Latin America Program Presidential Portfolio Review

*Support for Digital Media in Latin America (2008-2015)*

**Outcomes summary**

**Role of media grantees and relation to civil society:**

* These organizations have a consolidated presence in their countries and the region and seem to be a reference. Going forward, are we looking to fund more of the same or are there different expectations? How do they see their role on the future? To what extent does civil society see these outlets as a reference for reporting and reflecting their voices on certain issues? Is there a new, hybrid form of journalism emerging in which this media is almost seen as part of civil society itself? What does it mean to have a journalism lens on civil society values? Can these actors go beyond reaching audiences that are already inclined to follow their type of journalism (by, for example, being more versatile)? (Silvio Waisbord)
* Is LAP supporting these specific grantees because they are civil society per se or because of their role as media as well? (Shuwei Fang, PIJ)
* Looking at this portfolio, is LAP supporting platforms for news and information to get out and for people to debate things or you can say you were interested in their editorial voice as opposed to a platform role? Is LAP interested in the work of journalistic enterprises as they become closer to civil society and start campaigning as an NGO might? Are the organizations in this portfolio moving towards this and is this something you would encourage? (Chris Stone)
* Bloggers and columnists, often civil society folks, play an important role in this media, so there is definitely a strong connection with civil society. (David Holiday
* Should we be looking to support similar work to what IDL does in its investigative reporting and radio programs, considering the great use of traditional media (and particularly community radio) still in the region in order to go beyond digital, elite-focused outlets? (Luc Athayde-Rizzaro)
* Would be important to understand how these media outlets could fit in networks, provide content to community radios, since once they are legalized, community radio often face difficulties in content and how to keep it running. Could consider ways to cover stories about OSF projects, such as on ASJ’s work that could be broadcast region-wide (Chris Stone).
* Does the unbiased and uncommon reporting of these five grantees only appeal to a certain segment of the population? Or are they able to reach the types of groups and sources that are needed in order to change democratic practices? (Cathy Ross)
* These are new and emerging actors, there are people seeing these models and replicating them, so there is something there. They seem to use a creative way to integrate other voices but are still directed at an elite and urban public. New generations seem more connected with this type of language. How do we see this portfolio impact the ecosystem of the media? Do we see new players emerging? (Nicolas Hernandez)

**Lack of a LAP-specific media strategy and relation to LAP’s work on democracy:**

* Portfolio reviews work best if they are constructed around a strategy a Program has and not when you have to look back to find a common thread. Because we don’t have as a starting point a strategy to be reflected on with this portfolio, we have a miscellaneous array of grants. Suggests the adoption of a strategic frame on media. PIJ (which co-funds many of the grants) is trying to look for independent quality journalism that is advancing the craft and skill in a way that promises the potential for thriving in the new media environment. LAP has to have a different reason for funding these groups (Chris Stone).
* Under the assumption that LAP funded this work because they were part of a strategy to foster reporting on our issues, the question is, did they advance our drug strategy, did they advance other LAP strategies? Is our work more successful because of that? (Chris Stone)
* How much is independent media a part of this new, youthful, exciting, independent democratic practice in the region? Is this media playing a different role than media has traditionally played in democracies? Are you investing in organizations that are advancing new understandings of democracy? It’s important to OSF that LAP helps us as a global network answer that question, considering the general distrust in ideas of open society and liberal ideas that have failed to result in the “Western promise” of democracy, prosperity, emancipation and instead have served to enrich the 1%. To be able to show that in Latin America independent debate, critical thinking and democratic practices have resulted not in degradation and alienation but in another way forward is vital to the network. What is the role of independent digital media in the democratic project? What has LAP learned from the contribution of these five vehicles to the democratic project? (Chris Stone)
* In order to advance our goals on democracy and human rights, should we invest in what we are calling “infrastructure” that promotes human rights debate? Is it important for us to create spaces where those debates can happen without the polarization and hate usually found on the Internet? Should we focus on infrastructure for those debates instead of the organizations providing the content for it? Can our experience funding independent journalism teach something about funding work around polarized debate on the Internet today? (Pedro Abramovay)
* What sort of platforms could it be? Fact-checking sites? These are not platforms for debate, but it would be a starting point to provide neutral information to start a debate. Is this something we should look more into? (Algirdas Lipstas, PIJ)
* There seem to be two different dynamics regarding the role these organizations play in fostering new democratic practices in the region. One is support for new media as actors who can inject information and analysis into the public discourse on issues we are interested in. It does not mean they are promoting our issues in any particular way, but rather that we support them as investigative journalists who are asking the key questions on certain issues. The second category is where we are working in fairly closed political contexts and there are very few organizations doing anything we can support them on, so we support these outlets so that sometime in the future civil society organizations can move forward based on credible information and analysis. (Cathy Ross)

