Community media and translocalism in Latin America: cultural production at a Mexican community radio station

Joy E. Hayes

University of Iowa

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717693682
Community media and translocalism in Latin America: Cultural production at a Mexican community radio station

Abstract

This article investigates the role that community media play in the translocal negotiation of local culture in Latin America. Translocal is a concept that captures the way that local cultural producers engage with national and transnational forces in shaping everyday cultural practices. This study focuses on community radio station Ecos de Manantlán in Zapotitlán de Vadillo, Mexico (Radio Zapotitlán) during the years 2006-2012. Radio Zapotitlán is officially categorized as a campesino or agricultural laborer/peasant station, and presents its campesino identity through radio and Internet content. Analyses of that content, along with interviews with station associates and listeners, reveal the complex cultural mediations between local media producers, national regulators and transnational donors. This study investigates the local production of a transnationally-funded radionovela, or radio soap opera, as a window onto the station’s role as a cultural mediator. This article argues that station participants used the radionovela to express local values and meanings, and to marginalize the educational goals of the transnational agency funding the project. Radio Zapotitlán offers a concrete case of cultural negotiation in which local interests engage with – and transform – donor-funded content aimed at the local community.

Introduction

Community media are places where people negotiate the push and pull between local and global, traditional and modern, rootedness and transience that shapes everyday life in Latin America. Community media typically (but not always) operate on a not-for-profit basis outside the bounds of government organizations and commercial markets (Howley...
The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) identifies community media organizations primarily on the basis of community participation, and less on geographical location, ownership, or sources of financial support (AMARC, 2012). Community media often combine old and new media practices – such as radio and the Internet – in order to speak to local, national, and transnational constituencies. Despite being vibrant sites of cultural production and negotiation, community media have long been “blind spot[s] in the cultural analysis of communication” (Howley, 2002: 1). Although landmark studies by Huesca (1995) and Rodríguez (2011) offer key insights into the cultural practices of community media, further cultural analysis is warranted.

Focusing on Radio Zapotitlán in rural Jalisco, Mexico this study takes a closer look at cultural production at a community station, and illuminates the dynamics of translocalism in community media. The concept of translocalism captures the agency of local actors in working with and through transnational agents and networks without necessarily losing their groundedness in local culture (Carpentier, 2007). The case of Radio Zapotitlán, however, shows how local culture is often fundamentally bound up with, and permeated by, national and transnational interests – including the interests of migrant laborers who sustain the local community from afar. This study shows how one community station negotiated the translocal give and take between transnational NGOs, national regulators, local participants, and migrants.

In particular, this study focuses on the production and content of the 2006 radionovela, or radio soap opera, Cortando Sueños (Cutting Dreams). This Entertainment-Education series was written, produced, and performed by local station participants with training and funding provided by New York-based NGO, PCI Media Impact. The PCI Media Impact web site defines Entertainment-Education as, “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes and change overt behavior” (PCI Media Impact, 2016b). Cortando Sueños, which was projected to run at least sixty episodes, used a fictional story about local youth to promote reproductive health and family planning among women aged 12-23. The show’s educational content challenged traditional, Catholic
views about reproduction prevalent in the community, however, and Radio Zapotitlán associates abruptly ended the series after broadcasting only sixteen episodes (Associate 4, personal communication). As a result, Radio Zapotitlán received only part of the funding originally pledged by PCI Media Impact (Project Director, personal communication). The production of Cortando Sueños, then, provides a rich site for examining the clash of interests between local producers and transnational donors.

This investigation contributes to recent scholarship on the political economy of community radio that examines the influence of external donors on community media content and reception. Some scholars interpret this process as the “NGOization” of community radio, whereby transnational NGO’s shape the content and agendas of local stations (Manyozo, 2009; Rennie, 2007: 157). Other studies look more broadly at the political and economic impact of donors – be they local, national or transnational (Ali & Conrad, 2015; Conrad, 2014; Keefer & Khemani, 2011). Conrad’s (2014) study of community media in East Africa shows that stations regularly put donor desires ahead of community interests. As one station manager put it, the station “need[s] funding to survive and so it’s hard to turn down content that comes with money” (Conrad, 2014: 782.) Conrad also cites reports of community members losing interest in the station and taking on “recipient” rather than participant roles because of overwhelming donor involvement (785). Without a viable funding model that protects stations from donor influence, the acquisition of funding may conflict with community goals.

The case of Radio Zapotitlán provides a concrete example of both donor influence and community push-back against that influence. The hybrid text of Cortando Sueños provides a cultural space in which to trace the competing interests of outside donors and station participants. Because PCI Media Impact wanted to increase community buy-in with its population control message, it encouraged locally produced (rather than pre-packaged) content in the case of Cortando Sueños. However, this meant that local station participants gained a greater level of influence over the radio series. Rather than “glocalizing” their message to fit their understanding of local conditions, PCI allowed Radio Zapotitlán participants to engineer a “translocal” text. Translocalism provides a conceptual tool for interpreting the process of local, national, and transnational interaction that ultimately shaped the production of PCI’s Entertainment-Education
project in Zapotitlán. *Cortando Sueños* complicates our understanding of “donor influence” by providing evidence that, in some cases, donor participation promotes a process of cultural negotiation that may empower local voices.

