Letter from Sydney

Activists, media practitioners, community development workers, researchers and academics were the main participants of the OURMedia 6 / NuestrosMedios 6 international conference held in Sydney, Australia, from April 9 to 13, 2007. This conference followed those organized since 2001 in Washington, Barcelona, Barranquilla, Porto Alegre and Bangalore. Year after year the OURMedia network has expanded internationally covering all regions of the world. 200 people from 40 countries participated at the OURMedia 6 conference, presenting a variety of experiences and themes for discussion.

The OURMedia Network has become an important forum for dialogue on issues affecting participatory, community, alternative and citizens' media and communication throughout the world. A central challenge has been that of building the legitimacy and recognition for the vital role of grassroots media and communication work within processes of social, cultural and political change. The network has provided a focal point for affirming the value of this contribution, and has enabled collaboration, exchange, research and activism on many issues, including freedom of expression, the right to communicate, and fairer access to the world's media and communications resources for the betterment of all.

OURMedia 6 participants renewed their commitment to support the innumerable struggles going on in the world to establish, strengthen and amplify the voices of those that have been silenced or marginalized. These struggles take place at all levels of society, from grassroots communication initiatives to advocacy, policy-making and legislation efforts from the local to the national to the transnational. Forming and strengthening alliances and linkages with other sectors and movements has been, and will continue to be, an essential part of OURMedia's strategy.

Many key insights, successes and challenges were expressed by participants during the conference, some of them having potential as research themes or topics for the next Our Media conference. Here are just a few highlights:

Building community, identity and alliances

Many participants shared insights into the identity- and community-building effects of community and citizen's media, both in developing solidarity and cohesion within marginalised groups and communities, and in enabling links, voice and representation between these communities and wider audiences. Further work is needed to encourage these community-building processes, and to foster links and partnerships between community media actors and others. Within this, we need to engage in solidarity with all generations of migrants from around the world in their struggles for human rights.

Participation in policy and governance processes

In a world in which "participation" has been used instrumentally to legitimise top-down policies, participatory media and communication are providing means by which people can represent themselves on their own terms, and reframe their issues and identities rather than conforming to external definitions. We need to better understand the role of community and participatory media and communication within policy and governance processes; including the role of media actors as policy actors.

Addressing differences: power, gender, diversity and worldviews

We are challenged to reflect and analyse power relations, including the way differences of gender, identity and cultural worldview may be either challenged or reinforced by our media and communication work. Enthusiasm for technical and methodological innovation needs to be balanced with attention to how power operates in culture and society, and the way it is constructed at the personal and micro levels. We need to be reflexive about our own power and practice, and sensitive to power

realities in the contexts of our work, highlighting what our responsibilities are.

The power of art and aesthetic expression

Many presenters underscored the centrality of art, emotion and feeling in media and communication work, as a means of producing and redefining cultural assumptions. Art has the ability to challenge socially and culturally embedded norms of power which give rise to inequalities – whether rooted in class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity, age or citizenship status – and to imagine and express new meanings and identities. We need to address the divide that sometimes arises between art, media practice and the generation of new knowledge.

Audiences and the right to be understood

We have work to do in better understanding both the audiences and producers of community media, and how the relationship between community media audiences and producers differs from those in other forms of media. We need to reconceptualise community media beyond issues of access and participation, to include the notion of "listening" and "the right to be understood".

Beyond the binary of "alternative" and "mainstream"

We need to question the binary between alternative and mainstream media, (particularly in relation to youth media) where politicised definitions may exclude certain voices and inhibit the development of digital literacies. Participatory and community media needs to define itself as much more than an "alternative" to mainstream or dominant forms, and to affirm its place as force for social transformation.

Sustainability, community ownership and control

Much work is needed on models and strategies for sustaining community media and communication work at all levels, and especially to enhance the capacity of local level producers to own, control and manage their activities. Within this, we need to look to models that combine resources and knowledge to strengthen the capacity of non-profit organisations. Many presenters commented on the time it takes to media producers to

develop self-awareness and confidence as well as technical capacities. Those who practice and support community media need to get beyond project-based approaches and see our work as long-term and part of the media ecology.

Measuring outcomes – Participatory Evaluation

Many presenters expressed frustration with narrow, results-based funding and reporting requirements, leading to an emphasis on "product" and short-term results. There is a strong interest in developing capacities to better document qualitative effects on the lives of media producers and users. We need to develop our skills and methodologies for action research and evaluation, and also educate donors about the qualitative social change outcomes we are striving for.