**Challenges in funding independent journalism:**

* We are not supporting these organizations for the sake of independent journalism, but to advance certain issues, which is a dangerous statement to make on the issue of independence. It often seems journalists we support are being criticized for what they do because it’s Soros funded and the best independent journalism we have in parts of the region are not only Soros funded, but Soros dependent. In this context, how can we support independent journalists who do not have a sustainable outlet and can we fund specific work? (Pedro Abramovay)
* Are we compromising these organizations’ independence through our funding? How do you assess in hindsight the success of these grants in terms of their role as civil actors, as journalists, or as creative contributors to democracy? Has the funding made them less credible? (Chris Stone)
* There does not seem to be any public or private tainting of these organizations because they are funded by OSF. They do bring in paid advertising. There hasn’t been a big controversy about any Soros conspiracy. In Central America, digital media are closer to civil society. (David Holiday)
* Difficulty of thematic and regional programs to define what they want to achieve by supporting media. Tension with independence in promoting open society agendas. This is not in accordance with the reason why PIJ supports media and needs to be discussed further. (Algirdas Lipstas, PIJ)

**Conclusions and next steps:**

* The analysis of the impact of LAP’s strategy would have required a different type of analysis. It will be important to make media an explicit part of our strategy going forward so that we might better assess this work (David Holiday). Once LAP gets back into a cycle of including media in our strategy, these types of portfolio reviews looking back will be easier (Vonda Brown).
* Looking forward in terms of how democracy is advancing in Latin America, independent media can play a big role in setting the agenda and giving voices to issues and areas that democratic discourse has not reached. In this context, media actors are becoming more and more hybrid as civil society actors and looking less like traditional media. (Vonda Brown)
* If a big part of our strategy is to help and to foster innovative democratic experiences using new technologies, to enhance democratic participation and to get human rights organizations to leave their insulated debate, there is a discussion to be had about journalism, media and civil society organizations. We should consider trying to develop a concept or create a line of support around new infrastructure or ways of producing credible information to diffuse polarization, including on the Internet. We should determine if our strategy should be more focused on having platforms or outlets that can produce credible information in order to advance our strategy. (Pedro Abramovay)
* On independence, there is line that is important to keep in mind in terms of funding particular stories. However, thematic programs should find ways of supporting “beats”, of putting a group of reporters on a beat to cover an issue, even while PIJ is increasingly looking at the journalistic enterprise itself. These strategies can work together. (Chris Stone)
* Overall, these have all been very good investments, we should continue to fund this sort of work. Pedro’s idea to focus this in a concept is interesting and we have to debate if it is worthwhile to also invest in more traditional media like radio or have country specific strategies. My prediction is that we should continue to fund this and do more. The more recent, ongoing funding for thematic beats for journalistic efforts is evolving. At the moment, El Faro is the only organization “dependent” on OSF (over 1/3) and all others have grown more independent of our support. (David Holiday) Worth continuing support for them because they are a different type of media organization that produces objective, independent stories on polarized topics. (Silvio Waisbord)
* Very interested in seeing where this conversation takes LAP. There is a trend of consolidation in the media industry in the region and in the enhanced importance of independent media. In some ways this speaks a little more to PIJ’s strategy than concepts LAP would be advancing. Question the discussions leaves us with are: 1) Support for elite versus more mass audience. The bridge from community radio to digital handheld and other forms communication would be interesting to explore. Would suggest a dual strategy in finding balance between both approaches. If we are trying to move an issue like drug policy we might go for an elite audience, but if we are looking for democracy in the region and participation or homicides we might want to reach a broader public. 2) Investments in infrastructure versus in content. On community radio, for example, we might want to look more into content, since there is usually ample funding for infrastructure. 3) On digital media, should we fund a neutral platform to foster voices and inclusion, or a journalistic/civil society hybrid, which could promote a campaigns and content on participation? (Chris Stone)