

Interactive Community Radio: An Examination of Community Radio in Central Mexico

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Abstract: Today, many take for granted the explosion of newer communications technologies, such as Twitter and Facebook, which help people stay connected. However, “old fashioned” communications technology such as community radio continues to serve communities throughout the world (especially among poorer populations) and remains essential. Although radio predates the recent flood of trendier social media by nearly a century, it continues to connect people to one another and to their communities.

This article examines how radio in Mexico serves community needs through educational and public service programming. In addition, my research looks at how Mexicans living in the US have used Mexican radio stations to stay connected with friends and family in Mexico, and the cultural phenomenon that allows for personal messages to be broadcast to an entire community.

Keywords: Community radio, interactive media, communication technology, oral history, Mexico, media studies.

1. Introduction

Recently, my research has concentrated on electronic media usage in rural Appalachia as I examined how the arrival of radio, television, and the Internet has affected the lives of people in this mountainous region of the US (Podber, 2008). This paper looks at how Mexicans living in the US use Mexican radio stations to stay connected with friends and family and the cultural phenomenon that allows for personal messages to be broadcast to an entire community. In addition, I examine how radio in Mexico serves community needs through educational and public service programming. The potential for community radio to provide “a lever that ordinary people can use to empower themselves” is too powerful to be ignored (Fairchild, 2010, p. 24). As Howley (2005, p. 75) posits, “community-based media are significant precisely because they provide an opportunity for those whose perspectives, opinions, and interests are marginalized within dominant media discourse to participate in the public sphere.”

On a recent trip to Mexico, I conducted oral history interviews with radio producers, announcers, hosts, and writers at several radio stations in exurban central Mexico, and was surprised to find a unique intercultural communication phenomenon at work. Some Mexicans who travel to the US in search of work call radio stations in Mexico to ask hosts to broadcast messages to their loved ones back home. This intercultural communication experience is especially important for families living in rural Mexico without telephones (or limited cell phone resources) or Internet connectivity. Although most messages simply send good tidings or messages of love, on one visit to a station in Dolores Hidalgo, Mexico, I heard a caller residing

in Atlanta, GA announce that three people from Dolores were involved in a car accident and had died.

The interviews I collect create a valuable human diary that documents the importance of radio in rural communities. Research should be approached as a discourse: a coordinated process of socially-constructed meaning (Tyler, 1986). As an example of my approach to research as socially constructed discourse, I noticed when I first began doing earlier research in Appalachia, participants, especially elderly Appalachians, would get caught up in telling tales from the past. Having always loved stories, I can only assume that the pleased expression on my face must have encouraged the storytellers. Of course, I was also aware of a potential negative effect of this social construction. One must be sensitive to the possibility that participants might tailor their stories to get a positive reaction from the interviewer (Podber, 2007). This recognition served me well in my recent research interviews in Mexico.

Lindlof (1995, p. 167) says, "Interviews are especially well suited to helping the researcher understand a social actor's own perspective." Although my spontaneous interviews helped gain the trust of many participants, I attempted to structure my formal interviews, where I used a tape recorder, in as relaxed a manner as possible. I would often chat casually with the participants before turning on the recorder. When I sensed that the interviewee was beginning to settle down, I would announce that I was about to start recording. After recording, I would again make casual conversation for another minute or two. I also paid careful attention to microphone placement. I would try not to place the mic in the sight line between the participant and myself. This helped insure that the interviewee would be looking at me and not the microphone when he or she spoke. Often, this allowed the participant to forget that his or her words were being recorded and made for a more relaxed interview. After completing the interviews, I began "living with the data" (Nelson, 1989, p. 223). I listened to the recording and read the transcripts and my notes repeatedly until I began to recognize patterns. Throughout the interview process, I tried not to rely too heavily on my prepared questions and allowed the interviewee to follow any unexpected path he or she chose to take. Of course, my initial questions did shape the direction in which I felt I could derive the most raw materials, and I tried my best to guide participants in the direction that best served my scholarly aim. As the author of this work, I also recognize that I chose the quotes that are included herein (Podber, 2007).

Frisch (1990) addresses the notion that the interviewer may feel more responsible for the creation of a work; however, the interviewee is the greater partner. It is in the interviewee's stories that the greatest value of interview resides. Furthermore, the interviewee also participates in the interpretation of the stories since he or she constantly analyzes their own motives while recalling them. "Critical ethnographers," writes Stacey (1991, p. 115), "eschew a detached stance of neutral observation, and they perceive their subjects as collaborators in a project the researcher can never fully control. Moreover, they acknowledge the indispensably intrusive and unequal nature of their participation in the studied culture." I have always felt that telling one's story can be cathartic and hope that participants in this study benefited from telling their stories.

