

Social Uses and Radio Practices

The Use of Participatory Radio
by Ethnic Minorities in Mexico

Lucila Vargas



Social Uses and Radio Practices

International Communication and Popular Culture

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The Use of Participatory
Radio by Ethnic Minorities
in Mexico

Lucila Vargas

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To the memories of
my beloved mother, Carmen Márquez,
my dear aunt, Ana Márquez de Orozco,
and my brother, Fernando De Soto Márquez



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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xiii</i>

PART ONE

The Social Value of Participatory Radio

1 Introduction	3
-----------------------	----------

Participation in Radio-for-Development, 4
Mexican Indigenous Peoples, 9
<i>La Radio del Instituto Nacional Indigenista</i> , 11
Conceptual Blueprint for the Book, 14
Notes, 17

2 Methodology	19
----------------------	-----------

Selecting the Case, 20
Specific Aims, 21
Research Methods and Techniques, 23
Sample of the Audience Study, 25
Fieldwork, 28
Analysis, Interpretation, and Caveats, 31
Notes, 32

PART TWO

Indigenous Participation in Production Processes

3 Indigenous Peoples and Instituto Nacional Indigenista	37
--	-----------

Indigenous Ethnic Groups in Mexico, 37
Mexican <i>Indigenismo</i> , 41

Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 42
Notes, 47

4 The INI Network 51

History of the *Radio Cultural Indigenista*, 51
The Network in the Early 1990s, 61
XEVFS, Radio Margaritas, 66
Notes, 69

5 The Network's Staff and Other Actors 71

Stations' Staff Profile, 72
The Staff of the Network's Headquarters, 73
Station Staff, 75
Relationships and Alliances, 84
The Daily Routines of Radio Margaritas' Staff, 86
Ideology and the Everyday, 88
Notes, 91

6 The Programming of the INI Network 93

Multilingual Broadcasting, 93
Programming Profile, 95
Notes, 118

PART THREE

Audience Participation and Social Uses

7 Radio Margaritas' Target Audience: The Tojolabal Maya 123

The INI Network's Audience, 124
The Tojolabal Maya, 129
Notes, 156

8 Exposure, Listening, and Taste 161

Exposure and Differential Modes
of Involvement in Reception, 164
Patterns of Taste: Music, 170
From Live to Radio Broadcast Music, 173
Diversion Uses, 177

Radio Margaritas and the Construction of Reality, 178 Notes, 182	
9 Social Impact of Radio Margaritas	185
Impact of Radio Margaritas on Local Information Flows, 185 Radio Margaritas as Community Radio, 194 Notes, 204	
10 Radio and Ethnodevelopment	207
Tradition, 207 Improving Living Conditions, 217 Notes, 229	
11 Outline of Radio Consumption Patterns	231
Limitations to Exposure, 231 Users and Consumers, 232 Uses of Radio Margaritas' Music, 233 Enhancing the Local Information Flow, 235 Radio Margaritas as Community Radio, 235 Traditions and the Reproduction of Culture and Society, 237 Improving Living Conditions, 237	
12 Participation, Racism, and Social Uses	241
Indigenous Participation in the INI Network, 241 Unequal Participation: Project Beneficiaries, 243 Racism, 245 Collective Self-Esteem and Sustainable Development, 248 Social Uses, 250 Implications for the Use of Radio-for-Development, 251 Notes, 254	
Appendix 1: Conceptual Framework	257
Concepts Drawn from Development Studies, 257 Concepts from Cultural Studies, 272 Latin American Media Research, 283 The Research on Latin American Participatory Radio, 286	

Notes, 288	
Appendix 2: Interview Schedules	293
Focus Groups Interview Schedule, 293	
Audience Interview Schedule, 294	
 <i>References</i>	 297
<i>About the Book and Author</i>	309

Figures

1.1	Map of Mexico Showing the INI Stations' Location	12
4.1	Radio Stations of the INI Network	62
4.2	Basic Organization Chart of the INI Radio Stations	63
4.3	Blueprint of Radio Margaritas	68
5.1	The Social Space of the INI Network	74
6.1	Sample Weekly Listings of the INI Stations	96
6.2	Radio Margaritas' Listings	97
7.1	Map of the State of Chiapas Showing the Tojolabal Region	130
7.2	Map Showing the Location of Margaritas City, Tabasco, and Madero	132
7.3	Ownership of Electronic Media Among the Families Interviewed	154
A.1	Conceptual Map for Assessing Participation in Media-based Projects	271
A.2	Sample of the Audience Study	296



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Preface

This book is about the social value of participatory or community-oriented radio and stresses how the politics of race, ethnicity, class, and gender shape the extent and quality of people's participation in development efforts. It shows, ethnographically, how a number of Mexican ethnic minorities use the communication resources made available to them by a network of radio stations sponsored by the federal government through its *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI).

