## Chapter 10 – Spanish-Language Television and Pan-Latinidad

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Spanish-language television is well known as the largest component of Spanish-language mass media in the United States. The two chief providers of Spanish-language television, the broadcast-online networks Univision and Telemundo, are foremost US media institutions. Delivering news broadcasts, sports events, and signature entertainment programs, the two networks at peak hours together have reached upwards of one-half of the nation’s 75 million Latinos. They perhaps are best identified for instituting a television program genre that defines Latinx media. **Telenovelas**, continuing episodic dramas similar to soap operas, generate more Latinx participation than any other mass media form.

While familiar, abounding in superlatives, and big, Spanish-language television is said to have brought something still bigger, a so-called US **pan-latinidad**. Many believe that, largely because of Spanish-language television, Latinos living in the United States consider themselves part of a single Latinx society. The idea was popularized by scholar and author América Rodríguez. In a 1999 study, she proposed that the main effect Spanish-language television was “creation of an American ‘Hispanic’ population.” Today, common Latinx behaviors—from lifestyle choices to everyday shopping decisions—are traced to messages and symbols that Spanish-language television uniquely conveys to Latinos regardless of their backgrounds or where they live.

As was discussed in Chapter 4, there is in fact no real Hispanic, Latinx, Latino population. Individuals living in the United States who are of Latin descent tend to identify with their ancestral nationality. They refer to themselves, for example, as “Mexican,” “Cuban,” “Guatemalan,” or “Colombian.” The largest number of Latinx media are newspapers, radio stations, and websites that typically reach localized segments of the Latinx population. They cater to one of the many nationalities. That’s why this textbook covers Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American, and Dominican media.

Yet at Chapter 4 goes on to emphasize, a dynamic process driven by social movements in the 1960s, and which was heeded by the US government’s breakout of “Hispanic” as a category in the 1970 census, helped build what Cristina Mora (14-15) terms a “sense of solidarity” between different groups of Latin American origin. Spanish-language television galvanized and drove the process. Unlike Latinx newspapers and radio stations, it grew from the expectation it would reach the entire Latinx population. Univision and Telemundo broadcast to all fifty states. It remains essential they encourage Latinos to dismiss national origins and amalgamate into a homogeneous “American” constituency.

The effect is both demonstrated and criticized. Not only is Spanish-language television, namely Univision and Telemundo, among the very few US institutions capable of cutting across nationalities and massing the entirety of the Latinx population. It was invented to do just that. Programming, entertainers, and presenters do not communicate to separate Latinx nationalities. News is not reported from one country’s perspective. Telenovelas are often synonymous with pan-latinidad.” They are devoid of dialects, performed in “standard Spanish,” and frequently feature generic plots filmed in unidentified locations. While many credit Spanish-language television for creating one “American” Latinx population, critics maintain that Latinos’ natural ancestral identities are lost.

### The Mexican Origins of US Spanish-Language Television

Spanish-language television developed much in the manner of its English-language counterpart. It is a **commercial broadcasting** enterprise supported by advertising. It formed from the model that had incubated national radio, that of generating profits as an entertainment provider. It was first seen shortly after World War II in a small number of cities on local stations. Much as the founders of English-language television hastened the joining of local stations into the national networks ABC, CBS, and NBC, and not long after, their counterparts in Spanish-language television also initiated national broadcasting.

A seminal event was the launch of the Spanish International Network (SIN) in 1961. That which began as SIN exists today as the modern network Univision. Its debut was noteworthy. Initiated barely a decade after ABC, CBS, and NBC, SIN was the nation’s fourth television network. Over the next fifty years, SIN/Univision was the dominant Spanish-language mass medium. Not only was it a trend-setter, among its advances, discussed ahead, its creation of a “Latino market.” A bulwark of telenovelas, SIN defined Spanish-language programming. Not long after SIN’s re-christening as Univision in 1986, the network’s programs in Spanish were so popular that they often exceeded ABC, CBS, NBC, and other English-language networks in TV’s Nielsen’s daily and nightly ratings. In 2013, Univision achieved a milestone when its audience exceeded that of all other TV providers through an entire seasonal **ratings sweep** (De La Fuente, 2013). Thus, frequently, Univision has been America’s No. 1 source of mass communication in any language.

