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Transcending Communication Barriers

It was a discovery: “America”—in the U.S. meaning of the word: that is, their country— had been silently invaded by Mexicans. Their numbers growing over the years, people from Michoacán, Jalisco, Zacatecas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Durango, just to mention the best known, added another color to the map of the 50 states of the Union. Neither white nor black were dominant anymore; the color black had burst onto the scene only four decades ago after being ignored, despite the fact that a bloody civil war had been fought in their name. Now was the multicolored time of those born south of the Rio Grande.

The 2000 census was the revelation. For the U.S. mainstream, the data were a surprise and the Hispanic nation emerged. This prompted the big corporations to take a look at this minority, since it was larger than the population of African-American origin. And the surprise was even

greater when it became clear that they were not the Cuban favorites who had had the doors opened to them after Fidel Castro’s revolution, or the Puerto Ricans associated with the Union, much less the Dominicans or Panamanians: the majority were Mexican.

The banks, insurance companies, health services, and, with surprising alacrity, also radio and television began making adjustments. The saga of the communications media began to become visible: in Mexico, this included the heroic efforts of figures like Emilio Azcárraga Milmo and his different attempts to dominate Spanish-language television in the face of Cuban and Venezuelan magnates like the Alarcón and Cisneros families. The radio stations that served the Spanish-speaking communities and were considered marginal by the big advertisers began to receive significant amounts of publicity income. The avalanche of dollars attracted the big radio groups, who began to acquire stations or convert others to Spanish-speaking programming. In less than five years, significant players were consolidated: Hispanic Broadcasting Cor-

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poration (HBC), Spanish Broadcasting System (SBS), Liberman Broadcasting, and Entravision, just to mention a few.

The appetite of Hispanic audiences, especially Mexican ones, certainly kept up: studies from 2004 revealed that Spanish-language radio listeners spent more than 23 hours a week of their time listening, 7 hours more than the English-language audience.¹

It was in this context that many communicators emerged and developed that we could baptize as Chicanos, bi-cultural, or Mexican-American. They have sought to foster communication that would erase or at least transcend the barriers of language, of cultures, and, of course, of the discrimination that had built symbolic borders down through history.

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Martín Díaz Samaniego discovered “Los Temerarios” (The Reckless Ones, a Mexican music group). He was already a well-known radio announcer in his native Zacatecas, when in the 1980s he began as the voice of B15 radio group and began building his reputation as a promoter of regional musical groups. One of these was “Los Incontenibles Temerarios” (The Irrepressible Reckless Ones), Mexico’s youngest group, originating in Fresnillo. Almost a quarter of a century later, he pioneered bi-national radio connections to broadcast live for the first time the program *Closer Now* from XEMA 690 am, “La Madre de Todas” (The Mother of All Stations), from Fresnillo and from WRTO am in Chicago, simultaneously.

“Martín can convene 2 000 people and fill Fresnillo’s central plaza in an hour,” said station head Adolfo “Fito” Bonilla, a MÁS Comunicación partner (together with Carlos de Córdova and the author).

“The broadcast signal isn’t very strong, but they’re listening very far away, way up there in Chicago,” said Martín Díaz Samaniego to a surprised audience. In the Windy City, Aileen Ocaña, at that time a host at the most listened-to Spanish-language radio station in the region, said hello to Martín and then invited the audience to send their families greetings in their hometowns. “Friends, welcome to *Closer Now*, a MÁS Comunicación program that brings together Mexicans on both sides of the border. . . . My friend Martín Díaz is with us from Fresnillo.” It was 12 noon at both poles of the migratory route, since they share the same time zone, on August 3, 2003.

“Great to be here, Aileen, even if it’s through the magic of telecommunications, we’re ‘closer now’. . . . That’s why I want to invite my friends to send their relatives on the other side of the border, to call here to the studio, and you’ll be heard all the way there, all the way in Chicago.”

In Fresnillo, broadband was just a project, so the Internet link had to be complemented with a phone call from Chicago, which meant that “The Mother of All Stations” had to free up the management’s phone line to take calls from the audience. “Aileen, while we’re waiting for calls, tell us, what’s the weather like up there in Chicago?” And, when she began to describe the summer heat, the first call came in: “I want to say hi to my mom in Río Grande, Zacatecas. . . .”

