

# False and Real Differences: Alternative and Mainstream Media in Latin America

*This article, written by Kristina Gaerlan, is based on María Suárez Toro and Margaret Thompson panel presentation on Globalised media and ICT systems and structures organised by Isis International-Manila during the World Summit on the Information Society held last 10 to 12 December 2003 in Geneva, Switzerland.*

**A**t first glance, an invitation to speak on behalf of FIRE in Costa Rica, about the intersectionality of militarisation, fundamentalism and global communication would seem ironic. First, because Costa Rica is one of two countries in the world that has no army. Secondly, it is one of a few countries in the world where telecommunications is still an efficiently run nationalised enterprise, providing electrical power and telecommunication services to 97 percent of the population at the lowest prices in Latin America. The country also continues to fund and oversee basic social services. In addition, FIRE is located in a country where the fundamentalist Catholic Church owned and operated a multi-million dollar radio station that broadcast to the entire population, but the Church decided to close this down. Thus Costa Rica represents a unique setting indeed, in a world where militarism, fundamentalism and corporate communications are on the rise.

The bad news is that although Costa Rica has no army, the United States asked permission from the government to establish a police training school that would probably substitute the School of the Americas and eventually become a government military school, much like the situation in Puerto Rico where a military school is not only about the school itself, but also about the kinds of military and political control needed to protect the school.

Another item of bad news is that as mentioned previously, while telecommunications is a public service in Costa Rica, the U.S. administration has lobbied strongly for privatisation of these services as a prerequisite for the free trade agreement now being negotiated in Central America.

Less than two years ago, 100,000 people took to the streets to protest this privatisation project, but now the pressure comes from elsewhere.

The other bad news is that the closure of the Catholic fundamentalist radio station was triggered by a scandal involving money laundering, fiscal fraud, and possibly even child sexual abuse by the fundamentalist priest who was in charge of it. The church closed the station so he could remain in impunity. The community radio journalist who exposed the scandal involving this priest was assassinated, and the crime remains unsolved, although many have strong suspicions of who might be behind it.

An army-less Costa Rica where telecommunications is a public service is a “species in extinction” in today’s world. And proponents of neo-liberal globalisation seem poised for the final blow, taking advantage of this intersection between militarism, fundamentalism and globalisation.

As the country undergoes these changes, the media in Costa Rica play a critical part in the impact of this intersectionality. Their part involves silencing of the opposition, serving as a platform for supporters of privatisation, and transformation of communication into a business rather than a platform for communication as a human right. Civil Society complains that it is harder for social organisations to get their voice in media. Thus, they create their own.

## Alternative Media’s Potential

In light of the way that mainstream media coverage serves primarily to support neo-liberal globalisation, alternative and community media play an increasingly important role in giving a voice to ordinary people who are struggling to keep alive the “species in extinction” such as those in Costa Rica so that people can know about such struggles in the midst of a homogenising neo-liberal policy worldwide.

One such venue among many in Costa Rica is FIRE—Feminist International Radio Endeavour/Radio Feminista.



María Suárez Toro (left) of FIRE during Isis' panel at the WSIS in Geneva last December 2003

As an alternative media outlet, FIRE has made use of interactive ICTs (information and communication technologies) to reach a global audience, involving live broadcasts through the internet and multimedia productions. Audience members may communicate with producers during broadcasts in a chat room on the FIRE website, as well as via e-mail, and the conventional telephone and fax.

FIRE does live webcasts on special occasions, including international events such as the World Summit on the Information Society and every UN conference since 1991, as well as the World Social Forums in Puerto Alegre, Brazil in 2001, 2002 and 2003, and annual broadcasts on November 25<sup>th</sup> for the International Day Against Violence Towards Women. Likewise FIRE broadcasts from numerous regional and local events, including the IX Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro and the Indigenous Women's Continental Summit in Mexico in 2002. And, because all the broadcasts and information are archived,

the website may be visited anytime for special information on certain topics.

