

J. Justin Castro (2016). *Radio in Revolution. Wireless Technology and State Power in Mexico, 1897-1938*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. 288 pp.

Political power struggles and communication systems have long been closely linked. These ties can be retraced as far back as messengers for political leaders in ancient times and have been the subject of much debate recently in regards to social media and their political implications. *Radio in Revolution* by J. Justin Castro¹ discusses this relationship from the perspective of the use of radio from the end of the Díaz reign to the beginning of the Cárdenas era. The book brings together the analysis of radio as a communication technology, mostly for military purposes, with that of radio as a mass media through broadcasting. By focusing on both, Castro analyzes the role of radio in the process of nation and state building by exploring its potential for military tactics and political control. While presenting radio as a driving force in the revolution and, vice-versa, as being shaped significantly by the revolutionary developments, Castro argues for three claims: “First, that radio technologies were crucial to certain attempts to centralize state power in Mexico during the late Porfiriato. Second, that radio was decisive to the outcome of the Revolution and subsequent plans for solidifying the nation-state. And third, that rebellions during the 1920s pushed government leaders to pursue more authoritarian radio policies and practices that, in turn, helped them consolidate their control” (p. 4).

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The book is structured as six chapters and proceeds chronologically for the most part.

The history starts with the transmission by the Mexican Consul in Rome, G.A. Estava, to Ignacio Mariscal, secretary of foreign relations in Mexico, of news about early radio experiments by Guglielmo Marconi in 1897. In the first chapter, Castro covers the preliminary steps of radio in Mexico in the final years of the 19th century and in the first decade of the 20th century. Besides the Secretary of Communications and Public Work (SCOP), he identifies the military as driving force, as is often the case in the development of new technologies, rightly noted by Castro (p. 41). After some experiments with French technology it was the partnership between the Mexican government and the German company AEG (later Telefunken), starting in 1902, that dominated the first two decades. While at first Veracruz played a central role for experiments with radio because of its port and the import of new technologies, the development later focused particularly on the two peninsulas. As Castro points out, this was mostly for geographical and political reasons. While telegraphy began in Mexico around 1850 and was developed further and further over the following decades, telegraphic lines in hinterlands with difficult geographic features remained a complicated affair. The peninsulas, particularly, continued to lack connection with the center of the country as underwater cable connections were not developed. Politically, the Diaz government was occupied with bringing distant regions under national central control. While in the Yucatan Peninsula Mayan rebellions were threatening these aims, in Baja California the Diaz government feared the American influence, primarily. To counter this influence, the government decided to work with European rather than American technology. Besides these efforts to strengthen the Nation-State, Castro identifies the military's interest in field radio technology as a driving force in the development of Mexican radio (p. 41).

Chapters two and three discuss the use of radio technology during the revolutionary second decade of the twentieth century, with chapter two focusing on the first half and chapter three on the second. As Castro points out, radio became an important tool for military intelligence and the different sides used the technology to transmit orders and tactical decisions (p. 65). The Madero forces used radio in areas where the rebels

sabotaged telegraph wires and special carts served to transport mobile radio technology. The rebel forces also soon started to understand the importance of radio, though they faced greater difficulties in obtaining the technological materials. Radio facilitated the fast circulation of information, but even long before debates about Breaking News culture, it became occasionally evident that “faster news did not mean correct news” (p. 56), as Castro remarks. This was the case when rumors about Madero’s presumed death circulated on February 14th 1913, one week before his actual death. As chapter three shows, foreign policies played a major role in the development of radio technology. While the Huerta government hired a German company to erect a wireless device, aiming to weaken American influence, the rebel forces obtained most of their material from the US. After the Veracruz occupation and the chase of Pancho Villa, the Constitutionalists, now governing the country, were also preoccupied with driving back US influence and procured radio technology from Germany between 1917 and 1919. Germany had a special interest in Mexico as a site from which to spy on the US and to spread German propaganda in Latin America. On their side, US journalists used radio technology to send information from Mexico to the States. Finally, Mexico, with German help, also developed a radio station in El Salvador in order to strengthen its influence in Middle America. This chapter well demonstrates that the Mexican Revolution and World War I contributed to the accelerated development of radio technology for military purposes in Mexico. The number of radio stations rose from 10 to 27 between 1910 and 1920 and, at the end of the decade, more and more international connections were established.

