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The Mouth of the Wolf: Anthropology and Radio

Anthropologists generally have very little to say about radio stations. This is surprising because the subaltern populations that are most usually the subjects of anthropology are very likely to listen to the radio. When radio does get mentioned in ethnographic monographs it is often a symbol of mechanization and modernity (Ortiz 1970: 92). Sometimes there is a moment of irony, as when ritual music recorded by the anthropologist is broadcast on loudspeakers (Whitten 1985: 217). Sometimes there are disturbing reports of the use of radio broadcasting by evangelical religious groups among indigenous peoples (Muratorio 1981). But overall, there has not been much interest by anthropology in radio broadcasting.[1]

On the other hand, communication studies has an ambiguous relation with ethnography. Participant observation has been used to study the production of newspapers and television shows (Gans 1980). The new subdiscipline of cultural studies has been more receptive to ethnographic method (Journal of Communication Inquiry 1989). But when cultural studies speaks about 'ethnographic research' what is often meant is unstructured interviews lasting a couple of hours and usually tape-recorded (Morley 1980). The most important exception to this is a small number of studies of youth subcultures that do involve sustained fieldwork (Willis 1977).

There are good reasons why ethnography is only one of many research strategies in cultural studies. For example, a study of the audience for a television show does not take as its object a 'community' and its culture but a multiplicity of viewers in modern society. A study of changes in the publishing industry will rely on historical research as well as interviews with book publishers. In general, cultural studies examines human action in relation to modern institutions and the state. How will a feminist television show survive in the TV industry? How will women viewers in quite different situations respond to that show? These are issues of social institutions and everyday life. What matters is the research question and not a commitment to a particular research method.

My own field research in Ecuador and Bolivia was to study community radio stations. It was mainly descriptive. With political writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971) in mind, I wanted to examine the

role of (mainly) non-commercial radio stations in political processes. Most of the radios broadcast only to their region but some had political effects at the national level. The research was also comparative and tried to explain why alternative media was much stronger in Bolivia—the poorer country. I thought it had to do with the history of social movements. If Bolivia had a network of miners' radio stations it was because of the militant history of the Bolivian miners. Ecuador was considered to be a 'safe' country, heavily policed and a suitable location for the offices of non-governmental organizations operating in Latin America. Alternative media in Bolivia was mostly self-organized and militant. Ecuador was a good place for UNESCO funded broadcasting experiments (O'Connor 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1993).

At this point there is an overlap between cultural studies and anthropology. I was involved in fieldwork in a very different culture and language. Most of the radio stations that interested me were in remote locations or regions with large indigenous populations. Before and during the research I read extensively in the anthropological literature about Ecuador and Bolivia. As a few anthropologists become interested in the use of radio and television by aboriginal peoples there is a clear overlap between their work and cultural studies. The work of Eric Michaels (1994) is well known. But more generally as anthropology itself turns to multi-site ethnography, another area of overlap opens up. Anthropology is currently rethinking its activities because the traditional ethnography of isolated communities becomes increasingly implausible. George E. Marcus (1998) offers several suggestions beyond the local study of subaltern populations. Follow the people as they migrate, follow the thing, even follow the metaphor or allegory.

Clearly I was following the radio stations. After interviews with media researchers in both countries, I drew up a list of about eight alternative media projects in each country. With that number of projects to visit, I could not undertake ethnographic studies of local cultures. In fact, I was interested in situating the radio stations in relationship to their regional social and political structure. For this I relied heavily on social science research, though my own observations were useful too. I visited each radio station and interviewed the staff. I also recorded samples of their programming. This was not a study of media reception but an attempt to situation the activities of the radio station within the regional social and political dynamic. Sometimes this involved visits to very distant communities.

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[1] For an exceptional study of radio broadcasting by an anthropologist see Miles (1998).

