located, have been particularly impoverished regions; you might call them the “Appalachians” of El Salvador. They remain predominantly agricultural, “peasant refuges” where those pushed off their land in richer agricultural regions have fled over the last century as commercial farming expanded. Mountainous, with thin, rocky soil, most people rent or own tiny plots of land where they grow subsistence crops such as corn, beans, sorghum and other fodder for animals. This subsistence farming was supplemented in the prewar years by labor migrations to coffee, cotton and sugar plantations. In the postwar era subsistence farming is supplemented by participation in the informal economy of small stores, crafts or roadside stands, and increasingly by remittances from family members who have migrated to the United States.

In the prewar years, peasant culture was predominantly fatalist and clientalist.

People were dependent on land-owning patrons for work, land and credit, and were encouraged by the church to be submissive. The rise of Liberation Theology in the late 1960s and early 1970s promoted the idea that all people are children of God and entitled to respect. So, rather than acquiesce to poverty as God's will, peasants organized on a massive scale, especially in the department of Chalatenango. This was followed by brutal government repression and civil war from 1980 to 1992. In the early post-war era, national and international non-governmental organizations supported a wide range of reconstruction projects, but these funds began leaving to aid other world trouble spots by the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, the returning populations began to integrate the autonomous governments and schools they created in the refugee camps into the Salvadoran municipal system.

An Introduction to Radio Sumpul and Radio Segundo Montes⁷

Radio Sumpul is located in Guarjila in the department of Chalatenango, in the northern mountainous region which borders Honduras. About 30 miles from the capital, San Salvador, a bus ride will take two hours or more because of poor roads. Like the other regional community radios, the station's 20 watt transmitter reaches an approximately 8-10 mile radius – north to Honduras, west to the department capital, east into part of Cabañas department and south to the *Embalse Cerron Grande*, the man-made lake whose dam provides much of the electric power for the country.

Radio Sumpul broadcast four hours a day during my stay. While electric hook-ups had finally arrived in the town the year before, the transmitter still required someone to carry a jug of costly gasoline up to the generator on the mountain, so broadcast time was limited. They produced and broadcast short news programs, mostly interviews with local political leaders or NGO directors; there were also educational programs about health, agriculture or environmental issues co-produced with local organizations and institutions. But most of the Radio Sumpul's programming consisted of blocks of music. This was a mix of *música popular* (the people's music), a Latin American folk and social protest genre; *juvenil* (youth), mostly rock from Mexico or Argentina with some English-language rock, and rap, reggae and techno; Latin American commercial pop and ballads, and *tropical*, such as *salsa* and *merengue*. But *ranchero* was the most popular music, a combination of mostly Mexican genres such as *norteño*, *tex-mex*, and *corrido* that initially gained popularity in the 1930s. If they don't play *rancheros*, one staff member told me, they would lose their audience.

Between every two or three songs the *locutor*⁸ announced the time, and interspersed *saludos* (song dedications) and *avisos* (announcements) like this one, "It's five in the morning with thirty minutes, five-thirty, let's, let's see what we have. ... hmm, all beneficiaries of the land distribution of the property of *Nueva Providencia*, [come] to an assembly to find out, to inform you about the mediation process about this important agreement about your property. The meeting will be Tuesday,

which is tomorrow the 8th of April at one in the afternoon, here in Guarjila...” The programming also included spots ranging from ads, identifications for this radio in particular and community radio nationally and globally, and spots from organizations, such as one from a local environmental group explaining the dangers of deforestation to the water supply.

Radio Segundo Montes is located in the far northeastern corner of the country, along the road from San Miguel on the way north to Perquin, where the well-known museum of the war is located. The community of Segundo Montes is just north of the bridge crossing the Torola River, spilt between the municipalities of Meanguera and Jocoaitique. The vast majority of the region’s population fled army attacks and massacres to refugee camps in Honduras, and returned as an organized community in 1989. The community took its name from Padre Segundo Montes, a well-known and brilliant Jesuit anthropologist who was assassinated on November 16, 1989, in the infamous attack at the Jesuit University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador.