The book includes an in-depth analysis of one of the INI stations, XEVFS, Radio Margaritas, and an ethnography of the radio consumption practices of its target audience, the Tojolabal Maya. Radio Margaritas is located in Las Margaritas, Chiapas (southern Mexico), one of the cities seized by an indigenous rebel army on January 1, 1994. Before the uprising, when I conducted the fieldwork for the book, the political situation in Chiapas was quite different from today. Although the Mexican army's presence in the region was very strong, and there were indeed many rumors of guerrilla activity in the jungle, I could not have imagined that three years after I left Chiapas, an army composed mainly of Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, and other indigenous peasants would declare war on the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, initiating what has undeniably become the single most challenging armed rebellion in modern Mexico.

The *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Zapatista National Liberation Army) launched its attack by seizing San Cristóbal de las Casas, Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas. The *Zapatistas*, as they have since come to be called, identify themselves as the army of a revolutionary movement, one collectively led by a committee including members of the ethnic groups of Chiapas. According to the movement's charismatic spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas speak on behalf of the country's poor and represent a national movement seeking to redress the economic and social injustices suffered by the peasantry. Subcomandante Marcos has emphasized not only the poverty and exploitation endured by indigenous

people, but also the racism of the dominant *ladino* (Spanish-speaking) society toward indigenous people. A *ladino* himself, Subcomandante Marcos recently commented on this same issue in an interview given to the Italian newspaper *L'Unita* (and reprinted by *Proceso* 8): "In Mexico, the entire social system is based upon the injustice of its relations with the Indians. The worst thing that can happen to any human being is to be an Indian, with its full load of humiliation, hunger and misery [my translation]."

The *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* took its name after Emiliano Zapata, the indigenous leader of the 1910 revolution. In modern Mexico, Zapata has acquired almost mythical status among both indigenous and *ladino* people and has become the prototypic Mexican revolutionary hero. By identifying their movement with Zapata and his struggle, the Zapatistas have added an electrifying emotional charge to the movement's appeal for social and economic justice. Not surprisingly, the response of Mexican civil society to the uprising has been overwhelmingly sympathetic.

The government, on the other hand, first responded by mobilizing a third of the entire Mexican army to Chiapas and declaring that the events were the result of the criminal activity of a small number of people, and not a genuine, popular political movement. According to outside monitors, the federal army committed numerous human rights abuses during the first days after the uprising, including the bombarding of indigenous villages and the harassing of international and national journalists.

However, an important component of the Zapatistas' strategy has been to wage a brilliant media war, which helped to polarize public opinion quickly in their favor, despite the typically lopsided coverage of events by *Televisa*, Mexico's pro-establishment and monopolistic television conglomerate. Fortunately, the national print press, the international press, and human rights organizations were on hand to publicize the killing, torture, and intimidation being carried out by the government troops. For once, it seems, the historical struggle of Mexico's indigenous peoples against racism, oppression, and poverty has been given its share of international press coverage.

The government's bloody response was strongly condemned by numerous sectors of Mexican society and demonstrations for peace were held in many cities; the attendance at the largest demonstration in Mexico City was estimated at 150,000. Because of the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the international community and press were closely watching Mexico, and traditional power elites found themselves suddenly in an uneasy position. Thus, nine days after the uprising, President Salinas shifted from the tactics of coercion toward a position of reconciliation, announcing changes in his own presidential cabinet and other important posts, including the governor of Chiapas. Central to the president's decision was the replacement of the *Secretario de Gobernación* (police and internal

affairs), Jorge González Garrido, the authoritarian and repressive former governor of Chiapas, with Jorge Carpizo McGregor, known as a jurist, academician, and human rights advocate. President Salinas explained that with these changes his administration was recognizing its past mistakes and initiating a new strategy for peace and justice.

The first peace talks between the Zapatistas and the government began on February 21, 1994, and subsequent negotiations continue as of this writing. Particularly significant for my research are two key demands made by the Zapatistas. Along with their broader demands for land reform and social and economic justice, the Zapatistas have specifically insisted on the adoption of Mexico's first and only antidiscrimination law and for a radio station to be owned, operated, and controlled entirely by indigenous peoples.

The mediator in these negotiations has been Samuel Ruiz García, the Roman Catholic Bishop of San Cristóbal, a bishop regarded sympathetically by indigenous ethnic groups. The peace talks have shown that the two historically important actors in Mexican politics, indigenous peoples and the Roman Catholic Church, have made an important reappearance in the country's political arena. Still, the beginning of peace talks has not diminished the sense of crisis in contemporary Mexican politics, a crisis further aggravated by the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the official party's (PRI) presidential candidate in March, 1994. This crisis will very likely end Mexico's 65-year-old "one-party democracy." On the eve of the presidential election (to be held on August 21, 1994), and with three political parties running a close race, the country seems to be awaiting either another revolution or a PRI-based counterrevolution.

The Zapatista uprising, triggered by chronic injustices and by a decade of neo-liberal government policies, attests to the dominant society's indifference toward the destitution in which peoples like the Tojolabal live. Furthermore, since the uprising's epicenter was in San Cristóbal de las Casas, precisely the place where the first branch of INI (*Centro Coordinador Indigenista*) was installed 44 years ago, somber questions are now being asked about INI and the state's development policy toward indigenous populations.

