Chapter 23

From the Sandinista revolution to telenovelas: the case of *Puntos de Encuentro*

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Every two months María Castillo and Esperancita Núñez cover the long dis-
tance between their cities and Managua, the national capital. María travels south,
from Chinandega near the Honduran border; her journey begins when she rides
a bus for 120 kilometers to the capital. Esperancita travels north, from Rivas, near
the border with Costa Rica; although only 100 kilometers, her trek can take much
longer, due to the frequent impassable conditions of the road.

      The city's busy streets welcome María and Esperancita with the swel-
tering, sticky noise of a million Nicas trying to navigate buses, bicycles, and horse-
pulled carts. The two women find their way to *Puntos de Encuentro* (*Puntos*), a
feminist non-governmental organization (NGO) where *La Boletina*[1] is published
four times a year since 1991 (*Puntos de Encuentro* 1997b, 4). Their journey's
objective is to pick up bundles of the recently published new issue of *La Boletina*,
a magazine designed to support and strengthen Nicaragua's women's move-
ments. María packs her bundles into a taxi and heads for the station where, with
some help from the driver, she loads them in the bus for their return to
Chinandega. Once there, *La Boletina* will be distributed for free to dozens of
other NGOs, women's organizations, and collectives. Esperancita will do the same
in the southern region. These two women are part of a network of twenty
women who come to Managua from the departmental capitals throughout the

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1 *La Boletina* is a play of words on the Spanish word for "newsletter", which is "boletín", always in the
masculine.

national territory to collect twenty-six thousand issues of *La Boletina* to be distributed to 500 organizations in the country.

Each issue of *La Boletina* contains numerous sections, articles, and announcements by women's organizations and collectives different from *Puntos*. More than *Puntos*' organizational newsletter, *La Boletina* is a magazine made available to Nicaragua's progressive social movements by *Puntos*. Using *La Boletina* as their communication vehicle, social movements can move various issues into public arenas, from gender roles and homophobia to hierarchical relationships between adults and youth. *La Boletina* illustrates well the communication for social change style of *Puntos de Encuentro*. Like *La Boletina*, *Puntos de Encuentro*'s communication initiatives are deeply connected with Nicaraguan progressive social movements. Also, like *La Boletina*, the goal of *Puntos de Encuentro* is to break into Nicaraguan contemporary cultural fabric with alternative proposals. In the following pages I intend to document the exceptional work of *Puntos de Encuentro* in the area of communication for social change.

Puntos de Encuentro can easily be classified as an entertainment-education (E-E) NGO. *Puntos* is a non-profit organization that produces entertainment media to effect change in Nicaragua's society; *Puntos* conducts fomative and summative research and evaluation in order to design and assess communication processes; *Puntos* carefully designs fictional characters and plots that address problematic health and lifestyle issues. Thus, at first sight, *Puntos* follows step by step the procedures generally described as essential to the communication strategy labeled entertainment-education (Singhal et al, 2004; Papa et al, 2000; Singhal and Rogers, 2002; Singhal and Rogers, 1999; Nariman, 1993). However, in the following pages I intend to demonstrate how, at the level of its communication approach, *Puntos de Encuentro* differs from traditional E-E. I want to propose that if we limit the analysis to the description of communication strategies and research methodologies, the work of an organization such as *Puntos* will fit the formulas of traditional E-E. However, if we delve into philosophical foundations around issues of communication, culture, and social change, *Puntos*' project comes into view with all its distinctiveness.

The goal of this chapter is twofold: first, to document the history of *Puntos de Encuentro* as a communication for social change non-governmental organization of the global south; and, second, to analyze *Puntos de Encuentro*'s philosophical approach to communication, culture, and social change.

Puntos is born out of a sense of malaise

In 1979 the Sandinista revolution swept through Nicaragua and transformed the social, political, and cultural fabric of this nation with the force of a hurricane. The revolution, led by the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), was itself a hybrid of socialist agendas, progressive Catholicism, popular culture, and fascinating class alliances. After the triumph of the Sandinistas in 1979, Nicaraguans,

together with thousands of foreigners[2] who had converged in the country to be a part of this utopian society still to be designed, rolled up their sleeves and proceeded to re-invent the entire social fabric, from a half socialized, half capitalist mixed economy, to a Ministry of Culture led by a Jesuit priest whose main goal was to make a poet of every Nicaraguan[3].

Finding themselves the center of this turmoil, three women, Ana Criquillion, Vilma Castillo, and Olga María Espinoza, experienced the complexity of implementing a utopia in reality. As with many other Nicaraguans, they found that the progressive, egalitarian agendas of Sandinista ideology clashed with the oppressive, authoritarian, and even dictatorial everyday practices embodied by Sandinistas themselves in their interpersonal relations. These women found that one thing was to believe in an abstract utopia, but that the challenge to implement it in the quotidian was a much more difficult task. While many Nicaraguans succumbed to the sense of malaise provoked by a revolution that had been unable to dissolve oppressive everyday cultural practices, these three women decided to re-direct their work toward the transformation of everyday life: "Our interest in transforming power relations in daily life arose of not wanting [the revolution] to remain an abstract idea but to be embodied in the ways we interact" (quoted in Hernández and Campanile, 2000: 2).

