

Prison Radio International goes Latin American!

By Dr Ruth Armstrong - Prison Radio International Consultant

The Prison Radio Association is leading the development of Prison Radio International (PRI), a growing global movement of people using audio in criminal justice setting for social good. This blog details recent PRI work in Latin America and the first PRI regional conference.

“Si la universidad me dio un sentido de Libertad, la radio me dio alas”

Paulina Ollala Dalgo

Speaking about her prison radio experience in Ecuador, Paulina told the audience of judges, policy makers, prison officials and prison ombudsmen at the Argentinian [Association of Magistrates and Officials of National Justice](#) that taking part in university courses during her prison sentence ‘gave me a sense of freedom’, but it was participating in prison radio that ‘gave me wings’.

Paulina was in Argentina for the first time with Ximena Granja, who is responsible for ‘education and culture’ in Ecuador’s prisons. Ximena’s role includes overseeing Ecuador’s five prison radio projects. Both Paulina and Ximena agree that prison radio is giving people in prisons the tools and freedom they need to build better futures through learning the art of communication and safeguarding the right to communication.

Embracing communication as a right has been one of the most impactful aspects of the Prison Radio Association’s work in Latin America over the last two years. We decided to trial building regional networks as a way to strengthen the global prison radio community and picked Latin America for the pilot because we knew of the deep rights-based traditions of civic involvement in prison life across Latin America. We suspected we might find many examples of excellent prison radio projects operating across the region. We were right!

Our initial visit in May 2022 showed exactly this. A questionnaire shared with grassroots organisations showed a broad range of projects in Argentina (18 at a quick glance) and another 10 in five other Latinx countries. Despite this, in near neighbours, Uruguay, we found a desire to develop prison radio projects, but nothing currently funded or given the green light by the prison system.

This initial scoping visit inspired us. We saw the potential to strengthen existing initiatives and to support new projects through building a regional network. With help from some generous philanthropic donations and funding from grants, foundations, a forward-thinking London based law firm and outstanding Argentinian partners, we helped to organise the first ever Latin American Prison Radio Conference. Our aim was to support the growth of a network of prison radio projects across Latin America.

The last two weeks in Uruguay and Argentina have been an inspirational roller coaster of hard work, mixed emotions and the kind of fortitude that comes from collaborative endeavours. Together with PRA CEO Phil Maguire, I was delighted to visit two of the four new prison radio projects in Uruguay. We also met with representatives from Uruguayan universities, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the National Institute of

Rehabilitation. They are all now working in partnership to deliver these projects. It gave us a boost to listen to the audio they have already produced and propelled us forward in thinking strategically about how Prison Radio International can support this work.

We left Uruguay with a clear sense that an agreed and ratified set of best practice standards would help all those developing prison radio projects globally. They could also help all of us involved in supporting prison radio in our efforts to safeguard the kind of dialogue and communication that builds better communities for us all, inside and outside of our prisons.

From Uruguay we headed on to [Radio Aires Libertad](#) in Batán, a state prison six hours south of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The depressing dilapidation of the prison, which was falling down around us while a bitter wind blew through its hollowed concrete structure, was warmed partially by open flames burning on every stove available throughout the prison.

But the real warmth was the spirit of '[Liberté](#)' a section of the prison entirely self-managed by prisoners. From leading the delivery of educational qualifications for both staff and prisoners around Latin America, to producing products for market through their different workshops and greenhouses, and having their own commissary warehouse, the mobile phone-using entrepreneurial prisoners of Liberté really blew our minds with everything they do.

The deprivation from which their initiative grows was more than obvious, but the strength of the human spirit in the most challenging of conditions was awe inspiring. It was a huge privilege to be interviewed on [Radio Aires Libertad](#). When they asked us for our reflections on what we'd seen, Phil said it was nothing short of a 'revolution' in what prisons can and should be, while I (Ruth) simply said one word - 'esperanza' (hope). You can see a video of this clip of the interview [here](#).

What better background to our next event, the first ever Latin American Prison Radio conference hosted by [@fmlatribu](#) (in its amazing community radio studios) and the students and staff of the University Centre in Devoto prison, coordinated by the University of Buenos Aires' Department of Philosophy and Literature's [Prison Writing Project](#).

We began with an online conference for those who couldn't make it in person, during which we met people developing prison radio projects from seven different Latin American countries. We were excited to see how different connections across and within countries could make starting new projects more possible and probable.

The next day was awesome beyond words. Under the guidance of Alejandro Demasi, the [@fmlatribu](#) team welcomed more than 60 delegates from across Latin America into its community radio studios. We heard from representatives of many different organisations running or supporting prison radio through their different initiatives in communications. It's hard to put into words how the day made our hearts sing. We witnessed the establishment of a Latin American prison radio community – in real time! We were with our people, and together we felt powerful. There was even a live radio show hosted by Diego Skliar, the coordinator of another university and prison radio project in Buenos Aires, 'Radio Mosquito'. You can listen to the show by clicking [here](#).

The next day, the awe-inspiring work of the University of Buenos Aires in its prison university centre took centre stage. Its ever-increasing professionalisation and educational offer in a centre run by and for prisoners and supported by the University is the stuff of dreams when considering the paltry reality of the higher education offering in prisons across so many other countries in the world. The hard work of our colleague Juan Pablo Parchuc and the professionalism of the Federal Prison Service was on show, processing 60 guests through the prison security seamlessly.