The genesis of Univision also was significant for having identified the founders of US Spanish-language television. Notably, they were not Americans. Instead, they were members of a rich and powerful Mexican family that Mexicans refer to as the Azcárraga dynasty.

The founding parent of US Spanish-language television was Don Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurretta (1895-1972). One of Mexico’s most renowned historical figures, the first Azcárraga brought radio to all of Mexico, a poor country, in the 1930s. His radio network, XEW, was heard throughout Latin America. In the 1940s, his empire enlarged with his acquisition of Mexico’s film studios. With his launch of XEW-TV in 1951, he pioneered Mexican television. He was assisted by his son and heir, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo (1930-1997). By the mid 1950s, the Azcárragas had established Mexico City as the Spanish-language “Hollywood.” The world’s best Spanish-language actors, performers, and entertainers converged on Mexico City for opportunities to star in the Azcárragas’ movies and TV shows.

<Fig. 10.1 here>. *Portraits of the elder and younger Emilio Azcárraga in the 1950s.* Broadcasting-Telecasting*, June 15, 1953, 82. Don Emilio* *Azcárraga Vidaurreta was the patriarch of Mexican radio and television and principal founder of Univision. He launched the US Spanish International Network, Univision’s predecessor, in 1961.*

Grasping the global appeal their then-new TV productions, the Azcárragas took a bold step. To facilitate foreign sales, they sped a process of de-Mexifying content. They refined a “standard” Spanish without Mexican dialect. They filmed programs with generic settings and themes. The Azcárragas concentrated de-Mexification on their signal invention, the *telenovela*. A soap opera-like drama of fixed three or six-month duration, the first *telenovela*, “*Ángeles de la calle*,” was seen on XEW-TV in 1951. The Azcárragas quickly thrived on foreign sales. Regardless of nationality, viewers throughout Latin America as well as in Spain and The Philippines flocked to programs the Azcárragas mass produced. By 1960, their firm, Telesistema Méxicano, was an international powerhouse.

The seeds of US Spanish-language television were sewn when in 1958 Azcárraga Vidaurretta partnered with Hollywood film mogul Frank Fouce (1899-1962) in a venture to broadcast Telesistema’s programs in the United States. Huge advertising revenues beckoned. However, aware the nation’s English-language networks would not broadcast Spanish-language content, they formed their own network, that which became SIN, later Univision. The Federal Communications Commission had opened channels on TV’s “ultra-high frequency” band. Azcárraga began acquisition of UHF stations in cities across the US Upon acquiring KCOR-TV, a UHF station in San Antonio in 1961, Azcárraga shipped programs to the Texas city. SIN commenced when programs received and telecast by KCOR were distributed to stations along the US-Mexican border.

For several years SIN struggled. Latinos living in the US numbered fewer than 10 million. There were no Spanish-language Nielsen ratings. Without data to confirm that SIN reached viewers, businesses refused to advertise. While UHF TV channels could be acquired in all 200 US markets, most 1960s TV sets were not equipped to receive them.

Yet abundant were hints of the pervasiveness and impact of Spanish-language television. Immigration and high birth rates promised a growing Latinx population. Azcárraga’s choice as head of SIN, Rene Anselmo (1926-1995), was a forceful if eccentric figure adept at winning favors from the FCC. The network’s fortunes gelled in 1962 when Anselmo launched KMEX in Los Angeles, the largest Latinx market. Broadcasting to Southern California’s one million Latinos, KMEX became the Spanish-language media’s first profit-center.

### Toward Pan-latinidad

Pan-latinidad refers to a widely-described if vicarious amalgamation of Spanish-speaking individuals in which distinctive national identities are paralleled by, and may give way to, their perception of belonging to a single Latinx population. Not only is Spanish-language television considered a driving force behind pan-latinidad. It was an invention mothered by necessity.

