Formulation and Implementation of

Indigenous Radio Policy in Mexico

by

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In the past two decades, shifts in policy have transformed the shape and goals of Mexico's indigenous-language radio stations. Radio, the first medium that allowed indigenous populations to enter the public sphere using their own language, has become an indispensable means of communication for indigenous peoples throughout Latin America. Unlike in other Latin American countries with large indigenous populations, however, the majority of the country's indigenous-language radio stations belong to the federal government. Through the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (Mexico's institute for indigenous affairs or INI), government officials in Mexico City choose the location of the stations, hire the general managers, and decide the amount of resources allocated to each station. Changes in governmental policy, therefore, affect indigenous-language operation in a direct way.

Since 1979, INI has been building a network of radio stations for indigenous audiences. Today, 24 stations broadcast in 31 native languages for audiences in 26 states. The radio system has become arguably the most prominent governmental support ever granted to indigenous cultures. Although the media alone cannot guarantee the survival, preservation, or expansion of indigenous languages, they play a leading role in the attempt (Browne, 1996).

In spite of the relevance that INI's radio stations have gained in the past two decades, the Mexican government has yet to define explicit radio policy (Castells-Talens, 2000; Zolla Luque, 1996). As the upcoming years will witness a major transformation of telecommunications legislation, INI is planning its strategy to present legislative proposals to the Mexican Congress during the summer and fall of 2002 (Angel Díez Mendoza, personal communication, June 3, 2002).

In this context of imminent change, the study of policy takes particular salience and timeliness. The changes proposed during the summer of 2002 are key to the future of indigenist[1] broadcasting. I propose to compare the formulation of INI's radio policy towards indigenous audiences with its implementation during key periods of the past two decades. Although the explicit goals of the policy have not been defined with precision, when they have been defined at all (INI, 1996), archival research and interviews with policymakers have helped[2] discern the goals of the policy. To compare the formulation of the policy with its implementation, I conducted interviews with key social actors in one of the pioneer stations of the network, Radio XEPET, "The Voice of the Maya," in the state of Yucatan.

Research Question

How does the implementation of Mexico's indigenist radio policy differ from the formulation of the policy?

The policy has witnessed key transformations since the network began functioning in the early 1980s[3] (Castellls-Talens, 2000). Three key periods in Mexico's recent history provide the time framework to address the question:

A. The early development of the radio network in the early 1980s. This period constitutes the official involvement of the government in building a radio system for indigenous audiences. During that time, INI began formulating policies that sometimes clashed with the goals of individual stations.

B. The EZLN uprising of 1994. After the Zapatista rebellion, Mexico witnessed a re-definition of the relationship between the state and indigenous populations. The

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[1] The term *indigenist* is used instead of *indigenous* because of the radio stations' association with the National Indigenist Institute.

[2] To assure that the research is current, some of the interviews will be conducted in June and July 2002, right before the preconference "Our Media, Not Theirs II."

uprising introduced an element of governmental distrust towards its own radio stations
(Castells-Talens, 2000).

C. <u>The loss of PRI's presidential election of 2000.</u> The election of Vicente Fox put an
    end to seven decades of the official party's rule. The new administration promised
    deep transformations in the executive branch, including more rigorous legislation of
    the telecommunications sector.

<div align="center">THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK[4]</div>

Politics represents a vastly unexplored area in ethnic minority media. If research has

paid little attention to indigenous media in general, the political dimension of native

broadcasting has been virtually ignored (Browne, 1996, 193). Most studies in the field of

ethnic media have therefore borrowed existing theories from mass communication and related

fields, such as sociology, psychology, or anthropology (Rada, 1978). More recently, cultural

dependency theory as well as cultural and development studies have gained popularity in the

study of ethnic minority media (Browne, 1996; Vargas, 1995; O´Connor, 1989).

In Latin America, however, a new theoretical challenge emerged as the concepts of

communication used in most studies originated in the United States. These concepts were

often alien to the domestic realities and inappropriate to understand the role of communication

in Latin America (Huesca, 1995). The frustration of several Latin American scholars set the

agenda for a new trend of research. Beltrán (1975) set the groundwork for mass

communication research theories based on non-commercial media. Huesca & Dervin (1994)

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[3] Although INI's first station began broadcasting in 1979, Mexico did not have an indigenist radio system until
the appearance of other stations in the early 1980s.
[4] The project's theoretical foundations and some preliminary findings were presented at the 50th Conference of
the International Communication Association, in Acapulco, Mexico, June 2000.

outline the evolution of this new school of thought, from its birth as a reactive movement to counter U.S. academic dominance to the development of an original theory for media practice.

