

## Radio Baha'i Ecuador

*Kurt John Hein.*

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"Projects such as Radio Baha'i of Ecuador—born, nurtured and developed by a handful of 'inexperts'—have been raised as a pilot project in the world of communications for the integral development of mankind, a model from which to learn" (p. 155). So states Raul Pavon, an Ecuadorian Baha'i and the individual most intimately associated with the conception of this radio station and its moulding into a tangible reality.

At a time when the current crisis in communication has prompted a search for an alternative to the traditional model of communication, Radio Baha'i, incorporating the key elements of dialogue and participation which theorists believe more accurately describes the communication process, could have a profound influence on media communications in the future. The crucial challenge, particularly in Third World countries, is to assist indigenous people to participate in the process of development while at the same time helping them maintain their cultural heritage. Radio Baha'i, working as it does in the front line of development, has already gone some way towards meeting this challenge.

In *Radio Baha'i Ecuador*, Kurt John Hein, who was both researcher and participant at Radio Baha'i, gives a concise and inspiring description of this recent participatory media institution and offers media professionals and those involved with community development projects a communication model worthy of consideration. The book provides "an institutional expression of a set of beliefs about the nature of man, the nature of development, the nature of community and the nature of communication" (p. 133).

The philosophy of Radio Baha'i Ecuador derives from the basic principles of the Baha'i Faith, especially those relevant to the spiritual and material development of the individual and society:

Baha'is, believing in all revealed religious truth of past ages as an unfolding of one divine plan, have respect for the customs and traditions relating to these religions and cultures. They desire to preserve the cultural elements that contribute to the well-being of man. An effort is made to acquaint people with their own history on earth....Because of the Baha'i belief in the unity of mankind, all people are recognized as valued members of society and play an equally important part in building world order. (Baha'i International Community, 1973-74)

Many principles enunciated by modern communication theorists can be found in the world view offered by the Baha'i Faith. The concepts of dialogue and participation, which are fundamental aspects of present communication theories, are embodied in key Baha'i principles such as consultation and universal participation. Many emerging communication theories dovetail with Baha'i teachings. Guided by principles such as the abolition of all prejudice; equal rights, opportunities and privileges for both men and women; the harmony of religion and science; and universal education and service, Radio Baha'i is realizing its primary functions in releasing the potential of the indigenous communities and individuals.

That Radio Baha'i has become a success is noteworthy considering the powerful restraints that stand in the way of any great transformation of existing media systems. The dominant political and economic groups using communication processes to assist in Third World development have, it seems, succeeded in creating a culture of poverty. Programming aimed at rural indigenous populations has had virtually no effect on social and economic practices. Marginal human groups have remained cut off, maintaining their precarious systems of internal communication. At the time of the UNESCO seminar on Participatory Communication in Quito in 1978, no projects incorporating participatory elements in their design had succeeded. At the seminar it was stated "that such a system could only be possible in a society different from that which actually exists."

Although conceived to provide a link between members of the large Baha'i population in the Otavalo region of Ecuador, most of whom were rural *campesinos*, Radio Baha'i expanded its focus to include the whole community; in so doing it has transformed this technology—potentially an instrument of cultural domination—into a means of affirming and strengthening the culture of the Quechua communities. By consistently trying to apply Baha'i principles to the analysis of present social conditions, Radio Baha'i has created a highly effective development institution with a special framework and philosophy of social change, development, and education.

Broadcasting on medium and short wave in the Ecuadorian Highlands, Radio Baha'i serves primarily the indigenous Quechua communities within a 50-mile radius of Otavalo. It addresses the needs and reflects the interests of its audience. The station tries to promote education, deliver social services, and disseminate basic development information. The key to Radio Baha'i's identity is its fundamental commitment to promote and maintain traditional indigenous culture. As a voice for the community, the station allows for the exchange of information and announcements and the sharing of news about important activities and events in the region. Both formal and informal evaluations conducted in the community indicate that listeners perceive Radio Baha'i as "their" station. This has greatly assisted in the restoration of a sense of confidence and dignity regarding Quechua culture and has helped counteract any attempts to limit the capacities of indigenous people. In its support of traditional art forms, Andean music, and the Quechuan language, Radio Baha'i has greatly encouraged elements of culture that had been in decline.

