



The Chicanx Radio Movement

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This paper looks at the historical development of Chicanx communications as an industry and mass media movement with its roots in the United States Chicanx movement, thus seeks to shed light on the symbiotic relationship between both movements, La Causa and Chicanx controlled media. This analysis argues that radio en Español, bilingual radio, community radio, and other means of community-controlled media in the United States contributed directly to Chicanx organizing, mobilization, politics and ideology.

Communication has historically been an integral part of social and political movements. Although traditionally communications have served more as an auxiliary agent to social movements and social change, it could be argued that the nature of Chicanx communications has the necessary elements to stand as a movement of its own considering the organization, structure and systemic delivery to a specific audience. The core of this thesis is to keep perspective on the political nature of bilingual community-controlled media as part of the Chicanx movement.

The Chicanx movement affected a series of social changes, formed attitudes, created organizations, institutions, impacted music, art, culture, literature, and language. Chicanx radio as a byproduct of Chicanismo reaffirmed the ethos of its source as a mass communication venue. However, the Chicanxs' search for identity in the amalgam of peoples and issues within the Civil Rights movement necessitated structured media organization that could provide a comprehensive strategy to politically and culturally galvanize La Raza as a national community.

This organizational media [ETM2] points to, if not the improvisation, the impromptu formulation of a number of alternative media outlets that developed within a specific timeframe working to promote a sense of community through information, education, politicization, validation, agenda forming, networking



and propaganda. As such, Chicana community-based media covered and reported on issues pertaining to Chicanas such as politics, education, culture, music, history, poetry, human and civil rights, community organization, economy, police-community relations, discrimination, literature, and art. Enhancing these topics from a nonconventional perspective that did not reflect mainstream Anglo American values and attitudes, through electronic and print media including many colorful murals that lit up the side of otherwise dull buildings in inner-city and rural barrios where history, culture and politics came alive.

The 1960's, and 70's witnessed the rise of the Chicana Communications movement in tandem with the unfolding of events known as La Causa. However sporadic, a network of Chicana media outlets including radio, newspapers, newsletters, fliers, posters, theatre, poetry, music and murals sprung like outposts across the Southwest, Midwest and Northwest regions of the United States that documented, chronicled and overall cemented the first written draft of El Movimiento Chicana.

Since Mexicans were generally associated with migrant farm workers and border crossing undocumented immigrants who occupied a place at the bottom of the power rungs in American consciousness, the hermetic nature of mainstream mass media had no place for events and activities that pertained to such a minority population group, Chicanas' revolution was never televised since Television as an industry was kept out of reach of any grassroots mobilizations, while documentary film had a small although significant role on capturing the images and momentum of El Movimiento through documentaries such as *Fighting for Our Lives*, the hour-long documentary chronicling the 1973 United Farm Workers' second grape strike produced and released in 1974 by what today is the Cesar Chavez Foundation. "Many early Chicana films in fact were documentaries produced on shoestring budgets that highlighted social issues and celebrated Mexican-American culture and identity. Such films included Valdez's *I Am Joaquin* (1969), Treviño's *Yo Soy Chicano* (1972), David Garcia's *Requiem 29* (1971), *Racho's Garment Workers* (1975), and Morales's *Chicana* (1979)". (Beltran, M., 2020). Consequently, the informal nature of Chicana alternative media became an open field, fertile and welcoming for the Chicana Communications movement.