This study investigates how a community station like Radio Zapotitlán mediates complex and competing local, national, and transnational interests in the process of translocal cultural production. First, I examine the specific case of Radio Zapotitlán, situate it within the political economy of Mexican broadcasting, and describe my approach to analyzing station practices and content. Second, I position this study within a larger body of work on community media as sites of cultural production. This section examines the development of community radio in Latin America, and explores the conceptual framework of translocalism and its relevance to the Latin American context. Third, I analyze recordings of the sixteen episodes of *Cortando Sueños* in order to access the discursive negotiation of competing interests concerning the reproductive and domestic lives of local youth. This section provides a close reading of the performance, plot, and language of the series and evaluates Radio Zapotitlán’s role as a medium of translocal culture.

**The Case of Radio Zapotitlán**

*A Campesino Station*

Radio Zapotitlán – XHZV 107.9 FM, Ecos de Manantlán (Echoes of the Sierra) – is located in Zapotitlán de Vadillo, in the west-central state of Jalisco, Mexico. Zapotitlán is located about 190 kilometers due south of Guadalajara. To the west and south of Zapotitlán rises the nearly vertical Sierra de Manantlán mountain range, cutting south-central Jalisco off from the city of Colima and the Pacific Coast. The town sits on the western face of the twin peaks of Nevado de Colima and Volcán de Colima – an active volcano. In addition to its proximity to the volcano, Radio Zapotitlán is also located in an active seismic zone. The station’s broadcast signal reaches the towns of Zapotitlán, Tolimán and San Gabriel and numerous surrounding ranchos (small agricultural communities), giving the station a potential listening audience of over 30,000 people. In the past eight years the station has developed an Internet presence (including a live audio
feed), primarily to connect with the migrant community, which is essential to the livelihood of the station and the town.

Community radio began in Zapotitlán largely in response to its isolated and dangerous environment. A local priest started a radio station after a major volcanic eruption in 2000. The following years saw significant volcanic and seismic activity, and an earthquake killed two people and destroyed many buildings in 2003 (Associates 3 and 4 and Listener 15, personal communication). Despite the need for a local means of communication, the Secretary of Communication and Transportation shut down the unlicensed station, Radio Santa María, and seized its equipment in December 2003 (Calleja & Solis, 2005). In December 2004, through the efforts of local citizens and AMARC Mexico – and with funding from a local migrant – Ecos de Manantlán, A.C. was granted a community broadcasting permit. Radio Zapotitlán was one of eighteen radio stations and media production centers to receive permits in 2004-2005 (Calleja & Solis, 2005). These were the first community stations licensed by the Mexican government since the 1960s.

Of these first community permits, eight went to urban and suburban communities, five went to indigenous communities, and five went to campesino (agricultural laborer/peasant) communities. Radio Zapotitlán was designated as a campesino station. When I asked about this designation, a station associate stated that eighty percent of local residents work in farming and cattle raising, and the area’s migrant labor force also typically does agricultural work for transnational agribusinesses in both the U.S. and Mexico (Associate 4, personal communication). While the term campesino is descriptive of the rural environment and agricultural focus of the Zapotitlán area, it is also a focal point for the translocal negotiation of local culture. Historically, campesinos have been viewed through a nationalist lens as the mestizo peasant roots of the Mexican nation (Boyer, 2003; O’Malley, 1986). Although they were active participants in the Mexican Revolution, campesinos were closely associated with traditional patriarchal values of honor, loyalty, and piety. In some parts of Mexico, including Jalisco, many campesinos supported the Cristero Rebellion of the 1920s, putting traditional Catholicism above the secularization project of the Revolutionary state. Zapotitlán was itself razed during the Cristero conflict (Kelly, 1949; Meyer, 2004). Despite this period of rebellion, by the
1930s the post-Revolutionary state and its cultural allies (particularly national radio networks and cinema) had re-inscribed campesinos into an idyllic nationalist vision of pre-modern harmony and order (O’Malley, 1986). Campesinos, then, stand as icons of Mexican nationalism, at the same time they represent a rural world that was never fully integrated into modern Mexico.

National regulators and transnational NGOs both value Radio Zapotitlán’s campesino identity. As a campesino station, Radio Zapotitlán promotes Mexican national culture and heritage, which supports and justifies the state’s role as a broadcasting regulator. National culture is disseminated primarily through Ranchera music – operatic ballads originating in rural folk traditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ranchera music evokes a world of manly charros (horsemen), rancheros (ranchers) and pious campesinos; and it signals local customs as well as national traditions. In addition, the station’s campesino content provides evidence that the state is fulfilling the requirements of the 2002 Constitution by promoting communication media in rural communities living under similar conditions as Indigenous groups (Calleja & Solis, 2005; C. Romo, personal communication). Radio Zapotitlán’s existence as a campesino station reflects real social and political struggles for the recognition of the needs of rural Mexicans. However, it also reflects the interests of the state in coopting and institutionalizing those struggles.