The Obregon years, which are covered in the fourth chapter, are characterized, from a media historical perspective, by the development of radio from a communication technology to a mass medium. Castro highlights the important moment for broadcasting during the centennial celebration and the transmission of musical performances to multiple receivers. Soon, broadcasting also became a commercial factor. Private entrepreneurs, like the Azcarraga brothers with their CYL station started their businesses and contributed to the quick development of commercial radio. After World War I, the European economic influence declined and US expansionism of merchandises, publicity and the very dominant

position of the US in broadcasting became an important concern for the Obregon administration. As Castro highlights, the differences in broadcasting policies became clear at the annual Pan-American meetings, at which the US advertised private capital-driven communication systems, while Mexico and most of the other Latin American states preferred a (more European) mixed system, integrating commercial radio into a strongly state-regulated system (pp. 122-128). As the number of receivers quickly grew, broadcasting also became an important factor in political life, of which politicians were conscious, as the radio interventions of Obregon in 1923 and Calles as a presidential candidate in 1924 have shown. Castro also highlights, that after the Huerta rebellion, the Obregon and later the Calles administrations also favored more authoritarian practices for radio use (p. 106). However, in addition to analyzing the first steps of broadcasting, Castro also emphasizes that radio technology remained an important tool for the military for control, espionage and the oppression of uprisings. For example, radio technology in the form of the radiotelephone became an important tool in the Mexican air force in 1921.

Finally, chapters five and six focus on the Calles, the Maximato and the beginning of the Cardenas eras. While chapter five continues to analyze the military usage of radio at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, chapter six studies the development of broadcasting during the same period. Castro foregrounds that, simultaneous to the development of broadcasting, radio continued to play an important role in the military and for foreign relations. As military equipment was professionalized, radiotelephony and radiotelegraphy increasingly became standard. The increasing professionalization of military communication systems, together with the broadcasting of government-friendly political ideas, contributed significantly to the waning success of the rebellions in the 1920s and 1930s. Rebels were far less equipped with radio technology than were the military and radio became increasingly regulated as demonstrated by the law of 1926, declaring it to be illegal to report news contrary to the security of the state. As the number of radio stations increased significantly, so too did interference problems. This led to US-Mexican negotiations regarding frequencies, with the US largely dominating the market due to its very early development (the first

broadcast, by Reginald A. Fessenden, took place in 1906). In the final chapter, Castro discusses cultural broadcasting. To increase state control in the country, different radio stations were developed to disseminate education and culture, and schools were equipped with radio receivers. Politically, the PNR progressively cemented its power via its radio stations XEO and XEFO. “No antigovernment or anti-PNR operation ever aired long” (p. 186). During the 1930s, radio became a truly mass media and this was essential for the spreading of nationalist ideas. The number of radio receivers grew from 100 000 to 700 000 between 1930 and 1940, while in rural areas lack of electricity was a major issue.

Overall, *Radio in Revolution* is an easily readable and well-documented² history of the links between radio development and politics in Mexico during the first four decades of the last century. Castro manages to analyze both the development of radio as a one-to-one communication technology and, later, the evolution of broadcasting as a one-to-many mass media. The book’s approach to the history of radio in Mexico is mainly political rather than aesthetic, and as a result media content is generally less analyzed. For example, Castro only briefly mentions the range of content, from folk music to educational programs, and does not offer a deeper analysis of the language of broadcasting radio. Additionally, while Castro mentions the fact that the Lumière brothers had already brought cinema to Mexico in 1896 (p. 24), there is relatively little information provided on general media consumption in Mexico at that time, which makes it difficult for the reader to really comprehend the contemporary broadcasting situation in the general media sphere. What is really clear from Castro’s analysis, however, is that radio was a major battlefield of political power, both before and after the initial era of broadcasting. The book is a study of the Mexican Revolution through the lens of radio history and, in this way, highlights some interesting continuities in radio development in this era of constant political change: “a strong state presence, the desire for control, military modernization, the incorporation of electronic wireless communications for centralization schemes, the use of radio to increase nationalism, and the

² Archives consulted include: Archivo General de la Nación (AGN); Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal; Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada; Archivo Histórico de la UNAM (AHUNAM); Centro de Estudios de Historia de México Carso.

advancement of communications with foreign powers. Connecting the frontier territories to the center of the nation remained an especially important goal” (p. 199).