Chicanxs also learned about politics through a series of over 200 hundred barrio periodicals loosely organized under the Chicano Press Association such as Chicano Times (San Antonio, TX), El Sol de Aztlan (Lansing, MI), El Malcriado (United Farm Workers), El Tecolote (San Francisco, CA), El Grito del Norte (Las Vegas, NV), Coraje (Tucson, AZ), Columnas (Moline, IL), El Gallo (Denver, CO), Venceremos (Albuquerque, NM), El Tiempo, (Dallas, TX), Nuestras Palabras (Seattle, WA), La Prensa Libre (Chicago, IL), Brónze (San Jose, CA), Entrelíneas (Kansas City, KS), El Yaqui/Compass (Houston, TX), La Cucaracha (Pueblo, CO), La Voz Mexicana (Boise, ID), El Relampago (Woodburn, OR), La Raza (Los Angeles, CA), El Papel (San Diego, CA), Hijas de Cuahatemoc (Long Beach, CA), MECHA Newsletter (San Diego, CA), Somos Aztlan (Boulder, CO), La Guardia (Milwaukee, WI), Barrio (Corpus Christi, TX), Spanish Speaking News Letter (Washington, DC), Nahuatzen (Iowa City, IA), El Espuelazo (Springfield, MA), Desafío (New York, NY), Nuestra Lucha (Toledo, OH), El Golpe Avisa (Waco, TX), etc. The Movimiento also kept up with meetings, rallies, boycotts and community events through posters and fliers plastered on bulletin boards in barbershops, bars, churches, grocery stores, and community-based centers. This premise may put Chicano media as propagandistic although the case may be made that its message was educational and informative as an alternative view point.

It can be argued that within this movement, radio broadcasting was by far the most effective communication means to reach out, empower and promote the spirit of community among the new generation of Mexican Americans in search of a political identity. Ken Doyle, the engineer who built and maintained a pioneering microwave communications system connecting UFW union offices across California by phone and to relay data via fax machines and later computers during the '70s and '80s, said that Cesar Chavez's vision of developing a radio station was to empower his members and farm workers at large. According to Doyle, *"years before KUFW went on the air, Cesar was negotiating union contracts with the growers which included a clause that gave Union members the right to bring in, and listen to their portable radios while working in the fields. The growers gladly approved the new clause thinking that music would make faster and happy field workers. Little did they know that Cesar's plan would enable him to*



communicate with his members from his office straight into the field” (Doyle, Ken Personal Interview June, 1980).

As part of this media phenomenon, a series of community based bilingual radio stations in the western part of the country led the way in the production of local news and public affairs relevant to their target audience. Supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) stations like KBBF in Santa Rosa, KSJV in Fresno, KUFW in Woodlake and KUBO in Salinas, California, KDNA in Yakima, Washington, KRZA in Alamosa and KUVVO in Denver, Colorado were among the first stations pioneering community supported bilingual radio stations. This string of community-controlled radio stations rose up against a long history of neglect towards linguistic and racial minorities from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and National Public Radio, two institutions funded by the U.S. Congress to provide the citizenry a communications alternative to commercial radio. (Casillas, Inez D. P. 63)

Many of the programs on community-based radio stations can be credited for planting the seeds for grassroots initiatives such as La Raza Unida, the Brown Berets and farm worker cooperatives among others. In his article *The Voice of the Farmworker, 1975-1985*, Oscar Rosales Castañeda writes *“with the creation of Radio Cadena or Radio KDNA. Several Chicano/a leaders formerly engaged in el Movimiento in Washington State established Radio KDNA, an activist radio station that educated farm workers, advocated farm worker’s organizations, and provided Spanish language programs to non-English speaking families. Soon after the establishment of Radio KDNA, the United Farm Workers of Washington State organized in the lower Yakima Valley.”* (Rosales Castaneda, O, Seattle Civil Rights Labor History Project 2020)

Community controlled media impacts the community at a Micro and Macro levels. I propose that Micro level refers to the media’s structural constitution such as policies, practices, staffing and programming content and quality. Examples that come to mind are special programs such as children and women-oriented programs produced by KBBF and KDNA which are noticeably absent from commercial radio.



Producer Maria Emilia Martin recalls how after airing one show about domestic abuse and a list of shelter resources a listener called from a public telephone asking for help, saying that she had to leave her house to make the call so her husband wouldn't find out " *the way I see it our program Somos Chicanas, saves lives,*" she said. (Martin, Maria E. Personal Interview, June 1981). Another example is when KDNA manager Rosa Ramon --the only Latina in such position nationwide—instituted a programming policy to ban all songs with lyrics demeaning to women, taking aim at misogynistic culture in the Macho dominated music industry.

