Mass media and Civil Society Organizations:

Strengthening alliances for the benefit of democracy and human rights in Latin America

Catalina Montoya

Javeriana University and Programme of Journalism Studies, Colombia

July 2010

I would like to start my presentation by thanking Professor Guy Berger and the Open Society Institute, for making it possible to be here and share with you our experience in the *Programme of journalism Studies* and some of my own research within it.

The *Programme of Journalism Studies* is a non-academic programme within Javeriana University created to promote debate, training and alliances with civil society organizations around the social production and uses of information and communication technologies. The Programme is part of the Faculty of Communication and Languages, which is the second oldest in the field of communication in Latin America. It is also located in the multimedia technology lab MATRIX, which allows for visual, sound and web production.

The lab has allowed the Programme to accompany a variety of civil society organizations and groups in the production of their own communication projects. This experience, which we have called "Journalism from…", has started to build upon experiences in which indigenous communities, children, schools from marginal areas, communities affected by armed conflict, social movements and youngsters, amongst others, have developed their own communication proposals. At the same time, the Programme offers training seminars, particularly in the field of new technologies linked with social processes and digital journalism.

Our activities also include engaging in alliances with other institutions in projects aimed at renewing the practice of journalism and promoting the production and dissemination of

information, not only from media outlets but also from civil society organizations. For example, the Programme is currently involved in a project aimed at the creation of global corporate responsibility and sustainability standards for media organizations. Our partners are the Foundation for New Latin American Journalism (FNPI), AVINA Foundation, the Global Report Initiative (GRI) and different media outlets worldwide such as the BBC, The Guardian, Vivendi, Bertelsmann, Clarín Group, Reed Elsiever, Gestevisión Telecinco and Group Antena 3 from Spain, Gazprom Media Holding, TNT Broadcasting Russia, Warner Brothers Entertainment from the USA and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

We also form part of another alliance called "Media and Democracy" along with the Foundation for New Iberian-American Journalism (FNPI), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and AVINA Foundation, with the sponsorship of the UK Embassy in Colombia. The alliance started in 2006 to assess the contribution of news media to democracy and Human Rights through responsible and pluralistic reporting, corporate responsibility standards and a closer relationship with civil society organizations. As part of this alliance, the research I carried out and share today explores for the first time 15 alliances in Latin America between media and civil society organizations focused on human rights and democracy projects. In order to do so, 35 individual and group interviews were carried out between November 2008 and May 2009 with representatives of media and civil society organizations which were part of the alliances. The main purpose of the study was to identify strengths, weaknesses and lessons for future alliances and their contribution to the development of democracy and human rights. In addition, the research aimed to strengthen the ability of civil society organizations to consolidate more permanent and closer relations with media. The results of this study have been shared in workshops and debates organised by the alliance with media and civil society organizations to promote their inclusion in the agenda of both types of organizations.

Background

Media organizations in Latin America are going beyond the mere production of contents and information to become active agents in social projects from a corporate social responsibility framework and in alliance with external players, particularly civil society organizations. Corporate

Social Responsibility can be defined as a set of practices adopted by companies in order to improve the workplace and to benefit society further than these organizations are legally bound to do. Such practices are generated by social pressures or demands, ethical concerns, internal innovation or competitiveness (Vogel, 2005, pp.2-4). In other words, alliances are produced by a combination of altruistic and utilitarian motivations. Ethical concerns reflect the search for legitimacy and social credibility, and acknowledge the fact that that morality is part of a company as much as of any human relation and that the actions of a company impact on society in the places where it operates (García-Marzá, 2003, pp.22-24). Utilitarian motivations include reducing certain risks, improving the status quo, and looking for competitive advantages which improve the positioning of these organizations (Austin et al., 2005). In short, corporate social responsibility actions search to reconcile social values with the market (Vogel, 2005, p.28), improving the companies' reputation and social credibility and therefore, their profitability.

Civil society organizations such as Foundations or NGOs are becoming strategic allies for media, given the access they give to knowledge, human capital and social networks that amount to improved reputation, trust and credibility for media organizations. Civil society organizations can be defined as non-profit organizations that pursue the common good or the interests of their members and whose structure allows them to administer resources (Rey et al., 2008, p.209). At the same time, civil society organizations look to participate in public life through awareness-raising and media and, therefore, become an important tool for the dissemination and legitimazing of such organizations' actions and agendas. The cooperation between these organizations have materialised in alliances or collaborative relationships "in which two or more corporate organizations participate from a non-profit criteria, in order to achieve individual or common agendas" (Austin et al., 2005, p.4, translation by Montoya) through funds, human capital and/or technical expertise (Rey et al., 2008, p.194).

