

## **Media and Migrant Civil Society**

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## **Abstract:**

US-Mexican Mexican bi-nationality is assumed is assumed in the production of much of US Spanish language media. Mexican migrants are the primary consumers of these media, according to media executives and market research studies. As such, Mexican migrants are a valued audience, and a commercially viable product of the US media marketplace. *Univisión* and *Telemundo*, as well as *La Opinión* and *El Nuevo Herald*, and smaller neighborhood or community based newspapers are also political actors helping shape the civic agendas of their migrant communities. Because many migrants do not speak English, Spanish language media is a key link to the world outside their personal spheres. The content of these media is essentially different than that of general market, English language US media, offering coverage of Latin America for example, that is not found elsewhere. Additionally, many migrant media are service oriented. These activities include sponsoring voter registration drives and workshops designed to help undocumented migrants regularize their US immigration status.

## **Resumen**

La binacionalidad mexicana y mexicoestadounidense es un supuesto para la mayor parte de los medios de habla española en los Estados Unidos. De acuerdo con los estudios de mercadeo y los ejecutivos de estos medios, el inmigrante mexicano es el principal consumidor de estos últimos. Por lo mismo, se le considera un auditorio muy valorado y un producto comercialmente viable dentro del mercado de los medios estadounidenses. Medios como *Univisión* y *Telemundo*, así como *La Opinión* y *El Nuevo Herald* y periódicos de carácter más local también son actores políticos que contribuyen a dar forma a las agendas cívicas de sus comunidades de inmigrantes. Debido a que muchos inmigrantes no hablan inglés, los medios de habla española son fundamentales para que puedan vincularse con el mundo exterior. Dichos medios contienen información diferente a la del mercado estadounidense en general, pues, entre otras, cubren particularmente a América Latina, cosa que los demás no suelen hacer. Pero, además, muchos medios que tienen en mente al migrante proporcionan información acerca de servicios, como procesos de empadronamiento electoral y talleres que buscan apoyar la regularización de los inmigrantes indocumentados en los Estados Unidos.

## **Essay:**

US-Mexican bi-nationality is assumed in the production of much of US Spanish language media and Mexican migrants are, according to media corporate executives, the principal consumers of US Spanish language media—newspapers and magazines, radio, music, and television. The transformation of these largely working class Mexican men, women and children into a commercially viable product, a valued audience and the economic center of the Hispanic Market, is the topic of the part one of this essay. Part two focuses on the content of these media, and the ways in which these media are political actors.

The target audience and media content are not separable. Rather they interact, conceptually and materially, in the production of media. Part Three considers one of the most famous Mexican migrants in the United States, *Noticiero Univisión* co-anchor Jorge Ramos. The fourth part of the essay analyzes the limitations and potentialities of US Spanish language media's role in the creation of a US-Mexican civic bi-nationality. The essay concludes with suggestions for further research.

First, a few words about the economic structures of the US media market place. As the marketing director of a US Spanish language television network once said to me, "We sell eyeballs." In other words, what media firms sell in the marketplace is the attention of their audiences. Of course, not all eyeballs are created equal. In this era of digital television and radio production, and transnational satellite transmission, it may seem odd that the US media market values a Mexican migrant audience. However, seen from the point of view of the US media industry, Mexican migrant workers are an easily "targetable" mass audience. Their use of Spanish and settlement in particular neighborhoods makes them, in media industry terms, an "efficient" audience, worthy of investment.

This has not always been the case. In 1947, KCOR-AM, San Antonio, Texas, one the first full-time US Spanish language radio stations, was threatened by a lack of advertising. It was marginally sustained by ads from migrant owned bakeries and *bodegas*, but its Anglo owners wanted to attract general market advertising as well. In order for this to happen, KCOR needed to prove not only that the migrant audience existed, but that it existed as economic actors in the Anglo marketplace. So KCOR program hosts asked its listeners to send in box tops and empty containers. With these as proof of the audience's existence, mainstream advertisers began buying more advertising time, and the station began turning a profit--with its Spanish language format. KCOR is today the top rated of all San Antonio radio stations, both English and Spanish language.