Radio Segundo Montes was created in 1991, soon after the community had returned from the refugee camp and while the war still raged around them. At first they used loudspeakers, but then a church donated a 20-watt transmitter which reached most of the community; later they upgraded to a more powerful one that could reach throughout northern Morazan, about a 20 mile radius. By 1997 it broadcast eight hours a day, from 8 am to 1 pm, and 4 pm to 7 pm.

Programming highlights included director Juan Lucas Aguilar’s popular early evening program, which combined *ranchero* music with many ads, announcements and dedications. Informational programs included a local news interview, *Temas de Actualidad* (Topics of the Moment) played both at noon and in the evening. Beginning in September 1997, the national community radio association’s daily news program, *La Red de ARPAS* (The Network of the Association of Participatory Radios and Programs of El Salvador, hereafter ARPAS), brought national and international news as well as sharing community radio reports from all 16 community stations and programs in the country. Radio Segundo Montes’ signature program, *La Hora Verde* (the Green Hour), educated listeners about ecologically-based agricultural methods. A morning program featured songs, stories and environmental education for children. Special series varied, but the local women’s group had just completed a series of discussions and *sociodramas* (see note 3) when my fieldwork began, a history of *Radio Venceremos* based on former announcer “Santiago’s” memoir, “*La Terquedad del Izote*,” was set to begin when I left, and a UNESCO series on women’s rights continued.

How These Community Radios Help Build Civil Society in postwar El Salvador

Radio and Human Rights

For the staffs of these radios, human rights and citizenship education is particularly relevant to building civil society. According to this view, public consciousness of

human rights is essential for participation in the organizations and activities of civil society. People must feel that they have the right to have rights, that they are entitled to act in their own interests and to participate in civil processes, that they count in the eyes of society and government. These are human rights, recognized in international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted by the United Nations; they are not granted by governments. These rights include the right to communication, information and expression, which form the basis for the right for the radios to exist.

Human rights education and its link to citizen responsibilities was a priority for the community radios, and often was an underlying theme of programming focused on other issues. Local history and cultural programming, and even children's programming, had human rights themes. There were short spots made available by the Latin American and international community radio non-governmental organizations (NGOs), like a series made by United Nations Development Program (PNUD) on the rights of children and families in 1997; there had also been a series of spots on electoral rights earlier in the year. All radios examined in this case study played spots on the right to communication and expression, including support for the Salvadoran efforts to legalize the community radios, made by ARPAS and the World Community Radio Association.

A good example of human rights programming was a weekly half-hour radio program which focused on support for women's identities and participation. *Buenos Tiempos Mujer* (BTM), roughly "good times" or "a good era for women," was produced in San Salvador by the "Culture of Peace" program as part of UNESCO's post-war transition effort. BTM included interviews and program segments from a group of 65 correspondents from rural villages and urban neighborhoods all over the country, trained by BTM's production staff. The weekly programs interwove talk, and dramatic and musical segments, that linked the daily concerns of Salvadoran women with education on their rights. The show began with a rocking cumbia (a Mexican version of the Colombian country music form) and the greeting, "*Buenos Tiempos Mujer*, where you hear your voice. A space of solidarity and education, where women and men together walk towards equality in rights. Good times for women."⁹ In most shows, like one I recorded in 1997, several segments were interspersed with music. In the first segment, a woman intoned over flamenco-inspired guitar, "I am I, and in all the world, there is no one like me. ... I defend my body, my mind, my eyes, my feelings, my intelligence. I have all that is necessary to live, and will be what I want, because I have the capacity..." Then a short pre-recorded segment reminded listeners that they needed to rest for good health; another told about the history of the woman's vote in El Salvador. The BTM jingle, promoting women's equal rights with men, provided a short break. Next, a heated exchange between a woman and a man dramatized the theme of the right to vote, one of many short *sociodramas* in the series.