Along with skepticism over the real contribution of INI's development projects to promote social and economic well-being, recent events in Chiapas also raise pressing questions for development communicators. What supporting role does participatory radio have, if any, in the growth of popular revolutions? What radio practices occur in participatory stations that might sustain or impede the emergence of political resistance and insurrection by the oppressed? What specific roles, in relation to the uprising, did Radio Margaritas and other community-oriented stations operating in the region play before, during, and after the uprising? And

how is their role being perceived by indigenous ethnic groups sympathetic to the uprising and by the government elites having the power to cut the station's license and funding?

I have only a few sketchy details, but it is obvious that community-oriented radio stations certainly played an important role in the 1994 events. For example, as soon as the Mexican army started its terror campaign, the radio stations from San Cristóbal de las Casas were airing personal messages from indigenous people wishing to inform families in nearby villages of the whereabouts of their loved ones, of the injuries suffered by them, of incarcerations and murders. Also, as many other revolutionary movements have done, the Zapatistas, on the first days of the uprising, seized an AM radio station to broadcast their demands; this station, XEOCH, is government-sponsored and transmits from Ocosingo. Likewise, short wave radio played a significant role in the rebellion, as the Zapatistas used it to relay coded messages.

The government also struggled to gain control of the airwaves by using another radio station targeting indigenous peoples. XERA, *Radio Comunidad Indígena*, broadcast the announcements of the *Secretaría de Gobernación* asking the population to denounce indigenous members of the Zapatista army. XERA, which is located in San Cristóbal de las Casas, is sponsored by the state government of Chiapas and regularly broadcasts in indigenous languages.

The implications of the Chiapas uprising for my research are many and complex, but since I finished the book before the uprising took place, I have decided to publish my study as it is, allowing the reader to reflect on these fascinating issues. Nevertheless, I would encourage the reader to keep three important questions in mind as he or she reads this study. First, what potential do radio programs attempting to destigmatize indigenous languages and traditions have on an emerging revolutionary consciousness? Second, what impact might the radio broadcasting of messages *from the audience* have on processes of political and military organization for insurgent groups like the Zapatistas? And third, what is participatory radio's specific contribution to the poor in emergency situations like this?

This book owes much to the guidance and assistance of many persons and institutions. I would like to express my gratitude to Emile McAnany, who supervised my dissertation and guided me through the graduate program. Also thanks to Doug Storey for his thoughtful comments at different stages of the research, and to Sharon Strover, John Downing, Doug Foley, and John Lent for their encouragement, advice, and suggestions. For their careful editing I must thank Prentiss Moore and Bonnie Fink.

Thanks especially to INI's "insiders" who offered me their time and support. Two women assisted me the most: Candelaria Rodríguez, who acted as an interviewer and translator with Tojolabal speakers, and Inés

Cornejo, who generously shared with me her own research and insights into the network. I appreciate the help given by many other members of the network's staff, particularly the personnel at XEZV and XEVFS. Without the access to the INI stations provided to me by Carlos Plascencia and Eduardo Valenzuela, this book would not have been possible. Likewise, thanks to the many Tojolabal families and teachers who agreed to participate in my interviews.

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Finally, I need not just to thank Bruce dePyssler but to recognize his collaboration with this endeavor. Bruce helped me on a variety of fronts: on the domestic scene, in the field, and with conceptual and methodological issues.

*Lucila Vargas
Bowling Green, Ohio
April 20, 1994*



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PART ONE

The Social Value
of Participatory Radio



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1

Introduction

Most products only derive their social value from the social use that is made of them.

—Pierre Bourdieu¹

This book looks at the promise and performance of participatory radio for improving the living conditions and the sense of self-reliance and self-esteem of the poor. It focuses on the role played by the politics of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in media-based development projects, by examining the social practices created by a number of Mexican ethnic minorities in a network of rural radio stations sponsored by the federal government, through its *Instituto Nacional Indigenista*. By investigating these concrete practices and the relationships linking them, the book assesses the extent and quality of indigenous peoples' participation in the network and seeks to contribute to the study of the social uses (as opposed to individual media uses and gratifications) of minority broadcasting.

The book approaches participatory radio as a site where the competing demands of diverse social subjects are struggled over by inquiring, at one level, into specific questions about the concrete practices created by the participants of the radio network and by addressing, at another level, broader issues questioning how subaltern ethnic groups appropriate and refunctionalize radio, what are the social uses of radio among ethnic minorities in countries like Mexico, and what is the social value of participatory radio.

These questions have become pressing concerns not just for those interested in the study of popular communications and participatory development, but also for policy makers, development practitioners, and granting agencies committed to assisting ethnic minorities.