In its earliest decades and continuing today, KCOR programmers have deliberately positioned the radio station as social and political advocate for its migrant audience, mixing regional Mexican music with public service oriented news and talk shows. Throughout the twentieth century, bi-national Spanish language newspapers were published along the US Mexico border. Similarly, San Antonio's *La Prensa* (which was first published in 1915 and continues publication today) reported news about the Mexican as well as the US governments. It was sustained by US and Mexican advertisers: immigration lawyers, telegraph companies, and dry goods makers. Its voice was angry as it reported abuses of migrants by US authorities. Like other newspapers of the period, it was also a direct political actor, organizing public demonstrations and petitioning the Mexican consulate for assistance.

Latino journalism is interwoven into the dynamism of immigration and of the reception of migrants have received in the US. Historically and today, this journalism has played a political and cultural role maintaining a link with Mexico, while at the same time assisting the process of adaptation to life in the US. These transnational characteristics

make it part of the globalization of culture and simultaneously, distant it from much of US general market media.

A major turning point in the production and selling of the US Spanish language media audience occurred in 1986 when *Univisión*, the largest US Spanish language television network signed a \$20 million contract with the A.C. Nielsen company, the most important audience measurement firm in the US and globally, to survey its audience. Using the then new ‘people meter’ technology, the Nielsen’s quantified the Hispanic audience in language the US media industry understood. “The Nielsen’s are our bible,” said a US Spanish language network manager. As the Nielsen’s quantified the Hispanic audience, it legitimated it.

The semi annual Nielsen audience measurements (or ‘sweeps’) have shown consistently that about half of Spanish language television viewers speak ‘only’ or ‘mostly’ Spanish at home. While self-reported language use is not a fail-safe measure of audience (much less its migratory patterns or societal status), it is one of the few pieces of quantitative data available. I offer it with these qualifications.

Today, in addition to 2 principal Spanish language television networks (*Univisión* and *Telemundo*) and their affiliates, there are 14 US Spanish language daily newspapers, some 400 Spanish language radio stations, and scores of weekly or monthly publications. “There’s a myth that Latinos don’t read. We’re here to shatter that myth,” says Javier Adalpe, publisher of Dallas’ *Diario La Estrella*, which is owned by the Dallas Morning News.

While today most major advertising and marketing firms have a ‘Hispanic’ division, contemporary Spanish language media marketers say they still need to ‘sell’ the notion of a migrant Spanish language audience. However “targetable” the migrant audiences might be, their relatively lower disposable income (relative to the general market as well as to the larger Hispanic market) makes them less attractive to advertisers. Hispanic media advertising rates remain significantly below those of the general market.

The relatively large size of the migrant audience, the number of migrant “eyeballs,” and the development of ‘narrowcasting’ distribution technologies have opportunistically reduced any class, language or racially based dismissal of the market value of the US migrant audience. Spanish language radio is top ranked in terms of the number of listeners in Los Angeles, San Antonio and Denver. Another measure of the migrant audience’s value to the US media industry can be seen in major US media industries investments in Spanish language media. Time Warner, CNN, NBC, ESPN and MTV for example, have all purchased or created US Spanish language media properties in the last decade. Knight Ridder, the second largest US newspaper chain has joined large metropolitan dailies like the Dallas Morning News, the Chicago Tribune and the New York Daily News in publishing Spanish language newspapers.

2.

Historically, the great majority of US Spanish language television content was produced in Mexico, in blatant disregard of US communications law which prohibits “foreign” ownership of US broadcast stations. From the 1920’s and continuing through the mid 1980’s, US Spanish language radio and television firms imported Televisa novelas and other programming. Televisa’s US division went by the unfortunate acronym SIN, (Spanish International Network). For most of the twentieth century SIN, a transnational radio and television media system, was owned by Emilio Azcárraga. He was succeeded by his son Emilio Azcárraga Milmo. Today, the grandson of the broadcast pioneer is the principal individual owner of *Univisión*, Emilio Azcárraga Jean. In 2003 the Federal Communications Commission approved the merger of *Univisión*, and the largest US Spanish language radio network, prompting criticism from many Latino activists who feel that *Univisión* now has monopolistic control of US Spanish language broadcasting.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries virtually all of Spanish language radio and television programming available to migrants in the US was identical to that available to them in Mexico. This programming included musical performances, radio novelas and telenovelas, as well as Televisa produced news. Today, more than half of the US Spanish language television networks’ programming is imported. The remainder is produced by in the US, and is then exported to Latin America.

