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FROM LATIN AMERICANS TO LATINOS: SPANISH-LANGUAGE TELEVISION IN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS AUDIENCES

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Cultural identity may be socially constructed rather than any given essence, but it has to be constructed out of something. In the case of the various peoples who constitute the so-called 'Hispanics' of the United States, that 'something' is their origin in Spanish-speaking countries. Even if we reject this category 'Hispanic' as an artefact of governmentality and marketing, and accept instead the term with which many of these people now prefer to identify themselves generically, 'Latino', and/or 'Latina', it is still their putative Spanish-speaking, or 'Latin' origin which unites them. This paper will outline the diversity amongst the peoples of Spanish-speaking origin in the US, and examine how, even in spite of their various efforts to forge cultural identities on their own terms, the institutions of government, media and marketing have ascribed to them a common cultural identity for them to assume within the mainstream. On the other hand, the paper also offers a case study in how these institutions are adapting to, and in the process are being transformed by, the pressures they face in an era of increased cultural diversity within the nation-state and movement of peoples across its borders.

Diversity and diaspora

Leaving aside the fact that the speaking of Spanish in the Americas is the legacy of the first phase of European colonialism (some would say, the beginning of globalization), the entry point in accounting for the diversity of peoples of Spanish-speaking origin in the US today is provided by the Chicano activist and film director Luis Valdez when he says, 'We did not, in fact, come to the United States at all. The United States came to us' (1972, xxxiii). This serves as a sharp reminder that the US incorporated thousands of Spanish-speaking people when it took over what are now its Southwestern states from Mexico after 1848, so that some Mexican-Americans in those areas can trace back their family histories there for over a hundred years, while others arrived just this morning.

Thus, length of residence in the US is one major dimension of diversity. Yet it is not just a matter of when, but the historically specific circumstances under which certain people arrive which makes a difference. For example, the very fact that the Cubans, like the first Dominicans also, were political refugees from a crisis nation of the Cold War era has always put them in a quite different light to the Puerto Ricans, who are born as Spanish-speaking American citizens, since Puerto Rico is a possession of the US (Sullivan 2000, 6). Even within a given group of common origin, there is differentiation (apart from the usual race, class and gender). The Cubans thus distinguish between the 'golden

exiles', the business and professional people who fled to Miami at the very beginning of the Cuban Revolution, and all subsequent waves of refugees (Soruco 1996, 5-10).

The Puerto Ricans and the Cubans are the second and third largest groups of Hispanics identifiable by national origin, by far the largest being the Mexicans. According to the 2000 Census, Hispanics of Mexican origin amounted to 66% of the 32.6 million Hispanics then in the US. Those of Puerto Rican origin were 9% and Cuban 4%. However, there were also significant totals in the aggregated categories of Central and South American, 15%, and Other Hispanic, 6% (US Census Bureau 2001). While the term Hispanic, like Latino, is intended as non-pejorative and non-racial, people who identify as such for these statistical purposes are more likely to think of themselves in terms of their national origin. For the Central and South American category, this means mainly Salvadorians and Guatemalans, and Colombians, Ecuadorians and Peruvians respectively, while the Other Hispanics are predominantly Dominicans (Sullivan 2000, 2-8).

Thus, in addition to time in the US and the circumstances of arrival, Hispanic groups are differentiated by the cultural and linguistic differences which are tied to their regional and/or national origins, just as surely as English-speakers recognize differences within and between the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Yet the presence of such large numbers of people with a common language from diverse origins in the same country has no parallel in the English-speaking world. Rather, the US Spanish-speaking population resembles the huge diasporic overseas populations of Chinese, Indians, and Arabs, who, like the Hispanics, have been cultivated as international markets for television in their own languages and cultures (Sinclair et al 1996; Cunningham and Sinclair 2001).

Thus, to the extent that a diaspora can be defined by a series of mass deterritorializations from various countries, occurring both at different historical stages and continuing into the present, rather than a single dispersal of people from the same origin, then the dispossessed Mexicans, the Cuban exiles, the Salvadorian and Guatemalan refugees, and the endless waves of Latin American 'economic refugees', whether documented or not, who are all now resident in the US, can be considered collectively to form a diaspora.