Since the early 1970s, the number of radio stations dedicated to minority broadcasting has dramatically increased. Populations as diverse as Mayas in Mexico, Arabs in France, and Aborigines in Australia have adopted local radio as an important communication medium for their communities.² In

Latin America, as in most of the Third World, minority radio broadcasting has often been linked to rural development efforts sponsored by the state, the Catholic church, and other religious and international organizations. Largely because of their sponsorship from institutions of the mainstream society, the vast majority of Latin American radio stations broadcasting for minority groups are immersed in a plethora of social and cultural contradictions and become sites where the meaning of ethnic identity is struggled over.

Participation in Radio-for-Development

Empirical research on how local people participate in these development radio projects and the creative and often contradictory ways in which communication resources are appropriated, refunctionalized, and used at the grassroots level is very scant. This book is the outcome of an empirical investigation that I presented as my doctoral dissertation at the University of Texas at Austin. The dissertation explored the possibilities and constraints that participatory radio holds for improving the living conditions, the sense of self-reliance, and the self-esteem of marginalized ethnic groups. During the course of my fieldwork, however, I became more and more aware of the importance of race as a social force and of racism itself as an ideological thread running through the participatory radio project I was studying. As my research progressed, I became more and more interested in shedding light on how racism manifests itself in this type of minority broadcasting. I need to emphasize at the onset, however, that I found that despite this racism, some ethnic minorities are using the INI stations to maintain social institutions like language, to reproduce cultural expressions like music, and to strengthen their ethnic identity and sense of community.

This book is a case study of the matrix of interactions between a network of eight radio stations sponsored by the Mexican government (through the Instituto Nacional Indigenista [hereafter INI], which coordinates government activities concerning Mexico's ethnic groups) and the indigenous peoples living under the radio network's coverage. Using ethnographic techniques I examined radio practices occurring in two settings: first, at the radio stations seen as the sites of production/transmission of messages and second in the family households viewed as the primary sites of consumption/reception. By investigating these practices, I sought to assess the extent and quality of indigenous peoples' participation in the network, as well as to contribute to the study of the social uses of minority radio broadcasting. My study thus attempts to understand how two abstractions, "popular participation" and "social uses of radio," occur in the cultural microcosm of the network's broadcasting.

In addition to my general interest in the social uses of participatory radio,

I am also concerned with the implementation of communication policies. In that vein I explore how subaltern ethnic groups attain, or might attain, access to information and radio broadcasting facilities, and how subaltern groups use these resources to improve their living conditions and strengthen their cultures. Since the explicit objective of the network is specifically the improvement of ethnic groups' living conditions through the strengthening of their cultures, my investigation necessarily contains an assessment of the network. Evaluation research into this type of radio project, one with a strategy of open broadcasting and with no structural feed back from often unorganized audiences, has been considered a challenge.³

I contend that the study of media-based development projects should focus on the interplay between the project and its beneficiaries, and that this interplay can be examined only by using a holistic approach addressing all three components of the process: production/transmission, cultural products/texts, and consumption/reception. Furthermore, I argue that this interplay must be observed in the practices exhibited by those flesh and blood people actually participating in the process. By *radio practices* I understand the daily routines of the people producing/transmitting messages and the network's ideology and institutional or corporate constraints framing these routines. At the audience domain, I mean by *radio practices* the customary ways in which audience members use both the radio messages and the stations' resources. It is only for analytical purposes that my investigation divides the process into its discrete parts, but I aim to treat this particular form of radio communication as a whole, and to examine this whole in its social and cultural context.

Strictly speaking, this study belongs to development communications, an interdisciplinary field between mass communications and development studies. For its conceptual framework, I draw on alternative thought in development studies and on cultural approaches to mass media. Those readers specifically interested in development communications may find it helpful to read in Appendix 1 my more systematic discussion of the investigation's key concepts and theoretical underpinnings, as well as my working assumptions regarding development processes and mass media audiences. For those readers unfamiliar with the research on Latin American participatory radio stations I have also included in the appendix some highlights of this research. Here, it suffices simply to provide a brief discussion of how I feel this study is positioned within the overlapping fields of mass communications and development studies.

Alternative thinking in development studies emphasizes that grassroots participation is the key for the success of development efforts. But I wondered initially, what exactly is "participation"? Since participation is the central concept of the investigation, I surveyed the research on the topic and found that the conceptual impreciseness of the term has allowed

researchers to use it to convey very different meanings. I also found necessary to distinguish clearly the way the term "participation" is currently used (as in "grassroots participation") from its usage in the orthodox paradigm of development (as "representative participation"); furthermore, it is necessary to establish a clear-cut definition of the term that does not evade the crucial issue of power. Based on the work of critical researchers, my starting point is a twofold definition of the concept. First, participation is a means of achieving development, meaning a better life, self-reliance, self-esteem, and freedom from servitude. In this sense participation should be equated with the struggle for liberation. And second, participation implies moral and psychological empowerment, and as such, it is an end in itself.