The BTM program was particularly popular with audiences. Lives of women in the countryside seemed very much in transition. For many, the heavy and time consuming work of maintaining a household meant women spent most of their time in their homes and yards. But, at the same time, many teachers, health workers, and radio staff were women; there were women who were community leaders and po-

litical activists as well. BTM validated the examples set by these women while also speaking to the conflicts experienced by women living more traditionally circumscribed lives. One listener told me that “programs about the rights of women,” were her favorites on Radio Sumpul, because “now it is not like before, when they said that women weren’t important” (Agosta 1997).

The radio stations themselves were seen from their beginnings as embodiments of the rights to information and expression. Wilfredo Zepada, one of the founders of Radio Sumpul, urged me to add a human rights theme to my work. The radios represented this population’s grasp for their right to information, he told me. Whether the radios were legal or not, this was a human right, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights accepted by El Salvador along with other United Nations members in 1948 (Wilfredo Zepada, interview by author, March 28, 1997; United Nations, High Commissioner for Human Rights 1998).¹⁰

This was not at all hypothetical. Like several other community radios, Radio Segundo Montes was founded in the late stages of the conflict, while bombings and other attacks continued, radio director Aguilar recounted. The radio in those days was a way to keep the population informed about what was going on inside this community as well as a way to get news to the outside world. “At that time, there weren’t other communication media, and journalists weren’t allowed to enter this zone, neither national or international” (Juan Lucas Aguilar, interview with author, December 17, 1997).

The struggle to keep this right continued. Though initially the new community radios filed the required paperwork to transmit legally, they either received no response or were denied licenses. This was during a period when the Administración Nacional de Telecomunicaciones (ANTEL), the national telecommunication agency, more than doubled the number of FM licenses from 78 to over 160 (Ministry of Interior 1994). In December, 1994, the president of ANTEL (and, not coincidentally, of the right-wing political party, the Nationalist Republican Alliance [ARENA]), ordered the National Police to seize the equipment of all eleven of the rural community radios. The Human Rights Ombudsman’s Office intervened; unions, national and international NGOs and the United Nations protested and lobbied, and eventually the Salvadoran Supreme Court ordered the confiscated equipment returned. But a new telecommunications law passed through a nearly clandestine dawn vote made broadcast licenses available by auction to the highest bidder. The legislation contained no category for social, educational, cultural or non-profit broadcasting, instead defining radios by only local, regional or national coverage.¹¹ When this law passed, in November, 1997, without legalizing the community radios, Radio Segundo Montes director Aguilar commented, “Well, the radio has been in the process of legalizing itself since 1991....but we also have our own constitution which tells us that in no moment can they deprive us of the right to expression, and this for us is so important, because this is the primary law.” He told me that the twelve-year civil war was fought about inequality, with little result, with people living in as terrible conditions as before, and the radios were not going to give up their services to the community, or their freedom of speech voluntarily. (Juan Lucas Aguilar, interview with author December 17, 1997, and informal conversation, November 9, 1997).

During their first decade, much of the energies of the community radios and their national community radio association was spent battling the national government for legal status. The efforts of El Salvador's community radios to gain access to the airwaves and to survive became a national political conflict, resonating with many other post-war conflicts in which less powerful groups sought to bring their concerns – the fight of their mayors for a more reasonable percentage of the national budget, the right of union representation, right to march in the streets, the right to public services, the right to personal safety – to the national public sphere.

Radio programming filled the need for basic information for the communities the radios served. As Rosi, one of the staff at Radio Sumpul, explained, "If it weren't important, the people couldn't gather around it, or record their messages, their greetings, it wouldn't interest them... But there aren't other media here, there isn't even a telephone, there isn't anything." (Rosibel Orellana, interview by author, May 5, 1997). The mayor of Meanguera, where Radio Segundo Montes was located, told me that "the value of the community radio was that it... adapted itself to the realities of the community.... There is a lack all over the country of newspapers and TV, it is very difficult to receive them in rural areas" (Francisco Pereira, interview with author, November 13, 1997).