Simíatug is a remote indigenous centre in the Ecuadorian highlands.[2] Everyone interested in alternative media in the country knows about the community radio station there. There was even a video about this place and several research papers (Boca de Lobo c. 1985; Garcia 1985, Vandenbulcke 1986; Whittington 1985). A year before my visit, I had a copy of a radio program produced during a training workshop there. What follows is written, with an eye to modernist ethnography in a montage style (Clifford 1988). But also as part of a dialogue between cultural studies and anthropology. It starts by following a video into the town. It deals mainly with the radio workers whom I had been interviewing all over Ecuador and Bolivia. And in the end, it discovers what I had been looking for all along: the relationship between radio and social movements.

Boca de lobo

Perhaps because my copy of the video is several generations old it makes the long shots of the mountains look like an oil painting in deep green and brown pigments. The wind howls through the microphone. Simíatug in Quichua means the mouth of the wolf. A heavy truck covered in a tarp rocks its way up a narrow unpaved road. In medium shots it look picturesque against the mountains in the background. Meanwhile other two figures on donkeys make their way down the mountain. They are shown against the sparse undergrowth covering the bare mountain. The truck driver speaks. He was born in Simíatug but no longer lives there. He is a merchant and brings in goods, above all for the market on Wednesday. Two boys stand on top of the truck, seen against the mountains and the weaving road. The two figures on the donkey are arriving from a different direction. The truck driver explains the difference between mestizo and indigenous people in our country: they are badly brought up, there are things they don't understand. The wolf howls through the microphone. And there nestled in the hills is the town of Simíatug with its white houses along the curving entrance road into the central square.

[2] It is usual in anthropological writing to change the names of places and people in order to protect their identity. This gesture may lead to a false sense of security because the identities are frequently obvious to anybody with local knowledge of the society. It would be impossible to hide the identity of Simíatug by changing the name. I have waited ten years to describe my research, in part to avoid creating any problems for the community.

The houses look abandoned, the paint peeling from the walls. The camera shows a small sign that reads: For Sale. Another voice tells us that there only remain thirty or forty white families. Many houses are padlocked. Of those who remain many are women. One operates a soft-drink bottling operation in her home. She is a widow and inherited the business from her husband. She fills bottles with a funnel from a large plastic tub and a boy adds the gas and caps the bottle. She explains that the natives purchase clear soft drinks and cola as medicine. Things have changed in the town. Now the natives say that they are the same as us, she explains. The camera shows an open fire and there is food on the table. In another house with peeling paint, a woman explains that now she lives more apart. Before, things were cheaper. Now when the campesinos have meetings to decide things, she says, we are not taken into account.

For the first time, we hear a spokesperson for the indigenous people. He wears glasses with black frames and sits among a large group of silent people wearing ponchos and hats. The camera shows close-ups of hands. He explains that things could not continue as before. We were at their orders, we couldn't say a word. The indigenous people are now organized, he says. This is the only indigenous voice we hear in the video. But now the truck finally arrives in Simíatug, along the narrow streets and past the large church building, painted white. A woman's voice tells about the market that was organized in the town because the native people had products to sell such as cereals and animals. The streets are now crowded with people in black and red ponchos, women carrying babies. Indigenous men purposefully walk into shops. Some drink and play billiards in the towns bars. Goods are exchanged in the marketplace and money counted. Then people begin to leave by foot or on donkeys. Unsold pots are packed up. The truck is impatiently filled with sacks and then slowly pulls out of town, leaving the streets to an occasional dog or a group of small boys. On the soundtrack a woman sings a hymn and prays that the town will not be completely destroyed. In her ways of seeing things, the town in control of the natives. They're going to kill us, she says. A very large group of indigenous people in dark and bright ponchos follows a coffin painted deep blue into the cemetery. The mists swirl again over the town and the wolf cries into the microphone.