Our interest here is in how such a diaspora can be shaped into a television audience. If we set aside the development of Spanish-language print and radio in the US and concentrate on the television era, decade by decade, it is possible to trace the emergence of an audience for Spanish-language television in the same process as collective identities were being formed by other forces, including their own dynamics. However, there has remained a potential tension between the collective identities which various groups have

chosen and asserted for themselves, and those which have been chosen for them by media and marketing interests.

The 1960s – Chicanos, SICC and SIN

Spanish-language television in the US began as early as 1955, but it was not until 1961 that there were the beginnings of a network. In that year, the Spanish International Communication Corporation (SICC) launched its first station in San Antonio, followed by stations in other strategic locations over the next ten years, namely Los Angeles, New York and Miami. Programming was supplied by the Spanish International Network (SIN) from Mexico, the principal in these companies having been the founding father of the Azcárraga dynasty subsequently associated with Televisa in Mexico, although their manager was René Anselmo, a US Hispanic. The crude but durable economic model was that entertainment programming generated for a commercial audience in Mexico and already paid for and proven there, could do double service by attracting a culturally and linguistically similar audience in the US. This has since become a fundamental strategy for Latin American producer/distributors in the US, but it did not meet with immediate success (Sinclair 1999, 97-99). The prime reason for this was that an audience was still in the process of formation, and further, that advertisers had yet to be convinced of the existence of that audience.

US Hispanics became conscious of themselves as a group and began to mobilize politically during much the same period that television first sought to cultivate them as an audience. This is not to suggest that there was a causal relationship in either direction, but just to observe the 'elective affinity'. In particular, amongst Mexican-Americans in the Southwest in the 1960s, mobilization occurred around the Chicano movement. The choice of the name is instructive in itself, especially in relation to the term 'Hispanic'. According to one cultural activist, 'Chicano' is a corruption of 'Meshicano', which although once derogatory, serves as an affirmation of both the Native American and the Hispanic origins of the Mexican people (Burciaga 1992, 49). SICC/SIN were starting up their network while the Chicanos struggled for rural labor reform in the Southwest, the 'golden exiles' were getting themselves established in Miami, and the Puerto Rican and Dominican communities were becoming concentrated in New York.

The 1970s – a narrowcast national network

'Prior to the 1970 census, the concept of Hispanics as a group barely existed' (Davis et al 1983, 5), even for demographic purposes, let alone in cultural terms. As well as the diversity of socioeconomic and national origins, sheer geographic dispersion militated against any sense of 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). However, before the end of the decade, SICC/SIN had built itself into a truly national network through the innovative application of the

satellite as a new signal distribution technology. In 1976, it fully interconnected all its stations and affiliates via satellite so that they could air the same programming at the same time - programming which itself was being transmitted via satellite from Mexico, at first on a weekly basis. This put SICC/SIN ahead of the mainstream networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, in being the very first network to be nationally interconnected via satellite, although SICC/SIN was pleased to follow the mainstream networks' practice when it then instituted a 'must carry' regime. This meant that SIN could oblige all the stations, as a national network, to carry the by then daily satellite feed, including commercials, transmitted from Mexico (Sinclair 1999, 100).

This is what we would now call 'global narrowcasting', delivering the signal over a very large territory, but to a small and widely-dispersed specialised audience, in this case distinguished by their knowledge of Spanish. Neither the size of the communities reached nor their distance apart mattered, as satellite coverage meant that they could be sold to advertisers as a national audience. However, the linguistic and cultural dimension was crucial to the constitution of that audience. Univisión (as SICC/SIN came to call itself in the 1980s) thus acquired a vested interest in the conception of all peoples of Spanish-speaking national origin in the US having been formed into a vast diaspora, and that this was the natural constituency of their network. Anselmo declared that Univisión's 'mission' was 'to unite the Puerto Rican in New York, the Cuban in Miami, the Mexican in San Antonio and the Chicano in Los Angeles through their common Spanish heritage' (Quoted in Bagamery 1982, 99). But clearly, they had to do that on the economic basis of the predominantly Mexican programming to which they had low-cost access. As Dávila has argued, this has inclined Univisión to foster Mexican Spanish as the hegemonic standard, and at the same time, to cultivate a sense of common, pan-Hispanic 'Latinidad' (2000).