Translating the high resolves and noble principles of the Baha'i Faith into a vigorously functioning radio station was not an easy task. In the institutions and communities of the Baha'i Faith, decisions are reached through a process called "consultation." It might well be asked what is new about a decision-making process used by parliaments, councils, committees, and associations worldwide. The special feature of Baha'i consultation, it seems, is the attitude, spirit, and method in which it is carried out. Kurt Hein describes the process:

In a spirit of unity, and after prayer, the facts of the matter at hand are determined and every member is encouraged to offer freely his thoughts and opinions. The purpose of the discussion is to achieve consensus, or failing that a majority view, so that action can be taken based upon the collective wisdom of the group. (p. 36)

Such consultation avoids the confrontation of monologue. Decisions are reached by means of dialogue when members of Baha'i institutions harmoniously take counsel together and express their feelings or ideas in absolute freedom.

The challenge for the station licensee, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Ecuador, was to develop a media institution whose management structure reflected the Baha'i principles of consultation while at the same time allowing the effective daily administration of the radio station's affairs. To fulfill the need for a consultative body on site, the Commission for Radio Baha'i was appointed to manage the station, but it remained

answerable to the assembly. Administering the daily affairs of the station was a director who sat as an executive officer on the commission and was responsible to both the assembly and the commission. These organizational components, allowing a non-professional body to be responsible for Radio Baha'i, were unprecedented in radio.

As a participatory communication model, Radio Baha'i has actively encouraged the involvement of local people in the operation of the station, and these people, as sources and actors, have helped establish the legitimacy of the station in the eyes of the community. The staff, most of whom are Quechuans, are drawn from the immediate area around Otavalo. Not all are literate, but these men and women have been trained to use the station's equipment and to prepare their own programs. As the station operates on a small budget, the staff are volunteers, receiving only a subsistence allowance. They have become "collaborators" in community service as they have become increasingly involved in training their counterparts not only in their own country but also in Latin America. Through its organization and operational methods, Radio Baha'i Ecuador fulfills several of the criteria essential to the structure of a participatory media institution as outlined by communication theorists.

A high percentage of the programming is music, much of it traditional Andean music, reflecting the tastes and interests of the audience. Some of the music has been obtained from recordings of the station's annual traditional music festival, "Nucanqhic Tono" (Our Music). Through cultural programs devoted to folklore, customs, traditions, festivals, and crafts as well as music, Radio Baha'i has helped to highlight the positive aspects of local culture. In organizing an annual children's cultural festival it has also helped to develop in school children an appreciation of various Ecuadorian cultures.

The Radio Baha'i news program is a valuable social service directed largely by the local people who visit the studio to broadcast announcements. The focus on local news, except on occasions of national importance, enables villagers to communicate important local events to one another. A typical news program will include items about lost children, missing identification papers, stray livestock, community dances, and community work parties. The news programs serve many of the communication needs of the audience and, because of its popularity, functions as an effective vehicle for the dissemination of development-oriented messages.

Radio Baha'i Ecuador has been effective in reaching its primary audience of rural indigenous farm families because it has created a distinctive, attractive sound by broadcasting the voices and ideas of typical members of the listening audience. The goal of the successful program "Tarpupac Yuyay" (The Thought of the Farmer) was to answer the needs of the mountain farm-

ers and herdsmen; to this end, project staff invited *campesinos* to talk about their concerns. Two project staff, a village woman and an elderly farmer, moderated the discussions as they were tape recorded; they then introduced the edited program when it was broadcast, incorporating answers supplied by agricultural extension experts. Segments of another popular program "Tulpa Muyundi" (Around the Hearth), which promotes the education of children and the role of women in community life, were also recorded in the villages. This program provides information on environmental health, personal hygiene, nutrition, and other topics.

The innovative administration, production, and programming methods of Radio Baha'i have maximized audience participation in the station's operations. The people in the Otavalo area, who not only have access to, but also participate in and manage their own radio station, work to promote the well-being of their community.

As an organic institution, the radio station's successful gestation is not the end. The creative process is self-nourishing and will not easily be put in cold storage. Radio Baha'i has continued to explore different ways to release the full potential of people. Similar radio stations have been established in Peru, Chili, Bolivia, Panama, U.S.A., and Liberia, and further research is being done into the replicability of the model. Ways are also being sought to assist local people to become more self-reliant, both as individuals and as members of the community. The station also seeks to assist listeners in decision-making processes and, although it is an informal educational institution, Radio Baha'i Ecuador continues to investigate its potential as a tool for formal instruction.

*Radio Baha'i Ecuador* illustrates how one people's use of modern communications media has helped them uplift themselves; "in the process and as a consequence they are extending the benefits of their efforts to society as a whole" (Universal House of Justice, 1983). This book is a valuable resource for all those involved and interested in community development and education.

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