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By Dennis T. Lowry

# Broadcasting's Expanding Social Role in Mexico

*New border-to-border telecommunications network boasting a large satellite ground station will provide service to all population centers over 2,500; government educational and cultural programs aid national development.*

► Radio and television in Mexico are experiencing a period of dynamic growth. They are also expanding into new areas of activity of potentially great significance to the country's development. Much of what is occurring in Mexican broadcasting is worthy of study by other developing countries.

Radio broadcasting began in Mexico in 1923, and television broadcasting followed 27 years later in 1950. In both cases initial development was slow but gained momentum in spite of the barriers of low per capita income, mountainous terrain, poor transportation, and other problems inherent in a developing country. Early listening and viewing were done in public or semi-public places, since available receivers were scarce and few could afford to buy them.

## *Social Significance of Broadcasting*

From the beginning, radio and tele-

vision stations in Mexico have been almost entirely privately owned and commercially operated. From the beginning the Mexican government has been aware of the contributions broadcasting can make to further the social, cultural and educational goals of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20.

As early as 1924, only one year after the first radio station went on the air, a Ministry of Education station was authorized to broadcast information about agriculture and homemaking. The Ministry continued to use this station until 1939 when it began to farm out its programs to various commercial stations.<sup>1</sup> Another interesting way in which the Mexican government makes a special effort to further the social significance of radio is through *The National Hour (La Hora Nacional)*, a one-hour program of music, poetry, speeches by government leaders and information about government and public activities broadcast each Sunday between 10 and 11 p.m. The program is produced by the federal government and is carried simultaneously, by law, by all radio stations in the country. Its purpose is to keep the people informed of what the government is doing for them, to tell them how the country is progressing and to encourage their continued support. The format of the program is "soft sell," with a greater number of entertainment items than news or information items.

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Alisky, "Radio's Role in Mexico: a First-hand Survey," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 31: 67 (Winter 1954).

Although the two examples provide some idea of how the government attempts to increase the social significance of broadcasting, it is necessary to examine the laws affecting broadcasting to better understand how this is done within the context of a privately owned, commercially operated system.

### Government Regulation

The legal authority for government emphasis on social significance of radio and television is found in Title I of Mexico's Federal Law of Radio and Television signed in 1960.<sup>2</sup> Article 1 states that electromagnetic waves are part of the public domain. Article 4 states that since radio and television constitute an activity concerning the public interest, it is up to the State to assure that they fulfill their social function. Article 5 spells out more specifically what these functions are. They include: contributing to the strengthening of national integration; furthering respect for moral principles, human dignity and family ties; avoiding programming that might interfere with the normal development of children; contributing to the cultural level of the people; preserving their customs, traditions and characteristics; and strengthening democratic beliefs, national unity and international friendship and cooperation. Thus it can be said that both on paper and in practice the Mexican government exhibits a high awareness of the social significance of broadcasting for the people and the country. More examples of this will follow.

In actual practice, the regulation of broadcasting is divided among four federal ministries.<sup>3</sup> The Secretary of Communications and Transports (*Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes*) is concerned primarily with assigning concessions, or licenses, and as-

signing broadcast frequencies. In addition, it watches over broadcast stations to see that they maintain their assigned frequencies and comply with all other technical regulations.

The Secretary of Government (*Secretaría de Gobernación*) is charged with the responsibility of seeing that broadcasters do not disregard individual rights of privacy, or personal or moral dignity. The Secretary of Government is also responsible for seeing that broadcasts not only do not disturb the public peace and order but also are generally in the best interests of the federal government. Another important responsibility is administering Article 59 of the Federal Law of Radio and Television. This article provides another interesting example of how the government emphasizes the social responsibility of broadcasting, but does so within the context of a privately owned, commercially operated system. It states that all radio and television stations are required to provide thirty minutes of free broadcast time to the government each day, continuous or interrupted, for the government to use for *educational, cultural or social purposes*. The government does not actually produce this much program material each day, but the stations must broadcast it if it does.

The third ministry to share the regulation of radio and television is the Secretary of Public Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*). This ministry is concerned with the use of radio and television specifically for educational purposes. The fourth ministry is the Secretary of Health and Public Welfare (*Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia*). The jurisdiction of this ministry is primarily that of regulating the advertising of medicines, therapeutic apparatuses, insecticides and other potentially harmful products. Fines which may be imposed by the four ministries range from 500 to 50,000 pesos.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the four ministries, the other main regulatory body is the

<sup>2</sup> *Ley Federal de Radio y Televisión*, Articles 1-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Title 2, Articles 8-12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Title 6, Articles 102, 104. The Mexican peso is one of the most stable currencies in Latin America. The exchange rate as of July, 1968, was 12.5 pesos to U.S. dollar.