The 1980s – commercialization and competition

Thus, if the 1970s closed with the technical basis established for a national television audience, the 1980s saw the beginning of the ever more intensive commercial formation of that audience. This process involved advertising agencies and market research companies, as well as the advent of Telemundo, a rival network to Univisión, backed by mainstream capital. Government also played a role to the extent that the 1980 Census yielded more reliable data than previously had been available. Whereas the 1970 Census had notoriously undercounted Hispanics, relying as it did on Spanish surnames, national origin, and whether Spanish was spoken at home, the 1980 Census introduced the method (basically that still being used) of asking people if they identified themselves as being 'of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent' (Davis et al 1983, 6-7).

The Census brought out the kind of demographic patterns that marketers like to see: the Hispanic population was young, growing, and concentrated in geographical regions. This in turn precipitated a whole commercial discourse about 'the Hispanic market', including the first market research studies (Yankelovitch et al 1981; Guernica and Kasperuk 1982), and the arrival of advertising agencies, such as Sosa and Associates in San Antonio, that specialized in 'marketing to Hispanics', as a regular feature of the leading trade journal *Advertising Age* came to be called. Astroff has referred to these intermediaries between advertisers and the market as 'cultural brokers' (1997), who are themselves Hispanics, or Latinos, but there is a class difference emerges here, to the extent that these people are college-educated and in a position to capitalize on their ethnicity by delivering Hispanics to advertisers.

Indeed, the generally lower levels of education, income and occupational status of Hispanics would have made some advertisers reluctant to embrace them as a new market, but these characteristics have always been downplayed in the discourse. Relative to their countries of origin, US Hispanics have been claimed to be 'the wealthiest Hispanics in the world' (Guernica and Kasperuk 1982), and in any case, are reported to have other characteristics bound to endear them to advertisers. In particular, they spend much more of their disposable income on food and packaged goods than the general population, and are very conscious of brands, and loyal to them (Strategy Research Corporation 1986).

We have seen that SIN/SICC/Univisión, the only Spanish-language national network in the US prior to 1986, had a close connection to Mexico, and thus, authentic credentials as being at least one major kind of 'Hispanic'. What was striking about Telemundo, the second network which emerged as its rival at that time, was the fact that it was backed by mainstream capital from Wall Street. Small independent Spanish-language stations in all the key markets were acquired and formed into a network. Experienced Hispanic managers were recruited, and programming obtained from a wider variety of sources than the customary fare available on Univisión, giving the new network appeal to East Coast Hispanics. The venture was a token of mainstream capital's faith in the new discourse, and marked the emergence of Spanish-language television as an industry.

The 1990s – crisis and renewal

The 1990s saw the concentration of this industry in Miami. There are various structural reasons for this, which will be mentioned later in the paper, but it is worthwhile to note the role played by Univisión's reluctance to accommodate itself to the demands of non-Mexican Hispanics. Already in 1987, heavy-handed intervention in Univisión's news service by management from Mexico precipitated a mass resignation of staff who then set up their own company in Miami to produce a news service for the competing network, *Noticiero*

Telemundo. Telemundo itself had studios in Miami where it was producing original entertainment programming oriented to US Hispanics, and in 1991, moved its headquarters to that city (Sinclair 1999, 103-104).

Two other major developments in the industry during the 1990s were the expansion of the activities of US cable networks in providing their services in Spanish, and the institutionalization of audience measurement. CNN showed an early interest in exploiting the linkage between US Hispanic television and Latin American cable markets, first with dubbed entertainment programming, and subsequently with taking over *Noticiero Telemundo*. ESPN began satellite transmission to cable systems in six nations of South America with a Spanish sound track in 1991, the same year in which Time-Warner launched a whole movie channel for Latin America, HBO Olé. As the 1990s progressed, these were joined by MTV Latino, Discovery, Cinemax, Fox Latin America and Spelling's TeleUno (Sinclair 1999, 114-115).

The other major transition was the establishment of a ratings service for Spanish-language television. Prior to this, the network owners had not been able to provide the figures needed to convince potential advertisers of the nature and extent of Spanish-language television's reach. This had been a major disadvantage in their competition, not with each other, but with the mainstream networks, because many national advertisers believed that it was sufficient to advertise with the mainstream networks alone, particularly if the audiences for Spanish-language television were unknown.

So, in order to provide the hard data needed to sell the Hispanic audience which they had created to the major advertisers whom they had sought if for, both the Spanish-language networks collaborated in commissioning Nielsen Media Research, the major US audience measurement company, to set up a ratings measurement service for Spanish-language television, the Nielsen Hispanic Television Index. The first national figures were produced in 1992, and documented Univisión's commanding position, an overall 61 per cent share of the prime time audience (Sinclair 1999, 111).