At the transnational level, Radio Zapotitlán’s campesino identity appeals to NGOs desiring to reach under-served and isolated rural populations. A campesino station offers a unique means of reaching listeners with little access to education about family planning and sexual health. On the other hand, a campesino-identified station with close ties to the Catholic Church might not be a hospitable medium for family planning broadcasts, as became clear in the case of Cortando Sueños.

Radio Zapotitlán’s campesino identity also appeals to the nostalgic desires of locals and migrants to experience a pre-modern world outside of the harsh demands of everyday life. While station broadcasts circulate the aural version of this traditional world, primarily through Ranchera music, the station’s Internet outlets disseminate videos and photographs that similarly idealize a traditional past. In particular, images of Zapotitlán’s imposing Catholic Church, its central plaza, and its stark volcanic peaks present a pristine world of calm and order. Images and audio reports of folkloric
ceremonies and religious holidays also figure prominently in Radio Zapotitlán’s Internet presence. Rather than referring to the lived experience of the rural people of Zapotitlán, the station’s campesino web presence represents an idealized past that cannot be recaptured.

The idyllic rural world constructed in Radio Zapotitlán’s programming and online imagery is also shaped by the dialectic of presence and absence that frames community life in the region. Like many other municipalities and ranchos in Mexico, Zapotitlán cannot economically sustain its population. Historically, most of the population of working age was forced to emigrate to the US or migrate to other parts of Mexico to find jobs. Jalisco was one of the top three Mexican states for emigration to the U.S. from the mid-1960s to the 2000s, although emigration has slowed considerably in recent years for a number of reasons. Today, instead of crossing into the US, residents are likely to move to other parts of Mexico or ride buses for hours a day to work as jornaderos agrícolas (agricultural day laborers) for transnational agribusiness firms growing tomatoes and other crops in the region (Associate, personal communication). As Ramos Rodríguez (2005) observes in the case of another migrant-sending Mexican town, community members must “leave their territory in order to be able to stay on it” – whether those absences are daily, monthly or yearly, long term or short term (160). The need to be absent in order to be present inspires the proliferation of images that represent the local space of Zapotitlán as both idealized and dislocated from everyday, lived experience. In sum, Radio Zapotitlán’s “local” campesino identity is shaped by the push and pull of transnational, national and local forces.

Analytical approach

Martín-Barbero’s (1995) concept of mediations is helpful in conceptualizing communication practices as reaching beyond specific media institutions to resonate with popular cultural discourses about identity, community, and place. This approach reveals the processes of exchange and negotiation through which local citizens make sense of, and use, community media. I do not view Radio Zapotitlán as representative of Mexican community stations as a whole. Rather, I argue that the station provides a window onto cultural mediations that may be similar to those happening at other community stations.
Recent studies examine how people use community media to negotiate their political and cultural status in relation to longstanding and powerful social institutions. For example, a number of studies examine macro-level struggles, such as the fight for regulatory recognition of community broadcasters (Calleja & Solis, 2005; Klinger, 2011; Hintz, 2011; Light, 2011). Others focus on the micro-level mediations between community members and media practices that shape everyday life (Huesca, 1995; López, 2008). For example, Rodriguez (2011) found that the most important impact of community radio stations and media centers in Colombia was to promote meaningful face-to-face interaction between community members (see also Rodriguez, Ferron, Shamas, 2014). She describes a case in which something as simple as a neighborhood Christmas decoration contest promoted by station Radio Andaquí helped to unite a community in the face of endemic violence. In other words, community media support a range of practices that facilitate and mediate the exchange of local voices.

The present study investigates Radio Zapotitlán as a nexus of local cultural mediations surrounding family relations, generational conflicts, and the problem of community in a translocal context. Castells-Talens’s (2010) study of Mayan broadcasting in Mexico provides a model for approaching community stations as cultural mediators. For example, his study shows how the physical space of station XEPET provided an arena for cultivating Mayan nationalism through murals and festivities commemorating the 1847 Maya Rebellion, known as the Caste War. In the words of the station manager, through such celebrations the station offered, “a space where the Maya people demonstrates that it’s a living people working, struggling; that the Maya are not just archeological artifacts” (Castells-Talens, 2010: 266). Similarly, Radio Zapotitlán provides a space for negotiating and mediating competing cultural discourses about the meaning of family, home, and community. And, as with other stations in the region, these mediations often transcend local and national boundaries, encompassing distant colonies of migrants (Darling, 2014; Ramos Rodríguez, 2005).

