

School of Indigenous Journalism in Bolivia: a tool to strengthen autonomies

In the autonomous community of Charagua Iyambae, more than 25 young Guaraní people are being trained in how to create and manage their own media. They point out the importance of keeping their communities informed from within their own cosmovision, they want to contribute to the defence of their rights and highlight the importance of communicating in their own language.

By Francisco Méndez Prandini - 1st December 2020

Bolivia's indigenous nations continue on their path towards Indigenous Aboriginal Farming Autonomies (AIOC), a right recognised by the Political Constitution and guaranteed by the Framework Law on Autonomies and Decentralisation. However so far, only three communities have achieved this, making it clear that they still have a long way to go in the process towards the full realization of their self-determination.

In addition to the indifference shown by part of society, there is opposition from sectors that are against autonomy and against indigenous peoples governing their own territories. On the other hand, structural colonialism and ignorance surrounding the benefits of a form of government that can strengthen democracy, slow down the process. At the same time, the constituted indigenous autonomies present great challenges to consolidate and deepen their new governance structure.

Along this journey, tools of communication are fundamental. For this reason, in September, in the Charagua-Iyambae Guaraní Autonomy, the School of Indigenous Journalism (EPI) was founded with the support of the Oré organisation and the Arakuaarenda Foundation. The project was born with the objective of ensuring the inhabitants of the territory become the protagonists of their means of communication and with the principle that journalism needs to be nourished by different voices that stem

from a diversity of identities in order to consolidate a more inclusive and respectful reality.

Indigenous Autonomies in Bolivia

In Bolivia, only four of the 36 autonomy claims filed with the state have been fulfilled: Charagua-Iyambae (Santa Cruz), Ragaypampa (Cochabamba), Salinas de Garci Mendoza and Uruchipaya (Oruro). More than ten years after the enactment of the Framework Law on Autonomies and Decentralisation, this number is strikingly low.

One of the reasons for this scenario, is the current legislation, which implies extreme institutional bureaucracy that hinders and delays the autonomous process. To begin with, indigenous organisations must comply with an excessive number of requirements for their statute to be approved in the first place, while simultaneously they have to face up to the resistance from those who defend the municipal model. In the same way, the state has not modified its regulations to understand and relate to existing indigenous autonomies, preventing them from reinforcing their self-government.

On the other hand, indigenous autonomies are up against two main challenges in their administration. First of all, they are building an internal financing mechanism to generate their own economic resources. They are working on the development of a series of models to replace rent-seeking and are aiming for economic autonomy. In the same vein, secondly, they continue to explore and incorporate their constitutionally determined autonomous competences and powers. In other words, they have not yet exploited the potentialities of the autonomous form of government due to legacies of the municipal government.

Communicate in order to transform

The need for diversity and plurality of voices in the media is one of the issues that has been emphasised most by the new audiences and demanded by communities and native peoples. In turn, autonomous government officials themselves are demanding

communicators to allow for more efficient governance. The advisor to the Charagua-Iyambae Autonomous Government, Magaly Gutiérrez Galean, recognises the need to train specialists in communication: "The Autonomous Indigenous Aboriginal Farming Governments need to incorporate communication strategies and bodies that facilitate the management of public institutions and inform the communities with political support and with the Guaraní people's own vision".

Continuing with this approach, the school accompanies the training of young people in terms of journalistic assets and skill sets and in communication through social networks so they can create their own media outlets within their community, join other existing non-indigenous media and nurture the structure of the Autonomous Indigenous Government of Charagua-Iyambae.

"Communication is a fundamental part of the autonomous process, always from a social and communitarian point of view. It strengthens our sense of identity and allows us to make our reality visible and share it. My personal goal is that by means of this trade we can amplify the voices of our brothers and sisters, who otherwise cannot make their demands and realities heard. I hope to be able to contribute to transforming society and the community through information that will promote the development of public policies", Dedé Yarigua Maraguari, a student from the Charagua Norte area, explains confidently.

Communication is a human right that allows communities to exercise their right to freedom of expression and access to information. At the same time, information is essential to be able to defend and claim other rights. Therefore, training in the use of digital platforms, social networks and communication tools is indispensable in reinforcing both recognition and appreciation of the indigenous peoples' culture, through the creation of cultural content in their own codes and languages. If the media play a decisive role in terms of ideas and the conception of reality, indigenous peoples must be

integrated and contribute from within to interculturality, vindicating their knowledge, wisdom and feelings.

Environment, gender equity and inter-community networks

In addition, the School of Indigenous Journalism forms its students in current affairs and debates. In this respect, it encourages them to reflect on the environment, where pollution and degradation directly harms and affects the communities and their territories. In the case of the Charagua Iyambae Autonomy, there is a special interest in the fires that have affected the Bolivian Chaco in the last two years. In addition to the fires in the Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco National Park and the Ñembi Guasu Area of Ecological and Cultural Interest, there is also concern about the situation of the Ayoreo indigenous people in voluntary isolation.

In the same way, the School has taken on a real commitment to gender equality and upholding the rights achieved by women. To this end, it draws on the knowledge of indigenous and peasant women, as well as on the experience of the battles fought in other Latin American countries.