I refer Macro level impact to civic engagement derived by programs such as popular education activities, community meetings, rallies, campaigns, etc. Some examples include Census, elections and HIV/AIDS information along with community organizing and mobilization campaigns such as Phoenix Radio Campesina's KNAI critical participation in a public campaign against Arizona's SB 1070 in 2010, arguably the broadest and strictest anti-[illegal immigration](#) piece of legislation of that decade.

Despite pressure on CPB and NPR from within and outside, minority voices and representation in public media has been an uphill struggle. As a matter of principle, after having worked in noncommercial radio for twenty years, I made it a point not to listen to NPR due to its lack of minority relevant programming. For the same reason I was pleasantly surprised when in the early nineties I accidentally caught an interview with nationally renowned Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros on NPR only to realize at the end of the program that the interview was part of a BBC newscast.

In other words, for a Chicana voice to be aired in her own country it had to come from a program produced in England. Oddly enough this feeling was reaffirmed when a couple of years ago I caught a portion of the weekend program *A Way with Words*, a one-hour show that looks at the roots, cultural origin or meaning of idioms and English colloquial expressions by taking telephone inquiries from the audience. I was astonished if not insulted at the regional cultural disassociation of one of the hosts Martha Barnette, when she took a call from a listener in Texas asking about the origin of *Woman Hollering Creek*, the name of an



arroyo in central Texas between San Antonio and Seguin. Ms. Barnette explained that the creek's name went back to the colonial times when Indians would kidnap the settlers' children and all that could be heard was the mothers' wailing for their children. Most any Tejano or Mexican would relate the creek's name to the ancient legend of La Llorona, a Mexican folk story about a woman who cries at night looking for her children. Ironically, Sandra Cisneros in her book *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* makes a reference to the Mexican legend. (Cisneros, S. P. 57)

The evolving network of broadcasting projects also created a generation of Chicanx and Latinx media practitioners whose work affected a series of social changes, created organizations and institutions, impacted music, art, culture, literature and language as well as the reaffirmation of identity based on ideology and politics. Besides the community radio stations, three significant Spanish language news services evolved in the form of networks; *Radio Cadena News Service* produced by Dan Roble and Julio Cesar Guerrero out of Seattle a precursor of KDNA-FM, *Enfoque Nacional* produced by Jose Mireles and Hector Molina based in KPBS, San Diego and *California en Revista* produced by Maria Emilia Martin with California Public Radio in San Francisco. These news services operated through a loose network of stringers or news reporters that contributed to the networks' content through reports from the field on a wide spectrum of issues relevant to US Chicanxs and Latinxs as opposed to mainstream networks like Mutual and UPI that incorporated news items from Latin American countries.

These news networks' characteristic quality was twofold, they provided a professional platform for hundreds of Raza radio journalists and the fact that all the reports were original. Dan Roble, Development Director for KDNA was critical of what he called the *RTR*, (*Rip, Translate and Read*) system (Roble, Dan Personal Interview April, 1979). many commercial stations used for their news programs when he alluded to the practice of news broadcasters using news items from the wire services by translating them into Spanish, as opposed to reporting and producing original news stories relevant to their locality.



Before the development of community based Spanish language radio stations, Norteño music and Mexican Revolution Corridos rang over weekend one-hour programs in commercial and a few public radio stations found mostly in communities along the migrant stream. These radio programs were mostly found outside of the five southwestern states where there were full time Spanish language radio stations since the mid 1900's. The weekend block programming used in most radio stations offered the right fit for Spanish language radio that aired sandwiched between religious and farm and agriculture information programs. The large majority of these 30 to 60 minutes programs aired in commercial radio stations and catered to the migrant farm workers with Mexican and Norteño music and dedications. (Cruz-Davila, Richard, Key Summers, Laurie. NEXO, P 8).

Such programming fell under a brokerage system whereby the radio aficionados purchased airtime from local stations. In many cases the DJ's or announcers were part of the farm labor crew making the programs seasonal as well. A very small number of such programs aired all year around in National Public Radio affiliated stations were colleges and universities provided air time to settled-out migrant families. The element of consistency through Saturday and Sunday programs carrying heart felt songs and cultural oriented entertainment tailored for a marginalized population group created a loyal following among captive audiences whose level of literacy in either language would prevent them from relying on print media as a source of information.