I access these cultural mediations through a combination of methods. First, I evaluate the political economy of the station and situate it within its unique historical and cultural context. Second, I analyze recordings of sixteen episodes of the radionovela Cortando Sueños. My textual analysis focuses on the primary characters and themes developed in
the program, and on the use of sound and performance to represent the social and cultural space of Zapotitlán. I pay attention to the role that specific language plays in framing the everyday lives of young people – especially their relations with family members and the local community.

In order to interpret Cortando Sueños in its larger cultural context, I draw on interviews conducted in Zapotitlán in 2009, 2010 and 2012. I interviewed senior personnel involved in station programming and operations (referred to here as station associates), along with listeners (some of whom also participated in station productions). I recorded interviews ranging from thirty minutes to an hour with four station associates, including multiple interviews with the station director. I also conducted fifteen anonymous oral interviews with people in the market, plaza, and other environs of Zapotitlán. I estimate that these participants ranged in age from 18 to 65, and were divided about evenly by gender. My analysis of the interviews focuses on how people described their relationship with the station in general, how they understood the station’s role in the local community, and how they interpreted particular dramatic and musical programs in relation to local cultural values. In addition, I analyzed program schedules, web site content, and an interview with the PCI Media Impact program director.

Community Media and Cultural Production

Community media in Latin America

Although Latin America witnessed important innovations in community radio as early as the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that community radio really took off in the region and across the globe. While the Bolivian tin miner stations – numbering 19 stations by 1956 and 23 by the mid-1970s – inspired grassroots broadcasters around the globe, they represented an exceptional case of independent community broadcasting (Huesca, 1995, p 105; O’Connor, 1990). Prior to the 1980s, community radio was limited in most countries by the presence of public service broadcasting monopolies (Europe and most of the developed world), commercial regimes (US and Latin America), or state-controlled broadcasting systems (most of the developing world) (Katz & Wedell, 1977; Hayes, 2015). Due to the rise of social movements, as well as the expansion of transnational NGOs, community radio experienced growth in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in 1972 the Latin American Association of Radio Education (ALER) began
with 18 Catholic radio stations (Lopez, 2008). It was not until the 1980s, however, that public monopoly systems began to break down and Western European countries legalized local, non-commercial stations. In 1983, the rising tide of community broadcasting gained global institutional representation with the creation of the World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC). As liberalization, deregulation, and democratization expanded in the 1990s, citizen participation in community media grew enormously. Although community media still face political and economic barriers, and at times violent opposition, the sector grew in the 2000s both in terms of the number of community stations broadcasting and the number of countries that legalized the service (Mendel, 2015).

In Latin America, the rise of community broadcasting is part of a larger disruption of the long-standing alliance between commercial media and the state brought on by economic crisis and neoliberal reform in the last two decades of the 20th century. Historically this alliance promoted the political interests of each nation’s ruling groups, limited the expression of political opposition, and led to the development of powerful media oligopolies in most countries (Fox & Waisbord, 2002; Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1990). The rise of social movements – particularly indigenous movements – and populist regimes, in response to neoliberalism, also encouraged the expansion of community media (Castells-Talens, 2011; Hintz, 2011; Light, 2011; Murillo, 2003; Otero, 2004; Poblete, 2006). Today, community broadcasters face a broad range of conditions across the region. While both leftist and rightist regimes have opened their doors to community media, other governments remain indifferent or hostile to non-commercial, citizens’ media.

In Mexico, major political changes in the 1990s and 2000s encouraged support for community media. Before that time, the Mexican state tightly limited independent, non-commercial broadcasting, while supporting the expansion of state-affiliated broadcasting stations targeting rural and Indigenous communities. With the Zapatista Rebellion in 1994, economic crisis, and the rise of opposition political parties, popular support for community media grew. The election of Vicente Fox in 2000 – the first opposition party president in over seventy years – was followed by Constitutional reforms aimed at freedom of information and communication in 2002. The spirit of media reform
surrounding the political transition, as well as the government’s ultimate failure to support those reforms, inspired a community radio movement. The Fox government cracked down on illegal stations and started regulatory changes that were favorable to large commercial interests (Alva de la Selva & Esteinou Madrid, 2009). Mexican activists, working through AMARC, sought international intervention to force the state to recognize broadcast rights as human rights outlined in the Constitution and international law. AMARC Mexico petitioned the Inter-American Committee on Human Rights, which pressured the Mexican government to authorize community stations. As discussed above, the first community radio permits were granted in 2004, including one for Radio Zapotitlán station XHZV-FM. Calleja and Solís (2005) provide a detailed, insider’s view of this struggle. Unfortunately, despite this regulatory opening, both commercial broadcasters and the state remain aggressive opponents of community media in Mexico (Klinger, 2011; Hayes, 2012).