With the help of our funders, we were able to support the attendance of several people who are now free but took part in prison radio projects when incarcerated. This whole community going back into the prison together was a powerful example of the bonds prison radio can build. But without a doubt, the real star of this visit to the Devoto University Centre was the all-new radio station. Last time we visited, the excellent work of [Radioculta](#) was being recorded on equipment brought into and out of the prison and it took place in a classroom. Eighteen months on, and there is now a professionally equipped and dedicated radio studio space. We were warmly welcomed by the enthusiastic, professional and extremely competent radio production team. Phil was in his happy place!

There is something helpfully unseating about being in spaces in prison that are run entirely by people in prison, with no staff presence, and feels both safe and productive. That said, we know from experience that one of the most difficult aspects of this work is getting the different stakeholders into productive dialogue together because they all play a vital part in prison radio projects working well. While the recognition of a right to education and a right to communication certainly makes a different kind of prison radio possible in Latin America, we were very conscious that our ability to learn from these excellent examples depended on the prison system facilitating our visit. Collaboration, even where it is judiciously safeguarded and fraught with compromise, is always at the heart of progression.

We were grateful to our friend and prison radio champion, the penal judge Jimena Monsalve for organising our next event, hosted by the Argentinian [Association of Magistrates and Officials of National Justice](#). Here we were able to think more broadly about crime, the role of criminal justice institutions, education, the importance of dialogue and the role of prison radio in helping to build this dialogue.

It was such a privilege for Phil and I to speak at this event, alongside Ryan Conaro – General Manager and Program Director of Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio, Patricia Banchemo from the Parliamentary Ombudsman's Office for prisons in Uruguay, and Ximena Granja and Paulina Ollala Dalgo from Ecuador. The atmosphere in the room notably changed when Paulina recounted her experience with the language and style of a radio presenter! We felt enormous gratitude to our funders who had made it possible to fly this intrepid team of women warriors from Ecuador. They embodied what good looks like when those who work in prisons and those who are sentenced to reside in prisons build the kind of dialogue that generates respect and commitment to mutual values.

And then the jewel in the crown was the final day. The first time we visited Argentina (in May 2022) we landed at Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires, and within an hour, we

were sitting in Ezeiza Federal Prison with a team from the [Defensoría del Público](#) and their students from the radio workshop they lead in the prison. Back then, they were producing embryonic talk shows broadcast on a loud speaker to those in a close vicinity.

Now, 18 months later, we walked into a prison radio studio with a self-made 'on air' button and the most professional live production team coordinating a radio show which is broadcast on YouTube once a fortnight. The sports correspondent gave enthusiastic updates on all the prison sports teams (from table tennis, to football, to chess) and then moved beyond the walls of the prison to cover local and national sports fixtures and headlines. The show covered a range of subjects, including current affairs and a lively debate about which music genres are the most culturally important to the programme's audience. There were several presenters and each had obviously researched their different segments thoroughly, while the producer was keeping everyone to time and cutting to musical interludes between the discussions. The team was as diverse as any we have seen in a prison radio studio or classroom, and it was evident from their interactions and conversation that this radio project was binding them together whilst simultaneously setting them free.

At the end of their programme, they thanked staff from the Defensoría and the prison staff who were watching them with pride. All of us in that room (from Judge Monsalve whose court some of those present had come through, to the Deputy Director of that area of the prison, the Director of the Defensoría, [whom herself spent time in a secret prison in Argentina](#), and us visitors from abroad) left with a cemented certainty that we need to keep working to find ways to speak, to listen, to be heard and to hear each other.

I am writing this blog on our flight home, grateful for the freedom to connect with our colleagues in prison radio projects across Latin America, but just like Paulina, we return with a new sense of urgency to use our liberties responsibly.

From our time in Latin America, we understand anew the power of communication to be the wings that carry us to each other, that support vital and challenging dialogue, that can build trust and strengthen the kind of community we all want to live in. We head back to the UK determined to work with the Prison Radio International Advisory Board to create the structures that can scaffold and strengthen this growing and inspiring prison radio community to keep producing the kind of audio that changes us all, and brings us a taste of real freedom.

When I said on Radio Aires Libertad that the work of the Liberté cooperative gave me hope, I meant it in the same way Paulina talks about freedom – not merely a sense of freedom, but the wings you beat purposefully which give you flight to move beyond your current realities. I meant hope in the way Rebecca Solnit defines it in her book 'Hope in the Dark': "Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky ... Hope is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency." This kind of hope, that works consistently and carefully to build the kind of links that open doors to better futures, is the kind of hope we've brought back from this first ever Prison Radio International regional conference. The experience far outstripped all our hopes, and we will now work on to ensure its promise is realised.

With special thanks to:

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Diego Skliar, Coordinator of [Radio Mosquito](#), Centro Universitario San Martin Prison, run by Universidad Nacional de San Martin in Prison #48 of Servicio Penitenciario Bonaerense.

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Ximena Granja, Director of Education and Culture, National Ecuadorian Prison System for Adults and Adolescents.

Paulina Ollala Dalgo, participant in the Prison Radio project in Cotopaxi Prison, Ecuador.

Ryan Conarro, General Manager and Program Director of Inside Wire: Colorado Prison Radio, University of Denver Prison Arts Initiative.

[Justice Matters Ltd](#), consultancy supporting the strategic development of Prison Radio International.