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By Sebastian Hacher

Mute has recently covered the appearance of street TV in Italy. Here, Sebastian Hacher reports on the emergence of a new form of self-instituted community media out of Argentina's piquetero movement

[IMAGE]

Like the advertising people we talked about, I'm concerned with the precise manipulation of word and image to create an action, not to go out and buy Coca-Cola, but to create an alteration in the reader's consciousness – William Burroughs

'Mister, mister! What time will we be on TV?'

'Film his ribs, look at how skinny he is!'

The children come in from playing, covered head to bare feet in mud, dragging behind them the smallest child in a box on wheels. They get excited when the camera focuses on them in the middle of the preparations for the transmission. They probably aren't aware that the subject of their questions and pleas is not a normal television producer come to cover some crime, accident, or fire, but a piquetero. The man hanging off a post trying to mount an antenna is setting up the first ever live transmission by a mobile television channel in Florencio Valera's San Rudecindo neighbourhood.

'If you have cable, you can disconnect it for a while and use the antenna. Any television antenna will work. As a last resort you can put together an antenna by sticking two metal forks in a potato and connecting them to the antenna cable.' These few instructions were distributed during the week via posters and handbills printed by an unemployed workers' organization called the Movement Teresa Rodriguez (MTR) and Cine Alavío, a video activist group, announcing the arrival of TV Piquetera on Saturday at 2 PM.

The San Rudecindo neighbourhood, the cradle of this and other movements, is five kilometres away from the train station, Bosques. It has a population of 5,000, mud streets, wooden houses with corrugated tin roofs where people listen to cumbia music at full volume and as much unemployment as many other suburban neighbourhoods around the capital. The reason that the TV broadcast has arrived today is to inaugurate a communitarian water pump for the neighbourhood was built entirely by the movement.

[IMAGE] At two in the afternoon when the children with the wheeled box return they appear bathed and groomed. The results of a month of work for the members of the press commission of the MTR can now begin.

The transmission opens with an image of the women, men, and especially the children from the movement. For a few hours the sound of cumbia will vanish, and families will crowd in front of small television sets to be present at an almost magical event: Television from around the corner, by and for the piqueteros.

Blockading the information highway

Channel 4, La TV Piquetera, got its name after realizing that what they were doing was 'a picket of the airwaves' in order to transmit information that doesn't have a place in the mainstream media.

One of the milestones of this new project was a small transmission from Plaza de Mayo at the demonstration in December 20 of 2002 and another from a road blockade in September of last year. Ricardo Leguizamón, pioneer in this field, explains: 'Starting during the uprising on 20 December 2001 we realized that this was the moment to move ahead with the idea.'

But the project, in fact, had begun long before. In 1983, Ricardo was an engineering student who wanted to create community radio and television transmitters.

[IMAGE] To construct a transmitter seemed like a difficult dream. All the materials were very expensive and almost nobody knew how to build one. But it was not impossible. A Polish engineer, who had worked during World War II constructing radars and intercepting communications for the Allies, gave Ricardo the key to make it happen.

The Pole had had a mystical experience that caused him to abandon everything and to dedicate himself to experiment with techniques to 'make plants speak.' When Ricardo visited the old engineer in his garden, there were various devices that emitted different sounds upon detecting the arrival of a stranger. 'The plants seemed to like me,' says a smiling Leguizamón 20 years later, 'and so the guy taught me. The only condition was that his name never appeared in the project because he was living in another social world.'

With the transmitter operational, the first community television channel in the country was founded, Alejandro Korn's Channel 4 in the province of Buenos Aires. In time the community media multiplied and in 1992 an association was formed, AATECO (Asociación Argentina de Teledifusoras Comunitarias), with more than 250 channels all around the country, among them the mythical Channel 4 Utopia in the federal capital.

The struggle for community television continued throughout the rest of the '90s. When the revolt of the 19th and 20th of December of 2001 saw thousands reclaiming the spoken word on the street, many people – among them Leguizamón – saw a new opportunity to make the community TV idea a reality. Now, the equipment is at the service of the social organizations. 'We provide the technician and they provide the content,' explains Ricardo.

And although the groups say that they're willing to help each other out so that each one can construct their own transmitter, Ricardo acknowledges so far 'there are few that have learned to do so'.