As regulatory reforms continued in the 2010s, community broadcasters achieved legal recognition by the state, but remained disadvantaged in terms of access to licenses and financial support. In 2013 a revision of Article 28 of the Mexican Constitution replaced the system of concessions and permits with a new system of concessions. The law established, “four types of concessions for broadcasting service: commercial, public, private and social ‘which includes community and indigenous stations’” (AMARC Mexico, 2014: 12). The law made no provision for support of social use concessions (which were not permitted to sell advertising), and the government moved slowly to assign licenses. In April, 2015 the first concessions for social use were granted. Of the seven granted, four went to indigenous and campesino community broadcasters affiliated with AMARC in the states of Michoacán and Jalisco (Martínez, 2015). As of June 2016, AMARC Mexico listed only 20 affiliated broadcasting stations and 24 affiliated radio production centers (AMARC Mexico, 2016). Radio Zapotitlán received its social use concession in October, 2016.

In Latin America’s current climate of social and political change, community media remain vital resources for imagining and enacting community life. Rodríguez’s (2001) conceptualization of citizens’ media as alternatives to the disempowering and often anti-social content of commercial media is as relevant today as ever. Citizens’ media
empower through program content and through their larger roles as cultural mediators. In Zapotitlán, and many other parts of Latin America, community media are active sites of cultural negotiation and mediation, and thus catalysts for citizens’ meaningful engagement in community life.

**Community media and translocalism**

Although community media in Latin America are defined by the participation of local community members, they must look outside of the local community for financial and technical support. While some exceptions exist and alternative models of radio (like clandestine radio) have a long history in the region, most community stations would cease to operate without the intervention of national government agencies or transnational NGOs in the form of funding, training, equipment and other basic resources (Lopez, 2008; Rennie, 2006). Transnational NGOs have been a part of community media in Latin America since the beginning, and their activities have only increased in the last 25 years. Most community broadcasters receive support from a variety of NGOs, including ALER and AMARC. For example, Radio Tierra in Santiago, Chile is a member of AMARC and has received support for different projects from the Danish organization KULU, the European Union, ALER, Oxfam and the British Council (Poblete, 2006).

Scholars most frequently interpret the expansion of community radio in Latin America, and around the globe, as evidence of a growing transnational civil society. The term “transnational civil society” refers to “self-organized advocacy groups that undertake voluntary collective action across state borders in pursuit of what they deem the wider public interest” (Price, 2003: 580). In this view, community media represent a resurgence of global humanitarian values and promote the “thickening” or “revitalization” of civil society in countries that are still in the process of democratization (Fox, 2007: 55; Howley, 2010; Lopez, 2008; Rennie, 2006; Pavarala and Malik, 2007: 183; Poblete, 2006).

The question of power relations between civil society groups, or between local groups and transnational NGOs, remains largely unaddressed in the literature, however. Only recently have scholars begun to look closely at the influence of external donors on
community media (Ali & Conrad, 2015; Conrad, 2014; Manyozo, 2009). This research raises the concern that transnational funding agencies may gain undue influence over station practices and goals (Rennie, 2006). Alternatively, other scholars invoke the concept of translocal to describe the way that local actors work with and through transnational agents and networks without losing their groundedness in local culture (Lopez, 2008; Carpentier, 2007). As adapted from the field of geography, the concept of translocal captures the idea that the “local” is not static, but rather shifts as identities are negotiated and transformed under new spatial conditions, such as migration (Brickell & Datta, 2011).

This study uses the concept of translocal to describe the interplay of local and global forces in the life of the community. While Radio Zapotitlán is a good example of the local “spreading” or “travelling” with its migrants through music and other media content, the station also broadcasts national and transnational content to local audiences. Carpentier (2007) describes translocalization as the “mirror image” of glocalization (6). Therefore, it is helpful to reexamine Robertson and White’s (2007) notion of glocalization to understand the interconnection of local and global practices. Coming from the world of business, glocalization describes a situation in which the “localization” of global business practices can be an imposition of the global on the local at the same time that it is an adaptation of the global to the local. As Robertson and White put it, the real question, “becomes that of examining the ways in which the relationship between the global and the local is actually undertaken” (62). The same is true of translocalism. That is, the question of whether local actors transform global influences to suit their needs, or vice versa, is an empirical question. This study takes a closer look at some of the specific practices at Radio Zapotitlán in order to identify the dynamic interplay of global and local that constitutes translocal experience.

Analysis

The production context of Cortando Sueños

Funding, training and other support for the 2006 production of Cortando Sueños was provided by PCI Media Impact, a New York-based NGO with a long history of involvement in family planning projects. PCI (Population Communication International)
was an early adopter and developer of the Entertainment-Education strategy of pro-social soap operas pioneered by Miguel Sabido at Televisa in Mexico in the 1970s (Moody, 1995). Ten years after it aired, PCI Media Impact still features several episodes of Cortando Sueños on its web site, and touts the project as a successful example of Entertainment-Education targeting teenagers and pregnant mothers with information about birth control methods, pregnancy, and HIV and AIDS (PCI Media Impact, 2016a).