Although the School of Indigenous Journalism is operating in the Charagua-Iyambae Autonomy, young people from the Gutiérrez area (Future Guaraní Kereima Iyambae Autonomy) and the Chiquitanía also participate. In this way, it seeks to establish communication networks between the communities in the different areas of the department of Santa Cruz de la Sierra and within the indigenous peoples guaraní and chiquitano.

In the same way, it is also working with communities in the city of Tartagal, Argentina, and it is expected that - once the pandemic is under control - they too will join the course of study. This is important given that the communities share a common history and their problems and agendas are very much alike.

Paso a Paso: an internal communication tool

In February 2020, current students of the School of Indigenous Journalism founded [Paso a Paso con la Autonomía Charagua-Iyambae](#) (*Step by Step with the Charagua-Iyambae Autonomy*), a community-based digital media outlet. There, they report on events taking place within the autonomy, among the Guaraní people and in the indigenous world of Bolivia and Latin America, with the aim of influencing and transforming the reality of their communities. During the pandemic, *Paso a Paso* was very useful in providing the population with information in both languages on the measures that the autonomous government was taking to contain the spread of the virus.

Demetrio Mariano Vaca, a Guaraní journalist from the Kuarirenda community, Bajo Isoso, values the positive impact training these young people in journalism will have: "Paso a Paso will nurture itself from communicators from the different areas of the Autonomy, allowing for immediate coverage from within the territory". Internal communication is a key element for the political management and administration of a territory whose size represents 6.53% of the country and 23% of the department, and whose social fabric is characterised by a diversity of social actors.

At the same time, Demetrio Vaca highlights the prior lack of media in Charagua and the possibilities new technologies offer to help democratise it: "Before, there were very few media outlets; we only had one programme on Radio Santa Cruz. It was difficult to find out what was happening in the areas. Social networks have allowed the incorporation of *Paso a Paso*. People today expect answers from our media to the concerns they have about the functioning of the Autonomous Indigenous Aboriginal Farming Government (GAIOC). In the same way, now, by providing them with information about what the GAIOC does, we are contributing to the transparency and democratisation of politics."

As well as *Paso a Paso*, from the School of Indigenous Journalism, the students have recently started up [Ñande Ñee](#), a radio programme they both manage and produce. As they gain experience as communicators, they are entering the political sphere of their communities and solidifying their civic participation, projecting themselves as future leaders. Both media – each designed and produced by young people themselves - respond to the codes, uses and customs of their communities. Both the choice of platforms and the production of bilingual content are decisions they have taken, in accordance to what they themselves chose to consume.

Voices from the territories

Indigenous peoples can no longer wait for mainstream media to decide to make indigenous peoples part of their agenda or to communicate in their own language and worldview. On the contrary, they must become protagonists who make use of their voice, which is often silenced, misused or dependent on intermediaries. Today, a journalism with an inherent point of view from the otherness is not enough; it needs to speak from the same territory.

In this sense, Rud Aries Guzmán, a student from Alto Isoso, is confident that this reality can be changed: "The media can and should be transformed. I don't see any media in Guaraní yet, nor is there much participation from our community in the existing media outlets. The fact that we, the Guaraní, are the ones communicating the news makes a difference: experiencing it first-hand changes the way it is treated."

It is the territory that colours the way of writing, seeing, feeling and constructing communication with its experiences and knowledge. Indigenous media must be influenced by their identity, wisdom and interests. Only an indigenous communicator will be able to make the facts known to his or her community, by sharing the cosmovision of the world and the customs of life with his or her brothers and sisters. At this point it is important to emphasise that the use of their own language in the communication process - which is an

imprint of their own identity, - generates more empathy with the audience and guarantees greater effectiveness.

Marcelo Alberto Quelca, Aymara and director of Fundación Arakuaarenda, agrees on the importance of indigenous communicators who live in their communities and media created by the Guaraní nation itself: "Local people have more detailed information about their reality. Foreigners, even if we have been in the territory for 15 or 20 years, will never have a complete picture. It is the actors themselves who have to generate their own development. External bias can lead to mistakes. That's why they have to manage themselves."

The agenda of the young Guaraní

Along these lines, to the current criticisms of the credibility of journalism, the young Guaraní add an ethnic questioning. "I don't feel represented by the mass media: they maintain a hegemony that tries to change the community logic, our vision as Guaraní people. The fact that the voice is indigenous is very valuable because it is our own voice. We are the ones who make our own realities known, from our own lived experiences, without waiting for others to come and tell us about how we live. Sometimes, in the process, we change what we really feel. We will do so proudly Guaraní, from our identity," says Dedé Yarigua.

In the face of the shortage of Guaraní journalists and voices expressing their opinions on national issues, it is impossible to analyse the entire reality of the country, nor is it possible to think about public policies without including the worldview and lifestyle of these peoples, who remain isolated. Therefore, the challenge for indigenous communities is to form and manage their own community media, in order to then intervene in public debate and the mainstream media with their agendas and opinions.

Bolivia's indigenous peoples, particularly those of the lowlands, must specialise in learning communication tools in order to preserve their identity, their view of reality and their

knowledge. In the era of communication and technological revolutions, the media's place is more relevant than ever. In this context, the School of Indigenous Journalism was created in the Bolivian Chaco to support the training of young indigenous people so that they can make a contribution to their communities and to the construction and development of autonomy through communication.

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