In spite of its productivity for alternative communication theory, Latin American research has failed to address ethnic minority media as such. Indigenous broadcasting is systematically analyzed within the framework of *comunicación popular* (grassroots communication), and even though indigenous mass communication fits most aspects of the concept (Castells-Talens, 1994), the additional cultural and political complexities of the indigenous factor tend to be undermined.

To date, one of the few theoretical models that explicitly addresses both indigenous media and their political relationship with government has its roots in sociology. Its author, Stephen Riggins (1992), suggests that ethnic minority media need to be analyzed within the larger socioeconomic system to which they belong. The state is studied as a key player because of its policies of subsidization, regulation, and legislation. Ultimately, "the state makes possible the technological and economic transfers that permit minorities to assume the means of media production" (Riggins, 1992, 8). Although the success of the project depends on the indigenous communities themselves, the role of the state, which operates in self-interest, is primordial (Ibid.).

METHODS

Policy analysis research allows the use a variety of methodological tools (Miller & Whicker, 1999). To study the differences between formulation and implementation of policy in INI's radio network, the changes of the policy were traced during the periods marked by three events (the early development of the network, the EZLN uprising, and the 2000 presidential election) through archival analysis and interviews.

Although policy analysis has relied often on quantitative, economic research methods, the recent past has witnessed an increase in the use of qualitative methods (Gabrielan, 1999). A qualitative approach to the study of Mexican policy on indigenous peoples can offer modes of understanding that are, at best, difficult to achieve with quantitative methods. The uniqueness and complexity of specific events in recent Mexican history, the nuances of a radio policy that has lacked an explicit direction (INI, 1996), and the dissonance between the official rhetoric of indigenism and its practice in the field provide just a few examples of key ideas that might be undervalued by quantitative methods. In her study of indigenist radio in Mexico, Vargas (1985) argued that complex questions need the methodological flexibility that qualitative research can grant. Once the fieldwork starts, questions and levels of analysis may change (19).

Though indigenous media have been approached with multiple research techniques[5], the most appropriate techniques to answer policy questions are archival analysis and interviewing. The interpretation of written documents at INI's national headquarters in Mexico City and the state office in Peto, Yucatan, supplied written texts with information, unavailable in an oral form, that provided a historical perspective. Interviews with key players in indigenist radio policy complemented the texts by enriching their interpretation and providing additional information. I interviewed policymakers, radio station managers and staff, experts in the field, and political actors in Mexico City and the state of Yucatan.

Yucatan represents an appropriate choice for the study for several reasons. First, it is the state with the highest proportion of indigenous population in Mexico[6]. Second, Radio

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[5] Successful methodological techniques have included ethnographies (Huesca, 1995; Vargas, 1995; Castells-Talens, 1994), surveys (Cornejo, 1998), and focus groups (Vargas, 1995).
[6] According to the 2000 official census, 37% of Yucatan's population speaks an indigenous language (INEGI, 2001).

XEPET, "The Voice of the Maya," is one of the oldest stations in the country[7]. Finally, because I have conducted research in the station for nine years and because I have studied extensively the Yucatec Maya language, field research was conducted more efficiently than in another station.

<div align="center">IMPLEMENTATION & FORMULATION OF POLICY</div>

The early development of the radio network in the early 1980s

Since its early days in the 1950s, INI based much of its work on the concept that the assimilation of native populations into the mestizo society was not only unavoidable but also desirable. The State could help assure that the assimilation process was successful through programs created and implemented by INI (Villoro, 1987). One of INI's explicit goals was to "castellanizar," that is, to Spanishize (to make Spanish the normal language of communication of the indigenous peoples) so as to transform the indigenous population into an economically functioning part of the Mexican society (Larios Tolentino, 1988).