Positive and negative developments

During the past few years, positive and negative developments have occurred worldwide in relation to participatory, alternative, community and citizens media and communication. We appreciate the efforts that some multilateral and development organizations, such as UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, are doing to support community media based Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), video and radio in countries of Asia and Africa, in particular.

However, the current worldwide situation is far from offering equitable opportunities for the right to communicate and to develop participatory, community and citizens' media and communication platforms and organisations. In spite of some improvements, the overall situation remains fragile and threatening. Advances in legislation that favor community media have been slow in spite of the work of organizations such as AMARC and APC in various regions. The forces of corporate dominance and transnational, national and state harassment, sometimes separate, sometimes combined, present major obstacles to the free development of these media.

Digital media is creating substantial challenges for community media, in terms of distribution, the development of appropriate technologies, intellectual property issues and the cultivation of digital literacy. As one participant at OM6 stated, "when the storm comes we have the choice to

build shelters or to construct windmills". Our aim, as community media practitioners and scholars must be to design and create windmills to harness the opportunities of digital technologies.

Advances and obstacles within major regions of the world

In Australia, recent 'reforms' to media laws are causing greater concentration of media ownership. Community media is more important than ever in ensuring diversity of voices and in maintaining and building (multi)cultural openness and understanding. However, the political environment has resulted in a compartmentalization and fragmentation of community and alternative media practices, which in many cases are fully dependent on the structures of local and regional governments. At the national level, digital broadcasting legislation must urgently accommodate existing community radio and television services and provide adequate spectrum access for growth, experimentation and new participants. Australia has been a pioneer in the establishment of community and Indigenous media and has a strong base from which to innovate and extend democratic media structures. It is imperative that research is conducted into viable models for community broadcasting distribution across all platforms and that radio and television stations are assisted in making use of new media platforms.

We see a potential problem with the introduction of new research quality framework schemes (RQF) and the negative impact it may have on researchers interested in research with and by communities. We believe there should be a proposal for a national forum on community media where different sectors could meet and debate futures of participation through media in Australia. We are concerned that the Australian government has not prioritized issues of equitable access to ICTs in Australia and that the simplistic solutions to the digital divide (providing internet access in schools and libraries) and the provision of non-sustained funding through Networking the Nation and other smaller initiatives need to be reviewed and updated to ensure communities and individuals already marginalized through social, economic and/or geographical exclusion are not further excluded. We also call the Australian government

In the Pacific, community media is developing slowly and needs to be encouraged so that Pacific Islanders have access to a diversity of governance and development information. To assist community media to develop further, Pacific Island governments, civil society organizations and international agencies need to embrace community media as an integral part of governance and development.

In Asia, we recognize the important advances in India with the introduction of legislation that legitimizes community radio in that country. We are pleased to note that India is the first country in South Asia to have a policy for community radio. We welcome the restoration of democracy in Nepal and its ongoing journey towards establishing people's rule. We are pleased by the way the independent media in Nepal is generally able to function freely since the April uprising in 2006. We also welcome the recognition of community broadcasting in the Digital Strategy by the Pacific ICT Forum Ministers meeting, which includes the recognition of community FM broadcasting in the Digital Strategy.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned by the fact that the recognition of community broadcasting in India has been accompanied by excessive limitations on content. It is not acceptable that the Government has put a restriction over the broadcast of news by community radios. We view this as a violation of the basic right to information and appeal to the Indian government to remove such barriers from the policy. In the Philippines we are gravely concerned about the safety and freedom of community radio stations and broadcasters, which are being continuously attacked by criminal forces that enjoy the backing of politicians in power. The take over of Thailand by the military junta is a step backwards for media freedom, democracy and people's right to freedom of expression. We are also deeply concerned at the level of oppression against media after the military coup. Authorities have shut down more than 300 community radio stations and are exercising strictest measures of control over all independent media outlets.

The ground for Community Radio in sub-Saharan Africa has been pockmarked and oftentimes rocky, but it is a hardy plant, resilient and enduring like its peoples. Wrested out of apartheid, the trailblazing leadership of South African community radio was reinforced by Namibia and other countries in the southern hemisphere and will surely help

community media activists on the ground and in the diaspora to tear down the walls of repression in Zimbabwe. Community radio has, with careful nurturing, taken strong root in Mozambique and, given the same care, can look forward to thriving elsewhere in the varied landscape of Lusophone Africa.

