Chapter 8:
From the Kitchen to the Radio Studio

(Excerpt from Part Two: Stories of Learning)

In Chapter 8, Mónica Valdés introduces us to Martha Calderón and traces her journey from the kitchen to the radio studio in the town of Belén de los Andaquíes in Colombia. Martha transforms from a nagging citizen, who uses the local radio station as a forum to vent her frustrations with local citizens’ attitudes and behaviour, into a social communicator and a focal point for dialogue in the community through her very own programme, which becomes a vehicle for informal learning and community participation.

More information: www.col.org/LearningWithCM
COL's Healthy Communities programme: www.col.org/HealthyCommunities
The community radio comes on every morning before the light peers through from the Andes Mountains and the Amazon rainforest, in the south of Colombia. At 5 a.m., the airwaves come alive with the sound of guitars and invitations to enjoy the morning. The host brings his mouth to the microphone with a greeting, “Good morning to listeners throughout the Andaqui Radio broadcast area. Wings to your voice ...”

Martha Calderón listens, faithfully and critically, to the radio. She has been a listener since 1997 when the station came onto the FM dial with 250 watts of power. She listens as she washes the dishes. She listens as she prepares the food she sells to visitors, to the police and to officials who serve temporarily in this town of 11,000 inhabitants, located in the northeast of Caquetá Department.

Martha listens to the radio from her spotlessly clean kitchen and complains. Things are not going well in the village. She needs to talk.

The town of Belén de los Andaquíes was established in 1917 by men and women who came from the coastal areas of central Colombia looking for land, opportunity and a place to raise their children. It remains a distant place, with unsatisfied basic needs and high levels of corruption. It is a place lacking in infrastructure, job opportunities and, above all, education — particularly civic education. There are no opportunities for the people to learn to be citizens, to know their rights and duties as citizens, or to understand the value of public goods, space and utilities. However, Belén de los Andaquíes is also a privileged place: a place of rivers, mountains and rainforests — and of enterprising people with the potential to transform their situation.

Martha’s very first call to the radio was about the garbage left by people on the banks of the Sarabando River. At the station, Alirio González, the director, replied, “Hello, thanks for contacting us. What do you want to tell us?”
Colombia’s Martha Calderón was once a regular call-in listener to Andaqui Radio, speaking her mind on things she saw as wrong in the community. Today she is the host of her own popular programme — *La Cantaleta* (The Nagging) — which gives all citizens in the broadcast area the chance to air concerns about civic, social and family problems.

Martha came forth over the phone with anger and indignation. A large accumulation of waste along the river’s banks — from rides and games, lunches and restrooms — threatens not only its beauty but the very survival of its waters. She asks the people of the village why they do not take care of the river. Would they leave their houses as they have the river, full of dirt and disorder? Why do they not acknowledge the generosity of nature? She talks and complains to get rid of that anger that consumes her.

For several months Martha called the station to denounce everyday acts of residents and their leaders that contributed to problems in public services, the care of natural resources, the management and investment of the taxes, a lack of respect and solidarity among neighbours....

One day Alirio González made her a proposition on air: “Martha, why don’t you come and give us the benefit of your daily nagging right here at the station? You are no longer just a listener to the station; you have become the voice of our people.” She resisted: “No, I am not going there to the station. I don’t like microphones and I have a lot of things to do in my kitchen.”

Much like the old saying, “If Mohammed will not come to the mountain, then the mountain must come to Mohammed,” Alirio took the radio to Martha. He put together a remote transmitter and brought it to Martha’s kitchen where he talked to her on air. She complained, but she also spoke
about her recipes and what she was cooking that day. The radio programme was so well received that in no time listeners were familiar with this daily ritual of Martha talking about everyday problems in their municipality while simultaneously explaining some new recipes. This occurred always in dialogue with the director or the announcer on duty. That’s how Martha’s programme, *The Nagging*, got started. However, this was not enough. Martha began to receive complaints from other people and, in order to assume them as her own, she started to acquire a journalist’s habits and skills. She never denounced people or groups without first investigating and following up on complaints. The bulb of a street light, for example, was missing from a local road, inviting theft and inciting insecurity among people in the neighbourhood. Martha denounced it on the radio. When the bulb was replaced, she took to the airwaves, acknowledging the response, but warning public officials to be attentive to the complaints of citizens.