PCI Media Impact works closely with local educational and media institutions on current projects in more than thirty countries throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, Africa, Asia and the United States. In the case of Cortando Sueños, educators and project supervisors came from universities in Guadalajara to train local participants in radio production. When I interviewed the PCI Media Impact Project Director, who was also a Jalisco native, I asked about the production process. In particular, I asked whether the radionovela had been developed through a process called “story harvest” touted by the PCI Media Impact Communications Director. He described “story harvest” as a process whereby PCI producers, “sit down with members of the community and gather experiences, stories, points of view, perspectives, even language that comes straight out of that community. These things are then inserted into the scripts…” (PCI Media Impact, 2011). Story harvest is based on the idea of taking a “global” message about family planning and “localizing” it through the use of familiar characters, stories, and language.

As it turned out, “story harvest” was not the strategy that PCI Media Impact used in working with Radio Zapotitlán. Instead, the radionovela storyline was written and developed by local participants – the writer was a local woman and production was attributed to jóvenes de Zapotitlán (young people of Zapotitlán) together with station associates (Cortando Sueños, 2006). The PCI Project Director noted that young people played a significant creative role in the series and added their own social concerns to the novela. For example, local teens insisted on adding a storyline about incest to the Cortando Sueños series (Project Director, personal communication).

As noted in the Introduction, although as many as 60 episodes of Cortando Sueños were planned, only 16 were produced because influential members of the local community objected to the family planning content of the series. The following analysis
of *Cortando Sueños* suggest that Radio Zapotitlán associates and local teens involved in the project were ambivalent about the family planning and sexual health messages associated with the program from the beginning. In the sixteen episodes produced, PCI Media Impact’s family planning message was marginalized and distorted in order to focus on social issues of interest to local youth. In particular, *Cortando Sueños* interrogated the dangers faced by children and youth in a community broken by the immorality of migration.\(^7\) My interviews with associates and listeners indicate a generational divide between young people involved with the station and the older associates and listeners aligned with more traditional social interests, including the Church (Associates 1 and 4 and Listeners 12 and 13, personal communication; see also Hayes, 2012). I argue that this divide can also be seen in the production of *Cortando Sueños* – both in what was included and what was excluded from the series.

**Translocal negotiation and the hybrid text**

Focusing on 15-year-old Mariela and her friends, *Cortando Sueños* was framed as a radionovela about the lives of teenagers living in Zapotitlán. Each episode opened with the protagonists, Mariela and Ernesto, speaking in unison and introducing: “una historia que podría ser la tuya…sólo en tus manos está la decisión” (“A story that could be your story…the decision is in your hands”). The first episode opens during the Christmas Fiestas, as Ernesto – like other migrant workers – returns home from the North with money and a nice car. Mariela and Ernesto meet at a public dance, sparks fly, and they begin seeing each other romantically. Ernesto, who is six to ten years older than Mariela, increasingly pressures her to have sex as the weeks go by. He eventually encourages her to get drunk and coerces her into having unprotected sex. Mariela eventually discovers that she is pregnant and must decide what to do as she realizes that Ernesto is not the man she thought he was. Not only is he preying on other young women, but it turns out that he is a married man!

Like other station productions, *Cortando Sueños* celebrated and idealized Zapotitlán’s unique rural locale through the use of sound effects, colloquial language, and nostalgic descriptions of local festivals. The background sounds of roosters, barking dogs, birds and insects (in the evenings) recreate the small-town, rural setting. The use of slang like
escuincle (kid) and cruda (hung over) and rural expressions and intonations similarly establish a “country” setting. When the good-looking Ernesto enters the dance, the announcer says, “Amarren sus pollas, porque el gallo anda suelto” (Tie up your chicks, because the rooster is loose). In addition, the narrator adds an air of nostalgia to the scene with descriptions such as the following:

Terminaron las fiestas de Zapotitlán… Que estuvieran llenas de tradición – las danzas, los viejos, las peregrinaciones, y los toros.
(The Fiestas of Zapotitlán have ended…They were full of tradition – folk dances, the dance of the old men, religious processions, and bull riding.)

This evocative description of the fiestas would have resonated with both local listeners and distant migrants. Such fiestas – focusing on the return of migrant workers – are defining cultural and economic moments for migrant-sending communities.

While the plot followed Ernesto’s pursuit of Mariela and her struggle to deal with an unwanted pregnancy, family planning was not the central focus of the novela. Instead, the novela interrogated the immoral and dangerous conditions that young people faced in a migrant-sending community like Zapotitlán. This happened in two key ways. First, the novela constructed a Manichean worldview in which local residents who migrated to the US were morally bad, while those who stayed, or were left behind, were morally good. This logic was expressed not only in the case of Ernesto and Mariela, but also in the story of Mariela’s family, which provided a window onto the moral landscape of Zapotitlán. Second, the novela marginalized and disempowered “official” messages about family planning and sexually transmitted diseases. Specifically, it weakened and distorted the medical information offered in the novela, thereby diminishing the educational content of the program.

