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TELEVISION IN NICARAGUA

Locally produced programmes and a more comprehensive coverage of global issues

I am in San Juan del Sur, a fishing village of 3500 inhabitants built up like coral around a crescent on the southern Pacific coast. I am in the salon of the Hotel Buen Gusto, more truly a pension. On the fading turquoise walls are religious images and a huge cheaply stenciled poster of Comandante Gaspar García Laviana, the town's Spanish-born parish priest who died fighting for the FSLN (Frente/Freute Sandinista de Liberación Nacional).

There are about fifteen of us around the television set: the guests, mostly young Europeans from Nicaraguan solidarity committees who've managed to find some sort of work in the Revolution; the family, four generations of women who run the hotel; and a number of unfamiliar villagers who seem to have dropped by for the big special. We all patiently tolerate the ads for washing soap and the familiar station breaks with nationalistic Christmas carols.

Channel 6 has been advertising this special for a week and today the newspaper I read devoted a front page article to it. The program commemorates an incident, which occurred in 1974 on December 27 (today's date), when members of the FSLN stormed a party at the home of José María Castillo, Deputy and Vice-Minister of the State in Somoza's government. The group ransomed their hostages for the release of political prisoners and a large sum of money.

The format of the hour-long program, *Diciembre Victorioso*, is simple. First there is a voice-over introduction as the camera pans the Nicaraguan countryside. We cut to the surviving guerillas, an average, almost suburban-looking group of middle-aged women and men, reminiscing about the assault. We then cut to a somewhat over-stated dramatization of the operation interspersed with news footage from the actual incident. The show closes with more reminiscing in front of a revolutionary mural.

Diciembre Victorioso was still being edited the day before it was broadcast. And although this harried schedule resulted in a certain lack of polish, the energetic acting and production generally

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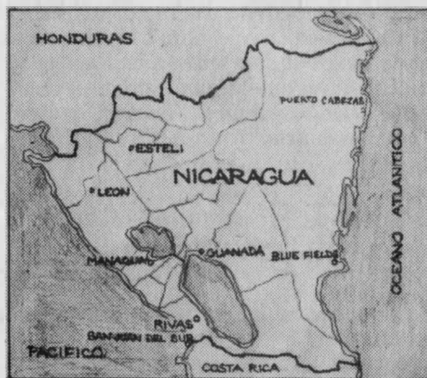
Tim McCaskell (Toronto) assisted as interpreter during Fung's research.

rendered the show very watchable.

Earlier in the week, I had witnessed the taping of the dramatic reenactment, ironically in the home of former Chief of Television, Alberto Luna. I was told that three people had lived in this vast complex of four inter-connecting mansions — not counting servants, of course. The former owner, like most Somosistas who could afford such opulence, now resides in Miami.

Few local productions

Diciembre Victorioso is one of the locally produced programs which comprise less than ten percent of the programming on Nicaragua's two TV channels. Sixty percent of all shows are bought from the US, the rest from Mexico, Spain and other European countries.



When it began in 1979, Sistema Sandinista de Television, the official body incorporating both channels, produced more local programs. It was an experiment on a national scale. Mass organizations, (unions, peasant groups, etc.) could at that time use the medium as they wished. However, the finished products seldom matched the initial enthusiasm and in the end the SST decided in favour of producing fewer shows of a higher quality which they were sure viewers would watch. By the time the Somoza regime fell in July, 1979, Nicaraguans had become accustomed to technically sophisticated imported television.

