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**Net Neutrality Repeal:
Another Rock On The Road Of A Suffering Music Genre**

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Report

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Dedication

To my mom and dad, for providing me with love, roots and wings to succeed. To my sister, for always showing great support. To my grandma and aunts, for encouraging me to pursue my dreams, no matter how crazy they seemed. To my cousins, for being extended brothers. To Renita Coleman, Rosental Alves, R.B. Brenner, and all my professors at the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, for providing me with a world-class education. And to all the angels who appeared on my path to help me one way or another in order to make this adventure a life-changing experience.

Abstract

Net Neutrality Repeal: Another Rock On The Road Of A Suffering Music Genre

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In December 2017, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to reverse Net Neutrality laws, which prohibited Internet service providers from blocking content, throttling speeds or charging more for faster Internet. Repealing that regulation will have multiple effects in all industries that use the Internet, music included. Experts believe that without Net Neutrality, independent artists will struggle to distribute their music and promote their careers.

In Texas, Tejano music is a genre that is especially vulnerable to the Net Neutrality repeal since it lacks sufficient radio support, publicists, media coverage and other basic elements needed to succeed in the music industry. The Internet has been the main means by which the genre has managed to survive for the last decade.

But, the Tejano music community maintains a ray of optimism that it will overcome this obstacle, just as it has done with a whole series of adversities that have kept this Texas roots music in danger of extinction.

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Tejano musicians fear effects of Net Neutrality repeal; devise plans to overcome.

Piper LeMoine was determined to have her voice heard. As a long-time Tejano music fan, she was concerned that for a second time in its history the already disadvantaged genre could suffer a big blow because of a government ruling.

When LeMoine heard that the Net Neutrality rules enacted in 2015 could be repealed, she feared it would hurt the independent artists who use the Internet as their main platform to promote and distribute their work. And that included Tejano artists, a community that has relied on the web for over a decade as their only means to survive.

In December 2017, the Federal Communications Commission, lead by President Donald Trump's appointee Ajit Pai, voted 3 to 2 to reverse former President Barack Obama's Net Neutrality laws, which prohibit Internet service providers -the companies to which users pay a fee to access the Internet- from blocking content, throttling speeds or charging extra fees for faster Internet lanes.

Being a web developer, LeMoine, who has lived in Austin for two decades, believes that letting ISPs charge higher fees for services like streaming and social media would be a huge impediment for independent artists trying to build their careers.

LeMoine and former DJ and Tejano music expert Baldomero Frank Cuellar run Rancho Alegre Radio, an Austin-based nonprofit which since 2013 has been dedicated to preserving and promoting Tejano music through the

digitalization of analog records and interviews with artists and important figures of the genre.

They wrote a letter to Pai and the FCC commissioners on behalf of the entire Tejano music community. In their November 28 letter, they explained how the Internet saved the genre from disappearing after the loss of terrestrial Tejano radio stations in the early 2000s.

“I had to say something,” LeMoine said. “A lot of the people that either are musicians in the genre, or that own online radio stations, or just fans, they need to know that this could affect them.”

But despite the Net Neutrality repeal threatening independent artists of all genres, the Tejano music community in Austin holds a ray of hope that they will overcome this obstacle, just as they have done with a whole series of adversities that have kept the genre in danger of extinction for more than a decade.

Tejano, a key piece in the Texas music culture

Tejano belongs to a group of American music genres born in Texas, that also include conjunto and orquesta. Those three types are commonly grouped as Tex-Mex music, due to their origin in Northern Mexico and Texas.

Conjunto, Spanish for “group,” is the oldest of the three, born in the 19th century from a mix of German, Polish and Czech rhythms brought by immigrants to Texas, and traditional Mexican music. It’s considered a working-class kind of music, in which accordion and bajo sexto are the main instruments. Some of its big figures include conjunto pioneer Narciso Martínez and San Antonio legend “Flaco” Jiménez.

The influence of blues and jazz in the 1950s and 1960s, and the addition of many more instruments gave way to orquesta, “orchestra” in Spanish, which became popular among the upper classes that enjoyed dances in big ballrooms.

Meanwhile, the arrival of synthesizers, and the influence of rock, R&B and country led to the foundation of Tejano in the 1970s and 1980s, aimed to the middle class that was also part of the workforce but could afford going to nightclubs or buying Tejano albums.

“An analogy would be that conjunto is to Tejano what blues is to rock,” said LeMoine in their letter to the FCC. “These genres are deeply important to Mexican Americans all over the country, but especially in Texas.”

