

# **VENEZUELA - Community TV, Interview With Blanca Eekhout, Director Of ViVe TV (Justin Podur, ZNET)**

Monday 10 October 2005, posted by [Dial](#)

*September 06, 2004 - [ZNET](#) - A key part of Venezuela's process has always been communication, and especially television. While the role of the state Channel 8 in reversing the military coup of April 2002 is known outside of Venezuela, largely thanks to the video documentary 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', the role of community media with a more critical eye and a grassroots focus is increasingly important. The first example of this was CatiaTV, a TV channel based in the barrio of Catia just outside Caracas. CatiaTV provided cultural, educational, and political programming about the community, made by members of the community, for members of the community. ViVe, a national TV channel, is attempting to do for all of Venezuela what CatiaTV did for Catia. Blanca Eekhout was a founding member and director of CatiaTV, and today is the director of ViVe.*

Podur: Tell us a little bit about ViVe.

Eekhout: ViVe is a public, state channel. At this time it covers 60-70% of the population. We want for ViVe to be available throughout the territory, but we are at an early stage - we cover Caracas, numerous other states, but not the whole countryside. Its mission is educational, cultural, informative. Its intention is to make visible the population that has been excluded to date - the majority - afro-descendent, campesino, indigenous, who were erased from the possibility of appearing in the media until now. Or rather, these communities have appeared in the media, but in a stigmatized way: They are shown as marginal people, criminals. They are not shown building, constructing, part of the struggle for the development of the country. That's one thing we are trying to change.

Another thing is ViVe tries to be a bridge for Latin America. Since the Spanish conquest, empires have built barriers between the peoples of this continent, and in this process the media have played an important role. For us it's much easier to turn on the television and see any neighbourhood of Chicago than it is to see Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, even Venezuela. We can't see or recognize each other.

One of the things we do is to be a bridge. So we have important time slots dedicated to Latin American documentaries and cinema. Not just that, but we've established possibilities of co-production with independent producers. We did a special on the Social Forum of the Americas in Ecuador last month. We managed to transmit live to Caracas - it was very interesting because we dedicated 4 hours to programming on the Forum over a week. People from movements there were very excited about ViVe. The indigenous movement was excited: they could see not only movements there, but also their own Venezuelan delegates functioning there.

We are still getting the equipment we will need to do satellite broadcasting for the rest of Latin America. For us it is very important also to make 'the other Venezuela' visible.

The dynamic of this process of change you don't want to stay stuck in the present alone: you want to have a wider, strategic view. The political debate isn't the only thing. There are spaces of education, culture, spaces for children.

Our first meetings made it obvious that people didn't just want to see new programming, they wanted to make it. We did workshops to teach camera work to people in the communities. People from campesino

and other movements came to make their own programs. We have been struggling for media democratization, diversity, plurality. This has been difficult because of the private, vertical monopoly, and exclusion and cartels that are impenetrable.

There is a struggle for a law of social responsibility by the media, which tries to establish quotas for national production because national production is so often substituted for transnational (read: Hollywood) production. So at ViVe we are struggling for national, and independent production. ViVe, in advance of the law, has already established its quotas - 60% national production, and of that, 60% independent production. We are supporting and financing independent producers and collectives. TV has this possibility of diversity and plurality in programming. There's also the cultural programming, to make visible work in communities. Not just excluded people and movements, but also artists, musicians, who had never found spaces in the past. We are trying to create a platform for them.

Podur: The ViVe experience is linked to what you and others did in Catia, with CatiaTV. Can you talk about the CatiaTV experience and the history of both networks?

Eekhout: CatiaTV started in 2000. I was director for just over 3 years. I was there until 2003. The project started with what are called CineClubs. We would show films on screens in popular neighbourhoods. The CineClub movement started in the 1960s, but at the time it was linked to the client networks and patronage of the major political parties. In the 1980s, it moved away from that and gained a certain independence, and the CineClubs became instruments of the organized communities. Cinema can move people and we brought a lot of people out to watch films. Networks of people were created. It was a form of cultural resistance, part of a whole matrix of cultural resistance activities like megaphone radio where people would broadcast from the backs of vans or cars. In the mainstream media, the popular neighbourhoods, the barrios, they were shown as nests of crime. The media controlled the image of the barrio.

So this movement of cultural resistance came from the barrios and surged there. A lot of the spaces where films were shown were just people's houses.