Octavio Cortéz Acevedo of SST, himself a Dutch-trained engineer, explained that American programmes were passed to Nicaragua by satellite: "You could see the world series, live, in Managua. We bought all sorts of expensive programs but while we had the

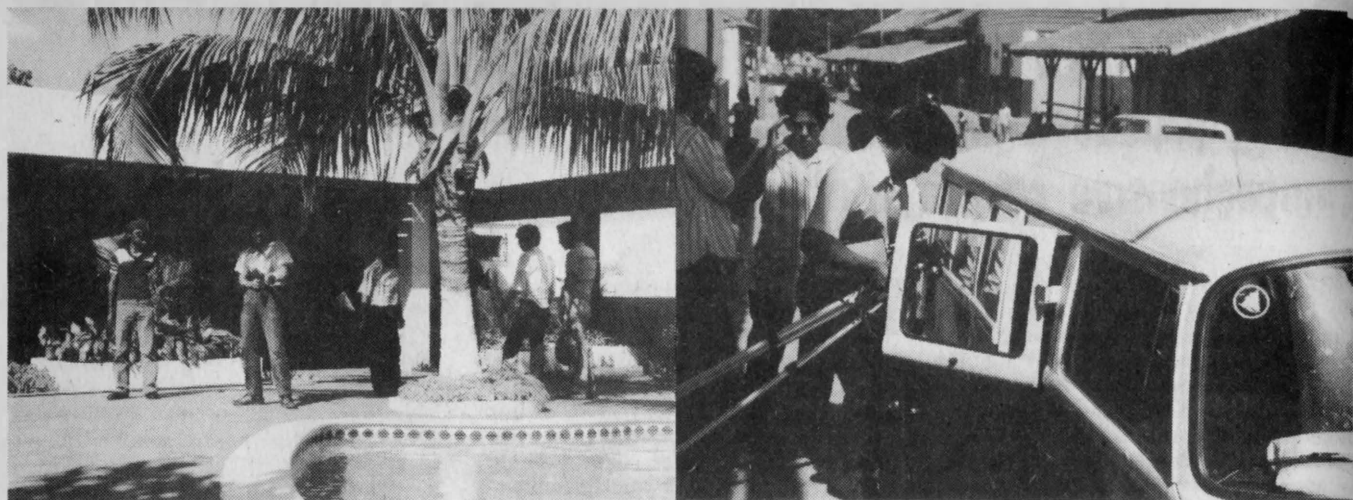
most up-to-date TV, our equipment was of the most rudimentary kind. We had a transmitter and equipment to receive the programs coming over satellite and almost nothing else. Suddenly in '79, we found we had no TV studios in the country. There wasn't even one Nicaraguan television director who could produce at a professional level."

But this is changing. Now a training centre offers courses in both technical production and English to those involved in broadcasting. English is necessary not only for the reading of technical manuals but also in anticipation of the program production scheduled to begin in 1985 for the English-speaking region of Zeleña located on the Atlantic coast. This region, formerly the Mosquito Coast, a British protectorate, is extremely isolated. The two largest towns, Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas cannot even be reached by road. The literacy campaign, so effective in the Spanish-speaking parts of Nicaragua (from 68 percent illiteracy in 1979 to only 20 percent presently) is only now beginning in English and Mosquito. The integration of Zeleña with the rest of the country is crucial to the government and television will certainly be an important tool.

Selected areas of broadcast

Today, Sistema Sandinista has a staff of 230, most of whom like the director of *Diciembre Victorioso*, garnered their experience in advertising. This training ground of course fosters its own particular orientation to the medium. Nevertheless, Sistema Sandinista is very certain about the role of television in Nicaragua: it must be used to raise consciousness and not to manipulate.

But first, contact must be made. Up until 1979, television broadcasts reached only selected areas of the country. Sr. Cortéz: "Our TV was oriented toward consumption and advertising and was restricted to the major centres of consumption: Managua, the capital; to the south, Rivas; and in the North as far as Leon. Originally, the north of Nicaragua might pick up Honduran Television and the south, signals from Costa Rica. On the Atlantic coast, there was nothing at all. Mexico gave us a transmitter which allowed us to reach Estelí (in the north) and then we got



Richard Fung

(left) The storming of the mansion re-enacted for *Diciembre Victorioso* and (right) an SST mobile crew on assignment.

another to cover Bluefields."

Where there is TV reception it seems to be extremely popular. I saw sets like shrines in very poor homes. The audience seemed omnivorous, gobbling up the sometimes alarming combinations with equal relish: CTV's *Stars on Ice* followed by exhortative anti-imperialist poetry by Ernesto Cardenal followed by promo tapes of the Jackson Five.