These comments focus on the right to communicate with each other in a public space and to receive information about their community and the larger world; in a sense, the right to not be marginalized from the debates and understandings of the larger society. But the Universal Declaration of Human Rights cites both the right to information (receiving) and to expression (speaking and being heard); in other words, to participate in two-way communications. The community radios, more than commercial radios based on a one-way broadcasting model, make expression possible. A respondent to my audience survey in Guarjila said, "the radio understands the community, it is for communicating. In [the other radios] one can't communicate, only listen, inform oneself" (Agosta, 1997). Participatory community radios embody the practice of this basic human right.

Participation could be as simple as the song dedications or greetings to family and friends that are so popular on the community radios. Often the requests and dedications at Radio Segundo Montes program *Anochecer Ranchero* (*Ranchero Sundown*) were so numerous that they had to be combined or saved for the next day. The office manager typed each one to make it more readable than the tiny hand written scraps of paper folded into little triangles that people brought to the station. Radio director Aguilar gave these contributions center stage, reading each twice and often adding his own congratulations. In this way he made the listeners themselves the focus of the program, emphasizing their participation. These interactions built a sense of community through the program.

The *avisos*, or announcements from individuals, local organizations and governments on many issues, were consistently referred to by people I spoke with as the most important programming that the radios offered (see Table 1). Respondents to my audience survey in Guarjila said, "the radio is good because of the possibility of giving *avisos*," and that it was the way to know what was going on (Agosta, 1997).

What kinds of announcements were read? Over the course of a month of an-

nouncements at Radio Segundo Montes, local events and organizations predominated. From one to six new announcements came in each day, averaging about three a day. There were 25 announcements from local organizations, six from local government, seven from individuals and four from national organizations. Together with frequent *saludos* or music dedications, the announcements represented the most fundamental way that these radios were participatory. This was because the announcements were supplied by the audience itself using the radio as their own communication media. Through these announcements, together with the spot ads and the local news programs, the existence and dynamism of all the different organizations referred to as civil society were multiplied in a concrete and cumulative way. Because the community radios were a reliable source of information about these activities, public participation was made more possible.

In this sense, the dedications and announcements from individuals represented the most basic practice of the right to information and expression, the right to speak and to express themselves. They were the most basic ways that the community radios created a public space that had not previously existed. Here the community of speakers and listeners asserted themselves as subjects, politically and culturally, through the content and the form of their radio greetings and announcements. In turn, these announcements increased the visibility of all the organizations operating locally, making it possible for people to participate in their activities. In short, this helped build a civil society that had not previously existed.

Supporting the Participation of Citizens

In addition to announcements, each station produced local news programs, mostly comprised of interviews with leaders of local government, organizations and institutions. News programs played an important role in informing these communities, as well as in supporting the development of local governments and local leaders. "Topics of the Moment" (*Temas de Actualidad*), a thirty-minute midday interview program of Radio Segundo Montes, shows these points more clearly. Local mayors were frequently interviewed, as were those in charge of development projects and other community institutions. This program helped inform the population about their officials activities. It also gave local leaders more regional and national visibility, especially if the story was picked up by the new daily news program produced by the national community radio association, shared by all 16 community radios around the country.

In the context of helping to build civil society, the main significance of programs like "Topics of the Moment" is the attention they brought to local leaders. The two stations' news programs tracked the projects, obstacles, and achievements of local government institutions and agencies. Mayors and other local leaders represented the rural populations in the broader national public sphere. Still, lack of national attention to rural areas and to agriculture remained a contentious issue; for example, municipal governments had few sources of revenue beyond a small portion of national budget to fund local needs and programs, and the mayors were fighting during 1997-98 to increase their share from 1 percent to 6 percent.