In East Africa, community radio is regenerating in Kenya, home of the first, but all too short-lived, community radio station in Africa, making significant inroads in Uganda and Tanzania and preparing for entry in Ethiopia and, even more actively, in both southern and northern Sudan. Community radio has proliferated in Francophone West Africa, especially in Mali, the other trailblazer in other Africa, and a strong, broad based grassroots organization will ensure its introduction in Nigeria sooner rather than later, even while it has emerged out of war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone and, though yet small in number due to regulatory constrictions, developed a strong participatory ethos in Ghana.

In most of the Arab countries, the governments still control the media through legislation, but there are some attempts to develop community media --- mainly in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. Community radio online has been an option in countries where broadcast licenses for community media are hard to obtain. But we still need a lot of political work to be done before achieving freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

Community media in Latin America has more than 50 years of development. Several thousands of radio stations, community and indigenous video organizations have developed throughout the region, particularly in countries such as Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile and Colombia. Legislation is being developed and approved all over the region, however and in spite of this history of participatory media, local communication initiatives are systematically curtailed - often with violence - in countries such as Guatemala, Brazil and Mexico. We solidarize with the struggle of community media activists and practitioners in Oaxaca and vigorously reject the violence responses of the Mexican government and the repression of Indigenous media makers in other countries of the region.

The concentration of commercial media in fewer hands has increased and is one of the biggest problems for the development of independent,

alternative and participatory communication. The conversion to digital systems is seen as an opportunity either for democratization of media or for the consolidation of power of the large conglomerates. Some countries such as Uruguay have improved the legal and regulatory environment in terms of recognizing community media, and others are supporting community media initiatives, such as Colombia or Venezuela with legislation and some measures to try to promote and fund new stations.

The Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States (OAS) in his 2006 Annual Report has recommended state members to legislate and to reserve part of the electromagnetic spectrum for community media. The issue of reserving a section of the spectrum is absolutely essential to guarantee real and future utilization of radio broadcasting opportunities.

In Europe, community radio has played an important role in democratic societies. Community radio in Ireland is now a decade old and cable community television is now up-and-running. The Broadcasting Commission of Ireland has a progressive attitude to community media, seeing it as a cost effective means to local development, multiculturalism and cultural engagement. We applaud the growth of the community media sector in the United Kingdom. We welcome the inclusion of the newly licensed UK stations, their volunteers and audiences into the global community media sector. We encourage other countries to emulate the Irish and British government's constructive approach to community media. We are pleased to support the development towards a community radio sector in Georgia and we hope that other Eastern European states view all forms of community media in a positive and supportive manner.

We are pleased by the fact that the UNESCO convention on cultural expression was ratified by the EU and came info force in March 2007. We urge the EU to take action on the promotion of community and independent communication, as an expression of cultural and linguistic diversity, with the establishment of stable funding. We also urge the Australian Government to take a more active and progressive role at the international level.

OURMedia is concerned by the ongoing revision of the EU directive "Television Without Frontiers" (89/552/EEC): although the directive aims at protecting diversity of opinion, media pluralism and the public interest, there is no mention of community or minority television.

In the Unites States, twenty years of media consolidation has led to a mediascape with little space for public dialogue and debate. Very few commercial radio stations offer news at all, most TV stations offer very limited local news coverage, and metropolitan newspapers are under threat in cities across the country. The impact has been greatest on poor communities, communities of colour, and new immigrant communities, which are systematically stereotyped or not reported. While the Internet has increased the number of outlets, the numbers of actual reported stories has shrunk. The blogging phenomenon has been positive in spotlighting, and providing some counterpoint to corporate and public service journalists and politicians; however, it has not generated a great deal of new reporting.

The "independent" news, radio, TV and Internet media, some of which are community-based, continue to grow in number, sophistication, credibility, and audience. Some of these services are significant sources of information for many people, and are regularly checked by the mainstream media as well. However, the challenges of sustainability remain for almost all. They are continually forced to fight for the platforms on which they operate, from the cable and satellite space, to radio spectrum. For example, the recent regulation supporting the renewal of micro-radio stations has provided some smaller communities with an important communications resource. However, the great majority of these new licenses have not been issued to groups otherwise shut out of the media, but to large conservative Christian concerns, which are already well-resourced. As well, some micro-radio centers are still considered illegal, as there is very limited provision for stations in urban areas. Looming as well, is regulation which would make cable access, which has been so important to so many groups, a thing of the past.