The conceptual framework of this study also incorporates central premises and key concepts of cultural approaches to mass media. More specifically, I draw on a group of authors whose work on media is theoretically grounded in the neo-Marxist culturalism of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. These authors, especially David Morley, have combined this grounding in cultural studies, with its respect for experience and practice, with empirical inquiry based on qualitative methodology. By and large these investigations have targeted reception processes and are coming to be known as reception studies or as ethnographies of media consumption.⁴ The authors of these studies focus on popular audiences, especially on social use and appropriation of mass media products. Like British cultural studies, but unlike more pessimistic continental understandings, such as the propaganda/mass society approach, the Frankfurt School, or Louis Althusser's focus on ideologically controlling apparatuses, these authors allow greater interpretive power to the audience when consuming, decoding, or reading mass media products. Consequently, they advocate focusing on the ways people relate to and experience mass media culture. Building upon Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, they view media as a site of struggle where ideological consent is either won or lost, a perspective that orients these researchers to the social use made of media texts.

Other authors of reception studies have an acknowledged debt to the school of uses and gratifications, but they have distanced themselves from the school's orientation to the individual's psychological needs by employing the adjective "social." The phrase "social uses of media" (as used for example by James Lull) was coined specifically to distinguish the new approach from uses and gratifications research. One of the most comprehensive typologies of social uses is the one proposed by Lull who has focused on television viewing. Lull distinguishes two primary uses of television in the home, the structural and the relational. He further subdivides structural uses into environmental (e.g., background noise), and regulative uses (e.g., talk patterns). He subdivides relational uses into four categories: communication facilitation (e.g., experience illustration), affiliation/

avoidance (e.g., verbal contact/neglect), social learning (e.g., behavior modeling), and competence/dominance (e.g., intellectual validation).⁵

However, with regards to development communications, and more specifically, concerning the study of social uses of participatory radio, I found that a new dimension should be added to those uses of media heretofore suggested. Along with gratificationists and other authors of reception studies, Lull is concerned only with reception/consumption processes. But the beneficiaries of participatory radio not only consume, but many also produce and/or help to produce programs. Hence, an entirely different set of uses presents itself for analysis.

I realized that I needed to broaden the frame of reference to include not only consumption but also production processes. Consequently, I envisioned three additional kinds of social uses of participatory radio. First, at the micro level (individual and small group), I needed to account for two more uses: (1) use of the station to substitute for other communication systems, such as the use of radio for broadcasting personal announcements to substitute for telephones, or to broadcast public announcements to substitute for print media; and (2) use of the station's resources for purposes not related to radio broadcasting, for example, as a place for getting a document typed, or for getting advice on dealing with government institutions. Second, at the macro level (the ethnic group, the peasant community of a region), there are two other uses concerning the re-creation and maintenance of society: (1) use of the station as a forum for the reproduction of the group's cultural forms (language, music); and (2) use of the station as a means for generating an alternate, stronger, and more complex sense of community among members of a particular group. And finally, at both the micro and the macro level, there are the symbolic uses of radio, especially the radio receiver, as a consumer good in family politics, majority-minority relations, and other realms of social life.

Apart from the first type of uses (e.g., substitute for telephone, place for getting advice), it can be argued that most of the uses that I highlight have already been indicated either by gratificationists or by the authors of reception studies. However, there are two key differences between previously proposed uses and some of the uses that I am discussing. One difference is that both gratificationists and the authors of reception studies have examined what people do when consuming media products; the audiences studied by these two approaches, in contrast to those of participatory radio, do not participate in production processes. The second difference is that while for gratificationists the unit of analysis is the individual, for authors like James Lull and David Morley the unit of analysis is the family, and for other authors like Dick Hebdige the unit of analysis is the subcultural group, I am examining the media uses of an even larger group, an ethnic minority. Because of their particular circumstances and experiences as colonized

people, ethnic minorities develop uses of media in very different ways than other groups. For example, using radio to reproduce an ethnic minority's language, a language that has been stigmatized for centuries, has an entirely different meaning than using the medium to reproduce a youth subculture's way of speaking.

Although my research focuses more specifically on ethnic minorities, it is worth emphasizing that media uses of each unit of analysis, the personal (individual), the small group (family), and the larger group (subculture, ethnic group), are not mutually exclusive, but concurrent and often simultaneous.

Since the unit of analysis is changed, so too is the methodology. Given that reception studies want to understand group uses, rather than individual ones, there has been a shift toward case studies relaying on ethnographic techniques. This combination of the case study and ethnography has often been carried out in institutions and social groups. As defined for example by Michael Real, this method is an interpretive and critical approach to people's media experience. According to Real, this method presents an ethnographic account of an influential case, situating it in its communitarian and historical context, and turning to contextualize the case in direct relation to questions of esthetic judgement, social power, conflict, ideology, and hegemony.⁶

I draw on this case-study method and rather than discussing my methods in an appendix, I go to great pains to explain in some detail numerous aspects of my methodology in Chapter 2 because I believe that methodology constitutes the governing axis of any investigation. Participation in media-for-development has seldom been examined ethnographically. Indeed I hope that a key contribution of this work may actually be a methodological one, one that orients development communications to this combined case-study-ethnographic approach. Specifically, for the study of media-based development projects, I propose (1) to focus on the matrix of interactions between the project and its intended beneficiaries; (2) to work within a conceptual framework which combines a critical perspective on development with a culturalist approach to media; and (3) to apply a holistic method that takes into account the three moments of the process under discussion (production/transmission, texts/programming, and consumption/reception) and that incorporates ethnographic techniques to examine the radio practices of subaltern groups in concrete projects. In the last analysis, the methodology of this case-study itself provides my main thesis: what I am proposing is a holistic way of doing research in participatory media-based development projects which grasps the relationships between production and consumption practices in order to ascertain the social value of these projects for their intended beneficiaries.