The search for alternate news sources

Understanding that American products are loaded with their own ideology, SST is working to locate alternate sources of programming, especially on world problems, this is their first priority. "We lived so long in complete underdevelopment under the dictatorship that we have no vision of the world. Vietnam didn't happen for us. Even many of our people working in newspapers here knew nothing of the modern world at all. Now we're talking about Internationalism and it is something we have to learn from scratch. For example, when Fidel Castro spoke last summer, everyone had heard he was a monster. They were so surprised when they saw on TV that he was just an ordinary man."

The programs produced by Nicaraguans tend to be about themselves and their country, subject matter which was unexplored until the present time. These local productions are seen mainly during station breaks: some are interesting, such as profiles of the Revolution; others featuring shaky pans of national beauty spots or the inevitable video feedback. Most Nicaraguan shows have a fresh grass roots feel, not unlike good community television programming in Canada. *Cara del Pueblo* (*Face of the People*) is a good example of this. Each week members of the Junta go to different areas to attend public meetings where they hear questions

and criticisms. The resulting material is then broadcast on both channels.

SST's pride, the *Sandinista News*, is a very well produced package with an admirable if sometimes lengthy amount of local footage. Sr. Sortéz explained that this local focus is partly intentional and partly a result of their limited access to other news sources. "It's hard for us to get images since we can't afford to buy them from the multinational news corporations. We tried to make arrangements with them to buy what we could but they couldn't agree. Mexico is now helping with visual material and we have just signed an agreement with West Germany. As well, we receive news news from ANN, AP, Prensa Latina, TASS, and others."

Financing through advertising

To finance the large amount of foreign purchasing, SST relies completely on advertising. But there are political limits to what advertisers will sponsor. While private companies prefer to advertise on the American programs, most locally produced broadcasts are supported by advertising from state-owned corporations.

Looking positively at the managerial aspects of this situation, Sr. Cortéz said: "We feel it's healthy that the System has to operate as a company. We think it generates a better spirit, that this is an enterprise and it must be run that way."

If this somewhat entrepreneurial approach seems surprising it must be remembered that the goals of the revolution were democratic and anti-imperialist but not socialist in nature. The extravagant greed and cruelty of Somoza and his national guard even managed to alienate a substantial section of the national bourgeoisie. In the end, both the Conservatives and part of Somoza's own Liberal Party, called for his defeat though of course it was the worker/

peasant-oriented FSLN that actually fought and won the war.

Undeniably, Nicaragua's exploited classes have made tremendous gains and the FSLN now holds political power. But while Somoza's former holdings have been nationalized (land, electrical power facilities, the television stations, etc.), the major productive part of the economy is still in private hands, and operates as such. After a unified movement to overthrow the Dictator, open class struggle in Nicaragua is just beginning.

At this juncture, the FSLN finds itself in the position of trying to defend the interests of the proletariat against the interests of the bourgeoisie, while simultaneously trying to unite with this same bourgeoisie in the interests of national reconstruction. All this in the face of US embargos and intrigue by right-wing forces within the country.

The FSLN alliance with progressive catholic forces undoubtedly legitimize them for many workers and peasants who on the other hand would never stand behind a 'communist' organization. This facilitated Somoza's defeat but definitely restrains the development of overt socialist trends by the government. Though the FSLN's popularity with the workers and peasants is unquestionable, the political direction of Nicaragua is by no means set. It seems that all Nicaraguan state companies and organizations face this contradiction in direction. They move ahead tentatively having no real models to imitate, and change is in the air.

In the fall of 1980, I spoke with Fernando Cardenal when he visited Toronto. Cardenal was in charge of Nicaragua's great literacy campaign. I remember him saying: "The first word we teach the people is 'Revolution' because it is the most important word. It has changed our lives and has made it possible for us to learn to read and write." In reaching the goal of a national television penetration, the Nicaraguan revolution continues. ■