



Research Article

Constructing a suitable platform for public health: Radio propaganda, instruction, and “The case of Elisa Cedillo”

The Mexican government communicated public health information in the early 20th century during radio programs dedicated to women. Turning to a platform committed to instruction and cultural programming, it publicized health education bulletins, which were sandwiched between weather reports and on-air cooking classes. These daily reports offered practical advice and information on proper hygiene and diseases, which gave the government credibility to dispel misinformation campaigns when necessary. The frequency of the broadcasts, moreover, was a reminder that health was an important aspect of everyday life.

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Research questions

- How did a government of a Global South country use mass media to disseminate state propaganda, challenge misinformation, and share public health information?
- What is an effective way for state media agencies to share community health information?

Essay summary

- In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Mexican government used radio to advance state ideology and to counteract misinformation. The most effective way that it shared public health information was inviting doctors to speak on the radio in a consistent, storytelling format.
- Governments need effective channels to communicate with their population. Without reliable platforms, facts and scientific information are at risk of being misconstrued or becoming targets of misinformation campaigns. Fighting misinformation with facts over the airwaves, moreover, is not enough. Disseminating public health information requires planning and adhering to an effective formula. Thus, when governments need to share important health-related information, such as the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, they can be heard, believed, and their recommendations can lead to direct action.

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- The evidence used to support this thesis includes official data from two Mexican government agencies, the Secretaría de Educación Pública or SEP (Mexico's Ministry of Public Education) and the Departamento de Salubridad Pública or DSP (Public Health Department). The methodology employed involved document analysis of archival sources and newspapers.

Implications

For eleven years radio station XFX was a vehicle used by the Mexican government to deliver state propaganda, public health information, and to challenge misinformation. Inaugurated in 1924, XFX was managed by the Secretaría de Educación Pública or SEP, Mexico's Ministry of Public Education. The station emerged during a time when the Mexican government labored to establish its legitimacy once the armed phase of the Revolution (1910–1920) had ended. The government centralized power by establishing new institutions and, after 1929, joined forces with the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), Mexico's authoritarian political party for more than seven decades (Camp, 1996). These political actions were facilitated by existing and emerging mass media (Hayes, 2000; Castro, 2016). New technologies, particularly radio broadcasting, offered the government previously unimaginable opportunities to diffuse state ideologies and propaganda, and to make direct contact with people, near and far.

Radio programs and cinema were part of an emergent nationwide cultural crusade committed to overhauling the educational system (Gudiño Cejudo, 2016). The ambitious campaign focused on secularizing the curriculum, training teachers, enrolling children in school, and constructing brick and mortar buildings. Schools were sites where politics and state ideology were debated, contested, and reconfigured (Vaughan, 1997).

Each week between 1925 and 1936, XFX programming included weather reports, women's advice shows, courses on a wide range of topics including proper cooking techniques, sewing, drawing, crafts, and languages (French and English), children's educational entertainment, political speeches, musical programs, concerts, and public health talks. Daily community health dispatches were elements of station programming starting from 1924. Often, they underscored that taking direct action, such as consulting a doctor, was a patriotic thing to do, as it would make a difference for Mexico's future. More importantly, though, these bulletins followed a formula: They featured a male authority figure who narrated a captivating story.

One example of a bulletin that followed this method is "The Case of Elisa Cedillo," which was a rabies prevention health talk broadcast over XFX on Monday, November 9, 1930. The two-page communiqué was read live over the air by a doctor from 8:05 to 8:10 p.m. Before dying from rabies-related health complications, Elisa Cedillo has been a healthy teenager from Mexico City who did not realize that contracting a bite from a small dog would lead to the end of her life. By the time the wound generated symptoms associated with rabies and Ms. Cedillo turned to health specialists, there was no remedy for her condition. She passed away days later. The five-minute health bulletin used Cedillo's tragic story to clarify misinformation about rabies, instruct listeners on the importance of vaccinating dogs, and made recommendations on forming appropriate bonds with pets. Thus, it was in line with the blueprint created by XFX to counter rumors and inform listeners in rural and urban Mexico. By carefully using a contemporary and shocking news story that terrified the nation and ensuring that the account was told by a voice of authority, XFX shared public health information effectively.

Public health education in Mexico benefitted from the collaboration between the SEP and the Departamento de Salubridad Pública or DSP (Public Health Department). The DSP shared health information and disease prevention data with educators working in urban and rural schools. It also aided XFX by asking doctors to write the health bulletins and directing them to appear live at the radio station.

Using a male voice to fight misinformation was shrewd, as men's voices echoed paternalistic authority figures in the everyday lives of XFX listeners. Putting men behind the microphone was also a powerful strategy because it reinforced patriarchal society, especially when doctors reminded listeners that they were sources of authority and the only ones capable of diagnosing diseases (Hilmes & Loviglio, 2002). Replacing the paternalistic voice of a Catholic Church authority figure with that of a public health professional, moreover, followed the directives of national secular education and censorship of the airwaves. By the mid-1930s, efforts to disseminate public health information from XFX headquarters in Mexico City to rural communities fell short. Campaigns to outfit schools outside of the capital with radio receivers failed, proving that a growing number of listeners preferred commercial radio programming and popular music over educational broadcasting (Hayes, 2006). Furthermore, privately funded commercial radio stations modernized their technology and fine-tuned their transmissions.