This way of doing research is anchored in feminist epistemologies which foreground not just a holistic view but also moral and political matters.

Feminist epistemologies build upon the insights offered by critical researchers like Paulo Freire who have developed, in opposition to positivist science with its artificial separation of questions of value from questions of fact, more participatory, and value-driven, “emancipatory” research methods to advance the struggle against various forms of domination.

This is not only a question of the way that politically-committed cultural studies, emancipatory research, and feminism align themselves against positivism’s separation of facts from value, but also of the very placement of these paradigms within the social sciences. Sandra Harding, for instance, remarks that feminism incorporates many of the criticisms of positivist science raised by other emancipatory movements “while challenging the low priority that specifically feminist concerns have been assigned in such agendas of social reform.”⁷ Though I did not intend to undertake a feminist evaluation of a development radio project, as a feminist myself I could not help but to conduct research from a feminist perspective. My own consciousness of gender led me to view the different actors who participate in the radio project as gendered subjects, and their actions and ideologies as shaped by patriarchal social structures and androcentric beliefs.

The centerpiece of my study has to do with race and ethnicity, but rather than ignoring the intersections among race and ethnicity and class and gender, I examined precisely those intersections, considering, for instance, the emancipating impact that the radio broadcasting in vernacular languages may have had in the daily lives of indigenous women. Another important question of my research, therefore, is whether the “development” brought about by the INI stations is beneficial to indigenous women. I use feminist notions to unravel the underlying reasons for the social and cultural practices that I looked at, and I also made a concerted effort to account for women’s experiences and to include female voices in my research. It is in its methodology that the study reveals more clearly my feminist stance, but before introducing the specifics of the methodology, it is necessary to delineate the salient features of the case itself.

Mexican Indigenous Peoples

Mexico, with the largest indigenous population of the Americas, has been described as two nations: one is the mainstream Spanish-speaking society and the other is composed of at least 56 minority ethnic groups. In contrast to other Latin American countries, Mexico’s 1910 revolution brought about a limited number of political-economic measures to improve indigenous peoples’ living conditions (e.g., the agrarian reform), as well as social policies to recognize the value of their cultures (e.g., the support for artists like Diego Rivera). Mexico became a country advocating the rights of these peoples, and as such became the only Latin American *indigenista* state.

On the other hand, just like other Latin American governments, the revolutionary government sought to establish a closed system of cultural control in the name of national unity and economic development.

Thus, although revolutionary Mexico has been an indigenista state, the country's multiethnic composition has complicated the government's task, and vernacular cultures have frequently been seen as obstacles to implementing national policies. Most of the time the contradiction has been solved by discursively positioning indigenous cultures as part of a glorious past, something very useful to the invention of traditions for the young nation. Nevertheless, progress and modernization have been given a high priority, and the rights of living indigenous people have often been ignored in the race for modernization. Today, despite their belonging to an indigenista state, Mexico's ethnic minorities remain politically and economically marginalized. Yet, they are not a small group; about one in every eight Mexicans speaks a vernacular language, and indigenous people have the highest growth rate of any population sector in the country.⁸

As I mentioned before, while I was doing the fieldwork it occurred to me that since I was examining the participation of indigenous peoples in the network, and participation is intrinsically linked to issues of oppression/liberation, I was actually doing an ethnographic account of how racism works at the micro level in Mexican society. This is indeed a complex topic heeding close consideration and analysis because Mexico, as a nation, fails even to acknowledge that the problem exists. Racism is a fact of social differences in Mexico, and the social uses of participatory radio created by Mexican indigenous peoples, by that very fact, exist within the boundaries of racist social interactions. Even so, as I argue later, many of these social uses of radio become weapons to resist racism itself.