To assess the impact of FIRE's diverse and interactive approach using ICTs for its media activities the organisation is collaborating on a three-year multi-method research project which is also designed to better understand the FIRE audience. Methods include a quantitative analysis of webpage statistics of hits and visits since the group's first Internet broadcast in 1998; and an Internet survey in English and Spanish sent via e-mail to individuals around the world who had written FIRE, which was also posted on the website. A qualitative analysis of letters received from all over the world—whether these were in Spanish or English—was also performed, as well as case studies of selected live web transmissions by FIRE.

The survey was filled out by audience members of FIRE from 34 different countries, most of whom are women, although there have been many male listeners of FIRE since it first began broadcasting in 1991 on shortwave, and later on Internet in 1998.

The website statistics indicated an enormous increase in the number of visits and hits between 1998 and 2002, confirming the power of the Internet. On average, people visit the website on average about 1-2 times every two months, with one-fourth visiting at least once a month.

The typical listener is 40 to 49 years old—slightly older than the average Internet audience. FIRE has a generally educated audience, with one-third having some college education, and one-half, graduate school. Most of the respondents were journalists, communication practitioners, professors or lawyers.

### Important Roles

Beyond the audience profile, however, the significance of the study was that it identified different potential roles for alternative media groups like FIRE as a result of their interactive communication with listeners: (1) as a bridge, (2) as a connector, and (3) as a multiplier and amplifier.

Firstly, FIRE is a bridge between the women's movement and the audience. One of the group's goals is to connect voices, technologies and actions, which requires active involvement in the women's movement at the local, regional and international levels. For the survey question "Why visit the FIRE webpage?" the most popular responses were: (1) to hear the voices of women, (2) to hear perspectives different from those found in mainstream media, and (3) because it's feminist and/or progressive. People look to



FIRE for information on feminism, women's movements and progressive activities or actions.

Secondly, FIRE serves as a connector between and among social and political movements, including the women's movements. Another one of the most popular reasons for visiting the FIRE webpage is that it offers alternative proposals and strategies to these different movements. This response indicates that FIRE provides its audience not only a discussion of the problems and challenges facing women but also insights into the women's specific suggestions on what needs to be done.

Thirdly, FIRE's role as a multiplier and amplifier is evident in the remarkable increase in the visits and hits on its website when it began broadcasting via the Internet. But FIRE recognises that most of the world is not yet online, so the group taps into the immediacy of community radio all over the world through different organisations such as AMARC (World Association of Community

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Broadcasters). Community radio is connected to the webpage during broadcasts, and can also download programmes from the archives and rebroadcast these.

It should be noted though that despite FIRE's use of modern ICTs, its broadcasts and distribution of its information remain highly interpersonal, with about 37 percent of the study's respondents learning about these from someone else.

### Alternative and Mainstream Distinctions

Alternative media have made creative use of modern ICTs—to the extent that resources permit—to promote content attuned to the needs and experiences of the people. In Costa Rica, one of the tasks of alternative media is to counteract the impending blow to our political system based on nation-state provided social services.

And mainstream journalists in the region are looking to alternative media for answers to their own work and responsibilities in giving a voice to people. For example, a recent congress of mainstream journalists in the region, the IX Congress of the Latin American Federation of Journalists (FELAP in 2003) stated that “technological, cultural and informational gap has deepened in the last decades, in an almost irreversible way, and the democratic flow of information and the quest for truth is urgent.” They also said that “Counterhegemonic communication is an imperative today: to alter, bring a counterpoint, and create an equilibrium. Community and alternative media is crucial to this.”

This recognition of alternative media is an especially significant development because perhaps for the first time, practitioners of alternative media have an opportunity to form alliances with the mainstream journalists who now realise they cannot democratise media alone.

Another major accomplishment is a recent resolution within social movements at the World Social Forums, calling for support of alternative media and communication within their organisations in resisting neo-liberal globalisation.

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The use of the verb “to delegate” is important as it clarifies the relationship of media to the people. Having a voice and publishing in media are a delegated right, therefore media has the responsibility to respond to what people want and to give them voice.