Previous research on alliances between the corporate and third sector in Latin America have noticed that the levels of cooperation are varied and can be located along a continuum: a *philanthropic stage* in which an organization sporadically donates expertise or funds to another; a *transactional stage* in which the relationships between organizations are important for their ends, so there is an exchange of basic skills around specific activities; an *integrative stage* between organizations were common initiatives are undertaken which include shared values, strategies and a high contribution of knowledge, skills and resources, having, in consequence, more possibilities

of establishing themselves over time and generating social and corporate value (Austin et al., 2005).

In addition, further pioneering research in corporate social responsibility of media in Latin America (Rey et al., 2008) has described alliances between media and civil society organizations as being part of wider initiatives orientated towards the generation of profit, central in Corporate Social Responsibility actions. This study found that 86% of the media observed in Latin America (37) has established alliances, and 87% of this percentage has done it specifically with Civil Society Organizations.

The research introduced in this paper focused specifically on alliances that aimed to contribute to democracy and human rights, and in concordance with previous literature, the importance of alliances for social initiatives of media and CSO as well as their possible variations is acknowledged. The study explored the goals and strategies of the alliances observed, the mutual perception of CSO and media about the joint work, the achievements and the shortcomings of the initiatives and the lessons they provide for future alliances and their contribution to democracy and human rights agendas.

Methodology

Comparative case studies were chosen in order to allow a closer examination of the particular projects along with semi-structured interviews. The aim was to explore the perceptions of some of the main representatives of the media and CSO involved in the alliances regarding their mutual relationships and evaluation of such initiatives. The interviews were carried out individually or in groups via telephone, email or in person, depending on the availability of those interviewed. Some alliances included a variety of media, CSO, state organs and universities. Since the purpose was not to evaluate the alliances *per se*, but the relationships *between* two types of organizations, representatives of at least one CSO and media organization involved were interviewed.

In addition, the institutions that form part of the Alliance "Media and Democracy" helped in the identification of experiences through their Latin American networks which were then corroborated by consulting the web pages of the institutions and/or alliances identified. Experts close to the alliance's network were also very useful in providing information that allowed complementing the initial sample. The initiatives were chosen if they reported goals related to democracy and human rights, concrete strategies and achievements.

The interviews focused on the *alliances and their structure*, that is, the goals, organization, resources, achievements and shortcomings of the projects. Secondly, the interviewees were asked about how the *relations between media and CSO* were handled, the mutual importance of these organizations, the coverage of CSO by the media and the impact of alliances on the perceptions, coverage and pursuit of the organizations' agendas. Thirdly, the questions also focused on the *lessons learned* for the joint work between these organizations and their contribution to agendas of democracy and human rights.

Experiences

The experiences identified were classified into three groups: a) common initiatives in which media and civil society organizations contributed as independent organizations but within a common framework of principles and strategies; b) projects in which media foundations, which are CSO with a natural proximity to media organizations participated and; c) experiences of unilateral cooperation of media or CSO with its counterpart.

Alliances for joint projects between media and civil society organizations were similar to the *transactional*, longer term collaborations around shared views and strategies, described earlier (Austin et al., 2005). These included the promotion of public awareness and discussion around emigration (*Walkers,* Colombia) and community life issues (*Schools Student Journalism*, Peru). Also, they aimed at fostering qualified public participation in elections (*Vital Vote*, Colombia), the construction of candidates' political proposals (*Citizens' Agenda*, Puerto Rico), and civic life and sustainable projects (*Signs of Change*, Argentina). Other topics on which these projects focused was the advancement of transparency and accountability in political campaigns and public Administration (*Network of cities "How are we doing?"* in Colombia, and *Political Transparency* in Argentina).