Governments require reliable and trustworthy platforms to make immediate contact with their population. During emergencies or national public health campaigns, such as earthquakes or vaccination distribution campaigns, it is critical that they communicate quickly to as many people as possible, as lives are on the line. I argue that governments are effective when they share public health information if they focus less on offering a barrage of facts and more on educating the public through a story told by a male authority figure over a trusted platform. One recommendation is for state media agencies to integrate storytelling in public health education campaigns. Dismantling health-related rumors and educating the public is possible, furthermore, when attention is given to the time and frequency in which the bulletins appear over state media platforms. "The Case of Elisa Cedillo" was one of hundreds of reports read each year over XFX, yet public health information was a feature of weekly radio programming in Mexico since the implementation of wireless radio broadcasting in the early 1920s. Consistency gives the propaganda message importance and underscores its value, both to the government and—hopefully—to its people.

Evidence

For eleven years station XFX consistently broadcast public health bulletins. The evidence collected to support this claim was selected from two official sources published between 1925 and 1936: *Boletines* and *Memorias* of the Ministry of Public Education. The available *Boletines* provided information and listener reports from 1925 to 1931, and the *Memorias* from 1931 to 1936.

Boletines are monthly reports generated by the head or leader of each department within the SEP. Over the eleven years under review, these units included but were not limited to: primary and secondary education, fine arts, archaeology, statistics, rural education, cultural missions, administration, and radio education. *Boletines* offer an in-depth look into monthly programming by listing the topics health educators chose to broadcast about, and often included the script that was read over the airwaves. For example, between January 25 and 31, 1931, doctors from the DSP offered two conferences on hand washing (how to properly wash your hands and why it is necessary), one on oral hygiene, and three on the effects of alcohol on the body. Sometimes, *Boletines* included correspondence from radio listeners. The SEP measured the effectiveness of its programming and the strength and technical capabilities of its transmitter by archiving listener reports from Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, and a handful of countries in Europe. Since 1925, when the radio office began to collect this data, XFX managers published a handful of reports, such as a letter from Gilberto E. Román of Oaxaca, Mexico, who noted that the conference he tuned into had been "instructive and delightful" (*Boletín*, April, 1925).

A second feature of *Boletines* is that they list the times of the day when public health reports were on the air. Between 1925 and 1931 there was always at least a five-minute segment for health and hygiene over the radio between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., the time allocated to housewives and mothers. By 1931, public health bulletins were read twice a day, once in the morning during the women's education slot and

once in the afternoon through a conference by a DSP doctor. As sources of evidence, a third feature revealed in the *Boletines* was the number of health education programs XFX broadcast each month in comparison to those dedicated to other topics. While this information was always reported, the format in which the radio office described its data varied over time. Sometimes it was presented by listing the number of hours XFX dedicated to health and hygiene programs. On other occasions, the station listed the number of days in a week that XFX featured public health programming. In 1925, for instance, doctors offered public health conferences six days a week. In 1926 XFX aired hygiene and beauty advice three times a week between 12:00 and 12:15 p.m. By 1927 the station reported that out of 72 total transmissions in the month of June, 25 were focused on instruction, which included hygiene. In the following year, 24 out of 63 total conferences during April were about public health and hygiene.

Memorias are different from *Boletines* in two ways. First, they were compiled by the Minister of Public Education instead of by each department head. Second, because they were generated on a yearly basis for the annual state of the union address, they included broad summaries of the activities of each department within the agency. Thus, they seldom include correspondence from listeners, for example, or transcripts of radio programs. *Memorias* provide the official history of the Ministry, which is useful since public health education was restructured by the government after the Revolution. These interpretations reiterate that public health priorities reflected the hopes and wishes of the one-party government (Soto Laveaga & Agostoni, 2011).

Public health education bulletins followed a particular storytelling style, which helped build trust between the government and society. The third body of evidence used were transcriptions and correspondence between doctors and medical professionals of the Department of Public Health and the manager of the radio station. Doctors were required to submit the transcripts of their health talks and conferences prior to the radio program. When available, these sources indicate the name of the medic as well as the date and time the report was read over XFX. The final source used to ascertain whether or not XFX went on air and broadcast the programming it claimed it did were Mexico City newspapers, which corroborate the official archival sources.

Methods

The first research question concerned understanding how Mexico used new media to disseminate state propaganda, inform the public, and challenge misinformation. Addressing this question required analyzing historical monographs on Mexican politics, public health, and communications/mass media technology. Exploring and understanding the historical context in which public health bulletins were created was critical because they were broadcast at the intersection of three forces in the first decades of the twentieth century: new wireless media technologies, government centralization, and the beginning of a significant rural to urban migration following the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution. An overview of the official archival data included in the years under review, 1925 to 1936, was also needed. It became a suitable way to understand the propaganda the station chose to air. The information collected for the *Memorias* and *Boletines*, which includes listener reports and an official account from the Ministry of Public Education, proved crucial.

In order to address the second research question, which concerns finding the most appropriate way to share public health information, I focused on the history of XFX and the efforts of its managers to integrate bulletins into the daily programming schedule since the early 1920s. These dispatches, which followed a particular narrative style, told stories to dispel misinformation, emphasized personal responsibility, and highlighted the benefits of health and the risks of contracting diseases. Document analysis revealed the number of times listeners heard a doctor on a weekly basis share community health information. The "Case of Elisa Cedillo," for instance, was one way for the public to comprehend that a

dog bite could lead to serious disease or, perhaps, death. Understanding a country requires an examination of the ways its government communicates with its population. What is told is vital. How it is told, over which medium, when, and how often, is just as important.

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Ethics

N/A

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Data availability

N/A