2. The Importance of Community Radio

While in central Mexico, I interviewed Francisco Javier Zabala Ortiz, manager of Radio

San Miguel in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico. He stressed the importance of his “social program...we talk about a lot of things, social things....We talk about national and international news when it is important, but the (main) thing is talk about (our town) San Miguel, what happened in San Miguel, what happened with all its people...all the people try to solve their problems on this radio station.”¹ Ortiz takes pride in the fact that his radio station’s main purpose is to serve the people of the community. He also spoke fondly of his father Manuel Zabala Zabala, who preceded him as manager and came up with the station’s motto: “El que no vive para servir, no sirve para vivir,” which Ortiz loosely translated as: “If you don’t live to serve, your life is of no service.” Luz Maria Nuñez, a producer for the station, also stressed the importance of interactive community talk shows. The top program from the past, which continues today, is:

A very local program in which almost all the citizens, or the people who are in the audience, talked by phone to Mr. Manuel Zabala and spoke of all their problems; if there was a problem because there were no lights in the streets or there was a leak, a water leak...the normal problems...And it is very interesting because since those days the same format has been recovered because Mr. Manuel Zabala died two years ago and Javier, his oldest son, is the one who is in charge of that program...doing almost the same thing.²

The program provides an invaluable service to the community, especially for those who may have been underserved by local governmental agencies. Nuñez spoke of the wide footprint of the listening audience:

Even the people who work in the government listen to this station. The people [public], even before calling the light department or government agencies, call the radio station. They want everybody to know. And sometimes, as is also the case in the States, people in the government who answer the phone maybe don’t pay too much attention to the people or don’t attend to the request. If everybody listening knows what’s going on, I mean, it’s like a pressure for the government to do what they should do in any case, no?³

On a more personal level, the call-in shows also provide a way for listeners to keep in touch with family and friends, especially during a crisis. Nuñez recalled a flood caused by a broken dam that divided the city. A river of water settled in the flat land of the town, and people could not get from one side of town to the other. As a result, stranded people called the station to announce that they were safe, so members of their family wouldn’t worry. Nuñez takes pride in the service the station provides to the community. “The station, first, before it introduces entertainment, before music, before whatever...pays attention to people.”⁴ This attention

¹ Francisco Javier Zabala Ortiz, interview with author, audio recording, 30 October 2008.

² Luz Maria Nuñez, interview with author, audio recording, 30 October 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

seems to foment a loyal listenership. Nuñez, who is understandably proud of her station, boasts, “You walk on the street, and you can listen to the program through all the windows and all the doors that you are crossing. You get into a taxi, you get onto a bus...., and it’s magic because almost everybody is tuned to this station.”⁵ Putting aside the enthusiastic ratings expressed by Nuñez, her small radio station serves the public in ways few large commercial stations attempt.

3. Crossing the Border

Perhaps the most unique service that the radio stations I researched in Mexico have become known for is the service to its citizens living across the border. During the period before wide Internet access, many Mexicans who migrated to the United States would call their local radio stations back home. As Nuñez put it:

As soon as they could reach a phone, they would call the radio station and say “Please tell my mom on the ranch or in the countryside that I am O.K”....So it was incredible because you could, on your ranch, listen to the voice of your son that left two or three weeks ago, and he is actually saying “Mama, don’t worry. I’m O.K. I have a job.” It’s a real community service, mass media radio.⁶

Nuñez also spoke of how her radio station served as a mail collection point in earlier days when mail service in her small municipality was not very reliable. Rather than taking a chance that a letter from the States might get lost finding its way to a small farm or ranch in rural areas, many listeners would address letters to the radio station back home, where every morning the station manager would announce “El cartero del aire,” (the mailman on the air) followed by a mail call with a list of all the listeners out in the countryside who had mail waiting for them at the station. There still is a sign atop one window at the station that reads “cartas” (mail).

Before the advent of the Internet, radio served as an important international and intercultural communications medium as Mexicans living in the US telephoned their hometown stations in order to broadcast messages back home. Today, e-mail makes it easier and cheaper to communicate with family. However, for those without Internet access, community-minded radio stations continue to assist in the communications cycle. Mexicans living in the U.S. with Internet access now simply e-mail messages to hometown stations. As a result, loved ones, who have no or limited phone or Net access, can hear their messages on the radio. Consequently, radio, usually a one-to-many broadcast medium, becomes a many-to-many broadcast medium.⁷ As Nuñez put it, “Now we use the Internet and messaging is easier. The service that the radio gave in the past, and is still giving, is very important.” To be responsive to their listeners’ needs, the station has a live announcer from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. “I mean there is a person there,” says

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ It is important to clarify that this many-to-many communications model already occurred when migrants telephoned radio stations with messages, but the ease and economy of sending e-mails allows for a potentially larger sender population feeding messages to radio stations and the listening public.

Nuñez. “If you call the radio station, you are gonna be answered by the person who is talking on the microphone, O.K?”

Having someone at the station 14 hours a day to answer and broadcast calls and e-mails is essential for addressing a community’s needs. This is in sharp contrast to operational procedures at mammoth radio conglomerates like Clear Channel Radio that records programs in Texas for broadcast on its 1000+ stations across the U.S. (Clear Channel, 2011). In the U.S., the Federal Communication Commission agreed in 2000 to begin to license low-power FM radio stations to serve individual community needs. However, existing broadcasters successfully lobbied Congress to dramatically limit the number of low-power stations. Today, instead of the hundreds or thousands of stations proposed in the United States, there are just a few dozen (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). There are, however, countless low-power stations targeted to specifically defined communities across the globe. In Paris, France, alone, nearly one fourth of all FM frequencies are assigned to community stations. Among these “radio associatives” are an anarchist station, a station closely associated with the right-wing National Front, Protestant, Jewish and Catholic stations, a station with programming for gay listeners, along with stations that target minority listeners, including North African, Flemish, Basque, Bosnian, Kurdish, and Portuguese (Poindexter, 1997). Low-power radio stations also serve a valuable role in the dissemination of social information in areas of the world with low literacy levels, limited financial resources, and developing areas without electricity (see Olorunnisola, 1997 and Rockwell, 2001).

4. Informational and Edutainment Radio

Of course, Radio San Miguel also serves the local community with its personal broadcasting style. If you lose your dog, camera, purse, or just about anything, you can call the radio station and have the announcer describe the lost item on-air and ask, if found, that the item be returned to the station. Other informational shows have physicians speaking on health issues while some shows simply review recipes. Given the varied population that makes up San Miguel, the station must appeal to a broad audience. As Nuñez puts it, “You must be oriented to everybody...I mean, there are a lot of people from the ranches, out in the countryside, who listen to this radio station but there are also people from the city and from different neighborhoods. I mean there are very rich people and poor people.”⁸ Some shows invite people from the ranches to address vaccines for horses and cattle and given the large ex-pat community of U.S. and Canadian residents living in San Miguel, some broadcasts are in English.

Another way the station serves the community is through its production and broadcast of radionovelas. In cooperation with the non-profit organization CASA (El Centro Para los Adolescentes-The Center for Adolescents), a radionovela was produced on the topic of *partersas* (midwives) that examined the tensions between midwives and doctors in the region and the special importance of midwifery in rural areas. However, Radio San Miguel cannot accommodate all the community radio needs of CASA. CASA coordinator of radio programming José Roberto must travel about 40 km from CASA’s offices in San Miguel

⁸ Nuñez, interview with author.

de Allende to host a weekly show on Saturday mornings on sexual rights and health at a local station in Dolores Hidalgo. He says, "I love what CASA is doing as a social platform directed at vulnerable sectors and I believe radio is the best medium to reach these people."⁹ When asked what other topics the Saturday morning program discusses, co-host and CASA coordinator, Gustavo Acosta explains, "This month we have focused on violence against women, but we look at other topics like sexuality, ecology and human rights. We are thinking of exploring new topics like drug trafficking or other hot topics in Mexico. We are looking at the abortion issue very closely in Mexico."¹⁰ These young men not only talk about important issues like spousal abuse and reproductive health issues on the radio, they also act as advocates by suggesting public agencies that may be of help to the caller. They initiate follow-up assistance, if requested, by contacting the caller to assure that the suggested public agency was appropriate and/or helpful. As Roberto put it, "We keep in communication with the caller to make them feel that they are not alone."¹¹ This personal attention is important to callers who are seeking assistance, but may not want to be on-air speaking about personal issues such as unwanted pregnancies. Roberto continues, "Some are ashamed to be on-air, so they usually choose to have a private call."¹² After the caller hangs up, the conversation is discussed anonymously on-air for the benefit of other listeners. In addition, Gustavo and Roberto have personal, face-to-face interactions with their listening audience. They are not merely amorphous voices transmitted through the ether. Some listeners, who do not want to risk identification by calling the radio station to ask for assistance, wait to speak to them outside the studio after the show. This personal involvement takes the concept of community radio to the next level.