I was involved in this from early on. In 1989 the whole process became much deeper. The government of Carlos Andres Perez, who had won the elections promising to return the country to paradise, imposed a harsh neoliberal program and there were riots in Caracas. The government sent the military and police to repress the riots, and hundreds, we think thousands, were massacred in the barrios. The media played an interesting role. On the one hand, the people's voice, the voices of the barrios, found no outlet in the political parties or the media. Instead, the media were literally applauding and celebrating the massacre on television. The current president of RCTV was taped saying that "we" had "won a victory" after the massacre had occurred. It was more obvious than ever whose side the media was on.

On the other hand, though, it was the media's reporting of riots in one place that acted as a call to revolt throughout the country. By reporting the revolt, they helped to generalize it. But then they silenced the people.

There were some organizations in the barrios that surged in response. I was involved in one of these, an 'asamblea de barrios'.

In 1992, there was the uprising led by Hugo Chavez. Those of us who were cultural activists, we realized that we were really working without any proposal for change. There wasn't any party or leadership for that kind of

thing: what we were doing was a kind of social weaving. But the uprising of

1992 brought a proposal for change throughout the country. Until then, our organizing in the barrios - I remember it - it was around very concrete, daily issues. Access to water, transport, basic necessities. That kind of organizing can lead to a certain level of mobilization. People who had gone without water access for ten years, people who had to walk for water and fill buckets at common cisterns, they would mobilize

to change that. But there was not really an accompanying political discourse. And to be honest, the left didn't have any credibility to put such a discourse forward in any case.

People believed in our work and the basic fights for dignity. But Chavez managed to accomplish in two minutes on television what we weren't able to accomplish in years. They gave him two minutes on television so he could tell those who had risen up to surrender and prevent a massacre. During the broadcast he said two key things. First, he said "I take full responsibility", which was something people had never heard from any politician or public figure before. Second, he said "For now", we have to lay down our arms, but that "for now" became a promise of a struggle for something better. The uprising put forward the idea that there could be an alternative political project for the country.

I saw the effect in the barrio. My house was filled all the time with people saying: "Can you believe this?" "Can you believe what Chavez said?" And it wasn't just what he said. It was that he was someone who looked like them: with his black, indigenous looks. People felt represented for the first time.

The media image of Venezuela up to that time had been empty: a rich country, an oil country, a country of beauty queens. Not a country of people waking up at 4am so they could be exploited at work for a pittance to try to keep their families alive. No one could believe someone was on television saying: "I am responsible." We had always thought of the military as a part of the system we were fighting. How could someone from the military actually sacrifice his own freedom, go to jail, to fight for change?

Podur: For those of you who were activists before Chavez, was there as a result a lot of distrust of him?

Eekhout: I myself have been imprisoned twice. I know how the military and police treated people. They didn't have any respect for people. We didn't have a lot of trust for Chavez, with his military background and his attempt at a coup. But all around us, people were just amazed to see a young, moreno, mestizo on television.

It's also important to remember that the rebellion in 1992 was of very young officers. The highest rank involved in the rebellion was Lieutenant Colonel.

Those above that rank were solidly against the rebellion and with the system.

People came out to defend Chavez, to ensure he was treated well in jail. Then there was another uprising in 1994. This time there was more civilian participation, but there was no clear project or plan.

But at around that time, the left started making gains. A leftist, Aristobulo Isturis, won elections to become mayor of Caracas in 1993. He is black. He was a teacher by profession. He was in the Congress, and he used that platform to defend the people involved in the uprising. His presence in the municipal office gave the CineClubs and other popular movements a great deal of support. Before 1993 we were working with a 16mm projector, and there were not a lot of films available. We'd show the same films over and over. It was fine, it was still collective, it was still a break with the atomization of people watching TV in their homes, but under Isturis we got a video projector and that gave us a chance to show so much more material.

But more important than the video projector was that we got a camera.

People started making videos with no training. Attendance at our events exploded. People were now seeing themselves on television. The first videos were just registries. People would tape the street corner, the dog on the corner, the people hanging out on the corner, the local shop, the local graffiti. The next step was films about local sporting events, or assemblies, or parties. My college thesis was on 'barrio cinema', the internal discourses and how barrio events are weaved through the cinema. The next step in the process was decisive: the activists in the struggle for water, in the 'asamblea popular del agua', began to use film as a tool for their struggle. The camera became a weapon: we would tape officials coming to the community and making promises, and use the film to hold them accountable. This film movement started to become the cables of a network to connect the community. A network of barrio news was

created, based on creating and passing these films.

