

# Is U.S. Television Ready to Learn Español?

The growing importance of Spanish-language television to the 40 million Hispanics in the U.S. – now over 13 percent of the population.

By Humberto Delgado and Lorna Veraldi

**E**very evening at six in Broward County, Florida, the Delgado household watches local news in English on WPLG-TV, Channel 10 – the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale ABC affiliate owned by Post-Newsweek Stations. At 6:30 PM the set stays tuned to WPLG for the ABC network news. But at 11 PM, the household watches the news in Spanish on WLTV-TV, Channel 23, Univision's owned and operated station in Miami.

Years ago, the Delgado household watched only English-language stations. But over the years, the Cuban-born, multilingual members of this South Florida home decided that Channel 23 not only presents all the important local stories covered by its English-language counterparts, but also includes stories from Central and South America and the Caribbean that are missing from local English-language newscasts.

Switching back and forth between Spanish and English stations is not unique to the Delgado household. Research shows that many U.S. Hispanics

want and use television in both English and Spanish and no longer see Spanish-language television as a temporary, transitional medium appealing primarily or exclusively to newly arrived immigrants. The U.S. Hispanic population is now the country's largest minority group. Close to 40 million people in the United States are Hispanic – over 13% of the U.S. population. By the year 2010, it is predicted that almost 16% of the U.S. population will be Hispanic – almost 50 million people. That figure will include 20% of U.S. children younger than 5. The U. S. Hispanic population is younger than the non-Hispanic population. (The median age among Hispanics is 27. Among non-Hispanics it is 37.) Average household size is larger among U. S. Hispanics than among non-Hispanics (3.6 persons in an average Hispanic household, compared to 2.4 persons in an average non-Hispanic household). Annual buying power of U. S. Hispanics is currently estimated at over \$530 billion dollars, twice what it

was ten years ago. That figure is expected to more than double again in the coming decade.

At the present time, Univision claims to entertain and inform more U.S. Hispanics each day than any other media company, noting in its promotional materials that “of all TV Networks programming a full prime time schedule, only the big 4 outrank Univision in prime time viewing.” Its television broadcast operations include the Univision Network, TeleFutura Network and the Univision and TeleFutura Television Groups. In any given sweeps, in markets like Miami-Ft. Lauderdale, the Univision owned-and-operated station may well outperform its highest rated English-language competitor in key local newscasts, in prime time and even sign-on to sign-off.

This Spanish-language media powerhouse grew from modest beginnings. In 1961, the first Spanish-language UHF station in the U.S. was started in San Antonio, Texas to serve the local Hispanic community. That station, KWEX, originally part of Univision's predecessor, Spanish International Network (SIN), today is a Univision owned and operated station. In 1970, Univision became the first U.S. network to provide live coverage of the World Cup soccer championship. Six years later, Univision began to link its affiliates via satellite, and in 1979, it launched Galavisión as the first Spanish-language cable network in the U.S. Now a publicly traded corporation, Univision also owns and operates Univision Radio, Univision Music Group and Univision Online.

Like the U.S. Census Bureau, Nielsen defines “Hispanic” households as those in which “the Head of House is of Hispanic origin or descent.” “Spanish

Dominant” households are those Hispanic households in which only Spanish or mostly Spanish is spoken. Univision says Nielsen estimates that almost 46% of U.S. Hispanic adults live in Spanish Dominant households, and that fully 90% of U.S. Hispanic adults speak at least some Spanish at home. This is true of all age groups and all income levels. Univision has predicted that Spanish-language television “will continue to benefit from high Spanish-language retention among Hispanics,” and predicts that Spanish will continue to be spoken in U.S. homes. The reasons? Approximately two-thirds of U. S. Hispanic adults were born outside the United States, and immigration will continue. An interest in preservation of cultural identity, the geographic concentration of U. S. Hispanics and the ease of travel and telecommunications will contribute to the continued vitality of Spanish in America. Spanish Dominant households are critical to the success of Spanish-language programming in the United States. But Hispanic households that are not Spanish Dominant also use Spanish-language television. This is true even in Hispanic households where little Spanish is spoken. And, says Univision, citing research by Rostow Research Group, Hispanics who view Spanish-language spots find them more persuasive and more memorable than English-language advertising.