Tejano saw its popularity peak in the 1990s when artists like Selena Quintanilla, “The Queen of Tejano,” Emilio Navaira, and David Lee Garza reached nation-wide success. They had big record deals and airplay all over the

country. At that time, there were radio stations playing Tejano and conjunto in almost every city in Texas, according to LeMoine.

But in 1996, the FCC passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which, among other things, allowed the ownership of multiple media businesses by a person or corporation. In the field of radio broadcasting, the law increased the number of stations that one company could own to eight.

Locally owned radio stations of all genres sold their frequencies to big conglomerates. In Austin, most radio stations suffered minimal format changes with their new owners, but for Tejano radio stations, there was a little bit more of a twist.

“These companies bought the Tejano frequencies and changed the format to another Spanish language genre,” LeMoine said. “They either changed to norteño or Mexican regional. And for some reason, they felt like the existing audience wouldn’t know the difference. It’s in Spanish after all.”

Norteño is the typical music of Northern Mexico. It is similar in instruments to conjunto, but it usually has a faster beat. Its biggest names, such as Los Tigres del Norte, Intocable or Los Tucanes de Tijuana, are known for their matching flashy suits.

By the time of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, there were at least 10 radio stations playing Tejano or conjunto in Austin, according to media reports. By mid-2000s, that number went down to zero. After many efforts from the Tejano music community, the genre returned to the airwaves in 2007 through KOKE 1600 AM, which is the only Tejano terrestrial station in Austin.

“Unfortunately, Tejano music has rarely received the national attention it deserves,” said Gary Hartman, director of the Texas State University’s Center for Texas Music History. “For most of the past two centuries, it’s mostly been limited to Mexican-American and Latin-American audiences. Other than a few brief periods, Tejano has not been adequately recognized by the mainstream media.”

Forced to be DIY artists

Without terrestrial Tejano radio stations, the youngest generation of Tejano artists could be the most affected by the Net Neutrality repeal. They are the ones who are taking real advantage of the web to distribute their music via streaming, and to promote themselves, which is basically ensuring the permanence of the genre, said LeMoine.

Ashley Borrero is a young performer from Austin, whose career pretty much depends on her social media skills.

“It’s harder for us to get our name out there,” Borrero said. “You do very much have to rely on the Internet. You have to target the different people that you want to see your music, or to have certain connections. That’s the only way that you can get others to see your posts and to see your music.”

Borrero has been singing since 2011, when she joined the Angel Gonzalez y Vimana band as a backup singer, right after winning the local “Tejano Idol” contest. In 2014, she started performing with her own band: Ashley Borrero and The Boys.

She describes her style as “an eclectic mix,” with a repertoire that includes covers of artists ranging from the San Antonio-based band La Diferenzia and Selena, to Taylor Swift and Carlos Santana.

Borrero has recorded three singles independently, under the production of Grammy Award-winning Tejano legends Rick Fuentes and Mario Vigil. Her newest and first original song, “No Vuelvo a San Antonio” (I Won’t Go Back to San Antonio), was released in March this year. The only way people can listen to her song is through digital platforms or on her website.

“They haven’t played it on the [Tejano] AM radio station that we have here in Austin,” Borrero said. “Austin performers have it even harder, because there are [terrestrial] Tejano radio stations, but most of them are in Houston, Dallas, Corpus, and San Antonio.”

Borrero’s family has been involved in the Tejano community for many years. Her father, Mike Borrero, runs his own Tex-Mex web radio station. She knows that people won’t automatically find her music on Spotify or YouTube without any previous media exposure.

“I have had a couple of people from online radio stations just today reaching out to me and say ‘hey, email us your new song and we will start playing it for you’,” she said. “There are many Internet radio stations that I have made connections with over the years. You definitely have to work that kind of magic a little bit in order to get your music out there.”

Borrero knows firsthand the importance of social media for success. She has a full-time job in an online content marketing corporation, where she helps companies build web strategies to get their products seen. And she applies the same logic to her singing career.

“You got to know what to do, how to pitch yourself out there,” Borrero said. “I’ve been reading up on how to use the tools that we have, that for us they are free, to take your business, wherever it may be, to the next level.”

The lack of support from music labels or agents has forced new Tejano artists to take the responsibility of not only going on stage to perform, but also

handling their own gig bookings, promoting their music and administering their social media accounts.

Stephanie Bergara is the founder and lead singer of the Austin-based group Bidi Bidi Banda. Four years ago, she invited some Tejano musicians to join her on a one-time performance to honor Selena Quintanilla. She posted a picture of herself dressed up as the late singer on Instagram, and the result was unexpected.

The photo created such an excitement among the Selena's fans that the performance was a huge success. What was supposed to be an act for a single night became a band that this year commemorates four years of celebrating Selena's legacy.