The radio technician in Quito

Andy Laughlan is a young radio technician, a British volunteer who had been working with the Latin American Association for Educational Radio (ALER) for three years. During this period he has been in Simíatug for a total of about six months. He knows more about the station than anyone at ALER. He sketches the history of exploitation of the indigenous people by mestizos who controlled access to the market. They would block the road and force indigenous producers to sell or threaten to destroy their goods. The Catholic Church also extracted taxes in kind, which it then sold to the mestizos. Gradual organization of the indigenous people developed into a base organization that is highly democratic. On the example of the radio schools in Riobamba and with help from the Shuar Federation the radio station was started. The 'radio quality' of the programs may not be very high by outside standards but they are listened to avidly because they are by and about themselves.

The Church cannot claim credit for the radio. The federation is suspicious of it because of its role in the past. The only connection is that the first radio director was a lay pastor from ERPE, the radio school in Riobamba. There have been problems in recent years with aid. The federation is very suspicious of whom it accepts help. At present there are technical services, training and technical advice from ALER. After several years of building this relationship, the radio is affiliated with this organization. Oxfam America is also involved through a local organization. This raises problems because all of these local organizations are informally affiliated with a political party and are not disinterested. They're attempting to gain support for their party. They provided a trainer *chosen by them* to the disappointment of a local person and the organization's hopes. Also tape recorders, cassettes, salaries for popular reporters. There was an attempted imposition of a western hierarchical structure with a director paid more than the others, but the federation successfully resisted this. Oxfam Britain is providing help with bilingual school materials. The ministry of education is also providing some schools and the new priest (who abolished the Church tax on goods) is also interested in starting schools. The influx of large amounts of money (and in rumours it gets inflated) creates the possibility of tension and suspicion within the organization, This is a serious problem because their strength has always been in their unity. The best day to visit is probably Wednesday because it is market day. You can get a ride in a truck or a four-wheel drive car is needed on the unpaved road. Access is very difficult for outsiders. The weather is cold and the food is mostly rice and potatoes.

Notebooks and memories

In my notebooks there is nothing about renting a small truck in Quito with no driver's license: they said my passport would do. About being warned to put the anti-theft lock on every time I left the vehicle. These trucks are very popular, they said. About struggling to find the exit from Quito to the highway. At one point I turned the wrong direction into a one-way street and a policeman stopped me. It's just that I don't know the streets very well, I explained. I'm trying to find the way to Ambato. But you have to pay for your sins, he said quietly. It took me a few moments to realize that a small banknote would solve the problem. Overnight in Ambato I stayed at a small hotel because it had a secure yard for parking and the next morning had difficulty maneuvering the car out. I drove slowly over the worsening roads to Simíatug, enjoying the beautiful scenery and the mists over the mountains. I was also wondering what to say when I got there. I had a letter of introduction from a priest active in community media but he had warned me that the coordinator of the radio station was very separatist. And you, said the priest looking me up and down, are very white.

I finally arrived in the early afternoon and attracted quite a bit of attention. I must have told somebody I came to visit the radio because soon I was sitting in the studio with a group of radio workers. The studio was in the Runacuhapac Yachana Huasi (the house of the people's knowledge) beside the church on the main square. It was a courtyard with meeting rooms surrounding a volleyball court. The radio was well equipped and had a tape library, some records and a portable recorder. I started to talk about my research on popular media and found that they were very well informed about popular movements and radio stations. There were eight workers at the radio and one of them had visited Nicaragua as part of a four-person delegation from Ecuador. They had very firm political views. The discussion was cut short by Eusebio, the coordinator of the radio, who explained that I would first have to get permission from the community. There would be a meeting that evening. He said that they were busy with meetings all day and why hadn't I phoned to say I was coming?

