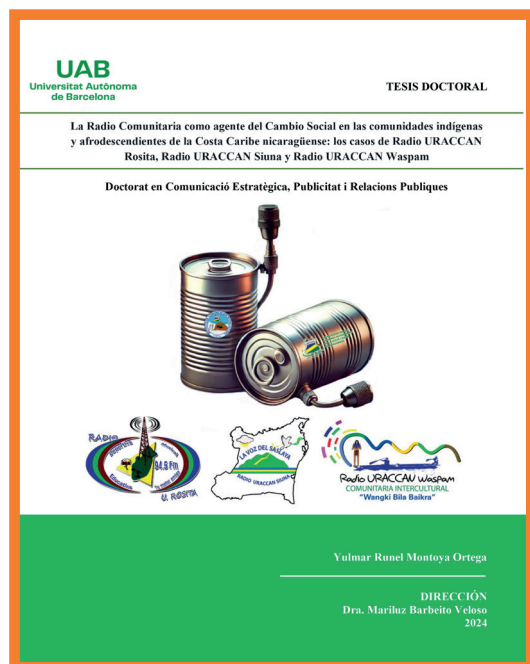# Voices as visuals: a review of community radio as a graphic communication tool for intercultural social change
*Veus en imatges: una revisió de la ràdio comunitària com a eina de comunicació gràfica per al canvi social intercultural*

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## Abstract
This review examines Montoya Ortega's dissertation on the transformative role of community radio among Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Nicaragua. Based on three URACCAN radio stations, it shows how campaigns on health, land rights, and identity enhance strategic and participatory communication. Using a mixed-methods approach, it traces the relationship between civic action, culture, and identity. The study offers graphic communicators and public service communicators valuable tools for designing social change, revealing how sound, rhythm, and collective memory can generate new forms of visual narrative.

## Keywords
Community radio; graphic communication; intercultural media, social change; visual storytelling

## Resum
Aquesta revisió analitza la tesi de Montoya Ortega sobre el paper transformador de la ràdio comunitària a les comunitats indígenes i afrodescendents de Nicaragua. Basada en tres emissores de l'URACCAN, mostra com les campanyes sobre salut, drets territorials i identitat milloren la comunicació estratègica i la narrative participativa. Amb un mètode mixt, traça la relació entre acció cívica, cultura i identitat. L'estudi ofereix als comunicadors gràfics i anunciants eines valuoses per al disseny del canvi social, revelant com el so, el ritme i la memòria col·lectiva poden generar noves formes de narrativa visual.

## Paraules clau
Ràdio comunitària; comunicació gràfica; mitjans interculturals; canvi social; narrativa visual

## RESEÑA pp. 39_42

INTRODUCTION

Research on the crossroads between community radio, communication, cultural identity, empowerment, and social justice especially within indigenous multicultural communities has been a major area of interest among scholars (Verma et al., 2025; Rimmer, 2020; Barlow & Johnson, 2008).

Montoya Ortega's (2025) Ph.D. thesis examines these intersections by assessing the effort of three community radios—Radio URACCAN Rosita, Siuna, and Waspam—towards initiating social change among Nicaragua's Afro-descendants and indigenous peoples. Although his study is focused on community radio, its relevance is not limited to broadcast communication scholars but essential for those of us committed to graphic communication and advertising.

The thesis frames community radio not only as a means of broadcast but also as a cultural tool that can be used for visual storytelling—where voices, identities, and messages are used as collective strategies to inform, persuade, and raise awareness among the masses. For graphic communicators and the broader field of visual communicators, Montoya Ortega's thesis challenges us to rethink how non-visual media can, in fact, construct long-term visual images in the shared imagination of marginalized communities.

DEVELOPMENT

Montoya Ortega puts forth a key question: How can community media be agents of structural change in multiethnic, marginalized communities? He grounds his response to the question in the lived experiences of Nicaragua's Indigenous and Afro-descendant Atlantic Coast population, highlighting the socially constructed systems of exclusion that persists despite legislative autonomy statutes and constitutional guarantees (Montoya Ortega, 2025, pp. 1–4). From a graphic communications perspective, however, we can add that the activities of the three community radio stations investigated in the thesis can be perceived beyond mere broadcasting efforts; and rather branded as visual platforms in disguise. This is so because, the campaigns led by these radio stations—from COVID-19 health alerts to peace messages amid land conflicts— as identified by Montoya Ortega, tend to construct impactful visual stories. For example, when a radio jingle promotes intercultural health practices, it does more than disseminate information; it asserts the legitimacy of ancestral medicine within a state system that that routinely overlooks it. This is strategic communication at its most intimate.

*Methodological Soundness*

The thesis applies a rigorous methodological approach by merging ethnographic techniques (participant observation, interviews) with quantitative content analysis to draw a vivid picture of the media as an agent of social change in Nicaragua. The research is strengthened by solid empirical grounding and precise operationalization of key indicators such as health, education, and territorial identity within radio programming. Montoya Ortega's strongest contribution, however, is interpretive: he claims that these radio stations are instruments of "development with identity" (URACCAN, 2021, p. 12)—a notion that resonates with designers' commitment to user-centered (Brown, 2009; *Overview – Design Challenge*, 2025), culturally-grounded communication (Escobar, 2018; Krippendorff, 2006).

*Strength of Arguments*

The key argument of Montoya's study—that radio communities serve as catalysts for social change—is well substantiated. The thesis has unequivocal evidence that URACCAN radio stations are not only sources of information but also tools for civic action, cultural maintenance, and right activism. Intercultural health campaigns, education of indigenous people, and the right to land show how communication is organized for collective action. However, while the study convincingly demonstrates the potential of community media, it leaves a gap in the critical examination of structural limitations. For instance, political interference, sustainability of community radio, and women's participation are noted but not examined. Future studies from the perspective of graphic communication can be used in exploring these gaps more intensely.

Montoya Ortega goes on to theorize that the airwaves are saturated with music programs (p. 355). However, within these musical interludes there are hidden pedagogies— songs in Indige-

nous languages that address land ownership, advocacy, and cultural identity. For researchers in graphic communication, especially those interested in public service advertising, these encoded hidden messages reveal something about how education, counter-hegemony, and cultural affirmation can be subtly woven into entertainment media. Montoya's work, therefore, sets the stage for us to perceive community radio communications as graphic pieces with encoded rhythmic messages.

Furthermore, the thesis positions community radio in wider historical and philosophical perspectives—from Marxist theories of agency to Bourdieu's field theory and Weber's focus on action and meaning (Montoya Ortega, 2025, Ch. 2–3). This places the practice of communication in the context of power, history, and social change. For graphic communicators, it serves as a reminder that our designs can shape, reinforce, or challenge social constructs.

Drawing on García-García (2013) and Bosch (2014), Montoya Ortega suggests that community radio promotes interculturality through dialogic participation. This point resonates with us as graphic communicators, as it translates into co-creation—participatory visual cultures where audiences are collaborators, not consumers.

CONCLUSION

Montoya Ortega's thesis serves as a relevant and timely work in communication for development, intercultural media studies, and Latin American sociology. The study provides a logically structured, theory-guided, and empirically rich explanation of the way community media drive social change.

Beyond Nicaragua, the research has the potential to be a model for similar research in other rich cultural environments. Besides improving academic writing, the research also holds implications for media practitioners, development agencies, and policymakers interested in designing media-driven social interventions in multicultural societies.

In the case of graphic communicators, public service advertisers, and strategic communicators, Montoya Ortega's thesis serves as a reminder that good design is not always about pixels or brands. Sometimes it's a voice, a song, or a story, that requires a listening audience.

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