Diverse Communities, Diverse Media:
The 10th OURMedia conference in Goroka, Papua New Guinea

By Verena Thomas and Clemencia Rodríguez[1]

The 10th OURMedia conference was held from 21-25 July 2014 at the University of Goroka (UOG) in Papua New Guinea. The Centre for Social and Creative Media (CSCM), a media research centre of UOG, took the lead in organising the conference. In line with the focus of the CSCM around locally appropriate approaches to research and media production, the conference themes included the theory and practice of alternative and community media, indigenous values and communication for development, mobile and social media, and issues of representation and intellectual property among others. Attended by over 150 scholars and practitioners from over a dozen different countries, who were welcomed by the traditional landowners of Humilaveka[2], OURMedia X was a significant event for understanding community and alternative media in the Pacific. This brief report captures some of the key concepts and ideas discussed at this conference and the contribution it makes to current debates around communication and social change. We predominantly present examples from Papua New Guinea to contextualise some of the keynote presentations and discussions at OURMedia X.

A brief history of OURMedia

At the start of the new century, ten years before the Arab Spring and eleven years before Occupy, few academics paid any attention to alternative/community/citizens' media. Publications and panels on the subject were rare at academic conferences and mainstream media rarely covered anything related to media used by communities and/or social movements. To address this void, and to encourage connection between academics and media activists, a small group of scholars[3] founded OURMedia/NUESTROSMedios in 2000.

OURMedia/NUESTROSMedios is a global network with the goal of facilitating a long-term dialogue between alternative/community/citizens' media activists, practitioners and policy experts and academics whose research focuses on these types of media. The network is founded on two principles: firstly, that all communities and collectives need to communicate, to express themselves, to inform and be informed, to dialogue with others and to network; and secondly, that every community and collective has the right to the appropriate communication and information technologies and know-how required to meet its historical communication and information needs and wants. OURMedia provides a space for collaboration in which needs and alternatives can be identified in the areas of communication and information infrastructure, policy and research. Ultimately, the goal of OURMedia is to design and develop initiatives that can strengthen citizens' media, community media and alternative media in national and international policy arenas. Over the last fourteen years, OURMedia has brought the voices of citizens' and their media to the floors of the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS), the World

Social Forum (WSF), and other international forums. Currently the network includes more than 600 academics, activists, media artists and practitioners working in more than forty countries. The work of OURMedia spans many fields: community media, independent media, radical media, citizens' media, grassroots networking, telecommunications policy, copyright regimes, internet governance, indy-media activism, cultural and digital arts, communications theory, social-movement research, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, development communication and communication for social change. Our meetings, which have taken place since 2001, have become active spaces of strategic collaboration and analysis. OURMedia conferences are unique in that they bridge academia, practice and activism; they bring together academics and activists from the Global South and the Global North; and they nurture spaces of inclusion and dialogue. Past conferences have been held in Washington D.C., United States (2001), Barcelona, Spain (2002), Barranquilla, Colombia (2003), Porto Alegre, Brazil (2004), Bangalore, India (2005), Sydney, Australia (2007), Accra, Ghana (2008), Rio Negro, Colombia (2009), Dublin, Ireland (2013) and this year in Goroka, Papua New Guinea (2014).

Media in Papua New Guinea and the Pacific

"Diverse Communities, Diverse Media", the theme of the OURMedia conference this year, highlights the linguistic and ethnic diversity of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the roles of media in diverse societies. With 7 million people speaking over 800 languages, PNG is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the world. The languages are as diverse as PNG's cultural practices and beliefs, with over one thousand different ethnic groups. This cultural landscape requires unique approaches to understanding media and communication practices. Further, PNG is a country where indigenous population owns the majority of the land. Indigenous approaches to well-being and communication in the community are important to maintain and promote culture. The Highlands region was only exposed to outsiders from the 1930s on, and therefore had to adjust quickly to influence from gold miners, missionaries and government institutions.

As in many other Pacific countries, experiences of colonialism and a history of representation dominated by outsiders have shaped Papua New Guinea's image as exotic and often violent. Most recently PNG has been portrayed in Australian politics as a place no one would choose to live, by placing an asylum-processing centre in PNG as a way to discourage people seeking asylum in Australia. Such neo-colonial practices, played out predominantly through politics of aid and narratives of development, continue to shape (mis)understandings of PNG, both within the country and abroad.

