Chapter 13

Blending Old and New Technologies: Mexico's indigenous radio service messages

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From Chicago, USA, Luis Ramírez sends this message for his brother Arnulfo, in San Juan Puerto Montaña. Luis has the money for the musicians and wants Arnulfo to go to the phone booth in Metlatonoc in the morning of Friday, the eleventh. Luis will call then to get the number of the bank account where the money should be deposited.

Messages like this are common on the radios of the Sistema de Radiodifusoras Culturales Indigenistas (Indigenous Cultural Radio Network). They are an illustration of the communication services these radios have provided for the indigenous population in their broadcast areas since their inception more than twenty years ago. Even now this "airwave mail" is extensively used in many rural areas of the world because it is the only available form of telecommunication. Despite its simplicity, the service is very important to the community and it is offered by community, cultural, and commercial radios alike.

These messages reveal how indigenous peoples have imaginatively adapted the "old technologies" of radio and the telephone to meet their everyday communication needs and contribute in very practical and concrete way to local economic development, health, good governance, and, as with the message above, cultural heritage and the maintenance of a system in which community members help pay for the community's traditional and religious festivities, even when they are not able to be present. The messages are often broadcast into local languages, which means that they are important in terms not only of their usefulness to the population, but also of their contribution to strengthening the language and culture of the communities.

If we consider the spatial dimension of this communication, we can see that this technological *convergence* of radio and the telephone, has made it possible for the message service to play both an *intraregional* role, by establishing communication among the villages of the broadcasting area, and an *extraregional* role, by linking migrants with their native communities.

It is also interesting to note that this convergence happened years ago in a practically "spontaneous" way, as soon as the telephone became available. It was not a donor driven project but rather a response to a technological possibility that presented itself and that fulfilled concrete needs and demands of the population. Now the Internet is appearing in some indigenous stations in the same way the telephone did less than fifteen years ago, and it is being embraced in the same spontaneous way. The Internet, telephone and radio are being combined to extend communication possibilities and enable communities to keep in touch, despite migration and other factors that threaten the social fabric and economic possibilities of the communities.

Almost all of the twenty radio stations belonging to the network are connected to the Internet, although in some cases it is slow and expensive, requiring long-distance calls over bad quality telephone lines. However, Mexico's current public policies include an ambitious project to extend Internet connections to poor and isolated communities throughout the

country by installing centres equipped with computer equipment and other technology, such as satellite TV, in the country's poorest communities and regions. These centres, called "plazas comunitarias" (community squares), are intended to broaden access to education, fight backwardness, and help to reduce the so-called digital divide. Current plans involve establishing 500 such centres in 2002 and to have 20,000 of them in place by 2007.

This chapter will examine the message service provided by indigenous radio stations and the convergence of conventional technologies that it involves. We will then go on to look at some emerging opportunities and challenges presented by the increasing availability of the Internet in indigenous communities. The first part of the chapter presents a brief overview of the indigenous peoples of Mexico and of the characteristics of the indigenous radio network. That is followed by a description of the radio message service and some research findings on this subject. The document ends with some thoughts on the adoption of new communications technologies and the opportunities that they can offer for intercommunication among indigenous peoples.

Indigenous Peoples in Mexico

Mexico's multicultural make-up, a reality that is recognised in the country's constitution, is primarily a result of the presence of its indigenous peoples. Estimates vary considerably but even the most conservative estimates are that ten percent of the country's population is indigenous – twelve million indigenous people belonging to nearly sixty ethnic groups with diverse languages and cultures.[1]

Historically, Mexico's indigenous peoples have lived in extreme poverty and marginalisation and have suffered from the country's highest levels of infant mortality, malnutrition, illiteracy, etc. Many indigenous communities are located in extremely remote areas and almost 90 percent of municipalities with primarily indigenous populations are classified as poor or extremely poor. In summary, the current situation of Mexico's indigenous peoples reveals inequity in the distribution of wealth and public services as well as the ethnic and linguistic discrimination that they have endured for centuries.

Emigration is a major factor in the social framework of indigenous regions, with large numbers of indigenous people swelling the poverty belts in cities, moving temporarily to farming areas in other regions of the country, or illegally crossing the border into the USA. Although it is impossible to obtain precise data on how many indigenous people emigrate temporarily or permanently, this growing trend obviously entails significant cultural disintegration.