National Council of Radio and Television (*Consejo Nacional de Radio y Televisión*), which is subordinate to the Secretary of Government. The Council is composed of one representative from each of the four ministries, with the representative from the Secretary of Government as president. Two members who are owners or managers and two who are workers in the broadcast industry complete the membership of the Council.

According to Article 91 of the Federal Law of Radio and Television, the Council is charged with promoting and organizing broadcasts ordered by the Federal Executive; serving as consultative body to him; improving the moral, cultural, artistic and social level of broadcasts; and being knowledgeable in and expressing opinions on matters concerning radio and television which are submitted to it by government ministries or departments, or by institutions, organizations or persons concerned with radio and television.<sup>5</sup>

#### *More and Better Facilities*

Mexico's radio and television industry is increasing and improving in a number of ways. There has been a particularly rapid increase, for example, in the number of radio and television stations in the mid-1960s. In 1964 there were 443 radio stations and 26 TV stations.<sup>6</sup> By 1968 these figures had increased to 525 radio stations and 50 TV stations.<sup>7</sup>

The increase in numbers alone does not tell the whole story of change. Television in Mexico is a near monopoly. Telesistema, S.A., owns or controls (under various names) 40 of the country's 50 TV stations.<sup>8</sup> In Mexico City alone, by far the largest city and most profitable market in the country, Telesistema owns all of the three commercial stations. But it is likely that Telesistema's near monopoly will be somewhat weakened in the future. Two new, private commercial TV stations were scheduled to begin broadcasting in competition with Telesistema in the fall of

1968. These two stations were to be owned by groups of private businessmen—one in Monterrey and one in Mexico City. People with whom the author talked welcome this new competition and consider it a good sign for future industry expansion and competition.

Just as the number of radio and television stations has been expanding, so too has the number of receivers been increasing. Unesco figures indicate that in 1964 there were 3,500,000 radio receivers and 1,000,000 television receivers in Mexico.<sup>9</sup> The corresponding figures for 1968 obtained from the General Administration of Telecommunications (*Dirección General de Telecomunicaciones*) were: radio, approximately 7,280,000; television, approximately 1,850,000.<sup>10</sup>

The Mexican government has undertaken an impressive program that, upon completion, will provide still another type of increase and improvement in television broadcasting in Mexico. By summer, 1968, the country still did not have a truly national television or tel-

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Mexican broadcast laws see Walter B. Emery, "A Comparative Study of Broadcasting Law and Regulations in Mexico and the United States," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 8:185-202 (Spring 1964).

<sup>6</sup> Walter B. Emery, "Broadcasting in Mexico," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 8:257-61 *passim* (Summer 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Lic. Emilio Velasco Diaz, Gerente, National Chamber of the Radiodiffusion Industry (*Cámara Nacional de la Industria de la Radiodifusión*), July 11, 1968. The National Chamber is the equivalent of the National Association of Broadcasters in the United States. It is the only organization in Mexico concerned with the self-regulation of the broadcast industry.

<sup>8</sup> This figure was derived by adding the 27 stations listed on the information sheet the author was given at Televisión (the main office, studios, and transmitters of Telesistema), with 13 other stations that, according to the records of the Secretary of Communications and Transport, have the same mailing address as Televisión.

<sup>9</sup> *World Communications: Press, Radio, Television, Film* (Paris, 1964), pp. 155-56.

<sup>10</sup> It should be pointed out that both the Unesco figures and the figures from the General Administration of Telecommunications are subject to qualification. The Unesco figures could conceivably have been a year or two old before being published, and the 1968 figures are only estimates. Nevertheless, it would seem safe to conclude that there has been a healthy growth in the number of radio and television receivers during this period.

ecommunications network. This is a problem common to developing countries, and particularly those larger ones with mountainous terrain. The solution chosen by the Mexican government was a border-to-border, coast-to-coast system of microwave lines that ultimately will carry television and all other forms of telecommunications to all towns of more than 2,500 people.<sup>11</sup> This telecommunications net will consist of 203 repeater stations and 55 terminal stations.<sup>12</sup>

Work began on the new system in 1966 and completion was scheduled for the end of 1968. One of the major components of the system is Mexico's first, and the world's largest, satellite communications ground station in Tullancingo, Hidalgo. This station, with its 300-ton, 105-foot diameter dish antenna, will give Mexico direct telephone, telex and television communications with Europe and other Latin American countries which are building similar stations. Before this, telecommunication was routed through the United States.<sup>13</sup> Another important link in the new telecommunications net is a new 16-story telecommunications tower in Mexico City designed to serve as a central clearing house for the entire telecommunications net within the country, and for all telecommunications—including television programs via satellite—entering and leaving the country.<sup>14</sup>

Of particular interest to other developing countries is the fact that Mexico is spending very little of its own money on this program. Money was

obtained in long-term loans from Germany, Italy, Holland, France, Switzerland, Canada, the United States and Japan.<sup>15</sup> A Japanese company built the satellite ground station. The Mexican government will sell the services of the system to Telesistema, Teléfonos de Mexico and other private companies and then pay back the loans and interest with this income.