Starting with that conversation and for eight more years, Martín and Aileen called on their audiences to “erase the borders between Mexicans” and foster other live radio hook-ups that followed the reality of the migratory corridors: Zitácuaro, Michoacán, with Chicago; Fresnillo with Los Angeles; Zitácuaro with Los Angeles; Apatzín with Los Angeles; and Veracruz, with Raleigh, North Carolina.

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Señora Maru heard the first link-up between Zitácuaro and Los Angeles, but couldn’t get through to the XELX studio. But, encouraged, she went down to the station to wait until announcer Nacho Proa came out. He took the Sunday morning shift and was in charge of *Closer Now* for that region, which was not limited to the state, but also covered what is called “Tierra Caliente” (Hotlands) of Guerrero and the State of Mexico.

“Help me find my son,” Maru begged.

Nacho Proa took the search personally. He promised her that every Sunday he would make the plea. “Friends, Señora Maru reiterates her message: help her find her son. She doesn’t know his name because when the father took the child he told her he would change his name. He

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was 5 then and it’s been about 20 years since she saw him last.”

Six weeks later, Señora Maru went to the station to say, “Nacho, I’ve come to thank you because I finally found my son.” She said that a listener in Los Angeles had begun to spread the word among his fellow migrants from Michoacán, because he had already heard the story of a boy whose father had brought him to live with him and his new partner. When the listener found him, he invited him to listen to the program. The young man had recently been married, and he decided to travel to meet his mother and introduce his wife to her. He arrived in Zitácuaro, found her address, and knocked on her door. They all cried a lot.

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He had a strong, hoarse voice. It was already cold in Chicago. The bi-national broadcasts didn’t include musical interludes. But there was one exception: the first few bars of *Las mañanitas* (Good Morning, Mexico’s equivalent of *Happy Birthday to You*). “Welcome to *Closer Now*. Where are you calling from?” He said he was a construction worker and he lived in the outskirts of Chicago, that he had arrived several years before, and that that Sunday was his daughter’s fifteenth birthday. “I want to send greetings and a kiss. And ask her forgiveness because I can’t be there with her, but I sent her a little money for the dress and the quinceañera fiesta.” He wept. The host’s voice broke, too, when she introduced the music and the commercials.

For Aileen Ocaña, the Sunday program was a platform that fostered her professional growth and leadership in Chicago’s Mexican community. She began to receive invitations from hometown-based clubs to go to their meetings, host their events, and judge their beauty contests. She was even doing some television.

In addition to being an announcer at Los Angeles’s *La Ranchera*, Joaquín Maldonado was a real estate salesman and a promoter and singer in a music group. When the

link-up with Apatzingán, Michoacán, began, he was skeptical about audience participation because it was early on Sunday morning. But for the first broadcast, the phones were overloaded. “The switchboard lit up like a Christmas tree,” he blurted out, surprised.

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The discovery of that “new” Hispanic country was also a surprise for Mexico’s government, which developed a specific policy to deal with migrants and their organizations. Josefina Vázquez Mota and José Ángel Córdova were the ones who, as ministers of Social Development and Health, respectively, realized the potential for the link-ups for communicating with the audiences about their programs without it seeming like propaganda.

The National Savings and Financial Services Bank (Bansefi) did the same, with its program *La red de la gente* (The People’s Network), sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), to broaden out the possibilities for sending remittances to rural areas of Mexico.

The link-up was even used by the U.S. remittance-sender Western Union/Orlandi Valuta and its Mexican counterpart Elektra/Banco Azteca. The broadcasts from the Elektra store in downtown Fresno put a stop to the decline in remittances at that venue and generated real growth in the space of two weeks.

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These link-ups stopped broadcasting in 2011. The consolidation of the radio groups in the United States, pressured by the drive for profitability and the economic asymmetry between the two migratory poles, could be seen in the airtime rates in markets like Los Angeles and Chicago, compared to Fresno, Zitácuaro, or Veracruz. This created a situation that was difficult to deal with.

The possibilities of opening up the social networks have also shortened the distance, and the new generations have changed. ■■

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Notes

1 Arbitron, 2004 US Hispanic Consumer Study.