While PNG has the most vibrant media industry among the South Pacific Islands, much of PNG's media is currently under foreign ownership. About eighty-five percent of PNG's population live in rural areas, and with low literacy levels and poor infrastructure, participating in media is difficult. Radio is by far the most common form of mass media that people have access to. A number of informal media distribution systems exist, such as village cinemas -*haus piksa*- in the Highlands region (Eby & Thomas, 2014). In recent years, affordable media technologies have brought changes to the country. Recent policy shifts in telecommunications have allowed for an

increase in the penetration and availability of mobile telephony, which is also giving rise to wider media distribution of audio or visual materials. Mobile phone users in the country have increased from 160,000 in 2007 to 2.4 million in 2012 (Cave, 2012). This has had a significant impact on the way people communicate with each other and are using communication for voicing their concerns. Given this background, OURMedia X offered an important platform for PNG and the Pacific to share ideas and experiences, and to learn from other countries about the potential of alternative forms of media and how communication technologies can strengthen local initiatives and identities.

Key concepts discussed at OURMedia X

From the margins to the centre

One of the most exciting features of OURMedia conferences is the potential for South-to-South dialogue. Because OURMedia goes out of its way to bring together scholars, activists, and community media practitioners from different parts of the Global South, different approaches to social change, lessons learned, and best practice can be shared between them without the mediation of the Global North. At OURMedia X, one such discussion revolved around the notion of "the margin". According to keynote speaker Clemencia Rodríguez, in the 1970s, Latin American scholars and leaders of social movements insisted on the need for more critical approaches to theories of modernization and development. The Latin American approach interrogated the concept of "development", asserting that issues of power asymmetries had to form part of any discussion of social change. Notions of centres and margins replaced the idea that development projects occur in levelled-playing fields. Unequal distribution of power produces centres and margins; centres being sites where economic and political power is abundant, and margins being sites where economic and political power is scarce. Back in the 1970s, Latin Americans insisted that issues of poverty and underdevelopment could not be dealt with without addressing centres, margins, and issues of power inequity.

Jesús Martín Barbero's notion of "*contar para contar*"[4] is useful to understand media at the margins. According to Martín Barbero, the power of communities to name the world in their own terms is directly linked with their power to enact political actions. In Spanish, Martín Barbero (2002) plays with a linguistic pun between the terms "*contar*" (to narrate) and "*contar*" (to have a strong presence, to count) and explains that only those who can "*contar*" (narrate) will "*contar*" (matter) – i.e., only those with the ability to narrate their own identities and to name the world in their own terms will have a strong presence as political subjects. Martín Barbero's main concern points to the possibility of individuals and communities to have an active political participation in decision-making processes. His ideas identify the need for public spaces for deliberation and encounter, where people can be heard, and where local interpretations of reality have access to local, regional, and national public spheres. Media technologies have immense potential when local communities that exist at the margin can appropriate them and use them to express their own interpretations of reality; to express their ideas about how to shape the future, and how to better the quality of their lives in their own terms. In this sense, issues of voice are much more salient than issues of access and connectivity.

At the margins, media have generally existed out of sight; rendered invisible by the glitter and excitement over media at the centre - we have never had enough scholars, researchers, or policy makers paying attention to media at the margins. As a result, we tend to flatten media at the margins; we over-generalize and overlook key differences between distinct types of media. In the last twenty years, numerous terms have emerged to name media at the margins: alternative media, community media, citizens' media, grassroots media, autonomous media, indigenous media, pirate media, social movement media. Accordingly, debates abound on which term is more appropriate: there has been an explosion of theoretical arguments for or against each term; trying to privilege one over the other. However, instead of debating which term is better and should be used, we need to recognize that media at the margins exists as a plurality. There are many different margins, and each margin produces its own type of media, and we thus need to encourage nurturing and studying media at the margins as a polyvocal and plural phenomenon. Every margin is a different context, and in every margin, community communicators find their own ways to use media technologies to address specific local communication and information needs. At the margins, media are used in varied and idiosyncratic ways to meet different communication needs. Uses include disrupting stereotypical images of marginal communities, developing alternative versions of place and self, pushing local notions of social change into public spheres, interrogating taken-for-granted notions of "a good life", and strengthening social justice movements, among others. At the margins, the media are as diverse as the communities that create them.