After supper there was a meeting in a hall with many people sitting around the wall: mainly community teachers, radio workers and organizational officials. It was mainly men, though three women sat together. The group wanted to hear about daily life in Canada. Are there poor people? Indigenous

people? Why is Canada richer than Latin America? What products are produced in our factories? Cars? Armaments? What popular organizations exist? What are the problems of the indigenous people? I said that they had land claims, problems with forestry and oil companies. Ah, the same as here, someone responded. What do things cost in Canada? To what social class do I belong? Who paid for my trip to Latin America? What is the purpose of my research? They seemed to think that writing a book or article and the exchange of information between Latin American countries is a worthwhile purpose. After a pause, somebody told me that it was a good meeting—I was free to talk with people in the community tomorrow, which was market day. Later Eusebio told me that people often come to visit the radio. He said they wouldn't have talked to me without the letter of introduction. He told me about an American academic who had visited recently and grudgingly said that I seemed different. Still, he said, all these people come to visit and we never see any result. It's not worth the time.

At the community meeting it was obvious that these were very well informed people with a lively interest in politics and world affairs such as the student demonstrations in China. They were also very well informed about other indigenous groups in Ecuador. But they were very interested in everyday things like my glasses, my short-wave radio receiver (how much did it cost?) and my height (five foot, ten inches). That night there was an informal fiesta in the street with brass bands and dancing. There was one couple in traditional dress and much passing around of drinks (and cigarettes for the musicians). Many women sat around wrapped in red blankets. A few danced. An older man gave me a shot of homemade liquor and people were friendly. Somebody said that I danced like a girl. Eusebio was careful to explain that the community doesn't party like this all the time: this is a special month for festivities.

I was given a bunk in the community house (after some joking about lodging me with someone who was obviously very poor and who grinned at this) which was a hostel for people visiting the federation from the outlying areas. In the morning, friendly women in the communal kitchen made sure I got a boiled egg and a plate of rice. I recorded the evening show before the fiesta and the morning broadcast, which started at 4 am. Afterwards I hung around talking with people. Eusebio was surprised that I was leaving the same day but when he found I was heading back to Quito asked if he and one other person could come with me. He and a teenage boy were soon ready and we said our farewells and were soon crawling down the mountain along the unpaved road.

At first Eusebio was reserved and slightly hostile. The community could really do with a small truck like this. It would be very useful. I explained that it was rented for a few days and I couldn't afford anything like this in Canada. He wanted to drive but I thought that was unreasonable and didn't respond. We talked about politics for a bit. He thought that class struggle and issues of culture were equally important. The land is central to our culture, he said, working the land. He said that the film *Boca de Loba* is a record of the past when the organization was just starting and the mestizos controlled everything. He said that the film was sympathetic to the indigenous people. I thought it was really racist but I didn't want to ask him if he'd actually seen it. He carefully checked to see if I had learned the fundamental lesson from my visit: the strength of the community was in its collective organization. I didn't want to take advantage of our trip to pump him for more information. We stopped for something to eat and got chicken and chips. The teenage boy had been quiet throughout. They were going to Quito for a meeting to plan activities and protests for the 500 Years (of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas). I dropped them off in Quito outside the meeting place. There were warm farewells from both. Eusebio even told me to remember that I was welcome back in Simíatug.

The radio station in the field of power

The canton of Simíatug is located in a remote part of Bolivar province which includes several climates: sierra and subtropical. The radio is owned by the Runacuhapac Yachana Huasi indigenous campesino federation. Although campesinos are the most important part of its audience, the station defines itself as a community radio—for everyone in its listening area. The spokespersons for the radio insist that it is impossible to understand its purpose without understanding the social and economic history of the area. Several haciendas in the area had long expropriated the indigenous lands. With land reform in the early 1960s some land passed into campesino hands but exploitation by mestizos continued and with the support of the local priest. Campesinos were forced to sell their produce at very low prices. In Simíatug they were exploited by mestizo merchants for the goods they bought and by the owners of *cantinas* or bars. Health services were inadequate. Schoolteachers taught only in Spanish, were woefully ineffective and never stayed long.

A campesino protest against these conditions in 1962 was suppressed by the army. From the early 1970s unofficial groupings of communities refused to sell their goods except at market prices. They also began to struggle for official recognition of local teachers who spoke Quichua. The federation was formed in 1976. It represents 23 communities or about 60% of the population of the area. It has organized services for health, education and communication, a co-operative store and flour mill. The federation is a member of ECUARUNARI (the indigenous movement of Ecuador) and has economic and political contacts with other indigenous organizations.