This programming was important; no public sphere, no civil society is possible without public space for informing people about government activities. People

need to know about government activities and plans; this is a fundamental role of media in a democracy.¹² With this in mind, a major concern of most of the community radios involved educating their communities about the electoral process prior to the election. They explained the somewhat complicated processes: people had to apply for special voting credentials, and were assigned to voting locations alphabetically, not by residence. They warned people of frauds that would invalidate their votes. They actively encouraged all candidates to use their space to reach the public, with ads, interviews, and at least with some debates. Radio Segundo Montes' director called the experience of the elections "transcendent." In the seven years of the radio's existence, they had participated in the two post-war elections:

We tried to open the radio to all the political parties so that they could make their political campaigns. The FMLN, ARENA, PDC, *Movimiento de Unidad, Convergencia* all came here with programs and paid announcements, all of them came... . This marked for us one of the grandest [moments], a great honor for the media of communication ... (Juan Lucas Aguilar, interview with author, December 17, 1997).

During subsequent election campaigns, Radio Sumpul was able to train and station local correspondents in each town in the region covered by their broadcast so that they featured live phone coverage of the election process and returns (personal correspondence with Rosibel Orellana 2000).

The historic centralization of the country meant that rural areas, especially these mountainous regions, had been marginalized and invisible. In this power imbalance, local governments and leaders represented their local communities as part of civil society, rather than a part of the state. In this way, radios were serving civil society when they provided space for local government voices. Until the radios came into being, the region lacked this potentially effective arena of local opinion and debate; the few local commercial radio stations did not have this kind of coverage.

The community radios' non-partisan coverage and space for local, rural issues, and their efforts to increase voting participation strengthened the political agency of the region. Their communities were no longer a marginalized backwater, covered with a couple postage stamp reports about crime in the national press, but an area with serious local concerns that merited debate and solutions. Some of these concerns impacted national issues--agrarian debt and support for agriculturalists, financial viability of municipal governments, the privatizations of electricity and telephone services. But perhaps more important, providing a space for the local public to monitor and contrast the views of local leaders strengthened local civil society.

Community Radios as the Communication Medium for Civil Society Organizations

Perhaps the most impressive achievement of the community radios I studied was their integration with the local, national and international organizations and associations which constituted “civil society.” The radios provided crucial ways for these organizations to reach their constituencies, to enlarge them through promotion, and to educate and inform them in ways that reinforced and catalyzed the organizations’ efforts. For a few organizations the community radios provided a way to convey their vision of society and community to the radio’s listeners, visions that resonated with those of the radio itself. Most programs were produced collaboratively, especially with the non-profits. For small businesses, for the agricultural sector and for national and international NGOs engaged in development projects in these poor and war devastated economies, the community radios provided a tool for economic development through advertising. These efforts were mutual as the ads and co-productions were also the mainstay of self-sustainability for the radios themselves.

Economic Development

Radio was just about the only medium available to local business to reach potential customers, beyond a sign posted on the road or a flyer circulated at an event, but the economy was so poor that few could take advantage even of community radio’s low rates. Commercial radios were unaffordable or not as accessible. For example, when the Animal Feed Factory (*Fábrica de concentrados*) located in Comunidad Segundo Montes opened in 1995, Radio Segundo Montes was the only medium which gave them advertising space. By 1997, the company had established themselves in the eastern region of the country; the radio had helped them enter the market and they could now afford to advertise with the more expensive regional commercial station (Celia Concepción Sáenz, interview with author, November 11, 1997).

Some commercial clients of the radios seemed motivated by their admiration for the returned refugee community. The *Sastrería Oriental* (Eastern Tailor-shop) in Gotera, the departmental capital, was at the edge of the main market. Its shelves were packed with rolls of fabric, trimmings hung over a table near one door and glass display cases held buttons and other sewing supplies. The store’s proprietor had a long-term contract with the radio, and her ad was updated monthly. She considered the spots a form of mutual aid: more customers came into her store, while she supported the young people who worked at the radio. They are real workers, she told me, like the teachers that the community is going to graduate (Ana Julia de Ramos, interview with author, November 25, 1997). Commercial spots like these were produced by radio staff for a fee.