From these personal herstories rose the need to create an institution able to crystallize the utopia of a quotidian practice free of hierarchical and oppressive power relationships. This is the origin, in 1991, of *Puntos de Encuentro* (literally Meeting Points and figuratively Common Ground). *Puntos*' slogan is "para transformar la vida cotidiana", or "to transform daily life". *Puntos de Encuentro* was created as "a feminist social change organization dedicated to promote individual and collective autonomy and empowerment of young people and women" (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 1997b: 1). *Puntos* defines its mission in the following terms: "to promote equal rights and opportunities for everyone regardless of age, sex, class, race, sexual orientation, physical or mental disability and any other social condition. We believe that no condition should be the source of discrimination or oppression, and that the different oppressions are interrelated and must be addressed as such in order to combat the structural injustices and violence in our society" (*Puntos de Encuentro,* 1997b: 1).

2 According to Minter (2002), "hundreds of U.S. citizens worked in Nicaragua as internacionalistas for extended periods, and tens of thousands more visited on short-term solidarity visits. Church networks and sister city programs proliferated, with many being sustained into the 1990s and the current era, long after the FSLN's electoral defeat" (18). This is an important piece of data since Amy Bank, one of the earliest members of *Puntos* and current co-director, came from her native California to help build revolutionary Nicaragua.

3 From 1979 to 1988 a Roman Catholic priest –Ernesto Cardenal– became Nicaragua's minister of Culture. Cardenal believed that, given the opportunity, every human being could produce art. During his ministry, hundreds of poetry workshops were offered even in the most isolated provinces; the result was an exceptional movement of popular poetry written by peasants, farmers, children, the elderly. Cardenal's office at the time was a bathroom in the mansion of former dictator Anastasio Somoza's mistress, (for more on the Sandinista revolution see Walker, 1985. For more on Cardenal's approach to culture see Ministerio de Cultura, 1982 and Dore, 1985).

Puntos de Encuentro: not just another NGO

Puntos de Encuentro emerges from the realization that, in Foucault's words, power is capillary (Foucault, 1972, 1978). According to Foucault, power, or the force to shape the environment according to one's desire, operates not only at the levels of authorities, public arenas, and politicians, but more importantly at the level of everyday life. That is, hierarchies determining inclusions and exclusions are created and maintained by thousands of human interactions performed in everyday life. The hierarchy man/woman, for example, is maintained by minute "common sense" interactions, such as a man opening the door for the woman, deciding when they're going to have sex, or hitting her when she doesn't "behave."

From its origin, *Puntos de Encuentro* assumed an approach to social change based on the need to question and to transform everyday life interaction that legitimizes oppressive power hierarchies. The everyday, the quotidian, became *Puntos*' arena of struggle.

One of the features that makes *Puntos de Encuentro* unique is its founders' goal to create an institution that attempts to practice what it preaches. In other words, *Puntos*' institutional design embodies the aspiration for an everyday life in which women, men, the young and not-so-young meet as equals to join forces toward common goals. *Puntos*' janitors, driver, secretaries, professionals, and directors come from a world where title, class, gender, race, and age predetermine their place in a social hierarchy. However, once they cross the threshold dividing *Puntos* from the outside world, they come into an environment that purposefully attempts to challenge traditional hierarchies while developing clear and transparent criteria and procedures for decision-making and accountability to the collective. For example, a recent meeting to deal with a financial crisis involved Miguel, a man hired in 1993 as *Puntos*' driver, and Ana, a founding member and executive director. At *Puntos*, while hierarchies are not entirely absent, authority is established on the basis of skills, experience, and level of commitment with the institution, and not necessarily by title or position (Arosteguí and Carrión, 1997: 7)[4]. In the words of Ana Criquillion, founder of *Puntos*: "this means denying oneself privileges at the personal level… being the director does not mean you need a bigger office, a company car… or to have the last word" (quoted in Hernandez and Campanile, 2000: 8).

Puntos de Encuentro emerged as a feminist NGO not only on account of its effort toward gender equity in Nicaragua, but also in its attempt to infuse the organization itself with feminist characteristics; thus, *Puntos*' feminist stand becomes apparent in its nurturing work environment; in terms of its first director Ana Criquillion: "I believe that what we have done in these years of crisis, the fact

4 In general, in Latin America, there is a difference between "mixed" organizations that may or may not have a "gender perspective" and "feminist" organizations, which are usually all women. *Puntos* wanted to create a new kind of institution, an explicitly feminist organization that would be mixed from the beginning, so that men could be part of a feminist project and culture, meaning that traditional gender hierarchies would be challenged explicitly from the beginning.

that we managed to maintain an institution with such a level of solidarity, of caring, of being able to count on one another is a real accomplishment" (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 2002: 24).

Puntos' success in creating an alternative everyday life within its institutional walls is due to its ability to produce a counter-culture; that is, a culture that questions established meanings, and "common sense truths". *Puntos'* organizational culture cultivates the notion that there are not fixed truths, and that the same phenomenon can be interpreted as good or bad, depending on the context: "one of the things we learned was to appreciate and to value each and every one of us, including the defects […] that is, we learned to take advantage of everything we are in order to meet our goals; we learned to see that even our limitations can be of value in certain situations…" (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 2002: 23).

Puntos' approach to communication for social change

In 1991 *Puntos* embarked in the task of transforming everyday life among Nicaraguan women, men, adults, children, and youth. *Puntos* defines its goal as dismantling oppressive, unequal power relationships in which men dominate women, or adults rule the lives and decisions of younger ones. *Puntos de Encuentro* assumes that oppressive power relationships are legitimized by local cultures transmitted from one generation to another via collective and individual memory. For example, a father hits his child because his individual memory and the collective imagination of Nicaraguans associate hitting a child with disciplining a child. That is, the meaning associated with the behavior of hitting a child is legitimized as something not only normal, but desirable. *Puntos'* role is to question the connection between the behavior (hitting) and the meaning of the behavior (disciplining), and to propose a new connection, for example that hitting –even for "well-intentioned" reasons, is oppressive, disrespectful, and counter-productive parenting.