There were also alliances in which media foundations and organizations of journalists participated, which I took into account as a separate category given the relative closeness between such organizations and media. These initiatives also developed a *transactional* level (Austin et al., 2005) as described earlier on. The agendas carried out within this line of work included training and consultancy for journalists to improve the quality of their reporting, and through it, the quality of public opinion on human rights and democracy issues (*Reporters of Colombia* and training courses

given by El Universo Foundation). Also, one initiative leaded by Televisa Foundation in México, campaigned around social values to improve civic life (*Do you have the value or you don't care?*).

A third group of initiatives was more similar to the *philanthropic stage* (Austin et al., 2005, pp. 4-5) quoted earlier, in which media or civil society organizations provided funds, coverage or some other skills/resources characteristic of their own organizations in support of their counterparts. The experiences identified included media space on air and without charge (TV Globo, Brazil) or favourable coverage to civil society organizations and their agendas in general (Los Altos de Jalisco newspaper, Mexico), or to particular campaigns such as the *Alliance against racism and ethnic discrimination* in Guatemala (CIVITAS and other allies). Also, in some projects civil society organizations offered scholarships for training journalists (PRENDE, Mexico), or provided funds for reporting issues such as emigration of Central Americans emigrants by El Faro.net sponsored by the Open Society Institute (*On the Road,* Salvador).

Results

 The alliances researched focused on agendas of democracy, human rights or both. Examples of experiences centred in agendas of democracy were the *Network of Cities "How are we doing?"* and *Vital Vote* in Colombia, *Political Transparency* in Argentina, *Schools Student Journalism* in Peru, *Citizens' Agenda* in Puerto Rico and *PRENDE Scholarships* in Mexico. The projects centred of human rights were the radio show *Walkers* in ECOS 1360 of Colombia and the section *On the road* of El Faro.net in Salvador, related to the phenomenon of migration; the initiative *Reporters of Colombia* centred on the reporting of the armed conflict; and the *Alliance against racism and ethnic discrimination* in Guatemala. Also, the projects which worked on both democracy and human rights were *Signs of Change* in Argentina, the campaign *Do you have the value or you don't care?* In Mexico, the training of journalists by the foundation *El Universo* in Ecuador, the donation of space on air to CSO by TV Globo Brazil, and the favourable coverage given to CSO by *Los Altos* newspaper in Mexico.

The projects' goals underpinning these agendas were the *fostering of citizenship expression* in the case of *Schools Student Journalism* in Peru, the *Network of Cities "How are we doing?"* in Colombia, *Citizens' Agenda* in Puerto Rico and the radio show *Walkers* in ECOS 1360, Colombia, the space on air and coverage given by TV Globo in Brazil and Los Altos de Jalisco newspaper in Mexico to OSC. Secondly, the projects focused on *citizenship education* such as *Vital Vote* in

Colombia, *Signs of Change* in Argentina, the campaign *Do you have the value or you don't care?* in Mexico, *Walkers* in Colombia, and *On the Road* in El Salvador. Thirdly, some projects aimed at the *qualification of public information and press coverage* such as *PRENDE scholarships* in Mexico, training courses for journalists by Foundation El Universo in Ecuador, *Reporters of Colombia*, *Alliance against racism and ethnic discrimination* in Guatemala, Walkers in Colombia and *On the Road* in El Salvador. Another line of work was *transparency, accountability and efficiency of public administration* and it was pursued by projects such as the *Network of Cities "How are we doing?"* in Colombia, *Political Transparency* in Argentina, and *Citizens' Agenda* in Puerto Rico.

Mutual perceptions and joint work

According to the representatives of media interviewed, the importance of CSO lies in their expertise, their ability to engage with communities at grass-roots level, their support of media in consolidating corporate social responsibility actions and their constructive role in democracy. On the other hand, representatives of CSO asserted that the importance of the media lies in making these organizations and their agendas of public concern. Also, CSO attribute to media the potential to qualify or influence public opinion, mobilize politicians and citizens alike, and provoke public debate.

The experiences observed were classified into alliances between independent organizations, alliances were media foundations participated and projects were media or CSO received unilateral cooperation from its counterpart. On the one hand, the role played by CSO was to provide or search for financial aid, and support with human capital, planning, organization and development of strategies and training. On the other hand, the role played by the media varied slightly in the three types of projects observed. In projects with unilateral support, the media provided time on air out of charge, positive coverage and consented to be part of training programmes by CSO. When media foundations participated in the project, media normally supported with the dissemination of campaigns and products and participated in training strategies directed to them. Nevertheless, the role of media in joint projects between independent organizations included further actions from dissemination and coverage such as financial aid and the development of communication strategies.