In parallel, the Bolivarian movement and the Bolivarian circles were growing throughout the 1990s. In 1998, all the efforts culminated in the constitutional process. The constitutional process helped unify the movements around the idea of democracy. It wasn't a demagogical thing: it wasn't about demanding for the government to get me a house. It was about participating in the transformation of the country. The use of Bolivar as a symbol, and other symbols from Venezuelan history, was also something new. Before, the reference points for the left were ideologies like communism, marxism, things that didn't speak as clearly to the people. There were many diverse currents involved, and divisions as well: nationalists, leftists, religious people were all involved, and there were doubts among many about the electoral route. But despite the media campaign against the constitution - they called it Castro communism, fascism, etc. - the people didn't believe it and the Constitution won the referendum. It was a new vision for the country, to transform the country.

The movements had something besides individualist or local resistance.

The Constitution provided a legal framework for community media. Until then, community media were essentially illegal. But the media activists participated in the constitutional process and got communication established as a human right. So community media were not only supposed to be legal, but protected and developed as a human right like health care or education.

That was how CatiaTV started. Communication was in the constitution, but there was no regulation. The regulatory structures for the media were still based on the old republic, the 4th republic (since the 1999 Constitution we are in the 5th republic). The regulatory body, CONATEL, is designed to regulate the corporate media. That was a major task for the movements: to force compliance with the constitution. Of course, the managers of CONATEL, with their neoliberal idea of the state, their idea of "neutrality", just didn't get it.

So we obtained an a broadcaster and began broadcasting in Catia, without waiting for CONATEL, and thus were broadcasting 'illegally'.

Podur: How did you get the equipment?

Eekhout: In Rubio, there were very technically skilled people at the university who knew how to make antennas. They were very sympathetic to our cause, but they didn't have any connections to the movements. So we were close to the people but not the technology, they were close to the technology but not the people. We put our experiences together and started broadcasting.

At the beginning of 2000, President Chavez was in Catia for a public event.

Some of our people went to interview him, identifying themselves first as being from "CatiaTV, community television." He said: "What do you mean, community television?" When he heard what we were doing, he realized how important it was to support it. But other members of the government didn't realize. We planned an inauguration and invited the President to attend. His staff told him he couldn't, because CatiaTV was illegal. The President replied that it was legal according to the constitution, and the regulations would have to catch up. Finally, some changes were made to the regulations, and CatiaTV became official.

Podur: CatiaTV and ViVe are state media, but they are also community media.

Isn't there a contradiction there?

Eekhout: There is no possibility for people's participation in the private media. The only space where there was even a possibility is the state media.

But there are contradictions. There are definitely two conflicting models.

One is that of a state TV network, with a state budget. The administration of this network is controlled by the state. And the state is still, even after all of the changes that have been made, it is still a state that is conceived in the framework of neoliberalism, based on the idea of management and 'efficiency'. Those of us from activist backgrounds discovered that in some ways there were fewer headaches when we were working without state support! The neoliberal model of the media does not put the community and the people at the centre of things. It is about creating spectators who watch TV alone in their homes. We don't want spectators. We want communication. We are critical of the media. We want to give tools - cultural, educational, social, economic tools - to the communities. In the communication sphere we want to create the kinds of tools that exist in the economy, like the Banmujer and microcredit initiatives that have helped people empower themselves.

Podur: Are there structural ways that you have tried to break with hierarchy?

Eekhout: At CatiaTV, those first people who learned how to use the cameras to make those first films about the community, they are now the directors. I left the directorship of CatiaTV to come here. But CatiaTV also has a permanent assembly, and after a director's term is up, they go back to the assembly. The assemblies have university people on them as well as people who have just learned how to read through the missions. There is a very strong ethic that the university people should not take over or monopolize the assembly. It is not just the sensitivity of the university people that enforces this: it is also that the working people in the assembly would not allow it.

We have a setup here where the maintenance staff can train to learn the camera and start to do production work, administrative staff can participate in production. There's more of an open situation so that different departments can understand the different tasks that go on. It is a slow process, but we are trying to break with the hierarchies. Not only within the station, but also in terms of the relationship between 'viewers', the 'viewed', and the media workers. It is practice that is making the process stronger.

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Blanca Eekhout is the director of ViVe television. Justin Podur is a writer and activist based in Toronto. He visited Venezuela in August 2004 to report on the referendum and social movements.

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