With the appearance of the EZLN[2] almost eight years ago, the indigenous movement has become stronger, and its organisations have broadened and developed. Although recent constitutional amendments have not fully satisfied the demands of indigenous peoples, they have presented some interesting opportunities for greater participation of their communities and organisations in the design of development policies. Building a positive ethnicity as a means for struggle and survival is seen as a fundamental strategy by the contemporary indigenous movement.

The Radio Stations of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista

The Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) is a Mexican governmental organisation that works specifically with the country's indigenous groups. It operates the Indigenous Cultural Radio Network, made up of twenty AM stations with broadcast ranges between 50 and 120

[1] The 10 percent estimate is based on a strict linguistic criteria – 12 million people speak an indigenous language. When less strict criteria are applied, estimates of the number indigenous people rises to as much as 30 percent of the total population.
[2] Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional – Zapatisa National Liberation Army.

kilometres. The programming of this network targets five million people belonging to 30 distinct ethnic groups. The network also includes four low-power FM stations run by indigenous schoolchildren in the Maya Peninsula. INI's radio network is unique in the world because of its governmental nature, the number of stations that it includes, and the cultural and linguistic diversity of its audiences. Since the end of the 1970s, when its first station was set up, the network has grown continually and become one of the focal points for the state's actions on the indigenous front.

Radio generally has strong roots among indigenous communities, who appreciate and use the stations. While at times they are questioned because of their ties with the government, the radio stations in the network have shown that their regional presence is an essential part of the "cultural scene," and they are a highly-valued information and communication tool.

Although the objectives and strategies of this radio broadcasting system have changed over the years, reflecting in part changing State policies concerning indigenous peoples, and although each new experience has been accompanied by its own concrete changes,[3] strengthening indigenous cultures has been a constant concern of INI's radio stations, illustrated by the use of Native languages on a footing at least equal to that of Spanish, broadcasting time devoted to indigenous cultural expressions, and the free-of-charge broadcasting of messages.

The Message Service

INI's radio stations have set aside daily programming time to broadcast, free-of-charge, *avisos* or messages submitted by individuals, organisations, and institutions. These messages deal with a broad spectrum of subjects and originate from and are intended for very diverse audiences. What they have in common, however, is that they respond to explicit needs for information and communication as formulated by the service's users. Research has shown that the users consider the service to be very useful. For example, in a study conducted in the Mixteco area of Oaxaca, 20 percent of respondents said that the messages were their favourite part of the radio station's programming. Only music, preferred by 29 percent of respondents, was more popular.[4]

The radio-announcement programs are usually presented two or three times a day, and their duration varies according to the number of announcements. For stations located in mountainous areas, where roads and telephone lines are seriously lacking, the messages may be the only available means of communication for people living in scattered and isolated communities. Where geography and climate have made it easier to establish communication lines and where all villages are accessible, the situation is very different. A study conducted in 1995 describes how in radio stations such as XEPUR, in Cherán, Michoacán, or XEPET, in Peto, Yucatán, both located in regions with fairly good road systems, the message service is minimal. In areas such as Montaña de Guerrero or Sierra Tarahumara, however, the demand is much greater. [5]

Whatever the level of demand, in addition to being of immediate use for practical matters, the messages seem to have strengthened social cohesion within communities and regions. People make use of the station as a means of communicating within social networks

[3] Significant changes have been witnessed over periods of several years. Some of these are related to the positions of the "ethnicists," who promote an ideal view of cultural redemption and conservation. Other more avant-garde positions are aimed at having a positive impact on the reinforcement and development of ethnicity so as to contribute to the emancipation of indigenous peoples and to shape a project for indigenous autonomy within the framework of the nation-state.

[4] Cornejo, I (1990). La Voz de la Mixteca y la comunidad receptora de la Mixteca Oaxaqueña. Universidad Iberoamericana. Master's thesis.

[5] Vargas, L. (1995). Social Uses and Participatory Practices: The Use of Participatory Radio by Ethnic Minorities in Mexico. Boulder, Colorado, USA: Westview Press.

and even a way of maintaining the networks themselves. Messages also keep community members informed of events and activities involving other people in the community when, for example, messages intended for a neighbour or relative are overheard by others.