In 1979, the INI Spanishization campaign was intensified via the Institute´s own mass media. The radio network emerged with the intention of using the indigenous languages to assimilate the indigenous population. Within three years, the Institute started up stations in the states of Guerrero, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Chihuahua, Michoacán, and Yucatán (Castells-Talens, 1994).

The explicit goals of the first station followed the policy of the INI at the time: "to promote development projects, to support formal education, to change audience attitudes toward innovations, to be a medium for villagers' voices, to contribute to the integration of villages, and to prevent the exodus to the cities" (Vargas, 1995, 53). In addition to several

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[7] Radio XEPET began its broadcasts in 1982, three years after the birth of Radio XEZV, the first station in INI's network.

programs in Spanish for children, radio programming included shows for the general audience that taught listeners how to count, use money, ask for products in a store, and discuss prices (Ku, 1988).

The effectiveness of the Spanishization campaigns has not been assessed by any of the literature reviewed. What seems certain, however, is that one of the main flaws of the project was that many of the supposed enforcers did not believe in Spanishizing anybody. The implementation of the policy in the field differed greatly from its original formulation in Mexico City. Radio station managers were abandoning the Spanishization goals and concentrating on some of the original sub-objectives, such as the strengthening of indigenous cultures or the improvement of the living standards of the population (Radio XEPET, personal communication, date unavailable).

In the 1980s, President Miguel De la Madrid took a participatory approach to development.. Vargas identifies the De la Madrid administration as giving birth to the newly emerging official ideology of participatory indigenism (Vargas, 1995, 58). At the same time, indigenous groups were pressing for change. In a conference held in 1984 in the state of Chiapas, the demands for change of several Maya groups may have forced INI to revise its policy (INI, 2002).

During the late 1980s, a new shift in policy emerged with the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Salinas designed a development plan that included the poor and the indigenous peoples. The 1990s started with Mexico's signing of International Labor Organization's (ILO) C169 Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention. By signing the agreement, Salinas committed the Mexican government to legally protect and promote the rights of the indigenous peoples. The Convention came into force in September of 1991

(Castells-Talens, 1994). A few months later, in January 1992, the Diario Oficial de la Federación published an amendment to the Article IV of the Mexican Constitution to acknowledge the existence of indigenous peoples and protect the development of indigenous languages, cultures, customs, resources, and forms of social organizations (INI, 1995).

At that time, the implementation of the participatory policy that INI had been preaching took a tangible form. The radio stations created mechanisms to foster organized, indigenous participation. The explicit goals of Radio XEPET aimed at the "free development" of the indigenous people, a rather vague term that offered a wide range of interpretations, but that differed from the assimilative language used just a decade earlier. The objectives also called for the "transfer of the medium to the communities" (XEPET, 1993).

The general feeling of euphoria was tied to President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's Programa Nacional de Solidaridad, a federal development program that provided poor areas with electricity, pavement, schooling, jobs, and even titles to property (Krauze, 1997). INI's radio stations benefited from the program. During Salinas' administration, INI's budget increased by 1500% (INI, 2002).

Then on January 1st, 1994, the southern state of Chiapas saw a guerilla group, consisting mainly of Maya fighters, take over several towns and declared war to the Mexican army. The rebels also occupied the INI station in the town of Las Margaritas, from where they broadcast revolutionary messages ("La voz," 1999). Within the next two days, after several battles with the Army, the guerillas abandoned the towns and returned to their headquarters (López & Pavón, 1998).

The EZLN uprising of 1994

The rebellion of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) meant an immediate and radical change of the relations between the Mexican government and the indigenous peoples. Soon after the January uprising, the EZLN had become a player in national politics, and indigenous rights were an important item in the national debate. To negotiate with the rebels, the federal government created a parliamentary commission, which since has signed several agreements with the EZLN.

The rebels have included indigenous media in the negotiating agenda since the early days of the uprising. In a communiqué dated March 1, 1994, exactly two months after the guerrilla's first public appearance, the EZLN presented a list of demands to the government. The tenth item in the document read: "the guarantee of the indigenous' peoples right to truthful information at the local, regional, state, national, and international levels with an indigenous radio station that is independent of the government, managed by indigenous people and operated by indigenous people." (EZLN, 1995, 181).