Ads and programs for international NGOs, such as the post-war transition and development organizations working in the region were highly sought after by the community radios. They brought income to the radio itself and their programming and services helped fulfill mutual goals of community and regional development. At the same time, national and international agencies and organizations needed communication media that reached local communities in order for their work to be effective. For example, ADEL (de Desarrollo Económico Local, Local Economic

Development Agency) was an international post-war technical support agency.¹³ Radio Sumpul broadcast ADEL's system of agricultural price information, which helped farmers and retailers know where and when to buy and sell their products and supplies. ADEL staff researched wholesale and consumer prices in the region weekly and posted the prices in the markets, as well as sharing them with Radio Sumpul and the region's commercial station. In return for the broadcasts, ADEL agreed to pay for the radio transmitters gasoline (Marcelo Campos, ADEL staff, interview with author, May 13, 1997, Chalatenango City).

Larger NGOs like ADEL were happy to pay Radio Sumpul to produce and air their announcements. But for local organizations, the idea of charging for services often conflicted with the expectation that a community radio was a medium created by the community itself to serve its needs. This became more stressful as increasingly all institutions in the area were rather unrealistically expected to survive on their own economically, as national and international funders promoted the idea of self-sufficiency both for the refugees themselves and for NGOs.

For example, once supported by a grant for their environmental program from a European foundation, Radio Segundo Montes's income during my fieldwork varied from month to month, depending on ad and program income. After the costs of running the station, the staff was left with a "stimulus" which seemed to hover around half the minimum wage. For director Aguilar, becoming self-supporting was a great dream, one which depended in the long term on the legalization of their frequencies and the region's economic growth, and in the short term, on more income from ads and program collaborations (Juan Lucas Aguilar, interview with author, December 17, 1997).

Regardless of the viability of this dream — few non-profit or community based media organizations in the U.S. survive solely on earned income — it sometimes brought the radio into conflict with the very organizations they sought to serve. Workers at the Rehabilitation Center were initially shocked when radio director Fito asked them to pay for their spot. After all, the radio was supposed to be "community" radio; shouldn't it serve the clinic, and not force it to divert scarce funds from direct services? (Delia, physical therapist, interview with author, June 3, 1997. Rehabilitation Center, Guarjila.).

Working Collaboratively

The radio staff worked closely and collaboratively with NGOs, local, national or international, to help them develop and shape their messages. While the community radios did charge to produce programs or spots for organizations, they also encouraged real collaboration, from developing scripts together to training an organization's staff to be their own radio voices.

Fito, director of Radio Sumpul, introduced a collaborative process to produce the Rehab Center's spot. First the Rehabilitation Center staff thought of an everyday story: a woman leaving her house at four or five in the morning, as people often did, to collect firewood in a distant place. On the way back, she tripped and twisted her ankle and her back. Another woman came by and explained that the Rehabilitation Center could help her. A staff member who was from San Salvador wrote the script, then showed it to the other health promoters who were from the

region for advice on local expressions and phrases. For example, “I fall” would normally be, “*yo caigo*,” but the local health promoters suggested, “*yo tropiezo*” instead. Fito made the script more dramatic and humorous, then the group recorded it with their own voices along with radio staff. I observed the taping, with Fito cajoling and encouraging, working hard to bring out the emotion and timing of their voices. It was an intense experience for all involved, but the final product sounded convincing and professional.

For the women’s organization in the community of Segundo Montes (*Asociación para el Desarrollo de las Mujeres*, ADIM), the radio programs reinforced information presented in their discussion groups and one-on-one efforts, and gave the organization more recognition in the community. ADIM regularly announced meetings and events, such as their Day Against Violence activities or trainings for women in micro-businesses. Their biggest production was a series of interviews and dramatic dialogues meant to build women’s self esteem and inform them about legal resources for domestic or labor disputes, such as the Human Rights Ombudsperson’s offices in the departmental capital. The commercial station based there did not produce educational programming, and to buy space would have been very expensive. In addition, the radio staff made “commentaries that motivate people even more” to listen (Mabel Reyes, interview with author, November 12, 1997).