Given 500 years of continuous mingling among native Mexicans, Europeans, Africans, and other immigrants to Mexican soil, specifying who is or is not a member of indigenous ethnic groups becomes an extremely complicated task. Numerous categories have been suggested to determine ethnicity: physiological features (e.g., dark-skin color), cultural characteristics (e.g., vernacular language), social peculiarities (e.g., *cargos*, system of organization), economic specificities (e.g., pre-capitalist mode of production), psychological distinctions (e.g., sense of self-esteem), cultural identity (sense of belongingness to a group), and more. But in addition to all of these elements, there is a key consideration at work when Mexicans determine their own as well as others' ethnic identity: a person's position on the social ladder and the likelihood that this person will be exploited, a consideration that might be thought of as a cumulative effect of the above categories. Ricardo Pozas and Isabel H. de Pozas say that "fundamentally, the quality of being an Indian is given by the fact that the subject denominated as such is the easiest man to exploit economically in the system [my translation]."⁹

This point is crucial for my study because more than any other element taken singly, it helps to explain not only the very often contradictory feelings of the radio network's staff toward indigenous people, but also many of the network's policies. Moreover it shows the significance that listening—or not listening—to these radio stations has as a cultural practice. And finally, it increases awareness of the social function that listening to participatory radio fulfills in legitimizing structural and symbolic differences.

La Radio del Instituto Nacional Indigenista

The radio network's sponsor, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, was created in 1948 by the federal government to address the problems of indigenous peoples. Though indigenous peoples are increasingly becoming a migrant population, and many of them now live in urban settings (especially young men on a temporary basis),¹⁰ INI is still basically concerned with rural development. The radio network is one of the numerous projects that this agency has sponsored. In the early 1990s it had eight AM stations with an estimated potential audience of about three million. One of the stations is in the northern state of Chihuahua, a second is on the Guatemalan border, a third is in the southeast, and the remaining five are in central Mexico (see Figure 1.1). The stations combine Spanish and vernaculars in their programming which includes local ethnic music, news programs, two or three hours daily of programs in which personal messages and institutional announcements are broadcast (substituting for telephone service), and series based on interviews with local people in which traditional health and agricultural practices are combined with modern expertise, as well as others.

The radio network's stated goals rely on the ideology of *Indigenismo de Participación*, the current government policy concerning indigenous ethnic groups. As with many of today's sponsors of development projects, INI's current policies have incorporated two seminal ideas of alternative approaches to development, the need for grassroots participation and the importance of the positive role played by local cultures in development. Because of this official policy and, even more, because of the effective political struggle of a number of indigenous organizations at the national level, the network's sponsor (as a federal institution) mandates the participation of indigenous people. Nevertheless, INI is a bureaucratic institution of the Mexican state, and not surprisingly, its institutional practices are derived from outdated ideologies of assimilation, with this term's racist connotations. As is probably the case with most participatory stations and their broadcasting, the INI stations are sites where opposing ideologies meet, and occasionally, even clash. They are also sites of continual struggle between the competing demands of diverse social subjects, for example, indigenous organizations versus *indigenista* bureaucrats.¹¹ As an