Puntos operates at the level of symbolic meanings that traditional Nicaraguan cultures have assigned to different human interactions, and attempts to question such meanings. Puntos, in other words, is an organization dedicated to the transformation of everyday life's oppressive cultural practices. Because *Puntos* does not define its target as the transformation of behaviors, but the transformation of cultural norms, its approach to social change is collective and not individual-based (Gumucio-Dagron, 2001). Cultural meanings are defined collectively and therefore have to be deconstructed and reconfigured by the collective. *Puntos* shares the Freirean assumption that each individual should participate fully in shaping her/his own destiny; thus *Puntos* works toward the concientization and empowerment of individuals who will in turn collectively dismantle dominating cultures and re-invent new forms of more equitable interaction.

Traditional approaches to E-E emerge from an understanding of communication for social change as one-directional persuasive communication direct-

ed to an individual and intended to effect behavioral or attitudinal change in that individual (Singhal and Rogers, 1989, 1999; Nariman, 1993; Kincaid, 2002; Slater and Rouner, 2002; Piotrow and de Fossard, 2004). The goal of traditional E-E is to persuade target audiences to adopt prosocial behaviors or attitudes; Singhal and Rogers (1999), for example, defined the role of communication for social change in the following terms: "to influence audience awareness, attitudes, and behaviors toward a socially desirable end" (9), or "to promote *good* behavior and to dissuade *bad* behaviors"(Sabido, quoted in Singhal and Rogers, 1999: 53, my emphasis). Within this framework, interventions are designed to promote certain attitudes and behaviors pre-defined as socially desirable or good.

The design of traditional E-E revolves around a formula in which a prosocial behavior is predefined by the producers; characters and storylines are developed around the adoption of the desirable "good" behavior; characters are divided between those who accept to adopt the prosocial behavor, those who reject it, and those who are uncertain (Sabido, 2004: 70). Then "[during] the course of the soap opera, each of these three basic groups of characters will interact and create circumstances that will result in their moving closer to or farther away from the proposed social behavior. When characters move closer to the proposed social behavior, they are visibly rewarded. Likewise, when they move away from the proposed behavior, they are visibly punished" (Nariman, 1993: 63). Some examples of traditional E-E include "a wise father who spaced his family and prospered versus the foolish father with many children who could not pay for food" (Piotrow and de Fossard, 2004: 44); or a man who dies from AIDS while his brother, who decides to adopt the prosocial behavior, is rewarded with a good family life (Kincaid, 2002).

The theoretical foundation of traditional E-E is Bandura's social cognitive theory of individual and social change (Bandura, 2004). Built on an understanding of human change as cause/effect, unidirectional, and fairly controlable processes, Bandura's theory is entirely absent from *Puntos de Encuentro*'s conceptual foundations.

Puntos de Encuentro takes a very different approach to social change. According to *Puntos* "societies have to decide for themselves how to change"; therefore, more than prescribing certain behaviors, *Puntos* intervenes by encouraging "a coherent critique of traditional and official discourses" (Bradshaw and *Puntos de Encuentro*, 2001: 1) and a dialogue around alternative proposals. Instead of zeroing in on a specific "good" behavior, *Puntos* sees its role as a facilitator of a communication space where taken-for-granted traditional practices can be questioned and where alternative cultural practices can be presented, considered, and discussed. *Puntos* generates a communication space where excluded or marginalized alternatives have a chance to become central, to be incorporated into social fabric, to become "common sense". *Puntos* is proud to "remove taboo subjects from 'the closet' onto the public agenda and mainstream consciousness" (Bradshaw and *Puntos de Encuentro*, 2001: 1). Issues such as rape, homosexuali-

ty, and abortion, considered taboo in Nicaragua, have been boldly tackled by *Puntos*. Instead of targeting individuals with prescriptions, *Puntos*' goal is to disrupt Nicaragua's cultural fabric and everyday life world.

Puntos de Encuentro generates communication processes that do not reify the hierarchy between the active producers of messages pre-defined as socially desirable, and the passive receivers of those messages. The goal of *Puntos* is not that Nicaraguan audiences adopt its messages, but instead that alternative interpretations of reality have a chance to be a part of a national conversation. Thus, instead of prescribing specific behaviors to be adopted by individuals[5], *Puntos*' communication processes propose new cultural articulations and symbolic codifications. *Puntos* messages tend to be open ended, intended to be considered and discussed collectively according to each community's social, economic, and cultural context.

Equally important, alternative interpretations pushed forward by *Puntos* communication processes emerge from Nicaragua's progressive social movements, not just from a small group of "expert" decision-makers. In other words, *Puntos* sees its role as a communicator who takes –otherwise marginal– alternative cultural options from Nicaragua's progressive social movements and situates them at the center of the public arena. Thus, these options can be openly discussed, considered, deliberated, and contemplated by Nicaraguans.

Puntos pursues the goal of transforming everyday life oppressive practices on two fronts: first, questioning mainstream traditional meanings and encouraging the discussion of alternative options; and second, strengthening collective struggles toward social and cultural change. Because it understands social and cultural change as collective processes, not as individual behavioral change, *Puntos* is deeply anchored in Nicaragua's progressive social movements. Humberto Abaunza (2001) defines one of *Puntos*' main strategies as: "to strengthen the capacity of social movements to shape public policy" (1).