The quinquennial year of 1992 was a watershed in the development of both the major networks themselves. Given the high costs of local production and their limited access to Mexican *telenovelas*, the kind of programming perennially most popular with the majority of the Spanish-speaking audience, Telemundo's uncompetitive position resulted in bankruptcy. At the same time, there was a significant change of ownership at Univisión. Televisa had lost control of Univisión in 1987 when its level of Mexican ownership was found to be illegal, and both the stations and the network were sold to Hallmark, the greeting cards company. In 1992, Hallmark sold Univisión to a carefully-structured consortium which had a majority of its ownership in US hands, but with very significant minority shares being held by Televisa, and also by a major Venezuelan production/distribution company, Venevisión. This arrangement

effectively gave both the Latin American companies a guaranteed outlet for their programming in the US, just as it secured a supply of programming for Univisión and consolidated its dominance over the industry in the US (Sinclair 1999, 109-110).

Before the end of the decade, there was also a significant change of hands at the ailing Telemundo, in this case, marking the incursion of transnational capital to the industry. This took the form of Sony Corporation acquiring about 40% of Telemundo, and AT&T's Liberty Media, about 35% (Hoover's Online 2001b). This internationalization of the players active in the industry is one of a number of contemporary trends and further developments to be considered in the next and final section of the paper.

Trends in the new millennium

As the situation appears at the end of 2001, there has continued to be internationalization in the US Spanish-language television industry, other main trends being the expansion of the present networks, the diversification of the programming on offer, and the continued concentration of the industry in Miami. There is further internationalization in the ownership of networks taking place, given that TV Azteca, the competitor to Televisa in Mexico and one-time collaborator with Telemundo in the US, has been seeking to participate in a new network in the US. Azteca America Incorporated was first announced as a joint venture of TV Azteca with Pappas Telecasting Companies, which owns stations in the key markets, and was to control 80% of the company (Press Release 2000). However, after months of inaction, and scepticism amongst observers, Pappas Telecasting announced it would drop its 80% share in favor of a much more modest affiliate relationship with Azteca (La Fuente Media News 2001). Meanwhile, Hispanic Television Network (HTVN) is up and running, a US public company listed on Nasdaq, led by an Anglo businessman in Dallas, and distributed by various cable companies throughout the US (Hoover's Online 2001a). Both Univisión and Telemundo are expanding themselves, the former having bought the USA Network which it will develop as a second broadcast network, the latter having taken over GEMS to become its cable network.

In production, there also is some internationalization, particularly through the efforts of producers in Spain to penetrate Spanish-speaking markets in the Americas, notably Telefónica Media (now owners of Endemol Entertainment), and their rival Prisa. Prisa has been in 'development talks' with Telemundo. Interestingly, from the point of view of program diversification, the Kirsch/Berlusconi Telecinco company from Spain is co-producing *Radio Pirata* with Venevisión in Miami, a sitcom which 'explores the life of a multicultural group of Latinos working at a Spanish-lingo radio station in Miami' (Hopewell 2001; de Pablos and Hopewell 2001).

Further diversification of programming may be evidenced by Televisa's claims that its new *telenovelas* have improved production values, more enlightened cultural attitudes, and less heavily-accented Mexican Spanish, thus responding to common criticisms of their usual output. These will be seen on Univisión. For its part, Telemundo is doing co-productions for the international market with Globo of Brazil, the region's pre-eminent producer of *telenovelas* (Sutter 2001).

In ownership and control, a most significant development occurred in October 2001, when a completely new era was ushered in with the acquisition of Telemundo by the leading US network NBC (Stern 2001). This brings Spanish-language television fully into the corporate mainstream of US broadcasting, and poses the strongest ever challenge to Univisión's dominance of the traditional duopoly.

Finally, for a number of reasons, the industry has become even more concentrated in Miami, which is headquarters to Univisión as well as Telemundo. Demographically and culturally, Miami is an Hispanic or Latino city, and no longer just for the Cubans. Its geopolitical location has made it a major financial and trade center, with advantageous transport and communication links between the Americas, including for Spanish-language satellite television services. A clustering effect has led to related audiovisual companies basing themselves in the area (Strover 1999). Miami has become the media capital of Latin America and its diaspora in the US.

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