First, despite the dependence of the community on migrant breadwinners, Cortando Sueños represents migrants as irresponsible, irrational, and even threatening to the wellbeing of the local community. For example, Ernesto is represented as an outsider even though he is a native son and his parents still live in Zapotitlán. Mariela’s friend, Gabriel, verbally distances Ernesto from his homeland by referring to him as a “norteñito presumido” (conceited littler northerner). Mariela’s mother is also called to task for going
In one of the program’s more moving scenes, Mariela reads a letter that she is writing to her mother. She tells her mother that she appreciates how hard she is working for the family, but that they would be better off together. She continues,

Te pido por favor que vengas un día. ¡Imagínate, un día! ¿Sería grandioso, no? Mama te necesito, te necesito… ¡No! ¿Pero que estoy haciendo? Si te importaramos vendrías. ¿Qué te harías a ese señor que te preocuparías? ¡Pero no! ¡No sirve de nada!...” (Please come home for one day. Imagine, one day together! It would be great, wouldn’t it? Mama, I need, I need you… No! What am I doing? If we were important to you, you would come back. What are you doing with that man? But no! It’s no use!...)

Mariela tears up the letter in frustration. From her perspective, her mother has done the family more harm than good by going North and leaving them to their own devices. *Cortando Sueños* argues that migrants leave the community both broken and vulnerable to predators – and can even become predators themselves.

Mariela’s personal story, and the narrative trajectory of *Cortando Sueños*, situates the problems of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases within the larger context of broken families and social dysfunction. Mariela lives with her older sister, Ana, and Ana’s young son, Miguelito. Ana is angry and domineering toward Mariela, and neglectful and abusive toward Miguelito. Their father had been absent for some time before their mother left for the US with another man about four years before. Since leaving, their mother has had little contact with her daughters; however, she sends money home to support the family. Shortly after their mother left, their father returned home for a time. Shortly after that, Ana became pregnant. Mariela and the listeners eventually learn that Ana was a victim of incest. As noted above, this was a storyline that local teens who worked on the novela came up with themselves and insisted on including in the program. Ana’s rape at the hands of her father parallels Mariela’s rape at the hands of Ernesto. Both events represent an indictment of the immorality of migration, rather than the promotion of safe sex. In other words, the educational elements required by PCI Media Impact took a back seat to the social problems of concern to station participants.

While the *content* of *Cortando Sueños* marginalized the family planning message, the *form* of the novela did the same thing. One striking aspect of the novela is its use of sound effects to parody the soap opera genre. For example, the ironic use of music,
including “My Heart Will Go On” (the theme to the romantic film *Titanic*) and the “Carmina Burana,” spoofed the romance and passion associated with novelas. Incongruous sound effects, including crashing waves and loud “smooching” sounds, also disrupted audience expectations about the novela genre. On one level, this can be read as the younger generation’s creative play with a program genre that was likely understood as an artifact from their grandparents’ time. These aural disruptions and comedic elements encouraged an ironic engagement with the plot as a whole – and may have made it more appealing to the younger audience. On another level, the irony undercut the serious message of sexual education that PCI Media Impact aimed to convey.

The sound effects used in relation to the specific health messages included in *Cortando Sueños* directly undermined the authority of those messages. Specifically, when the main characters went to the clinic to consult a doctor, his voice was electronically distorted so as to make him sound inhuman (robotic), ridiculous, and isolated from the narrative space of the novela. The doctor’s voice was also sped up so that the medical information he offered was condensed and compartmentalized as something apart from the storyline. In *Cortando Sueños*, the authority of the doctor was called into question by making his voice disconnected and inhuman. At the same time, the doctor’s message about contraception and sexual health was presented as alien and outside the experience of the people of Zapotitlán.

While the producers could marginalize the family planning message early in the series, this became more difficult after Mariela’s unwanted pregnancy was confirmed. In what would become the final episode of the series, Mariela confronted the tragedy and helplessness of her situation when she met Ernesto’s wife, Angelica, face to face. Angelica openly insulted and ridiculed Mariela, and even though Mariela implored Ernesto to intervene, he did nothing. After this encounter, Mariela was forced to face the fact that everything she had with Ernesto was a lie. At that moment of despair, she delivered the final line of the episode (and of the series as a whole): “Quiero abortar!” (“I want an abortion!”)

Mariela’s declaration abruptly ended the series, and Radio Zapotitlán aired no further episodes. The program’s demise following Mariela’s mention of abortion as a solution to her unwanted pregnancy indicates that station associates no longer supported the series.
Indeed, a station associate confirmed that the controversial subject matter led directly to the termination of the series (Associate 4, personal communication.) My analysis suggests that both the younger participants and the older associates lacked support for PCI’s family planning message. Earlier in the series, the producers had either avoided explicit discussions of birth control, abortion and sexual health, or marginalized them as the product of an alien medical authority. The young people producing the series embraced the novela as an opportunity to address social problems they faced as young people in a migrant-sending community. The station associates and director embraced the funding and training that accompanied the series, and welcomed the opportunity for local production and outside recognition. However, once the content became a direct challenge to Church policy – and local custom – regarding pregnancy, women’s rights, and sexual education, they could no longer support the series.