Recent proposals in the field of development communication scholarship posit the rich potential of social movements' theory to move the field away from early modernization theories (Huesca, 2001). According to Huesca (2001), new social movements are "heterogenous groups forming outside of formal institutions and operating in discontinous cycles to forge collective meanings and identities that direct action" (421); new social movements emerge from the discontent of citizens who distrust traditional institutions (such as labor organizations and political parties) to bring about social, political, and cultural change. New social movements (i.e., women's movements, ethnic minority movements, human rights, environmentalists, etc.) emerge as citizens form groups that allow them to re-define collective identities and visions for the future. These identities and visions serve as forces that drive collective action and collective social change.

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5 Behaviors defined as socially desirable by traditional E-E include spacing/limiting family, breastfeeding, avoiding risky sexual behavior, washing hands before eating, keeping fingernails short, valuing girls education, or using certain parental skills (Piotrow and de Fossard, 2004: 41).

It is at the level of meanings that can be fed into these identities and visions that *Puntos de Encuentro* understands its intervention.

Puntos produces new meanings that, carried by campaigns, media, and other forms of interpersonal and mass communication, become the raw material of collective dialogues among Nicaraguans. These communication processes are in turn supported with *Puntos*' initiatives that connect social movements, build alliances among different social movements (for example gay, women's, and youth social movements), confront a conservative status quo[6], and connect local social movements with global movements for social justice.

Working within this framework, *Puntos de Encuentro* maintains a mix of different communication strategies that work in a well integrated manner: research and communication, movement building, advocacy, and education.

Research and campaigns

In 1999 *Puntos* embarked on one of its most innovative campaigns: a campaign targeting Nicaraguan men against masculine violence in the family. For a Latin American feminist NGO to channel significant resources and energy toward men was as exceptional as it was controversial (Rivera, 2000: 25). The campaign emerged from a research study about the connection between masculine identity and male violence against women in Nicaragua completed by *Puntos* (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 1998a: 9)[7]. Here again, *Puntos*' participation in social movements proved essential. Since its early days, *Puntos* had cultivated the formation of The Men-Against-Violence Group. Thanks to this alliance with the Men's Group, *Puntos* had access to over 200 local grassroots organizations and 700 volunteers to conduct the study (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 1999: 6).

At the end of October 1998 Hurricane Mitch devastated Nicaragua with a series of floods, mud slides, loss of crops, houses, animals, roads, and bridges. Several thousand Nicaraguans lost their lives, and tens of thousands more lost their homes. Knowing well that masculine violent behavior intensifies in post-natural disaster phases, *Puntos* decided to connect its 1999 campaign to Hurricane Mitch. The campaign built on several main ideas: first, that violence against women constitutes a "disaster" in terms of damage to people and society; that unlike a hurricane, which is a natural phenomenon, male violence is not "natural" or unavoidable, it is totally within men's control to avoid. And finally, that a family free of violence would contribute to the social and economic reconstruction of the country[8]. With this campaign *Puntos* offered an alternative articulation of Nicaraguan masculinity, away from the interpretation of "man" as a

6 What *Puntos* called "the ideological counter-offensive."

7 The reseach report was published as "Nadando contra la corriente: buscando pistas para prevenir la violencia masculina en las relaciones de pareja" [Swimming Upstream: seeking clues to prevent masculine violence in couples].

8 The campaign slogan was "La violencia contra las mujeres: un desastre que los hombres SÍ podemos evitar" [Violence against women: a disaster that as men we CAN prevent].

creature of violent nature and closer to "man" as a person who needs to decide if abussive behavior in the family will be or not part of his repertoire.

Enlisting once more the talent of McCann Erickson, *Puntos* designed a multimedia strategy that included television, radio, and printed materials[9]. In order to capitalize the lesson learned during the previous campaign, *Puntos* designed communication materials to be used at the local level by hundreds of grassroots organizations and collectives that form Nicaragua's gender social movements; the materials were to be used as part of these groups' concientization and mobilization activities, therefore they became central to hundreds of interpersonal and group communication activities. The materials included a booklet to facilitate workshops on masculine violence in the family, 3,000 caps and 5,000 calendars to be distributed among workshop participants.

Puntos succeeded in forming alliances with 250 local grassroots organizations, NGOs, local governments, local media, and local journalists to participate in the "masculine violence as disaster" campaign. However, instead of using these organizations as instruments to implement its campaign, *Puntos* encouraged them to develop their own communication initiatives around the theme of masculine abussive behavior and to connect with the campaign without losing their own identities. As a result, a myriad of other communication processes, including different campaign materials, songs, theatre, banners, cultural events, and workshops were implemented in each regional and cultural context (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 2000: 9).

Reflecting on this experience, *Puntos* notes how this type of work empowers local civil society and its social movements by building bridges among local organizations, linking local organizations to a national social movement, and legitimizing grassroots organizations as they become more visible among their local constituencies when associated with a national and high profile campaign (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 2000: 36). In addition, *Puntos* came to understand the enormous demand for well designed and produced communication materials that local groups could use in their own creative ways but lacked the know-how or the resources to produce their own.