“Without the Internet, it would have been impossible for it to take off,” Bergara said. “It’s one of these things where you have to be able to show to a lot of people in a very short period of time what you are planning on doing, and the use of the Internet and social media was the easiest way for it to be done.”

Bergara had six years of experience in the music industry, working as a booking agent, manager, and publicist for non-Tejano bands. That knowledge helped Bidi Bidi Banda reach an unexpected mainstream success that few Tejano artists achieve nowadays.

“I have music industry experience for a more mainstream aspect,” Bergara said. “I took that and applied it to a Tejano band. I don’t think that makes us better, I just think it makes our perspective different.”

This year, Bidi Bidi Banda were recognized with an Austin Music Award and were part of the official lineup of the 2018 South By Southwest festival, where Tejano has had a very small presence in recent years. They have also been featured in a PBS documentary, and been interviewed by multiple statewide media outlets.

“It would be silly to say that I wasn’t trying to pursue any sort of mainstream success,” Bergara said. “I think that the Tejano music community could stand to do a lot more to pay attention to mainstream marketing trends. The original theory behind promoting Tejano music is stuck in the 1990s.”

Borrero and Bergara agree that Tejano music is not dying, but is evolving. They also believe that the Internet and good marketing efforts are essential to assure the genre’s future.

“Technology and social media are not going anywhere, and it’s just becoming more prominent. If we don’t accept that and take advantage of it, then Tejano music will die,” Borrero said.

Bidi Bidi Banda is a tribute band, so they don’t record music and they can’t sell merchandise, which is under copyright by Selena’s estate. Their only source of income is live performances, which they promote only through social media.

If new Internet fees arise as an effect of the Net Neutrality repeal, the band said they would be willing to make the effort to cover them, but they also agree that it would be a direct blow to the Tejano genre.

“Taking Tejano music away from the worldwide web outlet or making it more difficult to access would only hurt the people who still love Tejano music,”

Bergara said. “It would make it even harder to discover it. If Tejano music starts to become less affordable, then it does start dying.”

KOKE 1600 AM: A reminiscence of Tejano terrestrial radio

Joe Morales sits behind the microphone at the KOKE 1600 AM small studio in North Austin. He sips coffee from the cup on his desk, while he reads the script he is about to announce live.

“You are listening to KOKE 1600 AM. The best of Tejano music in town,” he says as he starts his daily 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. shift.

Morales’ deep voice has become a symbol of Tex-Mex music in Texas. With more than 20 years in Tejano radio, he is for many the official voice of Tejano music. He has seen the ups and downs of the genre, and he was there when the Telecommunications Act of 1996 lead to the disappearance of Tejano on terrestrial radio in Austin.

Morales, who is also KOKE’s general manager, works with Joe Garcia, owner of the station. They both are aware of the Net Neutrality repeal’s threat to free and open Internet, but unlike others within the Tejano music community, they don’t see it as a menace for their business simply because the Internet presence of their station is minimal.

“KOKE is a family-owned station,” Piper LeMoine said. “They don’t stream, they don’t even have a website. They barely have a Facebook group page. They are as old-school as you can get, in terms of using the Internet. So they won’t be affected by this [Net Neutrality repeal].”

Sticking to a traditional terrestrial radio business model has worked well for KOKE. They have had a loyal audience among Hispanic Austinites for several decades, but struggle to reach a young population. And that’s not because new

generations don't want to listen to Tejano music, but because most of them simply don't have an AM radio receiver to tune into the station.

"I have told some of my friends and fans, 'I'm doing an interview at KOKE'," said Tejano singer Ashley Borrero. "And they are like 'where can we listen, where can we stream it?' I told them, 'Well, you can't'."

Being an AM station means that their reach is limited and their signal is prone to interference.

"It's frustrating for fans because there are some parts of town where you can't listen to it," said LeMoine. "That's where streaming would help them."

In a time when the ownership of radio receivers among 18-to-34-year-olds has decreased from 94 percent in 2008 to 68 percent in 2016, according to the Infinite Dial report by Edison Research, an online strategy could seem the obvious next step for any radio station. But for Garcia, it doesn't make much sense.

"Our radio listenership tends to be an older audience," Garcia said. "People are doing it because they believe that that's where the technology is headed, but it hasn't gotten there. If you see the Grammys, they always say the same thing: 'listen to radio.' They never say 'listen to the Internet'. They congratulate the radio stations for helping out for promoting the music."

