Castro on Robles, 'Mexican Waves: Radio Broadcasting along Mexico's Northern Border, 1930-1950'

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Sonia Robles’s *Mexican Waves* is a well-documented study of Mexican border radio that complements the work of numerous communications scholars and historians who have pieced together the myriad of ways that new electronic communications mediums influenced culture and politics during the first half of the twentieth century. Most prior works on Mexican radio have focused on two subjects—the role of radio in nation-state construction or the “border blaster” stations operated by renegade American medical quacks whom Mexican government officials used to force US interests to relinquish some of their monopoly over clear channel radio frequencies. Robles enriches both topics while giving long overdue attention to Mexican border broadcasters who were not affiliated with hillbilly eccentrics, goat testicle remedies for male sexual impotence, or fake cures for colon cancer. Instead, Robles highlights the role of smaller but important Mexican-operated stations that took advantage of their place on the border to both shape and cater to distinct borderlands communities. These border stations influenced consumption patterns, fueled the growth of regional communities, and also reinforced cultural and political connections between emigrants and the tumultuous nation-state they ventured from. More than any other author to date, Robles demonstrates all the ways that radio was simultaneously regional, national, and transnational.

Robles sets up her chapters to correlate with her arguments. Chapter 1 establishes the setting and foundations for the rest of the book. It discusses the ways and reasons entrepreneurs inaugurated stations in northern Mexico; the communities of potential audience members in northern Mexico and southwestern United States; the establishment of radio laws; and broader government policies geared toward media use, nationalism, and emigration during the postrevolutionary years. The subsequent chapters focus more narrowly. Chapter 2 examines how border station operators lured listeners on both sides of the border. Chapter 3 explores the lives and impact of government auditors or *interventores* from Mexico’s important Secretaria de Comunicaciones Publicas (SCOP), the ministry that oversaw regulating radio as well as highways, telegraphs, and telephones. Chapter 4 looks at the cultural messaging and aspirations of radio stations, artists, and government officials via radio programming but also theater, phonographs, and newspapers. Chapter 5, the last chapter, focuses on Spanish- and English-language commercials and their intended audiences. The first and fourth chapters rely heavily on secondary sources, which Robles uses to contextualize the other chapters constructed predominately from impressive research in the SCOP records in Mexico’s national archives.
Robles’s chapters are full of examples and anecdotes that emphasize the experiences of station owners, listeners, and government auditors. She discusses how Luis Castro began and expanded XEAO, Mexicali’s first commercial radio station. Starting with a small 7.5-watt transmitter built with repurposed World War I parts that he obtained in the United States, Castro successfully obtained concessions to increase his station’s power to 224 watts, allowing him to reach California’s Imperial Valley and also well into Arizona. Castro became an important broadcaster in the region, often defying Mexican laws while simultaneously deepening connections between Mexico and his target audience—Mexican agricultural workers in the US Southwest. Using such examples as the Fred A. Ingram Radio Advertising Company, El Paso’s Chihuahua Restaurant, and Dr. S. M. Cowen’s medical services, Robles demonstrates how Mexican border stations became useful marketing tools for US businesses that were interested in wooing both Spanish- and English-speaking customers. In turn, these businesses provided important revenue for border stations.

Some of the most interesting insights come from Robles’s chapter on the SCOP interventores, though her conclusion that these auditors exemplify the strength of borderland regionalism is somewhat problematic. Scholars have paid scant attention to these government operatives. Robles shows that these auditors rarely acted in unison. “Along the northern border some interventores, like Anacleto Díaz, added caveats to the existing legislation and perpetuated the region’s unbalanced development, unregulated broadcasting activity, and lack of cohesion through extortion.” Yet other auditors “worked diligently and followed the law as close as possible” (p. 73). Tensions abounded. Interventores had to astutely adapt to local circumstances to survive in their intermediary roles. Robles argues that these middlemen display the power of regionalism in radio development along the border, that their need to adapt to local conditions highlights the powerful influence of customs and practices in northern Mexico and the United States and the weakness of the Mexican state radiating out of Mexico City.

Yet Robles acknowledges that some of the SCOP policies, alongside those of other government agencies, were fairly effective, especially considering the circumstances. Most stations did ultimately broadcast some government messaging, and most stations collaborated in campaigns to promote education, to increase tourism, and to reach out to Mexicans living in the United States. The abundance of SCOP materials in the archives itself demonstrates that the central state was active in these border communities, even if SCOP agents often acted in ways different than the SCOP leadership intended. Robles makes a strong case that radio development and culture were unique in northern Mexico, but the evidence she presents also shows that the policies radiating from Mexico City did not go completely unheeded. Instead, government goals sometimes complemented, albeit messily, the commercial interests of the border stations. Broadcasting in northern Mexico helped strengthen transnational, regional border cultures, sometimes in defiance of Mexico City politicos, but also strengthened the reach of the Mexican state when stations collaborated in the spread of cultural nationalism, in political outreach to emigrants, and with an expanding bureaucracy.

Beyond the important contribution that *Mexican Waves* provides through its regional, borderlands focus, the book is also significant because of the new evidence it brings to longstanding arguments about the reach of early Mexican broadcasting in general. When serious studies of Mexican radio became more prevalent in the late 1900s and early 2000s, scholars tiptoed carefully about making bold claims about the reach of radio because of the difficulty of obtaining reliable records about...
listenership. Even when scholars acknowledged that aficionados, commercial operators, and Mexican state officials alike saw the immense potential of radio in creating nation-building programs, they rightfully questioned whether or not the actual reach of broadcasting was substantial. Robles provides more evidence to the mountain of work completed during the past two decades that shows that radio broadcasting was a major component in both the construction of regional associations and the growth of the Mexican nation-state from the 1920s to the 1950s. Mexicans in the United States often bought radios, bringing them back to Mexico and listening to them while abroad. Government officials, intellectuals, artists, unionists, entrepreneurs, and aficionados alike believed that radio was a powerful tool to be wielded in the creation of a new Mexico within a new globalizing world. They all promoted a sense of Mexicandad, even if done for conflicting and varied reasons and in different regional flavors. Far from being inconsequential, radio became powerful quickly, allowing broadcasters and audiences to shape identities in new and profound ways.


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