Even cultural television in Mexico will be increased and improved. As of summer, 1968, there was one TV station in Mexico devoted exclusively to cultural programming. This was Channel 11, XEIP-TV, in Mexico City, owned and operated by the National Polytechnic Institute (*Instituto Politécnico Nacional*). In practice, the term "cultural" was interpreted rather loosely, and the result was programming similar to that of an educational TV station in the United States. Programs included: French and English lessons, documentary films on travel and scientific subjects, lectures on Mexican literature and music, classic Mexican films and classical music.

Channel 11 broadcasts a limited schedule, in the evening, and has an effective radiated power of 5,000 watts. This low power results in poor reception even within some areas of Mexico City. In 1969 it is scheduled to move its transmitter to another location, increase its power to 20,000 watts and begin transmitting in color.

### *New Roles For Radio and TV*

Implicit in the above discussion of the changes in the status of Mexican radio and television is the assumption that most of these changes will have an accelerating effect upon the national development of the country. Certainly Mexicans the author talked with seem to believe this. Of course this type of assumption would be difficult to prove. However, if one looks at the entire spectrum of activities of radio and television in Mexico, those with the potentially greatest demonstrable contribution to national development are

<sup>11</sup> "Telecommunications net to be finished by Jan. 1," *The News of Mexico City*, July 13, 1968, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ing. José Luis Almazán, General Administration of Telecommunications, July 19, 1968.

<sup>13</sup> "Telecommunications net to be finished by Jan. 1," *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> "Mexico, entre los primeros países con comunicación vía satélite," *Boletín de Información, Órgano Oficial de la Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes*, Vol. II, Num. 16, p. 6 (Febrero de 1968).

<sup>15</sup> "Telecommunications net to be finished by Jan. 1," *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

those in which radio and television are being used for literacy training and secondary education. At the present time, the Mexican government is carrying out two major programs of this type.

The first of these two programs is *Alphabetización*, a radio and television course in basic literacy which is produced by the General Administration of Audiovisual Education (*Dirección General de Educación Audiovisual*), a department of the Secretary of Public Education. The core of *Alphabetización* is the workbook *I Can Do It (Yo Puedo Hacerlo)*, which is given free to any illiterate person who asks for it. The workbook enables the person to follow lessons via radio or TV in his own home or in small classes. *Alphabetización* consists of 80 lessons over a four-month period if taken by TV, and 125 lessons over a six-month period if taken by radio. It is carried throughout most of Mexico via 12 TV stations and 130 radio stations.<sup>16</sup>

The program first went on the air in 1965 and by the summer of 1968 was in its fifth cycle. The approximate number of copies of *I Can Do It* distributed by this date was 2,500,000. Analyses made by the General Administration show that 40% of those who begin the course do not complete it. But of the 60% who do complete it, 97% pass.<sup>17</sup> The definition of "passing" is learning how to read and write. At the end of the course, students are encouraged to write a letter to their radio or TV teacher to demonstrate their new writing ability. At the end of the second cycle, for example, 20,000 letters were received.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that some of the letters received are from *Alphabetización* students in the United States—presumably Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

The second of the two major government programs referred to above is *Telesecundaria*. As its name indicates, it is a program of secondary education

via television. Its purpose is to provide secondary education to students in rural villages unable to afford a secondary school or teacher, another problem common to developing countries. This program is also produced by the General Administration of Audiovisual Education and went on the air in January 1968. The subjects taught are mathematics, Spanish, biology, history, geography, English, civics, music, physical education and technology.

*Telesecundaria's* first-year class consisted of 9,000 regular pupils in 300 TV classrooms (*tele-aulas*). There were also 6,000 free students (*alumnos libres*) who watched the programs in their own homes. Each year, in 1969 and 1970, another secondary grade is scheduled to go on the air. Although *Telesecundaria* is still a young program, early results indicate that its students rank a little higher on achievement tests than students in regular secondary schools.<sup>19</sup>

### Conclusion

The status and role of broadcasting in Mexico are changing in new and progressive ways. This change has obvious benefits for the people of Mexico, but it has benefits for non-Mexicans as well. For other developing countries, Mexico provides an excellent example of how radio and television can contribute to the progress of a developing country under certain conditions. For scholars of mass communication, Mexico provides abundant opportunity to measure more precisely just what some of these conditions are, and to evaluate present theories of mass communication and development in light of the findings.

<sup>16</sup> *Horarios par la 5a. Etapa del Curso de Alphabetización por Radio y Televisión* (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 3 de Junio, 1968).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Profra. Maria Elena King, television instructor for *Alphabetización*, July 2, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dr. J. Guadalupe Mainero, Subdirector Extra Escolar, General Administration of Audiovisual Education, July 6, 1968.