Garcia's ancestors were pioneers in Hispanic radio in Texas. His father, Jose Jaime Garcia Sr., started his career as a broadcaster in Austin in 1952. He later founded Austin's first Spanish-only radio station in 1976: KMXX 102.3 FM, which now plays hip-hop and is known as The Beat KPEZ.

“Back then, in the 1950s, we had a very small Hispanic population in Austin,” Morales said. “Percentage wise, not even eight percent was Hispanic.”

Then the Hispanic population increased to the 34.5 percent of the total Austin population that it represents today, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. By the end of the 1990s, a big part of that Hispanic portion consisted of new arrival immigrants, meaning people who speak predominantly Spanish and keep traditions from their home country, including music preferences.

That is why, when the big media conglomerates acquired the locally owned radio stations in the early 2000s, they switched formats to other Spanish language genres, such as Mexican regional, norteño and Latin pop.

“The mega operators here in Texas decided that there was more money to be made on the Mexican language radio stations,” Garcia said. “They saw it because you go to a Tejano dance and the price is 10-15 bucks. But you go to a Mexican dance and it’s 35 to 45 bucks. So it was that derogative, if people are willing to pay more, then we can get more, so they focused on them.”

Suddenly, the Texas-born genres had to compete with other Hispanic rhythms that were much more popular, not only in Texas, but nationwide and in Mexico.

“Some artists switched from Tejano to norteño, like Intocable, because the market is so much stronger, and they have radio stations of those genres,” said LeMoine. “That’s another reason why online Tejano stations are so important. Having an online stream is the only place where you can really be yourself.”

In 2008, Garcia founded the Encino Broadcasting company with the purpose of repurchasing KOKE 1600 AM from Border Media Partners, the conglomerate that had acquired the station four years before. By then, several web-based radio stations had started to attract the Tejano fanbase. However, Garcia doesn't consider them a real competition for his station.

"It's a micro audience for them," Garcia said. "They have tried to put up events and they have all failed. When we do an event, it's usually a big event, like what we do at the rodeo: There were 1,200 one night and 1,500 the next night. It was packed."

While ratings are important, KOKE's executives measure success with attendance at the music events and revenue from their advertisers, which include Latino nightclubs, restaurants, attorneys, and mechanic garages.

"For advertisers, our product happens to be Tejano, and we are the only chocolate bar in the marketplace," Morales said. "We found the niche to target the Mexican-American, that speaks predominantly English but loves Spanish language music."

KOKE started last year a process of restructuring and expansion. They moved to their new studios on Parkfield Drive and are in the process of acquiring a translator to broadcast in FM. But the possibility of opening up to the Internet is not officially part of their plans yet.

"Radio stations in general may be dying out," said Hartman, the music historian. "Switching over to the Internet isn't necessarily a negative thing. In fact, you can reach a global audience that way. So, the Internet could actually expand the market for Tejano."

If your favorite radio station is gone, make one yourself

Mike Borrero stopped by his tuxedo store in southeast Austin, late at night. He and his friend and then-employee Manny Vasquez needed to finish work for some Mike's Formal Wear's customers. They wanted to do it the way they always had: to the rhythm of Tejano music.

It was 2007, when people still consumed their favorite music from CDs, but also from the first models of iPods. However, terrestrial radio was still the main source of music for people in their 40s, Borrero's age back then.

"Turn on the radio, Manny," said Borrero while sitting on his tailor table, in the back of his shop.

"How am I supposed to get it, Mike?" Vasquez replied. "They don't have our radio station anymore, remember?"

KTXZ 1560 AM, the last remaining Tejano music station in Austin, had been taken off the airwaves a few months before, after a slow process that started in 2004, in which traditional family-owned radio stations were sold to big corporations.

The shutdown of dozens of Tejano music stations in Texas was the biggest blow that the genre had experienced since the decline started in the late 1990s, after Selena Quintanilla was murdered in 1995.

Tejano artists tried their luck with norteño or country, while publicists and agents abandoned Tejano singers to represent musicians of more popular genres. Consequently, mainstream media stopped covering Tejano, and soon the Texas-rooted genre's presence was reduced to an underground scene.

But then the Internet came to the rescue.

“Hey, Manny,” said Borrero that night to his employee. “You are a DJ, right? You have lots of Tejano music. Why don’t we start our own radio station on the Internet?”

Back then, online radio had registered more listeners in the United States than satellite radio, HD radio, and podcasts combined, according to a Bloomberg’s 2007 report. As Internet and mobile devices were becoming more accessible, creating web-based radio stations started being relatively cheap and easy.

Borrero and Vasquez founded PureTejanoRadio.com. The goal was not only to give Tejano music an outlet, but also to create a way to promote his and other Hispanic community businesses.