News programs are the second most watched programs after the *telenovelas*—both nationally and locally. US Spanish language journalism, whether print or broadcast, has an ideology and agenda that, in broad strokes, is similar to that of the general market journalism. That is, it is rarely is critical of the US market economy, or the US form of representative democracy. That said, the topics of US Spanish language journalism are significantly different from US English language news broadcasts.

A content analysis comparing the *Noticiero Univisión* (*Univisión*’s nightly national newscast) and ABC’s *World News Tonight* shows that while Univision routinely gave over about half of its broadcast minutes to news of Latin America, ABC spent about one percent of its time on Latin American news. Similarly, while the *Noticiero* spent 30 percent of its time on news related to US Latinos, ABC gave 2 percent of its newscast to news in which Latinos were the journalistic subject. These proportions are roughly true for other US Spanish language media, such as the US Spanish language daily newspapers Los Angeles’ *La Opinión*, or Miami’s *El Nuevo Herald*. Journalism, like other media, is produced for specific audiences and communities of interest.

How are migrants presented in these media? Again, a broad comparison with US English language television news is telling. The very few times that migrants appeared on ABC news, they were portrayed as law breakers or other ‘problem people.’ In US Spanish language media Mexican migrants were most often presented in a heroic light, focusing on the sacrifices made in their US immigration.

The specific example of US Spanish language media’s response to IRCA, the Immigration and Reform Act of 1986 illustrates this point. IRCA resulted in the

“legalization,” or granting of resident status to about 3 million mostly Mexican migrants. *Univisión* and its local affiliates gave virtually daily coverage to this legislation in its news programs. These media sponsored voter registration campaigns and public education, as well as attorney staffed information booths at outdoor festivals and grocery stores frequented by migrants, such as Texas’ Fiesta markets.

From an economic point of view, US Spanish language media’s interest in legalizing its audience is clear: it wants to facilitate changing a mobile “migrant” audience into a more permanent “American” audience. But Spanish language media isn’t interested in homogenizing or bleaching its audience, much less encouraging it to lose its Spanish. Rather, they are interested in helping its migrant audience stay in the US. Many Spanish language media companies promote legalizing their migrant audiences and more broadly, implicitly re-identify them as Mexican-Americans, Hispanics and US Latinos.

At one level, this is accomplished by portraying migrants, and the sons and daughters of migrants, as active members of US civil society. Whether as city council, school board or Congressional representatives, Latino elected officials are prominently, and usually positively, featured in migrant media. More concretely, many of these newspapers and television stations produce advice columns for migrants looking to regularize their legal status in the U.S., or apply for government benefits.

3.

Jorge Ramos is the co-anchor of Univision’s nightly news cast. He was born and educated in Mexico and came to the United States as a young adult to pursue a journalism career—something that he felt was not possible in the Mexico in the 1970’s when Mexico ruling party, the PRI, routinely censored journalism that was in the slightest way critical of the government. In addition to his *Univisión* work, Ramos writes a weekly column that is published in 30 newspapers, including English language dailies, as well as *La Reforma* in Mexico City. He also broadcasts a daily radio commentary on dozens of US and Mexican radio stations.

Ramos has published a book, titled (in its English translation) *The Other America: Chronicles of the Immigrants Shaping Our Future* (Rayo, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 2002). The “our” of the title is bi-national; it is a collection of vignettes of Mexican migrants and their lives in the US. While Border Patrol officers and former California Governor Pete Wilson are present, they are clearly not the heroes of the stories. That position is reserved for migrants like Amelia, who worked for two years to save enough money for the trek to *el norte*, then several more years as a maid in Los Angeles, so that she could send for her children.

“I am telling you Amelia’s story because there are millions like her in the United States. I was surprised when Mr. Wilson, using warlike terminology, said that California was in a state of siege because of the undocumented immigrants, and

the face that I associate with that group was Amelia's. Why did Pete Wilson want to wage war against that woman?" (p.11)

This is the tone of the *Univisión*'s nightly newscasts. But Ramos and many US Spanish language journalists reject the label "advocacy journalism." Rather, they emphasize the inclusiveness of their journalism. In their reporting on the US, they deliberately and self consciously include US Latinos as civic actors: elected officials and members of the Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, as well as untitled migrants. Migrants are regularly featured in 'man on the street' interviews, anonymously representing the 'voice of the people.'

