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FEATURE

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REACHING THE LATIN AMERICAN PEASANTS

by SUSANA AMAYA

Thirty years ago, a young priest named Jose Joaquin Salcedo, recently appointed to the parish of Sutatenza, a small village in Boyaca, Colombia, had the idea of communicating with his parishioners by means of a home-made 100 watt radio transmitter. He installed three battery-operated receivers in strategically located homes in the Sutatenza Valley, and there the people met and marvelled at hearing the priest's familiar voice coming to them from such a great distance.

Thus began the most powerful educational radio system in existence today in Latin America. Mass Cultural Action (ACPO), or Radio Sutatenza as it is better known, controls an impressive national network that reaches as far afield as Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama and Peru. In 30 years, it has offered literacy classes, training for farm and household work, religious and civic instruction and above all, a system that exists exclusively for the use of the peasant peoples within a society that otherwise denies them the opportunities available to other citizens.

To many observers, the rapid advance of this system is due to the fact that it is the only means of bringing permanent education to the rural masses. Most of the 100 million Latin American peasants in fact can never receive the benefits of formal education and UNESCO data show that less than five percent of all rural inhabitants complete primary school. Radio has proven a viable and acceptable educational system, as much for the people themselves as for the national and international organizations involved.

In Bolivia, for instance, 3 million of the country's 4.7 million inhabitants are illiterate: 40 percent do not speak Spanish and 30 percent speak Spanish only as a second language. Most of the rural population lives isolated and on the fringe of the formal education system. ERBOL, the

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Bolivian Radiophonic Schools, was created nine years ago by the directors of five Catholic Church stations. Later, four other affiliates were incorporated to constitute a loosely integrated network aimed primarily at improving knowledge in agriculture and health and integrating the rural population into national life by means of literacy and language.

By 1975 ERBOL included 1060 listening groups in rural, urban and suburban areas, with 13 000 participants coordinated by voluntary workers and served by 153 employees. Local leaders or broadcasting aides who come from the communities take short courses on educational broadcasting methods as well as subjects like agriculture, health, cooperatives and Bolivian law. Their role is to assist the groups of students who gather in community centres, schools or sports clubs to listen, learn and discuss.

A year-long analysis of Bolivian educational broadcasting, begun early in 1976 by the Bolivian Catholic University, concludes that in spite of some deficiencies, the service provided by ERBOL is of considerable significance in the education of the Bolivian adult. The awakening of a critical consciousness is reflected on the community level in the formation of cooperatives, mothers' clubs and community action groups and in environmental improvements.

A different experimental program has been launched in Uruguay, a country whose economic, geographical and cultural conditions differ markedly from those of Colombia and Bolivia. Run by the Department of Communications of the Institute for Uruguayan Socio-Economic Development (IFPRU), the two-way communication project is jointly supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre and the Inter-American Foundation. Its goal is to explore the possibilities of the cassette tape recorder as an instrument of communication for rural development. A similar approach has been used with radio in Canada, India, Ghana and recently in Tanzania.

Participants meet and listen to a program recorded on a cassette, discuss the topic presented, and then try to adapt the suggestions to their own communities and cooperatives. At present 12 groups belonging to a central cooperative take part in the experiment, each with its own trained coordinator. Each group meets regularly for a producers' roundtable and to hear recorded programs on aspects of their cooperative organization. Answers are recorded on the same tape and returned to the central broadcaster who includes them in the next message to all groups.

After three months and five tapes sent out and returned, the system is proving effective: the feedback has been rapid and active. Those in charge of the experiment hope very soon not to need to intervene in the selection of topics and content, and, in fact, most of the topics already come from the participants themselves.

Thirty-six such educational radio services now operate in 17 Latin American countries. But, in spite of their flourishing growth, and more than 30 research projects focussed on assessing their effectiveness as an educational alternative for adults, it is still too early to form definite conclusions. Some suggest that educational radio produces higher academic achievement than the conventional system, at half the cost per student, and is important as an agent of personal and community change.

A survey of these research projects, carried out by ALER (the Latin American Association for Educational Radio) with the help of an IDRC grant, does point out many similar aims and methods followed in educational broadcasting. It also shows that radio is as effective as other mass interpersonal media in producing learning, and that, complemented by written materials, it can be as effective as a formal teacher or an educational television system. Given the difficult conditions of the rural Latin American environment, the use of electronic media and of group communication techniques represent perhaps the fastest and most economical solution available to these countries.

If it is as yet impossible to be conclusive, it is certain that educational radio has a strong future in rural Latin America. It is so far the only system that has been able to overcome the physical and cultural isolation of the Latin American peasant.

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