FIGURE 1.1 Map of Mexico Showing the INI Stations' Location

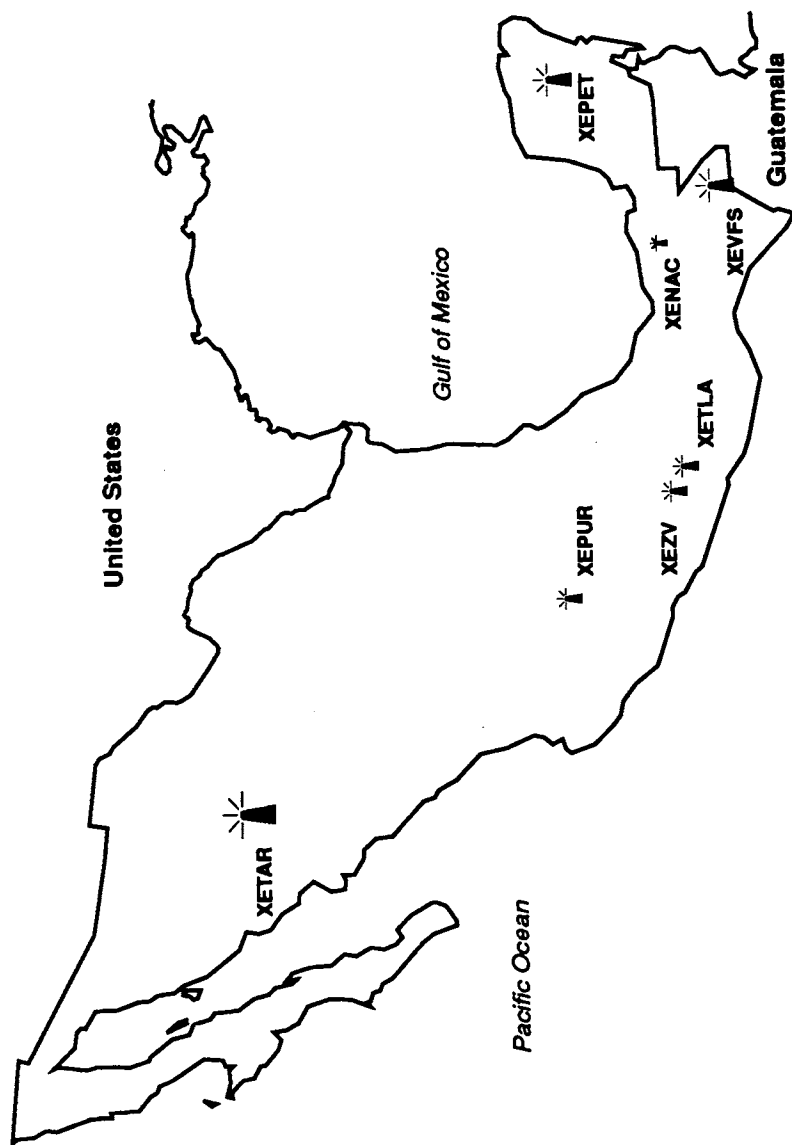


illustration of the potential for ideological struggle, consider the fact that complying with participatory policies, about 70 percent of the staff of the INI network are members of ethnic groups, yet the highest positions are most often held by *ladinos*, members of the Spanish-speaking dominant society. Even though I most often present the stations as sites of on-going ideological struggle and as sites where subalterns create their own uses and practices, this is not to say that the social inequalities imposed by *ladinos* holding the highest positions are always resented by the indigenous staff members. Here, for example, is a statement from an interview with an indigenous staff member implying that *ladinos* have some special, almost magical, leadership qualities that even educated indigenous station employees cannot hope to achieve. He said: "It is better to have a *ladino* as director of the station. Indigenous people can get an education but they cannot develop 'that something' that *ladinos* have. The project would fail if indigenous people were in charge."

Though I explain in more detail the reasons for the selection of the case in Chapter 2, here I should emphasize that I selected the INI radio network, rather than a self-managed station (e.g., the Bolivian miners' radio), because most participatory radio stations in the Third World are not self-managed radio, but are projects sponsored by outside agents, such as government agencies or the Catholic Church. Also, and this is especially important, I was attracted by the manner in which indigenous people have created social uses for the stations. To understand social uses further, consider for example the following quote from an interview with a Tojolabal speaker who implied that the radio is used for reinforcing the sense of community and ethnic identity:

Some rich people [he refers to *ladinos*] would like XEVFS to be closed because they don't like it, because they don't understand Tojolabal, and they don't like it because they don't like for the poor people to have a medium for exchanging experiences. But for us it is very important. Our hearts get happy when we listen to the *marimba sencilla*. XEVFS is different; they speak Tojolabal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil. It's not like the rich people's radio where only *Kastilla* [Spanish] is spoken. XEVFS is different, it's our radio.

In addition, consider the ways in which people use the stations' resources. Some stations have an average of over 200 indigenous visitors per week who may want to transmit their own personal messages over the air, to play music and participate in talk shows, to get a professional recording of their music, or simply to get advice on how to deal with the dominant culture's institutions.

Some critics of the network, such as Roberto Perea de la Cabada, maintain that this kind of participation serves only to legitimize INI's other more questionable, top-to-bottom activities, both in the regions in which the stations operate and in the macro-political arena.¹² And indeed I did find

some evidence that the same processes which make possible indigenous people's use of the station do provide important pay-offs to the project's sponsor, by creating a sometimes false atmosphere of cooperation between indigenous people and the federal government and by helping legitimize other INI's activities. The trade-offs between the Mexican state and the subalterns are quite complex, often contradictory, and important to delineate, but it is also important to recognize that within the context of Mexican media, which is characterized by commercial monopolization and governmental control, the network, even with these flaws, is still a rare and therefore vitally important island of participatory communication. The network offers a great deal of access to its audiences, and it may be legitimately argued that some of the stations have even struggled to realize the great potential of community radio.

Conceptual Blueprint for the Book

This book is composed of three parts. In addition to this introduction, Part One contains the chapter on methodology. Part Two (chapters 3 through 6) deals with the entire network, at both the macro and the micro levels. And Part Three (chapters 7 through 11) is an audience study of one of the stations, Radio Margaritas, plus a chapter with my concluding remarks.

Thematically, the research strategy analyzes the following five domains: (1) the institutional domain, to situate the network in its historical, social, and corporate contexts; (2) the staff domain, to investigate the employees' work practices (i.e., the daily routines of producers, disc jockeys, station director, etc.) and their ideologies; (3) the programming/texts domain, to examine general aspects of transmissions (e.g., percentage of vernacular language vs. Spanish) and to do content analysis of selected programs; (4) the users domain, to document the ways in which local people visiting the station use its material and human resources (e.g., as a local substitute for telephone service); and (5) the listeners domain, to discover patterns of listening, taste, and response to programming.

It is important to note that, as explained in Chapter 2, this research looks at the entire radio network for certain issues, but focuses on only one station, XEVFS, Radio Margaritas, for its audience study. Furthermore, I systematically sampled only one ethnic group (the Tojolabal Maya, the primary target audience of Radio Margaritas) for the reception study. Given funding and time limitations, I decided it was better to focus on reception processes as lived by a single ethnic group than to examine only superficially two or more groups/stations. Thus I conducted a qualitative study of reception (somewhat similar to Morley's studies of television viewing¹³) with a sample of 21 families selected from Colonia Tabasco and Colonia Madero, two Tojolabal villages.