In 1981 an abandoned transmitter was obtained from another indigenous group (the Shuar Federation) which has operated a radio for some time and broadcasting started the next year. It is interesting to note the precedents of the earlier generation of radio schools in Ecuador. Some of the present leaders of Runacuhapac Yachana Huasi were students of a radio school (ERPE, broadcasting from Riobamba). However the Simíatug community came to reject the radio school model and instead opted for a station closely linked to the progress of the organization. Programs are bilingual in Spanish and Quichua. The radio did not create the organization, concludes Garcia, 'it was the organization that created the radio to consolidate its organizational process, as one more tool in the struggle to change the power structure in the areas of Simíatug' (Garcia 1985: 39).

Many people come to the radio station to record or broadcast for the radio. One effect of this has been to strengthen the musical groups of the area. However, there are no facilities for taping outside the centre of Simíatug. The station broadcasts from 4:00 to 8:00 a.m. and in the evening from 5:00 p.m. There were problems at first because one person tended to dominate the radio. A new radio team was organized from 1988 and since then programs are lively and well organized. Spanish is used somewhat more than Quichua. There is the usual problem of sources for national and international news, though *Punto de Vista* (from Quito) and *Tercer Mundo* (from Santiago, Chile) tape services are used. The daily news is taken from Radio Latacunga and other stations and rebroadcast with additional commentary from Radio Runacuhapac Yachana Huasi. There is a high degree of political knowledge and sophistication.

Programming recorded on 30 and 31 May 1989 gives a sense of the intention of the radio. As it happened on the first day there was a meeting in Simíatug of persons from many of the communities that make up the organization. The program on Tuesday from 4:45 p.m. was one of music and greetings from

those at the meeting to their family and community at home. The program is bilingual but Spanish is used much more than Quichua. Music is autochthonous and folk music. There are also several batches of communications concerning meetings in various communities and also the six-monthly evaluation of the radio by the communities. A woman broadcaster reads one group of messages. All the other voices are male. The next day, the radio starts just after 4 a.m. with a program 'Wake-Up with God.' After this there is a program about reforestation. The last item is from the morning news show which concentrated on the national stoppage by bus owners who where demanding a 100% increase in fares and the right to import new vehicles without customs duties.

Radio transcripts

Tape 0 (side 1)

ANNOUNCER: [In Quichua]

GUEST: [In Spanish] Thanks compañeros. I'd like first of all to salute everyone in the community of S----, above all my family and friends. I hope you're well. You're there and I'm here for the meetings and so I can't work there as usual in the afternoon. After communicating with my family and friends, I'd like to communicate urgently to the community of S---- that this Sunday the fourth of June there will open a general meeting of all of the community members. Already this year we have been working on the matriculations that have not been done because of the educator. We communicate urgently to the president of the parents, or whatever secretary, that this Sunday therefore will be a meeting the fourth of June to carry out the matriculations. I'd also like to communicate with the community of S----. I've no more to say.

ANNOUNCER: [In Spanish] You as a community educator, do you teach them in bilingual or in our own language, so that the communities maintain our own language and the compañeros of S---- have to strengthen our own language and our people's heritage?

GUEST: [In Spanish] Well, in respect of this, you know well compañeros that in some communities we give little importance to the Quichua language. In the S---- community, in truth, there are two standards. There are some who desire to learn in both languages and some who don't desire. In our case no. One could

discuss in the meetings concerning this problem, from years back, that we should use both languages. Our own language is the Quichua language.

Tape I (side 1)

COMMENTATOR: There are some who simply want to convert people to Catholicism. For them to be Christian is, how can I say it, to be inferior. Not to protest, to conform completely. In other terms: peace. For them: don't respond, don't be badly raised. When everything is controlled, for them that's peace. When anybody protests that isn't peace. But we say on the contrary that peace is the fruit of justice, because without justice there wouldn't be peace, compañeros.