Three years after the first station in the network was inaugurated in 1979, Besauri and Valenzuela found that the announcement service had:

> *... indirectly and perhaps unintentionally led to a strengthening of regional social cohesion through new forms [of communication]. In other words, the opportunity for the residents of La Montaña to maintain interregional communication ... has enabled them to continue circulating information on events and situations that are part of people's daily lives.*[6]

By placing regional daily affairs on the public airwaves, the messages constantly remind listeners that their environment extends beyond the boundaries of their local community and neighbouring villages. The messages serve not only as a means of communication between two people but are also used frequently to send messages to specific groups or entire communities. Messages originate from groups of people as well. If we look at the messages that announce meetings for example, it is interesting to see that many are from municipal councils in coordination with local schools – invitations to community celebrations where traditional music is played and cultural identity is recreated and reaffirmed. These invitations are one way that radio is capable of supporting traditional forms of community organisation based on a feelings of identity and of belonging.

This service began as an *intraregional* communications alternative, but it has gradually become an *extraregional* means of communication as well, with a large number of messages requested from other regions of Mexico and from the USA. Messages are delivered to the radio stations by mail, telephone, third parties, and now the Internet. They include simple greetings, information about money transfers, and emergency alerts. The messages inform people who remain in the region about relatives who have left, and, for temporary or permanent emigrants, they are a means to keep in touch with their place of origin. In other words, given the significance of the migratory phenomenon, the messages have become an important tool for keeping culture alive outside its geographical boundaries.

Before the 1990s, when telephone lines were installed in remote small towns, people requested announcements only in writing or in person. Some would go directly to the radio station, and others would send someone else with their requests. Eventually letters began to arrive from other regions of Mexico and from the U.S. with requests for messages. However, since the appearance of mobile phones in rural areas, an increasing number of messages are phoned in to the stations.

Access to the telephone has had an impact not only on how messages are sent but also on their content. In research conducted recently in one region, it was found that the most frequent requests were for someone "to receive a telephone call" (22.9 percent); "to go somewhere" (12.7 percent); and "to make a telephone call" (8.2 percent).

The study also highlighted the importance of the extraregional communication flow with 36.4 percent of personal messages originating in other Mexican states or in the USA.

Advent of the Internet

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is a gradual increase in the number of message requests received via the Internet. While the message that began this chapter was received by telephone, similar messages are beginning to arrive via email. As the service

[6] Bezaury, J. and Valenzuela, V. (1982). *Presencia de la Voz de la Montaña en las comunidades.* INI. Unpublished research, page 40.

develops, it will undoubtedly become common for stations to receive emails asking that messages referring to telephone calls be read over the radio. This convergence of three means of communication and information will facilitate and strengthen the existing intercommunication between the radio stations and between indigenous communities and individuals in various parts of Mexico, in the USA, and elsewhere, providing support both for local communities and migrant workers.

According to all indications, the trend will intensify over the coming years. On the one hand, the government's *plazas comunitarias* will soon be appearing in a number of indigenous regions. On the other hand, in the framework of this project, some of these *plazas* have already been installed in the USA for use by Mexican immigrants. Furthermore, indigenous migrants settled in cities have begun to form independent organisations and some of these, aware of the potential that new technologies can offer, have begun to use them to their own advantage. One example of this is the Asociación de Mixtecos en el Distrito Federal (Association of Mixtecos in the federal district of Mexico City), which exchanges information and keeps in contact with the radio station that broadcasts in the Mixteco area.

There is, of course, some substance to the argument that indigenous migrants do not have easy access to the Internet, given their low education levels and poor living standards. However, it should also be recognised that migrants are not necessarily the least educated or most impoverished. On the contrary, migration has been most intense in those sectors of the population that have had the best opportunities. While there is truth to the claim that simply making technology more available will not serve to bridge the "digital divide", it is also true that we should not underestimate the abilities of indigenous organisations or their growing demand for opportunities and access to means of communication.

The message services and email are obviously not the only ways to make use of an Internet connection. There are other means of making relevant use of the Internet in combination with radio stations. Consider, for example, the development of portals for marketing products, distance learning and education, the exchange of information and programs among radio stations, or on-line consultation regarding health or agricultural techniques for sustainable development. However, meeting basic information and communication needs with this kind of messages continues to be a major imperative for supporting indigenous people's free and autonomous development. We therefore believe that it is essential to pay attention to the need for greater access to technology and to provide some direction and intentionality in the way that it is used. This means that the INI radio stations should be ready for the arrival and expansion of the Internet so that they can include it in their strategies and work plans, thereby increasing and improving the services they offer.

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