For almost a decade, Borrero has run PureTejanoRadio.com in the back of his tuxedo shop, surrounded by racks of jackets, ties and shirts. He streams not only Tejano music, but also conjunto, cumbias and other kinds of music under the Tex-Mex umbrella. Two computers, an audio mixer, a microphone, and a pair of headphones are all the equipment he needs.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, of Puerto Rican father and Mexican mother, Borrero arrived in Austin at the age of six months. He has been involved in Tejano music since he was 12, while growing up in East Austin. His brother, Felipe Borrero, plays big band style Tejano music with his band Tiburon, and he has recorded with legends of the genre such as Ruben Ramos and Little Joe.

Borrero spends long hours at Mike's Formal Wear. When he's not fixing a suit for a client or ironing a new tuxedo, he sits in front of the microphone and talks to the PureTejanoRadio.com audience. His listeners know him as DJ Tuxedo Mike.

"We have people from Quebec, Canada; from Warsaw, Poland; from Buenos Aires," Borrero said. "People hit me from all over, they ask me to play songs. I have from viejitos (seniors) to very young people."

Like Borrero's, many web-based Tejano radio stations arose all around Texas after the decline of Tejano terrestrial radio stations. ChicanoExpress.com, HotTejano.com, CompadresMusic.com, and BNetRadio.com are some of the most popular that are still online nowadays. Many of them do it as a hobby, without pursuing revenue.

"We don't want to make a profit, we just want to share this music," Borrero said. "We want to bring people in and help them to rediscover Tejano music. We do it for free, out of our pocket, for passion."

In order to broadcast, an online radio station simply requires a computer, an Internet connection with decent bandwidth, and a streaming service such as Radio.Co, Virtual DJ, or Sam Broadcaster, whose subscription rates range from free to \$99 a month.

"If you have got a laptop and you have your catalog of music, you can set up an online radio station now and play whatever you want," said LeMoine. "It's insanely easy at this point."

Borrero and Vasquez spend around \$250 a month to keep PureTejanoRadio.com online, including the Internet bill and the broadcaster subscription. Because they don't make a profit out of it, they don't have to pay royalties for the music they stream.

Their station can be heard through its website, but the TuneIn app -- for mobile devices -- is the main way people listen. In almost a decade, PureTejanoRadio.com has 90,000 followers on TuneIn.

"Internet radio has helped Tejano music because it allows new artists to emerge, and even old artists that we haven't heard from," said Manny Vasquez. "I know it wasn't just us, there were other radio stations too. It helped to get artists exposed. Music is still being produced, and it's still moving, progressing, especially when it's not a mainstream genre anymore, you don't get that help from mainstream radio."

Vasquez is the technical mind behind PureTejanoRadio.com. He does IT work for a medical nonprofit as a full-time job, but in his free time he becomes DJ Rysk and plays his favorite Tejano hits for the web audience.

As a tech-savvy person, he is aware that the Net Neutrality repeal could affect PureTejanoRadio.com, in terms of potentially being charged more for good quality bandwidth and other services. However, he also trusts that the series of appeal lawsuits that are being filed in at least 21 states over the FCC decision will have a positive effect before April 23, when the repeal is scheduled to take effect.

"I was aware, I even watched the meeting where they voted," Vasquez said. "I am really not too worried about it, I am hoping that it gets reversed by that time, or in few months."

In case the new ruling has an impact in their bills, Borrero said they would be willing to deal with it and find a way to keep PureTejanoRadio.com online. Even if they had to pay more, to keep Tejano music alive will be worth the effort.

“We are not going to stop, even if we have to pay a little bit more. We will find ways, we’ll get creative,” Borrero said. “You lose money when it’s a losing effort. I am not losing, I am making somebody happy, and somebody is benefiting, right? So if it’s a benefit, it’s a plus. So I’m not losing money.”

Borrero is aware that the Net Neutrality repeal could aggravate the situation of Tejano music, but he is clear to say that the genre is not dying.

“I never say that it’s dying, I never use negative terms,” he said. “It’s alive, it’s evolving. It’s everywhere. It’s not about the genre, it’s a cultura. That’s what people don’t understand.”

Hartman agrees Tejano music will still exist within the Mexican-American culture. It may or may not have the mainstream success that it enjoyed in the 1990s, but he believes that Tejano will still draw from the same Mexican folk roots it always has.

“All musical genres are constantly evolving, as they absorb other influences and as audience tastes and technology change,” Hartman said. “Tejano is still quite popular throughout Texas, but mainly within the Mexican-American community. Most Anglo Texans and others are not very aware of it. However, it has risen to prominence a few times in the past and will probably do so again.”

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