In the early 1970's I worked for a project between the Michigan State University Institute for Urban Development, WKAR Radio and Sol de Aztlan, a community-based organization that was housed in Quinto Sol, a Chicax community project in Lansing, Michigan. Located in the heart of Lansing's Chicax barrio, Quinto Sol focused on creating a community Chicax identity as a way of underlining the social inequalities in society as well as the importance of building Barrio power based on cultural and historical richness. Although funded by public monies, Sol de Aztlán had an air of independence and autonomy that allowed it to instill pride among Chicaxs.



This organization was one of the first Chicax centers of its kind in the Midwest. It housed several development and education programs that empowered local community members through civic engagement and access to education. The project had a strong communication component based on the history of the importance of grassroots-oriented media in all social and political movements. Underscoring Sol de Aztlan’s spirit of activism, founder Gilberto V. Martinez recalls that in order to gain access to WKAR airtime, the Barrio organization had to file a complaint with the Federal Communications Commission in 1967 challenging the radio station’s application for license renewal. (Martinez, Gilberto V. Personal Interview July 2020)

El Quinto Sol became a powerful symbol for social change by producing one of the first Chicax Murals in the Midwest and housed an extensive Barrio library. It produced informative radio programs in public and commercial stations and published El Sol de Aztlán newspaper. As a grassroots organization, it was vital in influencing policy in local institutions such as the Model Cities program, academic program opportunities for farmworkers and returning citizens at Michigan State University, substance abuse education and rehabilitation, outreach and community liaison programs for correctional residents and at-large advocacy initiatives capturing the attention of city hall, county commission and state capital politics.

I was in charge of coordinating the Radio production component of the organization. Through the radio production program, Quinto Sol became a satellite studio producing programs aired on WKAR licensed to Michigan State University, and WILS, a local commercial radio station, created the first bilingual children's program for public radio at a national level. It also offered broadcasting training programs for many Spanish language radio aficionados around Michigan and the Great Lakes area that would serve hundreds of thousands of Chicax and Latinx listeners around the Midwest, offering a series of one-weekend workshops in which people from Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Illinois were trained and later went back to their community where participants eventually developed their radio shows in commercial and public radio stations.



I designed and implemented a training program tailored for Chicana radio aficionados in the Midwest region that consisted of the technical hands-on component, FCC rules and regulations. It also included a manual with instructions on how to apply for an FCC Radiotelephone Operator's Permit, formatting programs, a list of Chicana record companies and on the Air Do's and Don'ts for DJ's. The radio laboratory included orientation to strategize around local support networks to sustain their radio programs as well as to approach the station management when asking for access to Air-time.

Access to airwaves would change dramatically during the 1970's and 80's due to a radical change in public policy, economics and social attitudes. The Jimmy Carter administration promoted minority ownership of electronic media companies by providing incentives to White owners willing to sell their licenses to minority entrepreneurs, the Public Broadcasting Corporation promoted a more inclusive approach to programming and many Anglo owned companies shifted from their English format to Spanish language programming based on the increase of the Latino consumer population.

The burgeoning demographic, political and economic presence of Chicanos and Latinos in the United States during the decade of the 1970's became a fertile ground for commercial full time Spanish language radio networks and independent radio stations and in a matter of few years flooded the airways in major cities throughout the United States. A large majority of these broadcasting outlets like SIN, the Spanish International Network were financed by foreign capital from Mexico while others were funded domestically by US Hispanic rich entrepreneurs and in some cases mainstream broadcasting companies switched their English language programming to an all-Spanish language format, all of them capitalizing on what was called the "Decade of the Hispanics." Although many Raza periodicals and magazines relied on affirmative action government ads from the Defense, Education and Health departments to survive, the commercial broadcast industry has forever dug its fangs into the dynamic Latino economy attracted by the Barrio's buying power of \$1.539 trillion in 2018 which is expected to grow nearly \$400 billion more by 2023. Indeed, Latinos' economic contribution to this country's economy compares to one of the top ten



largest and third fastest growing economies in the world. (Schink, Werner and Hayes-Bautista, David. *LATINO GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT (GDP) REPORT 2017*. P 5)