The campaign was evaluated using pre- and post-campaign surveys with samples of 2,000 men each, and a post-campaign survey among 660 women; also a series of pre and post in-depth interviews was conducted. According to the quantitative data, men exposed to the campaign said the messages helped them self-reflect (40%), improved life with their spouse (29%), and provided new information (18%). Eighty-five percent of the men exposed to the campaign said men changed as a result of exposure; 76% of the women surveyed agreed (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 2000: 32).

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9 The campaign included two 35' TV spots, four radio 30' spots, 76,000 posters, 75,000 stickers, 75,000 educational brochures, and eleven billboards displayed on the main cross-roads throughout the country. Radio and TV spots ammounted to approximately 500 TV transmissions and 17,200 radio transmissions (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 2000: 7).

Television E-E

Since the mid 1990s, feeling the limitation of short-lived campaigns to maintain its presence in an on going national dialogue, *Puntos* began exploring the possibility of using the media to maintain an uninterrupted conversation with national audiences. Knowing that Nicaraguans "have a TV set before they have running water or a floor" (Amy Bank as quoted in Miller 2002), and that telenovelas are the preferred media genre in the country, *Puntos* decided to explore the possibility of producing a television drama. The idea was to use a legitimate medium such as television to maintain an "ideological counter-offensive" in the form of proposed alternatives to the conservative status quo. To many, the idea of producing a weekly series in a country with almost no domestic television industry, no studios, no editing facilities, no script writers, no directors or producers, seemed unattainable.

For the next three years *Puntos* embarked on the Herculean task of developing the necessary human and technological resources to produce a weekly television series. Given the incipient state of Nicaragua's television industry, *Puntos* had to build everything from the ground up: from a team of scriptwriters to shooting and editing facilities. *Puntos* brought in a North American television writer to develop a team of young Nicaraguan scriptwriters; next, *Puntos* identified a team of youngsters without any acting experience and began intensive weekly training routines in different acting techniques, stage movement, and acting for the camera (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 1998b: 10).

In February of 2001, produced by Amy Bank and directed by Virginia Lacayo, the first episode of *Sexto Sentido* aired on Sunday at 4 pm. In half-hour episodes, *Sexto Sentido* develops parallel story lines about six young Nicaraguans dealing with issues of gender, sexuality, and oppressive interpersonal relationships. Maintaining an ongoing tension between oppressive relationships and individual and collective actions toward liberation and equality, the characters of *Sexto Sentido* find different ways out of traditional ideologies. In the words of Amy Bank: "essentially what we are trying to do as an organization is to take radical social and political ideas about human rights, about democracy, about respect and differences, about the right to live without violence, about discrimination… quite radical ideas, and put them out into the mainstream, totally flying in the face of traditional conservative values and what most of the media continue to promote. We want to say 'listen! you may think that these are alternative ideas, but they are not marginal', and we are going to have them all over the place, so that they become mainstream ideas" (Amy Bank as quoted in Miller, 2002).

In its first season, *Sexto Sentido*'s three young women and three young men dealt with a controlling boyfriend, teen pregnancy, homophobia, a violent father, conflicts with parents, rape, abortion, alcoholism, first-time sex, and a host of other issues. In what follows I present three elements that make *Sexto Sentido* an exceptional case of entertainment-education: first, how the work of progressive social movements and grassroots organizations informs story

lines and character development; second, how each episode of *Sexto Sentido* is well grounded in Nicaragua's popular culture; and third, the use of a communication strategy that integrates mass communication with group communication and interpersonal communication.

A series of consecutive episodes of *Sexto Sentido* developed the story of Elena, a young woman living with her mother, her abusive father, and her younger siblings. As the story develops Elena experiences different phases of the cycle of domestic violence: from thinking that getting hit is "normal", and blaming herself for "provoking" her father's violent behavior, to finally deciding that she and her family deserve a life free of violence. Thus, Elena strives to make alliances with her mother in order to bring about change. At one point, a friend informs Elena of a law that defends victims of intra-family violence (Miller, 2002).

To understand the strong connection between the storyline and Nicaragua's movement against violence against women we have to go back to 1992 when the *Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia* [Women's Network Against Violence] emerged out of a newly formed national autonomous women's movement[10]. *Puntos* was an active member of this network from its origin; several *Puntos* staff helped develop the network's projects, including campaigns against family violence, and in 1994, the network had its first office in *Puntos*' building.

It is no coincidence then that two of *Sexto Sentido*'s script writers as well as the producer of the series are active members of the Women's Network Against Violence. The strong connection between *Puntos*, the network, and Nicaragua's women's movement facilitates an easy flow between grassroots initiatives and *Puntos*' media programming. Thus, when *Sexto Sentido*'s writer Erika Castillo put the last touches on a script about Elena, her character comes to life with the empathy of a writer who knows firsthand the experiences of hundreds of Nicaraguan women who survive or succumb to abussive relationships. Clearly, the legacy of organized civil society feeds the storylines of *Sexto Sentido*.

By the late 1990s the Women's Network against Violence had become a leader of the women's movement in Nicaragua. Thanks to intense and continuous efforts of advocacy, lobbying, social mobilization, and communication, the network has been able to move domestic violence from invisibility and silence into the public agenda. In 1996, the network drafted and promoted what would become Law 230, designed to protect victims of domestic violence. Still, many Nicaraguans were unaware of the law or how to use it to protect themselves. In 2001, *Puntos* and the network joined hands once again, to produce 50,000 booklets explaining Law 230, using a photo of "Elena" on the cover. At the same

10 In 1991, in a collective decision to separate the women's movement from the Sandinista women's organization (AMNLAE), Nicaraguan women leaders convened the "Fifty-two percent Festival". In a clear act of rejection of Sandinista's exclusionary party politics, the leaders held the Festival at the same time as the AMNLAE national convention. During the Festival the movement decided to call for an autonomous movement embracing different struggles for genger equity and not only Sandinista agendas. One of the first collective projects of the autonomous movement was the Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia. (CITAR CAPITULO DE ANA SOBRE HISTORIA MOVIMIENTO DE MUJERES).

time that Elena, in *Sexto Sentido*, was learning about Law 230, Nicaragua was blanketed with free booklets (Miller, 2002).

