Chapter 3:

Tracing a History of Educational Communication in Venezuela with IRFA

(Excerpt from Part One: The Educational Potential of Community Media)

In Chapter 3, Carlos Manuel Araña traces the history of educational communication in Venezuela through the work of the Faith and Joy Radio Institute (IRFA). Araña takes readers through different ages of IRFA over the course of 30 years, from work guided by the slogan “every house is a school,” in which the radio extended the classroom into students’ homes, to a social constructivist approach informed by students’ prior knowledge and experience, and on to the present day, which finds IRFA in a quest for a new 2.0 model that targets youth, mostly girls and youth women, and aims to support technical and vocational education.

More information: www.col.org/LearningWithCM

COL’s Healthy Communities programme: www.col.org/HealthyCommunities
“It is no longer our intention to guide the student’s hand in learning different writing styles. Not by giving directions on the radio. We do, however, want to share knowledge, using the enchantment of the radio, giving priority to the skills to be learned and not just the content produced. More than an official educational programme, we look for the most relevant content to help listeners to face life as it is on the streets.”

Gerardo Lombardi’s words help us to remember the main purpose of Venezuela’s Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegria (IRFA; literally, the Faith and Joy Radio Institute): namely, to bring the poorest areas of the population into the educational system using radio and innovative pedagogies based on an edu-communicative experience. Specifically, this means developing content that is adapted to the changing needs of both the youth and adult audiences who make up the listenership of IRFA’s programmes.

IRFA’s history is marked by a dedication to political education, and the organisation has responded to many “moments of exclusion” that have affected the poorest areas of the population in Venezuela. For social groups that do not have economic power or technological means to produce or access content, educational radio development is an exercise in social inclusion, one that has gone through many phases of development.

The changes undergone by IRFA in its own history parallel those experienced by Venezuela and indeed even by Latin America as a whole. So as not to fragment IRFA as an institution, we prefer to describe our developmental trajectory in terms of ages instead of stages — a growth or maturation process that has occurred naturally.

We consider the following to be the ages of IRFA over the past 30 years.
Every house is a school
Father José Maria Velaz, founder of the Fe y Alegría organisations, said, “If we wanted to make each of the Fe y Alegría schools into a house in which children could find themselves, now with the radio we are going to make each house into a school.” This is IRFA’s essential paradigm: school and home, or, in other words, education and experience.

When IRFA first started more than 30 years ago, there were only four radio stations in the country. Venezuela had a 20 per cent illiteracy rate. Peasants left their fields to go to the capital with the hope of achieving development. It was a country looking to become modern and to shake off the stigma of underdevelopment.

While IRFA’s founders were looking for good examples of educational projects, they found the Cultural School of the Canary Islands (known by its Spanish acronym, ECCA), which in turn followed the work of the Colombian radio station Radio Sutatenza, the first radio station in the region to use the medium as a teaching tool. Father Francisco Villén of the Canary Islands was inspired by this educational approach and reformulated the islands’ educational system, reorienting the process on the basis of three synchronised elements: printed learning (didactic) materials, recorded audio classes, and learner support (orientation and tutoring).

At its outset, IRFA configured the relation between radio and education with these three pillars supporting it: a radio class known as “The Teacher at the House,” print materials and face-to-face tutoring. Using the radio, an instructor explained activities to the audience, page by page, referring to printed materials as if to give the feeling of close proximity to the student-audience, as much as possible taking the hands of the students and guiding them. Radio classes were followed by tutoring available every Saturday.

It was a purely behavioural or traditional educational paradigm, with no real interaction between teacher and learner. The radio was used purely as a conduit between the speaker, a teacher, and the student who could not speak through the radio, but merely listen.

Education and social transformation
In spite of this behavioural radio method, an interest in Paulo Freire’s pedagogical theories and practice developed among IRFA practitioners and, with it, an appreciation for his ideas of a liberating education and the teacher as an aesthete. In its second age, IRFA matured its project
Today IRFA is exploring new approaches to educational radio programming, including providing learning spaces for youth who are now more involved in all aspects of the learning process.

From its start, Venezuela’s Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegría (IRFA) combined educational programme broadcasts with weekly face-to-face tutorial sessions.
using these guidelines, moving towards edu-communication, in which education is the main tool to confront the potency of colonising projects. For someone like Mario Kaplún, a theorist of democratic communication from Uruguay, an edu-communication opportunity is an opportunity for a teacher to achieve a sense of freedom. *Abrebrecha* (or “Gap opener”) and *Avanzemos* (or “Let’s advance”) become more than just slogans: they are ways to understand adult education as it was to become practised at IRFA. And practising these ideals is exactly how the organisation’s expansion happened.

Radio stations and orientation centres alike started to appear all over the country, in line with IRFA’s goal to bring education to everyone. The development myth continued to keep Venezuela’s real advancement hypnotised. However, as more radio stations became established, a different approach to constructivist educational communication gained in popularity. This was an approach in which learning was viewed as a process through which individuals could “construct” meaning based on prior knowledge and experience.

In time, a dilemma between behavioural and constructivist followers appeared within IRFA, bringing it into an ideological crisis. Constructivists argued that behavioural schemes could not respond to contemporary needs. Old debates re-emerged about what can be successfully *taught* through the radio and how: answers or questions, interaction or monologue. As a result, the possibility that the radio audience would be able to think and participate was once again on the table. Constructivist educational and communicational theories were seen as being more suitable, but radio producers and educators continued to probe the boundaries and limitations of both paradigms.

**Innovative model – Version 2.0**

Today IRFA is exploring new approaches, adapting the constructivist radio model and consolidating its work as the organisation faces new challenges.

IRFA’s educational programming is different today, largely because school classes are no longer conducted through the radio. Instead IRFA has developed a live interactive youth radio magazine. Learners are no longer adults — statistics indicate that the average age of IRFA students is between 15 and 25 years old — and more than 50 per cent are girls or women. Technology has also changed: tape is no longer the

---

*Fe y Alegría radio stations, known for their success in teaching, will reach more than 15,000 participants by the end of 2012.*
standard for recording programmes, having been replaced by compact discs. Educational design is no longer based on objectives but rather on competencies. Technical and vocational learning is the new adventure. Venezuela’s economic situation requires increasing technical knowledge. Therefore, education programmes must respond so that the country’s human resources develop in such a way that young people are prepared for the challenges of the future. One of radio’s great contributions to educational communication is that it draws different segments of the population to the same conversation through the same process of communication — from indigenous peoples to women and children. This enables all people to learn about and know each other by sharing their lives and experiences.

The greatest challenge facing IRFA is to return to a place of education and communication innovation — in other words, to keep alive the restless attitude that gave life to the organisation in the first place. In its current capacity, IRFA is resisting the trend towards the reduction of communication to a mere product and of education to simply a generator of manpower. The organisation appreciates that the young and old alike find not only a place to study but a place where they can grow as people. More than ever, IRFA must pay attention to the changing times and become stronger with other institutions through collaboration.

Carlos Manuel Araña holds a degree in Philosophy and Philosophy Education. He works at the Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegría (IRFA) in Venezuela, where he is responsible for the training of staff and volunteers. He is part of the l’Équipe latino-américain de formation (ELFO) network of the Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica (Latin American Association for Radio Education, or ALER). Email: carlosmanuel1601@gmail.com

Instituto Radiofónico Fe y Alegría describes itself as a “Movement for Integral Popular Education and Social Development.” It works to empower the most impoverished and excluded members of the population by helping them in their personal development and participation in society. It sees education as a part of a pedagogical and political proposal for social transformation rooted in the local communities.

For further reference, see:

- www.feyalegria.org/