Tape I (side 2)

ANNOUNCER: Well, compañeros here we are again for you all. What's up, compañeros? Our sincere greetings to the leaders of the communities, also to the women's groups and to everyone belonging to the organization that continues to fight each day. In this program 'My Land' we'll talk about problems of reforestation in our communities. Welcome. [Music]

That's how it is. And as you know compañeros we are already at the end of May. In some communities they are already working on reforestation, in others perhaps no. We'd like to remind you of previous programs when we were with you conversing about forestation: the problems that exist. This time we'll talk about some of the problems and doubts that some of the community leaders have, also about the problem of wind and the problem of poor soil. Lets talk about the wind, compañeros, because we are already in the month of May, the start of summer when, as you know, we have so many problems with the wind. In past times these problems didn't exist. That's why we have to look for the causes. [Music]

That's the point. In the quarterly meetings of the communities we have talked about how we've got to this forestry problem. Think about the wind. Think about our bare land: desert. For this reason the quarterly assemblies in the communities have had the idea to have communal workdays to plant trees. Some communities have done this but there have been problems because small delicate trees have sometimes not survived. We'll talk more about this. But now to make us happy here is some music. In this case, musicians from one of the communities perform it.

Tape III (side 1)

ANNOUNCER: The theme of our news program this morning is the national stoppage by the bus owners. It continues and people are suffering much in the cities. We'll talk to someone who came from Ambato to Simíatug this morning. Did anything happen?

INTERVIEWEE: Nothing happened at all. It was all quiet.

ANNOUNCER: Is the city of Ambato fortunate? Is it the same as usual?

INTERVIEWEE: No it isn't.

ANNOUNCER: What's missing?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, because of the stoppage you can't just travel anywhere.

ANNOUNCER: What did the driver say about coming here?

INTERVIEWEE: He didn't say anything.

ANNOUNCER: How much are they charging?

INTERVIEWEE: Right now they're charging three hundred and fifty.

ANNOUNCER: What was it before the stoppage?

INTERVIEWEE: Just three hundred.[3]

ANNOUNCER: Did he explain the difference?

INTERVIEWEE: No. And I didn't ask.

The emergence of a social movement

I was following community radio. But in Ecuador I clearly stumbled on the emergence of something much bigger. The fundamental discovery here was not the radio station in Simíatug, important though it was. The real discovery was Eusebio: his reluctance to talk with outsiders and his insistence on the importance of organization. And the meeting in Quito. Part of the reason I was in Ecuador was that it was regarded as a 'safe' headquarters for non-governmental organizations. A safe place means one that is heavily policed and in the Andes it means a country where indigenous peoples are kept firmly in control. This is no longer the

[3] In May 1989 the exchange rate was 520 Sucres to one US dollar.

case in Ecuador (Field, 1991,Whitten, Whitten and Chango 1997; Zamosc, 1994). Indigenous organizations are militant and highly organized. They clearly had been building their organization for decades. That's what the meeting in Quito was about. Who knows what the quiet teenage boy is doing today?

We need look no further than the video 'Boca de Lobo' to understand the suspicion of outsiders and their representations of the problems of Simíatug. Where the video shows a ghost town inhabited only by widows and children, the reality is a meeting place of a federation of indigenous communities that has been gradually organizing for decades. The filmmakers show the graveyard but not the federation meeting hall and the radio station. Where the video describes the remote town through the voice of the truck driver, we discover from the radio tapes that the private transit operators not only exploit indigenous people but also are organizing a stoppage to demand increased fares. Without its own vehicle the indigenous organization is wholly dependent on bus and truck drivers from Ambato for access to the outside world. The main motif of the video is drawn from the winds in the mountains, naturalized as the cry of the wolf. Yet from the radio tapes we discover that problems of wind and soil erosion derive from deforestation and the extreme poverty and exploitation by mestizos of the indigenous people in previous generations.

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