[IMAGE]

This is who I am, and this is what I have to say

The broadcast alternates between pre-prepared videos and live public contributions from the makeshift 'studio' on land where a community garden and dining room feeds 10 families with two dozen children every day.

All the interviews and many of the videos and debates are produced by the piqueteros themselves. The host is Nicholas Valle Fertil, who surprises everyone with his talent for speaking on-air. Six months before becoming a piquetero, and for eight years, he had his own radio show in FM Popular Radio which, like many others, fell victim to the lack of advertisers.

Viviana, the other hostess, is one of the leaders of the zone. She motivates her companions to get on the air but worries about allowing all the boys to be on TV. Her profile – like everybody else's there – is very different from that which the mainstream media usually presents when talking about piqueteros duros ('hard' piqueteros). Almost thirty-years-old and with the movement for more than six years, she speaks with simple words and is simultaneously a baker, mother, and something of a teacher for all of the boys.

She tells about four companions that organized a bread sale, and how, when she learned a little about water contamination, they thought about using what the bakery produces in order to be able to make a well since, with the state of the water system, they couldn't even water the plants.

The recent television programmes cover everything in the life of the piquetero movement, from the road blockades to the work that they do, from the reclamation of space to the community construction projects and ongoing political discussions. Among the projects they have to represent there is the production of cleaning products, plastic ornaments, curtains, the community garden and the forthcoming inauguration of a factory which will host more ambitious projects. This could be anything from a slipper factory to a small hospital like the ones already in operation in other parts of the Florencio Varela district.

There are a lot of videos and speakers and the producers-piqueteros make an effort to contain the enthusiasm of the people accessing the microphone on the programme that they were trying to keep in order. And in that happy disorder, the strongest moment of the programming is the appearance of the women, with the job of explaining to the audience how they organize themselves.

Doña Argentina says that she came to the movement to work, that her function in the pickets and the dining rooms is 'to cook for thousands of people, and as you can imagine if you cook for a family, that is a very big job.' But the palms are for Porfiría, who is proud to show off her 'grey hairs and wrinkles like a trophy.'

'We' – she says forcefully – 'use the light blue handkerchief to show that we are identified by our work. We don't want either Duhalde or Kirchner to say that we are lazy, because they are the lazy ones, not us.'

Right before she says 'this is what I say, and I am called Porfiría,' applause erupts from three small houses away, where some neighbours have gathered under a tree to see her on the screen.

[IMAGE]

Speaking out

Someone who has never been in a picket surely will not understand what this means and encompasses. The road picket is not simply a blockade of paths; it is also the liberation of a portion of territory where an entire new world is developed, born of necessity and taking baby steps towards dignity.

It's a fight, but not only for revenge. Behind the walls of tyres and the masked faces of those responsible, a framework of relations, values, and communitarian life is being constructed. Marginalization is confronted, and hope gained.

To reduce the picket to a transport blockade is to hide its true essence, and that is what happens when it is represented by the cosy programmes of non-piquetero TV. To try to make them disappear is exactly that: to try to make them become once again socially invisible, people without faces, shadows without a future.

The analogy between the picket on the highway with piquetero TV is almost perfect, because it cannot be understood as simply an interruption of radio frequencies. It is not only about trying to take control of the space that is usually dominated by the communication monopolies but also creating a new relation between the common man and mass media.

When Porfiría declares to the four winds 'This is who I am, and this is what I have to say', she is making a political statement and simultaneously accomplishing an act of liberation. She recovers her own denied voice, and speaks for an audience of her companions and for anyone else that wants to hear her. She says what thinks and feels without any distorting intermediaries, publishers or editors of her speech.

And if there are people watching on the other of the screen, this is just a bonus. In itself the magical act of speaking out and speaking from the heart is enough to justify the whole day's work.

In times in which the media are divided between those that cry for repression and those that try to criminalize piqueteros like Porfiría, it is necessary to return to places like San Rudecindo to learn a little about communication. And it is necessary, also, to construct a few more blockades of the airwaves.

Cine Alavío

<http://www.revolutionvideo.org/alavio/>

TV Piquetera

<http://www.opipublica.com.ar/canalindex.htm>