Martha is over 60 years old, which does not prevent her from teaching and learning. Her main concerns are related to civic culture and public management. Her approach is simple: she complains about things that are wrong and do not work.
“One weekend, we went to the Sarabando River with a group from the radio station. We walked along the river bank. We collected 17 bags of garbage. It was terrible. There was every kind of thing you can imagine on the banks of the river: diapers, old shoes, chicken leftovers, etc. I said, ‘Isn’t this disgusting? Aren’t they ashamed? They don’t know that by polluting water they are polluting life?’ I came back with that anger and spoke at the station.” Since then she does not rest from her “nagging,” half an hour in the morning from Monday to Friday.

Although the care given to the river has improved, there are many issues that remain and which cannot be neglected. Martha’s programme talks about the cleanliness of the village, the use of public space, the lack of efficiency of local government and the indifference of its inhabitants. Family issues are also her priority, such as parenting and the prevention of everyday hazards in the household and the countryside. Martha also continues to give advice on how to keep the kitchen clean and how to handle food (for example, to control insects that cause diseases). She knows that these problems can be addressed by the community radio, helping citizens to learn and to contribute gradually to positive individual and collective change.

In a little town, everybody knows everything and everyone knows everyone. But not everyone has the courage to speak up when something is wrong. This is especially true within contexts of social violence and armed conflict, such as that of Belén de los Andaquíes. Listeners seek Martha out in the marketplace, at her home and even while she is walking down the sidewalk. They tell her what they think of her programme. Feedback is immediate. Her listeners are also the protagonists in the stories she tells, and together they work through their complaints and grievances using the space provided by the radio. Martha’s programme has become a critical eye providing a kind of oversight to the administration of the municipality. It is a space for people to vent about social issues and the public knows hers is a voice that will be heard. They go to Martha because she has credibility.

Martha says her strategy is to talk to the audience — and those whose ears she is pulling — as if talking to a friend. Her style is simple. She does not name names, but speaks loudly and applies a strategy of sweetness. Many times when it comes to an issue concerning the town administration, she invites bureaucrats to get up out of their chairs and go see the problems for themselves.

Her language is not the most eloquent or diplomatic. People have criticised her approach because sometimes her tone is too tough, too critical. Nevertheless, the people enjoy Martha’s open if un-poetic speech. Journalist’s Day is celebrated in Colombia on February 9 and one year on
that day she received a congratulatory scroll. She laughs and says, “Oh, a so-called journalist. I am really just a member of the community. I have been fine-tuning my approach.... Now I am fine to talk,” she says with a big smile. “In any case, there is still much to do, but it is a seed. As my dad use to say: ‘He who plants a tree, plants a life.’”

Mónica Valdés, a Colombian journalist and anthropologist, is currently Trainer Director with the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC) for Latin America and the Caribbean. She is an experienced media producer and researcher whose areas of interest include educational, creative and social application of information and communication technologies (ICTs); social and citizen participation; health and social change communication; human rights; and public policy. Email: monvaldes@gmail.com

The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) for Latin America and the Caribbean (ALC) is an international non-governmental organisation (NGO) with 400 member radio stations, national associations in 18 countries and a regional council represented by sub-regions: Andean countries, Brazil, the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico and Southern Cone countries. AMARC-ALC’s mission is to support its network in promoting the democratisation of communication, freedom of speech and community radio as a social movement, and to contribute to social participation and equitable development. Latin America and the Caribbean, as with all regions of the world, are represented on the governing board of AMARC International.

For further reference, see: