



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 15

New Voices

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Mexico's National Indigenous Institute (INI) has a network of cultural radio stations which provides a communication service for about 3.2 million people, most of whom are indigenous. The stations broadcast in 28 native languages and reach almost half of the First Nations groups in the country. They are located in the principal towns of the twelve ethnic regions where they operate; towns which in general have all necessary services and where indigenous people from the countryside come to buy and sell, take care of official business or make use of health care services. For one reason or another they have to come to town often and it is not unusual for them to visit the radio station while they are there, either to put up a notice, drop off a tune or simply say hello to the announcers.

This rather special experiment in communication began in 1979 when XEZV, The Voice of the Mountains, went on the air in Tlapa de Comonfort in the state of Guerrero.

The overall aims of the stations in the network are:

- a) to help improve the living conditions of the target population;
- b) to help strengthen the culture of the settlements and communities which fall within the stations' range;
- c) to promote and strengthen indigenous organisations as a way of achieving the free development of native peoples.

The programming that seeks to fulfil these aims falls into five main categories: Educational, cultural, news, entertainment, and "notices."

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Educational programmes are intended to improve the social well-being of the listener. The starting point for producing these programmes is always the real conditions in which indigenous people live, focusing on culture, natural resources, legal problems, health and so on.

There is no doubt that *cultural programmes* have the biggest impact on the population. These programmes broadcast the communities' major cultural expressions, such as music, story-telling, feast days, history, customs and traditions.

News bulletins keep the communities informed about the most important events. International and national news from NOTIMEX, the Mexican press agency, is carried. However, there is an emphasis on local news provided by several regionally-based community correspondent networks.

Entertainment programmes are primarily intended to increase listenership. These programmes and the stations' music programming conform to listeners' tastes and expectations. However, the stations don't play so-called commercial music.

"Notice boards" provide an important communication service for the communities. They are special time-slots during which personal messages or messages from various institutions and organisations are read. In areas where only very few households have telephones, these are often the most effective way of delivering personal messages to family members in the next town or letting the members of an organisation know of an upcoming meeting.

The common experience of the broadcasters and listeners has been extremely important. Studies recently carried out indicate that there is a very high listenership. Local people listen to their radio station not just to hear messages in their own language, but also because they strongly identify with it. And how could it be otherwise since they hear their own voices and their own music on the radio, and their hopes and desires are expressed over the air. Indeed, the success of these radio stations is due precisely to the fact that there is community participation on nearly all levels. There are three main ways by which listeners are able to participate in the programming.

First, and most importantly, the staff of the stations is almost entirely native. They are professionals, trained in radio production, cultural research and journalism, but they can also identify with and understand the listeners' culture and reality because it is their own.

Secondly, indigenous organisations produce programmes "in situ" at Radio Production Centres located at various places within the broadcast area of the stations. These programmes are then sent to the stations which broadcast them complete and unedited.

Finally, the networks of community correspondents that were mentioned earlier supply local and regional news and are a valuable way of enabling organised listener participation.

The type of participation and the degree to which it contributes to cultural self-definition varies widely throughout the network. The Zapotecs in the mountains of Northern Oaxaca, for example, have reached levels of organisation and productivity which are diametrically distinct from those of the Rarámuris in the Tarahynara Mountains

in Chihuahua. Whereas, for the Zapotecs, radio is a vehicle for discussing the projects of their various organisations and their successes and failures, the Rarámuris see it as essential only as a means of interpersonal and community communication. For the latter, the medium has not yet realised its potential for contributing culturally and organisationally to the community.

Community participation, although it has been the central focus of all radio activity, is still far from consolidating itself and making all the links that are needed. Participation continues to be spontaneous and individual and a lot must be done to transform it into something that can connect with the dynamics of the indigenous movement. There is no doubt that this is a reflection of the level of development of native people's movements and the extent to which they are present on the national political scene.

NEW RADIO STATIONS: PARTICIPATION, MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH

It has been noted that indigenous radio stations are an efficient means of communication and of strengthening native culture in Mexico. One indicator of this is the numerous requests for assistance received by the National Indigenous Institute (INI) from organisations and communities wanting to set up their own radio stations. Although the Institute's financial resources are limited, there is an ambitious plan to set up 14 new radio stations, bringing the total to 26 by 1994 and providing the service to almost all of the indigenous communities in the country.

INI's efforts are not only financial. A participatory project with the political implications that this one has, inevitably needs a strategy in line with the democratising spirit of the medium. It is absolutely necessary to be able to count on broad participation and direction from the very beginning of the project until the station goes on air, from choosing the equipment to the design of the programme schedule. In order to ensure this participation and direction, we have designed a research plan aimed at involving the community in determining what their station will be like. This research is conducted in every community before a radio station is set up.

The research plan involves three separate branches, each with its own aims, methodology and techniques. The first is a socioeconomic investigation whose aim is to determine in general terms the social, political and cultural infrastructure of the region. The second branch of research looks at media use and the habits of future listeners. Finally there is a participatory research project designed to define jointly with the listeners the specific aims of the station, what it will broadcast and how community participation will be achieved.

Socioeconomic research

This branch of research seeks to collect a body of documentary information about the region in which the station will operate. These studies will be a point of reference about the geographical, topographical conditions in the region and its natural resources.

A second activity in this research branch is a study of the region's labour processes. A detailed understanding of these processes will later permit the development

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of programmes that will provide technical assistance to farmers, forestry workers, and others.

The distribution processes and their resultant political-social system are also analysed. This level of research is directed at identifying the various political forces (parties, organisations, citizens groups) and their interaction with one another and with outside bodies.

The final part of this research branch looks at the most important aspects of the culture of the indigenous groups who will participate in the station. This brief cultural investigation is aimed at understanding the mechanism of cultural reproduction, acculturation and the methods of resistance adopted when faced with the influence of dominant cultures.

Media use

By means of a series of surveys and interviews, this branch of the research hopes to identify the uses the communities make of the various mass media. Do they listen to the radio? At what time? What are their favourite programmes and what do they like about them? How long do they listen? Who turns the receiver on? This gives us a body of information which will be very useful when drawing up the programme schedule.

To carry out the surveys and the interviews we use what we call community researchers – peasants, volunteers or people chosen by the community involved in the project. The results are amazing, for each interview session is a rich exchange of information between the researcher and the people being interviewed.

Participatory research

This is the backbone of the research. It is based on a series of what we call *Thinking Workshops* – meetings with organisations in which we talk and think about the role that the radio station will have in the future.

This branch of the research is concerned with establishing the channels and mechanisms for community participation as well as working with future listeners to define what the radio station will be like. At the same time as considering the communication needs of the settlements, radio committees and their respective representatives are being elected. In this way we are able to determine who the community correspondents will be, where the Production Centres will be located, and the interest of each group in doing particular programmes. This knowledge is essential as we plan the programming.

As a guide to this research and the Thinking Workshops, we came up with three basic questions from which the programming goals, content and methods will follow.

What will a radio station do for us?

What will we want to broadcast?

How will we participate in it?

The process is very simple and very accessible to the community. The answers to each question are written down in a big note pad, taking great care to write them down as literally as possible. For example:

The radio station that we are going to get, we will use it to stop our customs from being lost and so the kids will know the words of the elders, that's the use we will make of it.

The answers which come out in these meetings are like the one above, offered by elder in Zongolica, Veracruz. In the region Cora-huchol-tepehuana-meicana, in the states of Nayarit and Jalisco, we were amazed at the clarity of the answers. The governors of the indigenous communities got together (they are the representatives of the traditional forms of government) and presented a series of questions to the station. "Why are we going to broadcast our customs, if they are ours alone?" was one comment made by a governor. This gave rise to a long discussion amongst themselves in which they realised the importance of radio. This same discussion put conditions on broadcasting certain cultural forms: ritual music could only be broadcast at the time of the celebration of a particular ceremony and in a limited way; certain rituals, which are closed or only for initiates or *maracames*, cannot be recorded; recording of rituals must be done with the approval of the governors, and so on. In order to solve these and many other problems the Assembly of Indigenous Governors, the leaders of the producers' organisations, and the *maracames*, formed the Consultative Council of the Voice of the Four Nations, whose function will be to run and monitor the station. In this way channels for indigenous participation in radio were established.

It is clear that participatory research does not end with just consulting people; it requires a way of organising the information obtained and then presenting it to the participants. This on-going process makes possible a continual prioritising of suggestions according to the aims and headings which were mentioned at the beginning of this article. Thus, community discussion continues right up to the point when titles are being chosen for the programmes.

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