On the day of my interview with them, before Roberto and Acosta's program began, a caller from Atlanta was on-air sharing the sad news that three migrant workers originally from Dolores Hidalgo, living in Georgia, U.S. had had a car accident and died. As Acosta explained, "One of them promised to come back and marry his girlfriend. They had a baby. So, on the radio, the caller was worried about how to give the bad news to his girlfriend."¹³ When asked why they called the radio station, Acosta continued, "They know one of the guys here....The hosts know all the people in the community because they are in constant communication with them. People leave messages via the Internet or by phone."¹⁴ Again, this personal connection with the community goes far beyond the usual call-in radio show.

Because of scheduling limitations of commercial radio stations, independent radio producers Roberto and Acosta long for their own community station instead of being limited to Radio San Miguel or traveling 45 minutes each week to gain access to the airwaves at the Dolores Hidalgo station. As Roberto put it:

⁹ José Roberto, interview with author, audio recording, 16 November 2008.

¹⁰ Gustavo Acosta, interview with author, audio recording, 16 November 2008.

¹¹ Roberto, interview with author.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Acosta, interview with author.

¹⁴ Ibid.

I think radio is one of the most fruitful media to inform, but also to educate. In Mexico, the problem with radio stations is that they are using their frequencies for entertainment or commerce and not focused on information or education. So I believe radio has to be exploited in this way. But unfortunately, we at CASA don't have the resources or opportunities as presenters to be aired freely. We are trying to collect the requirements at CASA for getting a federal government license and community radio station. They auction the frequencies to the highest bidder. So our dream can only fully come true with a license for community radio.¹⁵

In addition, the time slot of Roberto and Acusto's program further demonstrates the need for access to a community radio station license. Aimed at a younger demographic audience, the only time available for the young men's program is Saturday mornings at 10:30. When asked if Saturday mornings were their choice for a program aimed at a young audience, Acusto replied, "Our main aim is young people but maybe they go out the night before so it is very early on Saturday for them."¹⁶

In discussing Roberto and Acusto's program, Nadine Goodman, an advisor for CASA, adds:

What is particularly stimulating about what they do is, you know, inspired by, designed by, run by, and evaluated by young people and that's their main focused audience. And I think it is an empowering tool for young people to voice their opinions and to do exchanges. You know, having an impact is a very wonderful thing....There is incredibly sensational stuff on TV...It seems like radio can be a more serious venue for more serious discussions....I don't know what it is; maybe because you don't have the visuals. You have to sit and concentrate, and it's a more tranquil environment in terms of, you know, really paying attention instead of just being spoon-fed with that visual in front of your face.¹⁷

At the end of the Ken Burns' 1997 documentary *Empire of the Air*, a narrator tells the story of a father discussing the arrival of television with his son. Asked whether the son prefers the new medium of television to radio, the boy thinks a while and answers that he prefers radio. Surprised, the father asks why. The son replies, "Because on radio the pictures are better." The value of community service radio today remains invaluable when looking at issues of localism and community needs. The ability to discuss issues important to a community, without the visual and graphic sensationalism that has become the status quo on many "informational" television programs, is one of radio's greatest strength. The examples of these community service radio programs continue to serve the needs of the people of Mexico in ways that few stations in the US would consider. As Nuñez described Radio San Miguel:

¹⁵ Roberto, interview with author.

¹⁶ Acusto, interview with author.

¹⁷ Nadine Goodman, interview with author, audio recording, 9 November 2008.

What is different about this radio station is that this radio station is a bridge to the community. I mean, it really connects you, the foreigner with the Mexicans, the politicians with the citizens, the poor with the rich, the rural with urban. I mean, here is a place where you can feel free to speak....It's a large part of the community. It has a very important place in the community, this radio station.¹⁸

With the current global deregulatory atmosphere, it is essential that community service radio stations and programs be given an opportunity to access the airwaves. The services they provide to the disenfranchised continue to be important, especially in the developing world. Although sometimes viewed as an ancient electronic medium, radio continues to change and evolve. The example of Mexicans living in the US and phoning their home radio stations might be somewhat unique to US/Mexican relations; however, radio's ability to adapt and accommodate the needs of its listening audience makes it unique, even in this era of media conglomeration. Its relative economy, especially when compared to television, makes access available to a more diverse population. With some pundits predicting the death of radio, Radio San Miguel and community service programs produced by Roberto and Acusto are examples of how radio continues to serve important populations within our society.

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¹⁸ Nuñez, interview with author.

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