Indigenous values and development

A central issue discussed at OURMedia X was the concept of development and its application within an indigenous context; in particular, in reference to communication for development (C4D) initiatives. Development as a concept is linked to modernity and a single definition of "a good life", which emerged in Western Europe and was then exported to the rest of the world. Seen through the lens of modernity and development, communities in the Global South appear as backwards, poor, and in need of guidance. However, if we re-train our eyes, features that generally mark poverty can be seen as potential; a family that eats what they grow can be perceived as engaging in poor subsistence agriculture and in need of development, or instead, what they do can be seen as a feature to be encouraged and protected because it guarantees the family's food security and the quality of the food they consume. In this sense, it is urgent to diversify definitions of well-being and to avoid framing communication for social change initiatives with narrow definitions of development, connected to western values and lifestyles and economies based on consumption. We need to nurture a plurality of definitions of "a good life", because imposing a single definition based on western and modern lifestyles leads to marginalizing even more those communities that live in the periphery.

According to keynote speaker Michael A. Mel, Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Goroka, colonialism and western education has threatened the cultural and indigenous values of PNG by promoting western values as better and more virtuous. Mel emphasised that the value of local cultures is not just their "display" potential; instead, local cultures are imbued with values that should be explored, understood, and used to design the future. Culture should be understood as the shared way of living of a group of people including their knowledge and understandings,

skills and values as expressed and constructed in their language, which is perceived by them as unique and meaningful. Culture guides economic and political models and ways of interaction. It is a source of creativity and innovation that can be appreciated in customs and tradition but also in biology, agriculture, technology and environmental knowledge; from livelihood skills to visual and performing arts; from leadership and decision-making to music, literature and the built environment.

In Papua New Guinea, values of interdependence, reciprocity, cooperation and human responsibility permeate local cultures, attachment to land and sea, as well as respect and generosity, family and kin; and the future should build on these values, instead of attempting to replace them. The history of colonization and exploitation has submerged these values under those imposed by colonizers, but all this knowledge needs to re-surface so that it can be used as PNG builds a future. In the Melanesian context, where reciprocity is a central value, negotiation and mutual understanding should frame interactions, instead of the one-sided deals imposed by the West in interactions that range from mining leases to filming in local communities.

The importance of understanding culture was also highlighted by Paige West, a cultural anthropologist who has undertaken extensive fieldwork in PNG. West pointed to the simplification of culture by outsiders and discussed the concept of representational sovereignty. She provided the example of an international photographer who photographed a man from New Ireland Province, but did not explain to the man how his image would be used. Here, West distinguished three scales of representational sovereignty: the individual, the ethnic group and the nation. What rights do individuals have to negotiate the use of their images? How do images and simplifications of culture or other issues impact how individuals, ethnic groups, and nations are perceived?

Images and stories produced and re-used by others can not only lead to misrepresentation, but also have serious consequences for people in their communities. This was evident in the presentation by the Human Rights Defenders Network, in which Monica Paulus, Yoks Ray Atomo and Mary Kini who shared their experiences with sorcery-related violence in the Highlands of PNG. As described by Monica, the team initially used media to expose stories and raise awareness of the issue. They received a great deal of international attention, and Monica and her team have since participated in numerous interviews and international documentaries. While these stories highlighted the issue of sorcery-related violence, Monica discussed the importance of using media and film as a tool for change to record good practice initiatives, not only to point to an issue but also to impact on change in communities. Mary Kini described a situation in which an international media crew insisted on filming in certain communities despite the group's recommendation against; the group found itself in a dangerous situation, and Mary was injured. Speaking at OURMedia X, she said: "We know the situations here, we need to cooperate and we need to listen to each other… We know our people and our ways through, but it takes time. We really appreciate the media as it helps a lot with our work, but it is important we communicate down to the grassroots [to avoid these difficult situations]". Frequently, film crews, documentary makers, and other media producers do not take the time to reflect on how media representation impacts on local communities. Short-cuts, sound bites, stereotypical notions, and simplified versions of events and cultural practices are easier and cost less to produce than complex

representations based on significant time spent in the community. The complexity of social relations at the grassroots level must be taken into account and be given time.
Dot West, Indigenous media producer from Australia, presented her journey in advocating for Indigenous Australians to tell their own stories. Relevant to the Pacific, Dot discussed Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights in Australia. While Australian laws protect individuals, they do not recognise communal intellectual property rights. But individuals and communities can use ICIP protocols, including a clause about use of images and sounds about the community, requiring that these are part of any contract they sign with outside producers. As Dot said "by putting it in the contracts it makes people take notice, it makes them understand that they need to follow the protocols of our communities."