But one right and responsibility that cannot be delegated, but needs to be undertaken by all, is the need to save our “species in extinction” so that corporate globalisation, fundamentalisms and militarism cannot deal the final blow. ♪

*Maria Suárez Toro, a Puerto Rican and Costa Rican feminist journalist and professor of communications, is with Feminist International Radio Endeavour, more popularly known*

### **Update on the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)**

■ On 25 January 2004, the U.S. Trade Representative Office (USTR) and Costa Rican representatives announced that, after two additional rounds of intense negotiations that were held this month, Costa Rica was ready to join the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Costa Rica had been the sole Central American country to leave the official CAFTA negotiations in December 2003 without agreeing to the CAFTA, saying that it needed more time to work out some of the sensitive issues in the agreement which included the telecommunications and insurance sectors and various agriculture and textile goods. In order to reach an agreement, Costa Rica had to abandon its earlier hard-line position against opening up its telecommunications sector. The country agreed to the gradual opening of its telecommunications market in three sectors: private network, internet, and wireless services. It is expected that private network services and internet services will be opened by 2006, by which time the country must create a regulatory framework. Wireless services will be liberalised the following year. Costa Rica did, however, manage to hold firm in not opening up mainland telephone services to competition. The U.S., yielding to demands for slower liberalisation of Costa Rica’s state monopoly on insurance, has agreed that country’s insurance market will be opened by 1 January 2008, with the remainder to open by 1 January 2011. (Farah Nageer, Center of Concern, IGTN Secretariat)

■ Following the announcement that Costa Rica had signed the CAFTA, trade union and civil society representatives from the country reaffirmed their commitment to publicly oppose the agreement. Fabio Chaves, a union leader for a group of employees of the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICU), the state telecommunications enterprise, has said that they will now focus their efforts on street protests. Chaves stated that “liberalising the telecoms market would only benefit the big transnational companies in Latin America, to the detriment of consumers.” (Mora, J. E., “Costa Rican

*as FIRE, which has been innovating in web-streaming of radio for years.*

*Margaret Thompson an associate professor in the Department of Mass Communications and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver, and teaches international communication. She has coordinated a special study to determine FIRE’s role in the context of the challenges that alternative media in Latin America face amid the pressure of privatisation, militarisation and globalisation in the region.*

*Note: This was presented by FIRE at WSIS in December, 2003. Since that time and when this was published in mid-2004, much has happened with regards to the examples of communications, fundamentalisms and militarization in Costa Rica. What follows is an update by María Suárez Toro.*

Activists Pledge to Keep up Strike against Trade Deal,” South-North Development Monitor, January 30, 2004)

■ In 31 June 2004, more than 12,000 people, representing civil society, marched through the streets of the capital city of San José, demanding their government not to sign the free trade agreements.

### **Update on the priest involved in the radio scandal**

■ In December 2003, the controversial priest, Father Minor Calvo Aguilar, was put in prison in Costa Rica, arrested by judicial officials for being the principal planner in the murder of journalist Parmenio Medina Pérez, who was assassinated in July of 2001.

### **Update about the International Law Enforcement Academy of the Americas**

■ In 6 June 2003, the United States and Costa Rica had signed an agreement to create an international law enforcement academy for the Americas. The academy was to be located in the Costa Rican capital of San Jose. Its stated objective was to train police officers throughout the Americas to handle transnational crime issues, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, sexual exploitation of children, and violence against women. The school would have been ran by the U.S. State, Treasury and Justice Department, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. According to Costa Rican law, the agreement would have to be approved by the Costa Rican legislature before going to effect.

■ Ever since the agreement was signed and people began to know about it, numerous civil protests began to emerge in the country, stating that a country with no army could not host such a school.

■ Legislators in a special parliamentary commission established to address such issues began to listen to their constituencies, thus deciding to write a letter to the U.S. Administration requesting clarification as to the fact that the school would never become a military institution.

■ Since a response to such a request never came, the project was archived for good.