Of course, due to their commercial nature, these radio networks and stations were inherently detached from and, even opposed to Chicana progressive discourse and ideology, something reflected on their heavy-handed music programming and poor emphasis on news and information. Authors Felix Gutierrez and Jorge Reyna Schement in their book *Spanish Language Radio in the Southwestern United States* where they offer the results of five years of research on Spanish-language radio, examining ownership and programming, noted that although Latinxs customarily listened to Spanish language radio stations for entertainment, they mostly relied on English language mainstream media as credible sources of news and public affairs information by comparing two top rated radio stations in San Antonio, Texas; KCOR (Spanish format) and KONO (English format). The study concluded that KONO consistently dedicated more time to news broadcasting than KCOR. (Gutierrez, F and Reyna Schement, J., P. 58). Furthermore, Leo Rivera a community activist who worked as an advertisement agent for KLAT “Radio La Tremenda” in Houston mentioned once that when he proposed the station’s publicity director to promote a program for a scholarships’ benefit, the director, a White male, disapproved the proposal responding “*the last thing we want to do is educate your people*” (Rivera, Leo Personal Interview, June, 1985)

Chicana consciousness and ideology prevailed past the decades of the 1960’s and 1970’s although not in the form of a popular movement, rather it transitioned from streets mobilizations to the politics of higher education through Chicana Studies programs and Chicana research institutes. Community controlled radio on the other hand spiraled onto a wide web of broadcasting outlets and programs over the internet.

Radio Bilingue, under the leadership of Harvard educated Hugo Morales, mushroomed into a 14 stations network and a production center for news and cultural programs distributed to over 70 stations, (Teehee, J. The Fresno Bee), while Radio Campesina grew to an 11-station radio network in over four states with an estimated 1.5 million listeners or followers. According to Marc Grossman, spokesperson for the Cesar



Chavez Foundation, *“After years of struggling between the choice of “pure” educational radio that produces great programming but small audiences versus commercial radio that generates big audiences but little, if any, meaningful social content, Campesina has struck a balance that draws the best of both.”* (Grossman, Marc, Personal Interview July, 2020).

The Campesina Radio network strategy to go commercial is not surprising but rather a pragmatic move considering the demographic and implicit economic explosion of Chicanx, Latinx audiences in the United States by birth and immigration, along with the community’s shift in media consumption trends and ways to keep informed, entertained and engaged in current affairs. To that effect the Chavez foundation is experimenting with two stations in California’s Central Valley called the Forge with English language format in order to connect with the children and grandchildren of the original supporters of the farm workers movement who in many cases are bilingual or even monolingual English speakers.

A 2014 report by the Coats to Coats group (C2C) hired by CPB’s Minority Media Consortia, forecasts that by 2050 Latinx demographics will jump from current 16% to 30% contributing to a major population shift where minorities will become the majority in the United States surpassing non-Hispanic white Americans. (Coats, J. Coats, R. Hudson, N. Omot, L. Velazquez, D. C2C 2015, P 8). In the State of Texas alone Latinx population increased by a 9 to1 ratio against Whites in 2019 and are expected to become the largest population group in Texas as early as 2022 according to recently released Census figures. (Ura and Hanzhang Jin, The Texas Tribune)

CONCLUSION

Houston community activist Lupe Casarez credits the internet for the democratization of communications (Casarez, Lupe, Personal Interview, May, 2020) alluding to the explosion of information sources and platforms inundating cyberspace. Largely unrestricted however, cyberinformation is plagued with a wide spectrum of information styles and formats that defy conventional processing methods and mindset.



Casarez argues that it is the responsibility of the information consumer to separate between opinion, satire, gossip, fact and fiction to confirm the message veracity or credibility in this vast Vox populi.

If indeed, the proliferation of the internet has grown to the detriment of newsprint and challenged cable and broadcasting industries, it has not affected Chicano-controlled radio as much because traditionally, radio broadcasting has been associated with working class audiences. If anything, it serves as a bridge to a broader computer literate audience so that corridos and norteño music cannot only be enjoyed on a journeyman's Chevy pick-up or a Barrio Low Rider but also by white collar laborers and in college campuses as well.

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