Indigenous filmmaking in Australia has undergone multiple stages in regards to its development, from early initiatives of recording community stories to a more recent national indigenous television station. While PNG filmmaking has a very different history, much can be learned in terms of policies and protocols that have been developed in Australia. Filmmaking initiatives in PNG highlight the potential of local stories and projects. A project presented at OURMedia X was *Pawa Meri*, a series of six films about six female role models produced by six women filmmakers. *Pawa Meri* challenges stereotypical representations of women and provides in-depth narratives about the challenges they face in their lives. The series relates to issues of development, but is told from a local perspective and has given a boost to PNG's film industry.

In the context of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific region, media should contribute to producing narratives and stories that can serve as points of entry for communities to use in the process of understanding how they see the world and how they want to respond to it. As Michael A. Mel stated, PNG has been inundated with stories from beyond; our challenge is to work side by side with communities to produce local stories; not to block the stories of the other, but to provide opportunities to produce and distribute stories of self side by side with stories of others.

Communication is not only about technology

Given the exponential increase of access to mobile and social media in the Pacific, the recurring argument surrounding access to technology was also a topic of the OURMedia conference. Due to telecommunication regulations, the entry into the mobile phone market occurred relatively late in the Pacific; however, the speed with which numbers of users have increased has been unprecedented.

There was no doubt among presenters that social and mobile media have offered platforms for political participation and provided a forum for debates for Pacific Islanders. This was highlighted in presentations by bloggers Emmanuel Narokobi and Martin Namorong, who discussed issues of transparency based on their use of blogs to hold decision makers accountable for their actions. However, a concern was expressed by Heather Horst and Robert Foster, who discussed the moral economy of the mobile phone, making sense of understanding consumer/company relationships and asking questions about the obligations of companies towards consumers. According to Foster, when it comes to technology, we need to ask how

technology is made available and on whose terms. Ultimately, we return to the discussion about the margin, and the problem of those who do not have access being further marginalised by technology.

On the topic of development initiatives, Amanda Watson discussed the use of mobile phones for service delivery. She pointed to the possible failure of development initiatives when these include technology distribution. Quoting Trucano, Watson said: "the best technology is the one that you already have, know how to use and can afford". In this case, those in charge of communication for social change initiatives need to think carefully about the existing use of technology and how information and communication technologies can be utilised without further marginalising those without access. Whilst technology was a strong feature in many presentations at OURMedia X, it was also clear that technology by itself is not sufficient, and that we therefore need to engage in how it becomes part of social relations and the way we communicate with each other.

A common feature of OURMedia conferences is to take field trips to local organisations and communities. Participants of OURMedia X had an opportunity to see different community communication initiatives being undertaken in and around Goroka. Some of them experienced first-hand the challenges that some of the communities face; fieldtrip participants had to navigate impassable roads, difficult access to electricity, let alone computers or internet access. Still, even in the midst of these and other challenges, fieldtrips exposed OURMedia participants to appropriate technology initiatives, community communication projects, and life in rural villages and urban communities.

Recommendations from the OURMedia X conference

Following the presentations and discussions during the five days of the OURMedia conference in Goroka, participants came together to develop some broad recommendations to be used to guide future activities and initiatives in PNG and the Pacific region. Some of the key recommendations were:

► **INDIGENOUS VALUES:** PNG and the Pacific Region need to encourage critical approaches to development. Social change and any type of initiative designed to improve the quality of life in communities should be rooted in local knowledge, local values, local communication styles, aesthetics and lifestyles. Development initiatives that simply impose external values, economic and cultural models, and communication styles should be avoided. Native cultures are not just for display; instead, solutions to problems and initiatives to improve quality of life should be designed according to local cultures -local ways of knowing, communicating and living. We insist on the value of local cultures and traditional knowledge not to "freeze" communities in the past, but to encourage change and to shape a future in accordance with local values.