In the same manner in which *Puntos* is an active member of the Network of Women Against Violence, it participates in national networks of the AIDS movement, the youth movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the men-against-violence movement, and the women with disabilities movement, among others.

Each episode of *Sexto Sentido* is carefully crafted to connect with Nicaragua's popular imaginary. Recent scholarship on race and media reveals the extent to which Latin American media contents carry colonial messages that conceal racial hierarchies behind race myths (Wade, 2000), or reify whiteness as more desirable. In contrast, *Sexto Sentido* is produced from a profound respect for the culture and the historical experience of its audiences; in contrast with most Latin American television series, in which the main characters are white, blonde, and blue-eyed, *Sexto Sentido*'s actors and actresses reflect well Nicaragua's mestizo ethnic fabric. While *Sexto Sentido*'s sets are more "posh" than the majority of Nicaraguans' milieu, they are designed to capture the everyday life of the working class majority.

According to Miguel Sabido, the founding father of E-E soap operas, "[t]he major problems of mankind can only be solved if the large masses of population in developing countries behave in a socially useful manner" (Sabido, 2004: 73)[11]. Far from this patronizing attitude, so common in traditional E-E, *Sexto Sentido* embraces the popular, in the sense that Jesús Martin Barbero (1993) gives to the term, and proposes new directions in which local cultures can grow. While it is common for E-E projects to conduct formative research into the everyday lives of target communities as "merely a tool for pretesting preconceived concepts and images with the target audience" (McKee et al, 2004: 339), *Puntos* assumes Nicaragua's popular cultures as its own historical context and therefore its own battle-ground. Instead of positioning itself as an outsider sender of finished truths, with *Sexto Sentido Puntos* joins the national conversation as an equal participant with radical proposals.

In its efforts to move the boundaries of what is considered legitimate within Nicaraguan cultures, *Puntos* has made great strides in different areas of the everyday world. Using television drama to express the legitimacy, beauty, and dignity of the experience of the mestizo working and lower middle classes, *Puntos* has sent messages that question hierarchies established around class and race. With characters that subvert traditional gender and age relationships, *Puntos* proposes a different option to establish relationships among different genders and age groups. *Sexto Sentido* portrays the first non-caricatured gay character in the histo-

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11 It is beyond the scope of this analysis to cuestion the validity of this statement with factual information; however, the ease with which Sabido blames people from the global south for "the problems of mankind" while exonerating the north's corporate sector and lifestyles based on never-ending consumption, is worrisome.

ry of Nicaragua's popular cultures, a character that allows audiences to visualize a social fabric devoid of homophobia. With the character of Elena, *Sexto Sentido* introduces an alternative interpretation of domestic abuse not as a necessary evil that women and children have to accept because "that's the way men are" but as an oppressive practice, and the target of Nicaragua's women's movement. Through Elena's exploits, audiences learn that hundreds of Nicaraguans with a different vision for their society have organized around a women's movement that strives for harsher laws against abussive men, better resources for survivors of domestic violence, and a different cultural codification of masculinity.

I believe one of *Puntos*' future challenges is to move these boundaries still further in the area of race, by addressing issues of blackness and indigenous cultures and their integration (or not) into a multicultural nation. *Puntos* has begun moving in this direction by introducing Johnson, a young Afro-Nicaraguan, and Shevony, a young half Creole and half Miskito woman from Puerto Cabezas as *Sexto Sentido*'s main characters.

Capitalizing from past lessons on the virtues of an integral communication strategy that combines E-E and mass communication with social mobilization through group and interpersonal communication, *Puntos* implemented a complex series of communication processes to broaden and intensify the dialogue incited by *Sexto Sentido*. This strategy, called *Somos Diferentes, Somos Iguales* [We are Different, We are Equal], includes a radio talk-show, published materials (such as the Law 230 booklet), workshops, and discussion groups.

Radio Sexto Sentido[12], *Puntos*' radio call-in show, produced by youth for youth, planned its programming to parallel *Sexto Sentido*'s story lines; by calling in, young Nicaraguans can discuss the characters' experiences and decisions with *Sexto Sentido*'s actors and actresses and with other callers.

Moreover, the entire cast of *Sexto Sentido* travels throughout the country to facilitate discussions, workshops organized by social movements in hundreds of localities. Here, in small groups, young Nicaraguans have access to communication spaces where they can question traditional discourses on gender, sexual identity, and oppressive interpersonal relationships. Thanks to these newly found communication spaces, many youth are able to break out of isolation; they find other youth asking the same questions, experiencing the same feelings; ultimately, they find community.

Interpersonal communication as social mobilization

Perhaps one of the features that makes *Puntos* an exceptional communication for social change NGO is its ability to maintain a line of work in social mobilization and interpersonal/group communication parallel to, and integrated with, its

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12 *Radio Sexto Sentido* transmits Monday through Friday on *Radio Universidad* (national coverage) and nine local radio stations throughout the country. *Radio Sexto Sentido* has a fan club with 143 members as of 2000. The target audience of *Radio Sexto Sentido* is Nicaraguans between the ages of 13 and 25.

campaigns and media programming. Grounded in the profound belief that social change is brought about collectively and not via individual change exclusively, *Puntos* believes that movement building and advocacy are important aspects of its mission.