Recent surveys show almost half of U.S. Hispanics consider it important to receive Spanish-language television channels on cable. Among urban Hispanics, 75% said that it was important for their households to receive Spanish-language channels. On the other hand, 40% of urban Hispanics say they

prefer English-language TV programs, and 20% of those in Spanish Dominant households say they prefer watching TV in English.

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This creates a framework for what retailers call “crossover appeal” and what advertising agencies label “crossover creative.” In programming terms, the authors suggest it might be called cultural convergence, a change in the literature of U.S. television as it evolves and adapts to incorporate new themes, stories, settings, actors and language. The old literature of television will not die or be replaced by something entirely new. However, neither will Hispanic or Latino culture or language simply be assimilated or co-exist with the rest of American television, in a parallel but separate universe. Latino culture and Spanish language are becoming part of a new American mainstream. This change will not be driven primarily by “public service” obligations, but by economics. Mainstream networks have watched audiences fragment. Once reliable forms like the sitcom have lost their power to draw viewers and drive profits. Spanish-language television is coming to be seen as both a serious competitor and a source of new ideas.

One approach, of course, is to incorporate Latino characters or themes into English-language programs. This is the approach exemplified in network series like *The George Lopez Show*, an ABC sitcom now in its fourth season that tells the story of a Mexican-American

family. Another example is *Sí TV*, an English language cable network with “Hispanic” content. This new cable network, launched in February 2004 with the backing of investors such as Time Warner Cable and Echo Star Communications, offers series like *New York Undercover*, aimed at U.S.-born Hispanics.

However, not just Latino themes and characters, but also Spanish language is making inroads into mainstream American television. As early as the 1970s, PBS broadcast *Qué Pasa USA?* – a bilingual series that portrayed Cuban immigrants in Miami and their survival in an English-speaking country. Both English and Spanish TV stations are still airing the series. Procter & Gamble's decision to air a Spanish-language spot for Crest toothpaste in the 2003 English-language Grammy Awards on CBS grabbed headlines. Other advertisers, including Coca-Cola and Volkswagen, are using bilingual ads in both Hispanic and general market advertising. One such spot featured Mexican actress Selma Hayek speaking Spanish in a restaurant kitchen and English at a table with companions; it aired on both English and Spanish-language networks without subtitles.

Attracting the growing Hispanic audience is important to advertisers. GE's acquisition of Spanish-language network Telemundo, long Univision's rival, reflected this reality. So did NBC's decision to air *Kingpin* during the February 2003 sweeps. The six-part series was scheduled like a Spanish telenovela, aired in its entirety over three weeks. Some heralded the series, the story of power struggles within a

Mexican drug cartel, as a modern-day *Macbeth*. Set on the Mexico-Texas border, featuring Latino actors and peppered with Spanish dialogue, *Kingpin*

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was an experiment (not entirely successful) in cultural convergence. Scenes of crime, violence and sex naturally led to comparisons with *The Sopranos*, and fueled speculation that *Kingpin* would bring NBC similar critical and ratings success. NBC hoped to capitalize on the buzz preceding the network premiere with repurposed versions of the series (in Spanish on co-owned Telemundo and in a more explicit version on co-owned cable network Bravo). When *Kingpin* premiered at 10 PM on Sunday, February 2, 2003, its ratings were promising, especially in the 18-49 demographic, giving NBC its highest rating for the time period in three years. However, ratings for subsequent episodes declined. By the finale, *Kingpin* ranked a disappointing 72nd in prime time for the week. Perhaps reactions to the series' negative stereotypes of Latinos were at least partly to blame for its ratings decline. Comments about the series were reminiscent of those made about the 1950s movie *Blackboard Jungle*: "It is impossible to have so many bad students all together in one single classroom." Unrelenting negative characters and themes may have overshadowed much of the initial attraction of *Kingpin* in the eyes of Latino and non-Latino viewers.

In *Kingpin*, the border that separates U. S. and Mexico also seems to separate

good and evil. Characters south of the border, Anglo or Hispanic, are corrupted by their surroundings. Take Marlene, the blonde American wife of American-educated cartel boss Miguel Cadena. Compared by some to Lady Macbeth, Marlene, a lawyer by training, secretly sinks into drug addiction in her husband's lavish

Mexican mansion. Her eight-year-old son, though protected by his parents and his bodyguard from the brutal power struggles of the cartel, seems unable to resist the corrupting influences of his surroundings, sneaking a sip from the communion chalice as an altar boy at the church, troubled by nightmares and bed-wetting. An American plastic surgeon, Dr. Howard Klein, who has supplemented his income dealing drugs, finds it hard to leave the life as he tries to pay for a messy divorce. When the kingpin's private jet ferries the doctor south of the border, he becomes an accomplice in an assassination.

