Constituent process in Chile:

the challenge of communicating to Indigenous Peoples

In Chile, communication from an Indigenous perspective is absent in the mass media. In the face of racist journalistic coverage and discrimination on social networks, it is necessary to respect Indigenous peoples’ freedom of expression and access to the media. The democratization of a concentrated media ecosystem must make visible a reality in which Indigenous peoples are alive, diverse and have the full right to generate cultural content in their respective languages and forms.

By Leyla Noriega Zegarra - March 1st, 2022

When Elisa Loncón Antileo became president of the Constitutional Convention, it was the first time that an Indigenous woman assumed a position of political relevance in the history of Chile. For this reason, the Mapuche constitutional assembly member was on the cover of the U.S. Time Magazine, to the surprise of the entire Chilean press.

With the election of Elisa Loncón, the Chilean Constituent Assembly acquired a new face in the international press: that of an Indigenous woman who broke through with her native language, which had never before been spoken in any speech by a nationally elected authority. Together with Loncón, 16 men and women from ten of the First Nations in the territory appeared as the "other voices" among the 155 elected members of the Convention.

However, that which had been highlighted and praised by the international press was altogether questioned by the traditional Chilean media, who further opened a space for those who criticized her clothing and language. Worse still, there were reports that
emphasized the marginal moments of her life, ignoring her academic and leadership role. Furthermore, in the press rounds, reporters directed the questions of importance to the Vice President of the Convention, rather than directly addressing the Mapuche President.

**Violence, abuse and racism**

It is important to comment on the remarks in social networking services such as Twitter, where messages of xenophobia and discrimination abound. This was ratified by the constitutional assembly member herself in an interview to the Argentine newspaper Página/12: "I have suffered political violence, racial violence and gender violence which, as the President, has fallen upon me in particular. In a country that has a colonial structure, it is assumed that Indigenous peoples have a subordinate status. And in this case, being a Mapuche woman, it is presumed that I should not be in these types of spaces. However, these are the obstacles that we have to overcome so that we can guarantee the rights of everyone in the Constitution. Because the fact that it has naturalized these forms of violence, mistreatments and racism does not speak well of a country. This is what forms part of today’s Chile with its current Constitution, which consecrates racism by denying the existence of Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, this racism does not stop the demands of the peoples, the territories, the women".

In this type of media scene where stereotypes, discrimination and racism prevail, it is important to ask: how do we arrive at fully exercising the right to communication from and towards Indigenous peoples in the constituent process and the new Constitution? There is a vast international and national legislation that protects and recognizes Indigenous peoples’ right to communication. In fact, the exercise of Indigenous cultural, linguistic and communication rights is protected in Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization of 1989, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001 and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the United Nations of 2007.

Since its inclusion in the Constitutions of Bolivia and Colombia, and in the laws regulating the media in Uruguay, Ecuador and Argentina, the right to communication has emerged as a right that cuts across other collective rights. In Chile, Article 28 letter C of the Indigenous
Law No. 19,253 affirms: "The promotion of the broadcasting of programs in Indigenous languages in radio and television stations and channels in regions with a high Indigenous presence, and support for the creation of Indigenous radio stations and media". Nevertheless, the right to communication – understood as the enjoyment of freedom of expression –, access to the media and to the generation of content from respective conceptions and languages, continues to be largely invisible in the traditional media.

Reality shows that even though social movements, Indigenous peoples, academic research and the current constituent process are discussing and placing Indigenous peoples’ right to communication on the agenda, its democratization is still confronted by the Chilean media ecosystem. This ecosystem is consolidated in large conglomerates and is based on the commodification of the media. In this light, the rules of advertising supply and demand determine the agendas and perspectives of the mass and traditional media. 

Building Indigenous communication

In the face of bleak prospects, the emergence during the last decades of networks and media created by Indigenous peoples pushing for “another type of communication”, remains to this day the media alternative for different voices to be heard in the daily debate.

In Chile, the discussion involves initiatives within the Convention that promote the debate on the need for media pluralism for a full democracy. Chile cannot continue to deny the presence of Indigenous peoples in the media. Once and for all, it is necessary to make the leap from imaginaries of the "exotic", "folkloric" and "prehistoric" to a reality in which Indigenous peoples are alive, diverse and have the full right to access the media in their languages and forms.

In parallel to the constitutional debate, it is urgent that the Convention itself communicates its work and activities to the Indigenous peoples. So far, it continues using the same communication and dissemination channels and strategies. In this way, the linguistic and informative richness that the presence of the reserved seats could otherwise generate doesn’t come to its full right.
After having had an Indigenous President in the first period of the Constitutional Convention, the new Chile needs to move from international press clippings to a pioneering communication policy that joins the process of change that the Indigenous peoples of the country are undergoing.

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