The move to digital platforms has provided new openings and closings. Many groups have migrated to the web, and used it in significant ways. However, broadband resources continue to be concentrated in the wealthier parts of urban centres, and many people are left out. At the

same time, restrictive intellectual property regimes have been used to share producers from sharing content.

While there is support for participatory and community media and communication work from within governments, and from international and national organizations, the huge potential of this field remains both under-recognized and under-supported. Too often media and communication are perceived mainly as means for the mass delivery for pre-conceived messages, rather than as vital forms by which ordinary and often voiceless people can participate more directly in shaping their culture, society and politics. We feel that the time has come that "our media" be accepted and supported as a legitimate force for change, rather than a message-delivery add-on to other programs and interventions.

There are still areas that need to be worked upon. One of these was raised in Porto Alegre and now in Sydney has been raised again. There needs to be a process by which self-representation is made possible, particularly in regards to participation of Indigenous speakers and participants.

Youth media is essential for the cultivation of digital literacies and this requires that access and training be mainstreamed. We need to question our definitions of alternative media in respect to the changing context of youth media engagement. The rise of commercial spaces such as YouTube and Myspace has popularized individual expression, and sometimes these spaces are used to build politically engaged youth communities. However, the primary function of these spaces is to capture advertising revenue for corporate shareholders by appropriating free cultural production and social labor from young people. They also typically have terms of use that give the corporate site the rights to do whatever they like with the user generated content. Finally, they readily respond to either corporate or government requests for information about users, as well as to corporate or government requests to remove material. For these reasons their success is a double edged sword. Non-profit alternatives built on free software exist, and can resolve these concerns, but require resources for technical development and maintenance.

Another key area of concern for community media makers is the battle over the so-called Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) regime. This regime includes ever-longer copyright and patent terms, the criminalization of infringement, increased resources from governments for the policing of intellectual property rights, the proliferation of technological controls built in to electronics devices, and a propaganda war funded by knowledge monopoly industries. In addition to the serious impacts on health (lack of access to medicines due to drug patents), agriculture (patents on seeds), and the theft of indigenous cultures, knowledge systems, and genetic material (biopiracy), the extension and strengthening of the maximalist intellectual property rights regime poses special threats to community media makers.

The IPR regime creates barriers to media production, because it severely limits how source materials can be used, remixed, analyzed, and reworked. Works of social history that include significant elements of community and movement produced media, like the documentary "Eyes on the Prize," have been blocked from distribution because of copyright clearance problems. Students and young people are the targets of a massive campaign to convince them that filesharing music and films is illegal, dangerous, and immoral. In the USA, many internet radio stations are on the verge of being shut down because they cannot afford to pay the royalties required to include copyrighted music in their playlists. The major media studios are pushing to build ever-stronger technological controls into each new generation of recording devices, computers, and information infrastructure. Still, each of these efforts is matched by resistance, and concrete counterprojects like Free and Open Source Software, copyleft, and creative commons constantly build, reconstruct, defend and extend the commons.

Strengthening and Sustaining OURMedia

Given these many successes, issues and challenges, there is clearly a mandate to carry OURMedia into the future, and to strengthen and sustain it as a vital network and transnational community forum. OURMedia has experienced impressive growth over its short lifespan, while maintaining its ethos of participatory governance, not having a "centre", and being rooted foremost in practice, activism and engaged research. The network continues to play the bridge-building roles upon which it was

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founded: linking activists and academics; North and South; and those working in different media. A challenge is to build and strengthen our links with social movements; with other key actors and sectors facing similar challenges; and with existing resources (such as areas of social theory and practice) that are central to OURMedia's aims and purpose. We must also ensure our work contributes to current debates on climate change, environmental policy and the role of community and alternative media practice and research in these areas as well as innovative uses of community media for peace building and conflict resolution.

Taken together, these issues, themes and challenges provide possible areas of work, research and networking that can help to strengthen and sustain OURMedia, and to position our community media and communication work not as a magic solution by itself, but as one vital part of a systemic and inclusive approach to social change and the right for all to communicate, that will lead to a more integrated, just and better world.

The Participants gathered at OURMedia 6 International Conference

Sydney, April 13 2007