At first, the rebels gave the government 60 days to provide such a station (López & Pavón, 1998, 102). Eventually, though, the EZLN announced the creation of its own radio station, Radio Rebelde, with weekly broadcasts (México, 1998). No reports exist on the extent to which the project prospered.

In February 1996, the government and the guerillas met in San Andrés, Chiapas, and signed a series of documents that came to be known as the Agreements of San Andrés. In the Agreements, the federal government committed itself to work towards creating a new legal framework for the relationship between the Mexican State and the indigenous peoples.

Document 3.2 of the Agreements of San Andrés states that indigenous peoples need their own mass media to communicate among themselves and with the rest of society. The

document proposes the drafting of a new communications law that allow indigenous peoples to acquire, operate, and manage their own media (Anzaldo Meneses, 1998, 293).

The loss of PRI's presidential election of 2000

On July 2, 2000, Mexico's ruling party admitted its defeat by the conservative National Action Party (PAN). The until then ruling Institutional Revolution Party (PRI) lost a presidential election for the first time in 70 years. PAN's candidate, former Coca-Cola executive Vicente Fox Quesada, became president after claiming that he would solve the Chiapas conflict in 15 minutes and that his administration would guarantee Internet access for all indigenous people.

What Fox will mean for indigenist stations is still uncertain. His party stands for heavy privatization and has been a historic ally of the most conservative branch of the Catholic Church. Both Fox's critics and supporters portray him as some one who favors globalization and a further liberalization of the Mexican economy. On the other hand, Fox's platform included an innovative list of proposals towards indigenous peoples[8].

One of the first policies of Fox towards the indigenous was the creation of an office of representation for the development of indigenous peoples, which seems to duplicate some of INI's work (Oficina para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2002). Additionally, a series of initiatives are already affecting several governmental offices. The birth of a section of bilingual, intercultural education in the Department of Public Education; the proposal of a national institute of indigenous languages, or a national program for indigenous communication are but a few examples (INI, 2002, 14).

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[8] One of his most notorious promises was to grant access to the Internet for all indigenous peoples. According to 1995 official figures, 45% of the indigenous people in Mexico are illiterate.

One of the main characteristics of the formulation of policy under Fox, however, is the power struggle within INI. The Institute has had three directors since Fox won the election. Additionally, a faction of Fox's National Action Party (PAN) is arguing for the disappearance of INI. Some leftist critics, such a representative Gilberto López y Rivas, had traditionally demanded that INI be dismantled because of its paternalistic policies (Ramos Higuera, 2001). Now the right coincides with the left, but for different reasons (cutting government spending on social issues).

DISCUSSION & PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Since the early days of indigenist radio policy in Mexico, the implementation of the assimilative policy has diverged from its formulation. To a large extent the implementation has shaped the changes in formulation. Since the rebellion in Chiapas, the explicit policy has not changed drastically, but the actions of the government suggest an obvious shift in policy. The budgets of the stations have been cut down, staff members laid off, and for a while, in Radio XEPET, anti-riot police were placed in front of the station and asked questions to the visitors.

Since the Fox administration took office in 2000, INI has seen changes, including the replacement of two directors. At the radio level, several station managers have been rotated to different stations, contributing to the instability of the network. It is too early in this research project to draw any conclusions about the new policy, but the changes so far could reflect a struggle for power, in which case time may bring stability to the Institute.

However, the changes could also mean the beginning of a process to purposely de-stabilize INI and force its eventual disappearance. After all, some members of the ruling party

are already advocating for this to happen. If the second case is true, the future of the stations is uncertain.

The radio stations have become too important a part of indigenous communities to disappear, but their future ownership is at stake. According to the San Andrés agreements, they should be transferred to the indigenous communities that request them, not a likely outcome considering the priority that the State has given to them so far. On the one hand, the State can plead the difficulty of defining who "the indigenous communities" are. On the other hand, transferring the stations to the communities could also become a euphemism for privatizing them. Privatization of indigenous services may seem unprofitable at first sight because most indigenous communities are inundated with poverty. Those communities, however, are located in economically strategic areas for oil, lead, gold, copper, hydroelectric power, bio-diversity, and forestry (INI, undated document, 22-23). A hypothetic privatization, however, would most likely bring conflict to the 24 regions where indigenist stations are currently operating.

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