The signature program of Radio Segundo Montes, *La Hora Verde*, (the Green Hour), also reinforced the sponsoring organization’s work in small groups. This program was produced through close collaboration with radio staff, who worked to implement the ideas proposed by the NGO’s staff. Its sponsor, the Technical School,¹⁴ was in effect the major development organization in the community of Segundo Montes. “The Green Hour” radio program was part of a project to provide practical information about agricultural ecology, like an agricultural extension program, staffers David Quintero and Rogelio explained. Their goal was to help local farmers modify traditional farming methods to produce better food crops and to stop environmental deterioration. To this end, they set up 11 groups of about 15 people each in all the neighborhoods of the community. Each biweekly meeting explored a different topic, such as how to make organic fertilizer, build plant barriers or terracing for soil preservation, deal with garbage, or raise pigs in sanitary pens. The weekly Saturday morning radio program introduced the themes covered by the discussion groups, so people could come to the meetings prepared with some knowledge (David Quinteros, interview with author, November 11, 1997). The radio and technical school staff worked collaboratively to package and convey this information, which in turn was being put into practice in groups across the community. In other words, the participatory aspect of the program extended beyond the studio to the discussion groups of listeners.

Like the Green Hour program, the community radios’ work with civil society organizations were almost always collaborations. They worked to adapt to each other’s needs and expectations, often though not always sharing a larger vision of development. Sometimes these relationships developed fluidly; other times there were conflicts. Much like the community press anywhere, the community radios were central modes of communication for small businesses and for nonprofit insti-

tutions (Sims 1969).

Conclusion: Developing New Social Actors, Strengthening Cultural Identity

The work of groups like those mentioned above were examples of the ways new social actors were being developed in the post-war era. Agriculturalists, women, and youth were recognized through these groups, and this recognition was reflected and amplified through the broader public space of the radio. Through organizing and acting on their own interests, these groups were producing civil society. The community radio provided space for them to reach more people and to reinforce their work in small groups. It legitimized their message, selecting and highlighting it by being on the air. In addition, because the programs were produced collaboratively, the radio played an active role in creating awareness of this new sector and helping them work more effectively. Combining its work with all these groups, the radio created a collective portrait of these new actors in civil society, a sense of a local public sphere where their concerns, perspectives and ideas could be circulated.

Efforts to educate about human rights and increase democratic participation by the rural community radios accompanied their broader, every day efforts to help construct a vibrant post-war civil society. As a communication medium for civil society organizations, the radios provided crucial ways for these organizations to reach their constituencies, to enlarge them through promotion and to educate and inform them in ways that reinforced and catalyzed other efforts. The organizations shared information, promoted activities, told their stories of the past and conveyed their visions of the future. In addition, they made their own decisions about how they would be portrayed because most of the programming was produced collaboratively: the subjects themselves were co-producers.

For small businesses and for the agricultural sector in these poor and war devastated economies, the radio provided tools for economic development through advertising. In the same way, the community radios provided an important tool for national and international efforts towards economic development in these regions. For non-profit organizations, these efforts were mutual as ads and co-productions were also the mainstay of self-sustainability for the radios themselves. For a few organizations, the radios provided a way to convey a shared vision of society and community to the radio's listening community.

Local commercial radios could not play these roles, both because of the more narrowly commercial orientation of this sector in El Salvador, and because the radios' work with civil society organizations were not simply commercial transactions but collaborations. The community radios were clearly involved in market-based exchanges through advertising and program production, and in monetary relationships with international civil society organizations. Economic exchanges were crucial to their survival, but collaborations with NGOs defined the identities of these radios. What was important was the potential of each relationship to build

local capacities, or strengthen a sense of local identity. Radio staff worked more closely with non-profit organizations, feeling that they were working towards common goals.

Efforts of the radios to cultivate awareness of human rights and a belief in civic action and public involvement helped to lay the groundwork for the construction of civil society. Through the civil society organizations which produced radio programming, agriculturalists, women, youth and other members of the radios' communities become the central voices in this public space of their communities. This recognition was amplified because radio was broadcast, potentially reaching everyone in the area covered by its signal. These groups and social sectors were recognized as important social actors--people who count, whose activities and perspectives were significant. Like any other kind of performance, radio broadcasts highlighted these actors and issues. Together with the growth of local organizations and leadership in local civil society, the community radios helped these groups to become the central social actors and speakers, no longer marginalized and invisible.