Not a single character who lives south of the border is virtuous – not a priest, not a politician, not a policeman or a prison guard. And not a single character who travels from north to south comes back unscathed. Latina DEA agent Delia Flores gets her partner killed when she foolishly trusts a double agent south of the border, and struggles to regain the confidence of her superiors back in the States after she is shipped back over the border in the trunk of a car, wounded and betrayed.

The significance of the border as a dividing line between good and evil in *Kingpin* is particularly interesting in light of criticisms of U.S. network news by the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. NAHJ has repeatedly objected

to stereotypical characterizations of Latinos on U.S. network news, writing in its 2002 report that news stories too often used “the image of the border to suggest a divide between the Latino and non-Latino populations and to define Latinos as illegal immigrants.” To the degree that life north of the border is depicted as virtuous and orderly and life south of the border dark and dangerous, *Kingpin* perpetuated this stereotype.

After *Kingpin* aired, over 300 students in journalism and mass communications classes at Florida International University in Miami were surveyed to find out what they thought about the series. The Miami-Ft. Lauderdale market is the third largest in number of Hispanic households in the nation. It has the nation's highest percentage of Spanish Dominant households (almost 70% of its Hispanic households). Almost 60% of the students in the FIU School of Journalism and Mass Communication are Hispanic. These are the young, multi-cultural viewers NBC targeted with *Kingpin*.

As *Kingpin's* disappointing ratings

suggested, despite its substantial promotion, few of the students surveyed had watched all six episodes of *Kingpin*. Those who had sampled the series were asked what they liked most about it. By far the largest number of respondents gave answers related to the series' Hispanic themes – Mexican setting, Latino actors, integration of Spanish into the dialogue. However, what students said they liked least was the negative stereotyping of Hispanic characters. In other words, the elements that drew them to the series also disappointed them.

NBC wanted a larger share of the Latino audience, and a larger number of non-Hispanic viewers hungry for innovative, cable-like television. But reaction to *Kingpin* suggested that, despite its attempt to be cutting-edge, NBC might not have moved far from the days in which Latinos were portrayed in movies and TV in *zarapes and sombreros*, a stereotype that insulted many viewers.

Finding a balance between negative and positive is not easy, and there is no



A scene from *The George Lopez Show*.

agreement even within the Hispanic or Latino community about what television ought to portray. *The George Lopez Show* was bashed during its first season by a Los Angeles *Times* critic for its “wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong” portrayal of Latinos. Lopez himself felt that critic missed the point. “His objection was it didn’t match his life. He sat there expecting to see his life with a happy family and everybody nurturing and he saw my life with no nurturing and an overbearing mother.” That, said Lopez, had been his reality, whatever other Hispanic families were like. Showing his character’s imperfection isn’t a bad thing, Lopez said in a recent interview with reporter Luaine Lee. “I don’t mind being held up as an example of somebody who’s learning to be better.” Negative stereotypes in *Kingpin* failed to reflect reality, but insisting on only positive images is equally unrealistic and restrictive.

The message? Cultural convergence creates both opportunities and risks. Programming elements that initially attract viewers, if not carefully handled, may ultimately drive them away. Creating programs that reflect the realities and complexity of Hispanic or Latino life and culture requires more than casting Latino actors or employing

“Hispanic” themes. In Spanish or English, or a combination of the two, U.S. television, fiction or news, needs to create stories that are truthful and balanced, that respect, rather than exploit, diversity. Advocacy groups have repeatedly pointed to a lack of representation of minorities on television in numbers that reflect their strength in contemporary America. Despite all the talk about attracting Hispanic viewers, critics charge that the 2004-05 season will feature fewer prime-time shows with Latino casts than the previous season. If television is to reflect the complex realities of Latino life, it is hard to see how that can happen without hiring Latino writers, producers and actors and increasing their visibility in prime time.

Hispanic purchasing and political power will continue to increase. Attempts to attract and serve this important and growing audience will continue. However, not every attempt at melding the old and new will succeed. Merging cultures, like merging corporations, requires delicacy and dedication. Attempts to find synergy can backfire. Only time will tell how soon and how successfully American television will learn *español*.

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