Translocalism captures the process by which community stations attempt to negotiate the push and pull of local, national and transnational interests. While community media are forced to seek aid from outside donors representing potentially foreign values, they attempt to assert their own local values in these same donor-supported cultural productions. Local cultural mediations – the concerns of young people to express their lived experiences and the conservative outlook of older station associates – significantly impacted the NGO-sponsored novela.

Although the production was cut short, Cortando Sueños served the interests of all parties involved to some extent. PCI Media Impact’s message was somewhat diluted, but the NGO still counted the serial as a successful production for prospective donors and collaborators (PCI Media Impact, 2016a). The senior associates at Radio Zapotitlán gained only part of the funding they hoped for, but they produced a series that celebrated the idealized, campesino world that was key to migrant nostalgia, state support, and international recognition. Finally, young participants found a medium in which to explore the immorality of migration that shaped their daily lives, if only for a few short weeks. Although there were limits to locals’ ability to redirect the goals of a transnational media project, they did as much as possible to express local cultural values via the donor-sponsored program. A close reading of Cortando Sueños shows the ways
in which both the form and content of the novela marginalized the transnational goals of PCI Media Impact, and brought local cultural concerns to the forefront.

Conclusion

Radio Zapotitlán provides a rich site for examining the role that community media play as translocal cultural mediators. The concept of translocal describes the way that local actors work with transnational institutions and actors without losing their grounding in local culture. The case of Zapotitlán suggests, however, that local, national, and transnational interests and cultural perspectives are difficult to disentangle. What appear to be local commitments to Ranchera music and campesino traditions, may in fact be the product of national and transnational expectations about, and for, “the local.” An analysis of the local production of a transnationally-funded radio soap opera, Cortando Sueños, reveals that Radio Zapotitlán producers de-emphasized PCI Media Impact’s family planning objectives and developed a focus on the immorality of migration and its negative consequences for young people. Because the station failed to fulfill the NGO’s full requirements, however, the station received only part of the economic support it hoped to get from PCI Media Impact. This case, then, illustrates the degrees of freedom that community media have to address local needs within the larger constraints of their dependence on outside funding.

This study contributes to the cultural analysis of community media and reveals the complex dynamics of cultural negotiation centered around one community radio station in Jalisco, Mexico. Station XHZV-FM, Ecos de Manantlán, is a medium of cultural expression for the people of Zapotitlán, particularly the young people who participate in the station as volunteers and listeners. While stations like Radio Zapotitlán remain deeply dependent on the Mexican state, NGOs, and “absent citizens,” local actors find some space to express their specific – and diverse – cultural visions and values.
References


Corando Sueños (2006) Ecos de Manantlán blog. Sept. 21. Available at:


Rodríguez C (2011) *Citizens’ media against armed conflict: Disrupting violence in Colombia*. Minneapolis, Minn: Univ. of Minn. Press.


**Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by a Stanley-Obermann Grant from the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa and by travel funds from the Latin American Studies Program and Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. I received crucial help from a number of colleagues at various stages of research, including Kristine “La Jefa” Muñoz, Jiyeon Kang, Toni Castells-Talens, Cristina Romo, and anonymous reviewers at MCS. Finally, the generous participation of Zapotitlán community members, and the support of Ignacio González, Jesús González-Hayes, and Alma González-Hayes, made this research possible.
AMARC México is the national branch of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters. It supports, promotes, and advocates for community broadcasting stations in Mexico.

2 The government refused to license any local, independent radio stations from the 1960s-2000s, with the exceptions of Radio Teocelo and Radio Huayacocotla, both started in Veracruz in 1965. See Calleja and Solis, 2005.

3 Radio Zapotitlán’s web presence has varied depending on budget constraints and changing web platforms. Along with its current website (http://www.radiozapotitlan.com.mx) the station has a significant presence on Facebook (https://es-es.facebook.com/XHZVFM) and YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmeyE7pg8uI). Images of Zapotitlán and the radio station can be found in all of these locations as well as blogs (e.g., http://laparotilla.blogspot.com/2006/09/visita-zapotitlan.html).

4 Cave cites a number of reasons for the decrease in immigration: the decline in birth rates in Mexico from about 6.8 per woman in 1970 to 2 per woman in 2011; increased economic and educational opportunities in Mexico; and, to a lesser extent, the increased danger and expense of crossing to the US.

5 The station Director gave me a copy of 16 episodes of the Cortando Sueños series. Several episodes of Cortando Sueños are available on the PCI Media Impact web site under “past productions” (PCI Media Impact, 2016a). The 2006 Annual Report describes Cortando Sueños as a “17-episode program,” however I am only aware of 16 episodes (PCI Media Impact, 2006).

6 Today ALER is an independent non-profit organization with 117 affiliated stations in 17 Latin American countries, using satellite and Internet to interconnect its stations across the region (ALER, 2012).

7 The expression, “immorality of migration,” was suggested by Castells-Talens (A. Castells-Talens, personal communication).