Notes

1. I use the term "radio" rather than "radio stations" to refer to the subjects of this research, in order to emphasize their characteristics as organizations engaged in participatory communication rather than the predominantly one-way flow of broadcasting entities.
2. A form of programming in which social issues or educational topics are presented in dramatic skits, in situations drawn from the everyday lives of listeners.
3. Other perspectives and definitions for civil society were more dominant among other sectors of Salvadoran society; here I focus on the prevailing perspectives in the professional and geographic communities in which I conducted my fieldwork.
4. "Civil society" has been criticized for its use as "a political slogan for a wide variety of purposes...a way for "neo-populist development theorists and practitioners" to praise the participatory development methods of grassroots NGOs; for "economic liberals" to promote privatization and deregulation said to be controlled through the disciplinary function of new business classes; for those promoting government cutbacks to praise the semi-governmental functions of service NGOs; for "former socialists" to point to the role of social organizations in peaceful transformation of society" (Biekart 1999:31).
5. A note about names: in Spanish-speaking cultures, people often use two first names (such as Juan Lucas) and include both their father's and mother's surname, in that order, as their own surname (as in Carlos Ayala Ramirez).
6. In contrast to the neo-conservative perspective, which promotes the idea of an entrepreneurial culture allowing creative initiatives and an unconstricted economy to meet the wide range of public goals and needs, while ignoring inequalities and injustices; and liberal pluralist perspectives, where NGOs and grassroots organizations are seen as broadening public representation in the political

- sphere, but where the impacts of class, gender and international forces are not examined (Macdonald 1994:270-272).
7. For this paper, I have focused on the rural radios in my research and left out consideration of *Radio Cabal*, an urban community radio station located in the capital city of San Salvador.
 8. A “*locutor*” for the community radios is more than a disk jockey or announcer; they are seen as the voice of the radio and community, charged with animating, educating and accompanying listeners throughout their day.
 9. This and all following excerpts are my transcriptions and translations from the BTM program for the week of April 4, 1997.
 10. Article 19 reads: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations 1998).
 11. As a result of this law, the community radios could remain as local radios and would have to operate at low power, at under 20 watts. Five of the thirteen small community radios received legal frequencies for municipal coverage. For the radios with regional coverage, like Radio Sumpul, Izcanal, Victoria, or Segundo Montes, ARPAS decided to seek funding from international sources to buy a frequency with national coverage, which they divided among the regional and local radios that had not been awarded frequencies.
 12. Of course, they also needed space to question and respond to those plans. I found that all of the radios attempted to host debates during the pre-election period, but debates and opinions were not a frequent part of their daily news coverage. This is an important topic for future research.
 13. ADEL had projects in most of Central America, and in some other areas of the world. The organization was started as part of post-World War II reconstruction efforts by the Italian government.
 14. The name reflects its roots in the training programs of the refugee camps.

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Interviews

The following interviews were conducted by the author in El Salvador for this research.

- Juan Lucas Aguilar, Radio Segundo Montes' Director. Taped interview, December 17, 1997; informal conversation, November 9, 1997, CSM.
- Marcelo Campos, ADEL, May 13, 1997, Chalatenango City.
- Delia __, physical therapist, June 3, 1997, Rehabilitation Center, Guarjila.
- Mario Maida, Co-director, Radio Cabal. Taped interview, January 30 and February 4, 1998, San Salvador.
- Rosibel Orellana, Radio Sumpul. Taped interview, May 5, 1997, also conversation June 3, 1997, Guarjila.
- Francisco Pereira, Mayor, November 13, 1997, Meanguera, El Salvador.
- Ana Julia de Ramos, November 25, 1997, Morazán, El Salvador.
- Mabel Reyes, ADIM director, November 12, 1997, CSM.
- Celia Concepción Sáenz, ALPENSA, November 11, 1997, CSM.
- Wilfredo Zepada, Radio Sumpul co-founder, March 28, 1997, San Salvador.

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