Jorge Ramos is professionally bi-national. He is one of the most visible Mexican migrants today, and he understands his professional journalistic role as an educator of migrants. He has not become a US citizen, preferring instead to retain his Mexican citizenship and be, in legal terms, a "permanent legal resident" of the United States. Despite personal financial security and considerable hemispheric fame, Ramos promotes himself publicly as just another migrant.

I make up part of the 20 million Mexicans who decided to live abroad because of corruption and lack of opportunities; and of the more than one million Cubans who didn't want to be accomplices of Fidel Castro's dictatorship . . . I am one of the 150 million people in this world who live in a country other than the country in which they were born. (pp. xxvii-xxviii)

With this self portrait, Ramos tries to reduce the distance between himself and his audience.

4.

Personal interviews by this author over the last decade reveal that the majority of US Spanish language journalists were educated in US journalism schools. This is true of the editors and reporters of the Los Angeles daily *La Opinión*, and Miami's *El Nuevo Herald* as well as the smaller circulation weekly *El Rumbo* of Austin, Texas.

They maintain that they are "objective" US journalists. What we do, these US Spanish language journalists say, is tell different stories, stories about people rarely present in US journalism. A recent instance of this difference is the coverage of Hurricane Katrina. *Univisión* and *La Opinión* produced stories about the New Orleans Mexican consulate helping evacuate and otherwise assist Mexican, and other Latin American migrant residents of the Gulf coast, while other US media largely ignored these communities.

Migrant media have a distinct global axis. Most general market US media have a world view oriented on an east-west axis, pointing toward Europe and Asia. US Spanish language media revolve on a north south axis that runs through the US to Latin America.

This global orientation is, at its best, daily exemplified by US Spanish language media's absorption into the dynamism of immigration as well as the reception the migrants have received in the US. US migrant media also present a distinct orientation to the US. Spanish language media in Los Angeles for example, include neighborhoods east of I-5 in their coverage. Washington, DC migrant oriented media cover events in Adams Morgan beyond its gentrified neighborhoods.

By offering a particular worldview, as well as specific information not available in general market media, US Spanish language media are broadly educating their audiences. "They're doing what a lot of mainstream newspapers did at the turn of the twentieth century [during a peak in European immigration to the US]. They basically became a sort of civics 101," said Aly Colon of the Poynter Institute. In other words, Spanish language media, offer frameworks, broad contexts for understanding our world. These newspapers, magazines and radio stations outline boundaries between US communities, as well as building identities within them.

The growth of Latin American immigration, as well as the residential segregation of migrant communities in many US cities, have reinforced migrants' use of Spanish, and helped shape a civic bi-nationality. Many migrant families live in neighborhoods and work in occupations where little English is required, or spoken. The vibrant and continuing use of the Spanish language is the bedrock upon which US Spanish language migrant oriented media have been built. This socio-economic context has proven to be fertile ground for these media ventures.

These frameworks are constrained by the economics of media production, by the need to maximize audience, and attract advertisers. While the growth of the "Hispanic Market" has encouraged migrant oriented media production, it has also often homogenized its content. For many of these media, there are also professional journalistic constraints that result in an over reliance on governmental or other official sources and points of view. Within these constraints, scores of migrant centered US media offer a collective voice for migrant communities.

Research about migrant media has also been constrained, largely by funding and logistics. Corporate sponsored migrant media, as in the examples mentioned above, are highly institutionalized, and so accessible by scholars. I hope in the not too distant future to visit migrant communities and analyze migrant audience interactions with media outside, or at the margins of, the commercial sphere. As I've done with large circulation US Spanish language media I would observe news production and conduct long form, open ended interviews with those creating media content. These include local radio programs, public access television, and small circulation newspapers and magazines. As I've done with the journalists of the *Noticiero Univisión*, *La Opinión* and others, I would spend time in at the sites of production, newsrooms and marketing meetings. I would include the media not only of major urban centers, but also that of smaller communities. The goal is to explore the unspoken assumptions and, preconceived notions media

producers have of their audiences, and by so doing be better able to analyze the production of migrant media content.

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