La Universidad de las Mujeres [The Women's University] was developed by *Puntos* as a way to create a space where leaders of the women's movements, as well as non-organized women[13], could learn and grow. Constantly offering short courses on themes such as "Gender and Development", "Power relationships: Sexism and adultism", or "Introduction to electronic mail", the university draws hundreds of women (and men) into this space of analysis and reflection. An important aspect of the university is its program on masculinity, a space for men to discuss, reflect, and question traditional notions of masculinity. *Puntos*' leadership youth camps are part of this same line of action. The camps convene hundreds of youth leaders for workshops, discussions, and panels frequently tied into *Puntos*' media messages[14].

Maintaining these communication spaces where small groups interact, discuss, reflect, and question has made *Puntos* into an organization that understands change as a multifaceted process involving not only interaction with the media, but also a complex mesh of interactions between an individual and his/her community, with his/her self image, and with his/her community's image of him/herself. Elsewhere, E-E scholars have emphasized the role of interpersonal communication in processes of social change (Papa et al, 2000; Piotrow and de Fossard, 2004; La Pastina, Patel, Schiavo, 2004). Still, we need to maintain clear distinctions between E-E projects that use interpersonal communication to further the influence of pre-defined socially desirable behaviors (Abdulla, 2004) and E-E projects that include social mobilization via interpersonal and group communication as part of their agenda. Soul City in South Africa (Usdin et al, 2004), *Puntos de Encuentro* in Nicaragua, and *Meena* in South India (McKee et al, 2004) are clear cases of E-E that take on advocacy and social mobilization as part of their agenda to strengthen progressive social movements. In these cases, interpersonal and group communication are implemented to foster discussion of alternative articulations of social reality, not as vehicles to move prosocial media messages deeper into community and intimate spheres.

Conclusion: theory from smart practice

Traditionally communication scholars think development communication theory as the product of academics. According to this traditional formula, a scholar affiliated with a university (generally located in the global North) conducts research about processes of communication for social change, E-E, or development com-

13 Non-organized women refers to women who do not participate in any social movement, grassroot initiative, or collective.

14 Due to shrinking funding by international donors, *Puntos* has had to reduce many of these projects.

munication (generally located in the global South); novel theoretical approaches emerge from data analysis, which are, in turn, applied by governmental or non-governmental organizations in their development communication projects. In these pages I have tried to show how, as development communication scholars and practitioners, we need to look outside of the formula in order to appreciate how theory can emerge from the practice of a smart and creative Central American NGO.

Indeed, *Puntos* has developed substantial theoretical insights into communication for social change. Grounded on complex epistemological reflection on how change happens in communities, *Puntos* articulates local cultures as the product of constantly evolving discourses-in-interaction. As they interact, social discourses engage in processes of domination, resistance, and negotiation; in each of these processes, cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and consumed (Geertz, 1973). It is these cultural meanings that make social reality intelligible, therefore alternative visions of society presuppose alternative cultural meanings. It is through the processes of production and circulation of meaning that behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs are either sanctioned or de-legitimized. From this perspective, *Puntos* perceives its role as an outspoken participant of a national conversation in which meanings circulate, gain legitimacy, or become marginal. *Puntos*' counter-cultural or alternative proposals circulate into the national dialogue via the mass media (radio, television, print, billboards, posters, etc.), interpersonal and small group communication (*Universidad de las Mujeres*, youth leadership training, participation in social movements), and even public relations (lobbying). *Puntos*' proposals resonate then from one realm of national life to another, including public forums (social movements' street demonstrations, rallies, marches, etc.), public spaces (billboards), public arenas (lobbying), family media spheres (radio listening, television viewing), small groups (camps, workshops), and even intra-personal communication (reading and reflecting).

Puntos feeds not only the national conversation, but also innumerable other parallel conversations at the local level, the community level, and the family level. *Puntos*' strong connections with local NGOs and collectives allow the organization to bring its messages to local forums and, at the same time, to stay in touch with regional differences. *Puntos* is very aware of strong regional and local differences, and participates in each of these conversations, paying attention to each distinct interlocutor. Although *Puntos* generates messages of national coverage, this NGO does not adopt the one-message-fits-all approach, which blankets national audiences with a single message and discounts ensuing distinct local dialogues. As local NGOs and collectives appropriate its materials, *Puntos*' national messages trigger countless local and distinct communication processes as important as the process of national diffusion, if not more so. *Puntos* devotes much energy, time, and resources to its active participation in these local processes.

Finally, *Puntos* integrates two dimensions of social change traditionally operating separate from each other: E-E and mobilization. Historically, E-E has

been in the hands of development communication organizations, governmental institutions, and communication scholars. Mobilization has been the forte of organized civil society, social movements, grassroots organizations, and political science scholars. In *Puntos*, these two spheres operate in an integral manner, assuming a dialectical relationship between communication and mobilization[15]. In fact, one of *Puntos*' present and future challenges rests in navigating people's expectations as it cannot easily be labeled as a social movement, a development communication organization, or an NGO (Rivera, 2000).