► **COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION CENTRES**: Instead of a focus on a particular medium (i.e., community radio or social media), we encourage the implementation of community communication centres in the Pacific region. Community communication centres foster a

diversity of media (i.e. radio, video, interpersonal communication, social media, performative media) and strategies (i.e. citizens' journalism, public campaigns, edutainment, participatory communication) to address communication needs.

► **MOBILE COMMUNICATION:** Mobile telephony has far more potential than online platforms in remote and rural areas in the region, where most of the population of the Pacific resides. We encourage universities, government institutions and activists to develop appropriate mobile platforms and tools to be used in communities. Mobile phone platforms need to be kept simple. As noted before, "the best technology is the one you already have, know how to use and can afford." (Trucano 2013 cited in Watson, A. 2014)

► **PARTNERSHIPS:** We call on government institutions and corporations (i.e. cellular telephony companies) to support media production initiatives by communities. We encourage private/public collaboration with communities, in order to train a new generation of media makers and content creators in the Pacific region. In the near future we would like to promote a vision where the majority of content in the local, regional and national media in the Pacific is produced in the region and not imported from the United States, Europe or Australia.

► **DISTRIBUTION:** Distribution of content is as important as content production. The Pacific region needs to develop intelligent and sustainable systems and platforms (digital and non-digital) to support delivery of content in radio, television, DVDs and social media. These systems and platforms should be locally grounded and linked regionally and internationally (for example, Maori and Aboriginal distribution systems in Australia and New Zealand should be linked to other Indigenous media content producers from the Pacific region).

► **PROTOCOLS:** We call on governments and content producers to develop a set of standard protocols for villages to implement with visiting media practitioners. The protocols are a guide for community-based organisations to modify according to local needs and requirements[5]. Visiting media practitioners would be required to respect and abide by these local protocols. In addition, the Pacific region needs to strengthen systems to ensure proper copyright among cultural workers, artists and performers. Protocols need to be put in place for Indigenous cultural intellectual property rights.

► **FORUM:** The Pacific region needs to maintain a continuous forum where community advocates in the areas of communication, media and culture can share lessons learned, update each other on communication for social change initiatives and the use of appropriate technologies to solve local problems in local ways. OURMedia needs to support these forums, make a commitment to encourage their continuity and help connect the Pacific region with communication for social change initiatives in other regions of the world—especially in the Global South.

The role and future of OURMedia

In contrast with communication for development (C4D) initiatives that are not willing to address issues of power, OURMedia is all about margins; the scholars, activists, and community media practitioners who come together in OURMedia acknowledge the urgency to strengthen communication and media at the margins, in those places where power asymmetries have left communities without the means and know-how to name the world in their own terms, to bring strong voices to public spheres, and to develop collective dialogues and discussions toward shaping their own futures. OURMedia X galvanized a diversity of voices from PNG, the Pacific region, and beyond brought together to engage is just this type of dialogue.

As seen in Papua New Guinea, the OURMedia network can play a key role in mobilizing regions to undertake initiatives in regards to strengthening local media and engaging in critical dialogue about current media practices. OURMedia X opened up critical discussion around indigenous communities and concepts of development and social change. Bringing together scholars, practitioners, activists and community members to discuss communication, development and social change provides an important space for the Pacific to understand the impact of media and communication projects and how to provide communities with the tools to tell their own stories. Toward the future, the University of Goroka, the Centre for Social and Creative Media, and all other organisations and individuals who participated in OURMedia X expressed an interest in keeping the dialogue going. Hopefully, issues of media technologies, cultural sovereignty, and social change will continue at the local and regional levels.

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understanding the role of community/ alternative media in our societies. She is a founder member of OURMedia. E-mail: clemencia@ou.edu.

[2] *Humilaveka* is the plateau or area where the University of Goroka is located.

3 John Downing (at the time Prof. at the University of Texas at Austin), Clemencia Rodríguez (University of Oklahoma), and Nick Couldry (London School of Economics).

4 Martín-Barbero refers to this notion in an interview in Spanish from 2010 available online at http://www.unlvirtual.edu.ar/blogcemed/2012/06/28/entrada-5/ [accessed 28 October 2014].

5 A model for such protocols can be found in Screen Australia.