In general terms, relationships between media and CSO tend to be under the responsibility of their management teams, communication offices, corporate social responsibility departments, or

people specifically in charge of the projects. In only one case (*Network of Cities "how are we doing?"*) the allies established an independent coordination of the alliance, which had been well evaluated by the partners. The coverage of CSO is normally appointed to editors, journalists, and sections, according to the subject.

With regards to coordination efforts, the alliances between independent organizations required more efforts in coordinating the work but also reported more indicators of success with regards to the other types of alliances. Meanwhile, those projects in which media foundations participated had greater support from media given their professional proximity, and those projects in which unilateral support prevailed didn't regard such coordination as particularly challenging.

The alliances or joint projects between media and CSO not only reported more indicators of success but also more challenges and obstacles in coordinating and aligning work rates between organizations, strategies and goals, in comparison with the other types of experiences evaluated. The gains were social and corporative (García-Marzá, 2003, Austin et al., 2005, Vogel, 2005), and included: making known the organizations, their agendas and projects, improving media coverage, and public debate, creating public awareness around the issues, engaging other sectors, influencing public policy in some cases, achieving good relations between partners, generating further initiatives, achieving long term projects and/or replicas in other countries or cities, and receiving awards. Only in one case, *Vital Vote,* did the interviewees specifically report a change in citizens' behavior, that is, less abstentionism and more vote of conscience. Nevertheless, challenges and obstacles reported included the search for resources and allies, the achievement of recognition for the projects, the strengthening of the structures of the partners to respond better to the projects' demands, the coordination of efforts, the adaptation of projects to changing contexts, the building of networks, and the varied political will from representatives in office to take on board initiatives and proposals coming from the projects.

The projects in which media foundations participated reported as indicators of success the achievement of their general goals; publicity for the organizations, their agendas and initiatives; the qualification of media coverage and, related to this, the creation of public awareness regarding the issues pursued. In contrast, the only limitation reported was the search for resources and partners to maintain and develop the projects. Similarly, the projects in which unilateral cooperation prevailed, the indicators of success reported were, besides the ones also reported for projects in which media foundations participated, the ability of engaging with other sectors and

influencing public policy. In addition, the limitations were the search for resources and allies and to make known and achieve recognition for the projects.

Lessons learned for the strengthening of alliances and their social contribution

A first set of recommendations proposed by the interviewees regarding the *relationships* between media and CSO is the selection of the partners. While some of them stress the importance of the reputation, reach and representativeness of the allies, others propose a broader inclusion of mainstream, independent and local media, as well as civil society organizations which work at the national and local level to improve the reach of the projects. Another recommendation is to promote mutual knowledge and respect between media and CSO in terms of their interests, nature, agendas, work structures, strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, the public interest has to be above particular or individual interests, political orientation or goals of organizations when it comes to develop join strategies. In addition, some interviewees agree on fostering team work through basic agreements around the mission, strategies, priorities, approaches, efforts, monitoring of the results and indicators of success.

A second set of recommendations is directed to specific actors. In relation to *media*, some interviewees stressed the importance of media independence from CSO since engaging in alliances pose risks in terms of credibility and objective reporting. Others, however, praised alliances as a way to achieve corporate social responsibility goals and recommended to foster collaboration within that frame and that of the public interest. In addition, other proposals included fostering openness and knowledge of CSO in order to choose partners more effectively, promoting projects within media organizations in order to achieve a wider support and engagement across their staff, and training media collaborators and journalists more effectively in the issues dealt with in the projects to improve reporting. With regards to *CSO*, the recommendations include having more initiative to approach media, advancing training programmes in public relations for CSO in order to improve their relations with media and achieve a better positioning of their agendas, designing long term projects which can offer an original high quality product, and working within the framework of social vocation and public interest of media and journalists.

Finally, the recommendations made to improve the contribution of these experiences to human rights and democracy agendas are to continue establishing alliances within a corporate social responsibility framework, to try to impact upon public policy agendas, and to improve systems of

evaluation in the development, implementation and impact of the strategies. In addition, for some of the interviewees, it is important to follow not only the social dynamics and context in which the initiatives are formulated so they can remain relevant and are up to date with the needs and expectations regarding agendas of democracy and human rights, but also to follow other experiences of alliances to learn from their strategies, strengths and weaknesses for future projects of this kind.