As a participant of national dialogues on gender, youth, and sexual identities, *Puntos* contributes to this conversation in several different ways. *Puntos* produces counter-cultural messages that otherwise would not have a chance to be considered, discussed, and reflected on by most Nicaraguans. In an attempt to build bridges and to find common ground with others, *Puntos* maintains its cultural counter-offensive as a way to drive a wedge into the status quo by deconstructing conservative discourse and analyzing its implications for people and their well-being, and then offering alternatives. And finally, *Puntos* serves as a catalyst of personal, intra-family, local, regional, and national conversations that would not exist otherwise.

Looking into the future, *Puntos* faces several serious challenges. First, maintaining its idiosyncratic organizational culture was easier as a small NGO. Today, *Puntos* has grown to include a whole television production team, a research team, and the staff necessary to support all other projects, hence preserving its egalitarian spirit becomes more difficult. Second, as I mentioned before, *Puntos* will need to confront at some point the fact that many Nicaraguan communities have been historically excluded from most national, regional, and local conversations. Nicaragua has paid lip service to the notion of being a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation, but in reality Miskito, Mayangna (Sumu), Garifuna, Rama, and Afro-Nicaraguan communities have been "erased" from the national imaginary. The challenge, for *Puntos*, will be how to reverse this erasure without losing its national audiences; that is, how to integrate languages, ethnicities, and cultures that mestizo Nicaraguans deem "uninteresting" without losing its appeal[16].

Finally, I am left perplexed by how the changing winds of international development aid has made it hard for even the most enthusiastic of international donors to support *Puntos de Encuentro*. In 2002, precisely at the time when it had matured into an exceptional communication for social change NGO at the global level, able to integrate research and practice, capable of articulating the local with the national and the global, and skillful enough to produce some of

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15 One of *Puntos* internal documents reads: "we need to always remember that television is not a medium that mobilizes" (*Puntos de Encuentro*, 1997a: 28).

16 In words of Amy Bank: "This is definitely a challenge: for example, now that we have main characters from the Coast in Sexto Sentido, there will be some dialogue in Creole English and possibly eventually in Miskito as well. We'll have to put sub-titles in Spanish. But not all our viewers are literate… so we're going to have access issues no matter what" (Bank, 2003).

the most innovative communication for social change strategies in the region, *Puntos* found itself in a financial crisis that almost resulted in having to close its doors. Some of *Puntos*' stable donors have a policy that after ten years of continuous funding, it is time for a change. Other donors have had reductions in their Latin American budgets, turning their attention to other parts of the world. Nicaraguan NGOs in general have also suffered donor pullouts due to lack of confidence in a government known for its corruption. The changing trends in aid programs mean that even enthusiastic donors can not find the right "pocket" of funds from which to support *Puntos*, since its work defies easy categorization. And finally, many donors are under pressure to invest in projects that apply replicable formulas to obtain immediate and measurable impact. The challenge is then, as is too frequently the case, how to overcome the contradiction among first world donors and third world processes. My hope is that scholarship such as this text can help international donors to develop more empathic relationships with third world grantees.

To build the wisdom and expertise of *Puntos* requires a long-term process. Successful communication for social change processes do not emerge from applying formulas. They originate from careful and respectful relationships built between an organization and a community. Such relationships require that organizations operate at many different levels, such as forming alliances, understanding local cultures, and maintaining close connections with local social movements. *Puntos* has managed to succeed in all these fronts, partly because of its great organizational flexibility. *Puntos*' ability to grow into a hybrid that operates well in very different areas, such as mobilization, E-E, research, education and training, and advocacy has made it into an organization deeply connected with the people it wants to communicate with. However, as in any other case of human communication, building these strong connections takes a long-term commitment and on-going support. And this is what donors need to understand.

As the field of entertainment education grows and expands, new categories and forms of classification will be needed to articulate differences and nuances that emerge from further analyses. Indeed, Tufte has already begun this trend toward more nuanced E-E categories by refering to first, second, and third E-E generations. In this light, I propose the term "activist E-E" to refer to the work of organizations such as *Puntos de Encuentro*, which use E-E strategies to intervene in the cultural fabric and to strenghten progressive local social movements; this term can serve to differentiate this type of E-E from more traditional "behavior change E-E".

Recent academic publications suggest that E-E scholars are trying to move E-E conceptualizations away from clear-cut binary theoretical frameworks. Issues addressed in these recent works include the limitations of traditional E-E theories (Singhal and Rogers, 2002), the non-linearity of social change processes (Papa et al, 2000), the narrowness of individual-centered theories of social change (Singhal and Rogers, 2002, 2004), and the need for more complex

methodological approaches (Singhal and Rogers, 2004). A few E-E scholars have already begun these novel and exciting explorations, such as Arvind Sighal (2004) with his analysis of Augusto Boals and Paulo Freire's theories of participation and empowerment, Thomas Tufte's (2004) application of Martin Barbero's theory of mediations to E-E, Thomas Jacobson and Douglas Storey (2004) and their work on Habermas' communicative theory and E-E, and Papa et al (2000) with their use of Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyze E-E in India.

In my view, it is urgent that E-E scholarship addresses two "black holes" that remain in its theoretical universe: bodies of theory that articulate culture understood as the circulation of meaning (such as cultural studies, semiotics, symbolic anthropology, and postcolonial theory) and theoretical frameworks that articulate power (such as feminist scholarship, Marxist and post-Marxist theories, Foucault and Bourdieu's elaboration of power, and queer theory). Combined with more interpretative and long term evaluation studies, the field of E-E scholarship could be starting a fascinating journey.