Limitations

This paper has summarised the main results of a practice-based study which explores some of the challenges, achievements and lessons that alliances between media and CSO leave for the strengthening of their join work towards agendas of democracy and human rights in Latin America. A total of 15 cases have been explored through documentary sources and 35 individual and group interviews to some of the main representatives of the projects within media and CSO which participated in the alliances. The questions focused on the goals and strategies of these projects in alliance, the perceptions of the achievements and shortcomings of the initiatives, the relationships between organizations and the lessons learned regarding joint work and contribution towards democracy and human rights agendas.

The results show that there are different levels of cooperation (Austin et al., 2005) between media and CSO in the alliances observed. The higher the commitment and operative integration between partners, the higher the achievements perceived by the allies, not only in terms of the goals pursued by the projects themselves, but also in terms of the generation of value for their members. In addition, the different types of cooperation observed were reflected in the mutual value attributed to their counterparts by the organizations, and the success and shortcomings perceived. Those involved in projects with a higher level of interaction valued more such interaction and joint work as a gain of the alliances. Nevertheless, the higher the commitment, the more organizational challenges and efforts were involved in maintaining the relationships.

From a corporate social responsibility framework, the results confirm the motivations and reach of the projects from an ethical or social benefit perspective, and, from a utilitarian point of view, the gains for the organization (García-Marzá, 2003, Austin et al., 2005, Vogel, 2005). Nevertheless, the interviewees generally had more difficulties describing the concrete contributions of the projects

to democracy and human rights, particularly if the projects' goals were related to behavioural change.

The methodology of case studies allowed the observation of the experiences of some of the leading media and CSO in the projects as well as their perceptions regarding their relationships. Nevertheless, given the lack of information about the entire alliances of this kind in the region, one of the limitations of the present study was to establish the representativeness of the sample. For example, greater certainty regarding the bulk of experiences in the region would allow inquiry into what type of projects are more commonly developed regarding agendas of democracy and human rights.

At the same time, interviews allowed the exploration of perceptions regarding these projects and the interactions between organizations. Nevertheless, the subjective nature of the points of view expressed, the memory and the defence of the own reputation can have an impact on the accounts (Richards, 1996). In this respect, there are limitations in assessing conflicts between partners. Besides, time and availability of interviewees varied, so the interviews' formats (email, telephone, personal interview) and quality and depth of the answers gathered was also uneven.

In addition, the documentary information gathered on line was very useful to recognise alliances and partners' profiles. However, the quality and level of updating of the web pages varied, making some pages very useful in complementing information, while others were very misleading.

Finally, the present research has aimed to explore for the first time projects in alliance between media and CSO in Latin America in order to identify strategies, problems and achievements of such initiatives and lessons learned for future experiences. More broadly, the experiences described may be useful in the generation and strengthening of new partnerships between these organizations which can have a greater impact on agendas of democracy and human rights in Latin America. In addition, the study hopefully   contributes to the strengthening of the ability of CSO to engage with media and consolidate more permanent and effective relationships for the benefit of their own agendas, by identifying some helpful dynamics in the approach of these organizations towards the media.

References

AUSTIN, J., REFICCO, E., BERGER, G., FISHER, R. M., GUTIÉRREZ, R., KOLJATIC, M., LOZANO, G., OLIGASTRI, E. & SEKN (2005) *Alianzas sociales en América Latina. Enseñanzas extraídas de colaboraciones entre el sector privado y organizaciones de la sociedad civil,* New York, IDB Bookstore.

GARCÍA-MARZÁ, D. (2003) Ética empresarial: un marco ético para la responsabilidad social empresarial. IN SICHAR, G. (Ed.) *La empresa socialmente responsable. Ética y empresa.* Madrid, Fundación CIDEAL.

REY, G., BETANCOURT, J., DEPAOLI, M. & ALONSO, F. (2008) *La otra cara de la libertad. La responsabilidad social empresarial en medios de comunicación de América Latina,* Bogotá, D.C., Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Latinoamericano.

RICHARDS, D. (1996) Elite interviewing: Approaches and Pitfalls. *Politics* 199-204.

VOGEL, D. (2005) *The Market for Virtue. The Potential and Limits of Corporate Social Responsibility,* Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press.