The founders had no doubt their audience must include all US Latinos. Concentrating on the largest national group, Mexican-Americans who comprised 60 percent of Latinos, would have meant sacrificing 40 percent of the audience. A chore was clear in a vital consideration: geography. Latinos of various nationalities resided in different parts of the US While those of Mexican origin concentrated in the US Southwest, Puerto Ricans and many from Caribbean countries resided in the Northeast notably in New York. Cubans and many from South American countries resided on the southern East Coast notably in south Florida in and around Miami. Breakthroughs in two early tests of national Spanish-language television demonstrated that pan-latinidad was possible.

A turning point in the rise of the Spanish International Network, the future Univision, was its entry into New York. Seven years after its 1961 founding, the network had been comprised of stations in California, Arizona, and Texas. In 1968, with its launch of New York station WXTV, SIN extended to the US East Coast. Anselmo engaged in debates on whether SIN’s variety of programs designed to appeal to Mexican-Americans would succeed in New York. There, Puerto Ricans comprised the largest Spanish-speaking group. Assistant Carole Bird, who had grown up while living in Caribbean and South American countries, proposed a solution. She recalled the immense popularity of the Azcárragas’ generically-produced *telenovelas* in every Spanish-speaking country. Anselmo vetoed SIN’s schedule of Mexican-oriented content. He had the Azcárragas ship to New York a collection of *telenovelas* that had driven audiences when distributed internationally. On WXTV, he broadcast the *novelas* back-to-back throughout prime-time.

<Fig. 10.2 here.> *Television’s role in Pan-latinidad was heralded when globally-popular Mexican telenovelas were first broadcast to diverse Latinx audiences in the United States. A turning point was the 1968 broadcast of “La Leona” on New York City’s WXTV. Although produced in Mexico, it attracted New York’s large Puerto Rican audiences. Because of their multi-nationality appeal, telenovelas became a defining feature of Spanish-language television as it expanded to other communities across the US*

It was a path-clearing innovation. Against predictions of failure, WXTV’s premiere was a triumph. As had happened internationally, New York’s predominantly non-Mexican audience embraced the generically-themed telenovelas the Mexicans produced. WXTV toppled an existing and popular Spanish-language station, WNJU, in the first Spanish-language audience ratings. Within a year, SIN scrapped its existing schedule of varied programs in favor of a prime-time comprised entirely of *telenovelas*. Because *novelas* guaranteed multi-nationality viewership, the exclusive scheduling of *telenovelas* in peak prime-time hours became a defining feature of Spanish-language television.

The second stride occurred three years later in 1971. That year upon Anselmo’s acquisition of WLTV, SIN entered Miami. The Azcárragas strongly opposed Anselmo’s move. Miami was a hotbed of anti-Castro sentiment. The Azcárragas insisted that a Mexican presence in Miami would be opposed, perhaps violently, because Mexico backed the Castro regime. In a confrontation, the son, Emilio Azcárraga, fired Anselmo when Anselmo argued that a true US network never could emerge if Miami was cut out. Anselmo was allowed to return, finally to make good on his claim that with telenovelas that did not identify Mexico, and with other generic programs including the first World Cup telecasts, Cuban-Americans would not detect a Mexican presence. They and the numerous Colombians, Venezuelans, Peruvians, and others who populated Miami rushed to view SIN’s shows.

Spanish-language television’s capability for joining US Latinos was cemented when in 1976 SIN became the first US broadcaster to relay programs coast-to-coast by **satellite**. SIN’s technological coup was envisioned and directed by Emilio Azcárraga. Upon the passing of his father in 1972, the younger Azcárraga reorganized the family firm into a technology-rich conglomerate he named “Television Via Satellite” or “Televisa.” Employing Televisa’s technology, SIN dramatically enlarged it reach. By the early 1980s, its twenty-four-hour schedule was broadcast on stations in 100 markets. It and a sister network Galavisión were available nationally on cable TV. With the premiere of *Noticiero SIN*, the first Spanish-language national newscast, in 1981, an audience that comprised nearly one-half US Latinos was informed by a US-produced news. Its content did not concentrate on any non-US nation or nationality.

### Expansion of Univision, Telemundo, and Pan Nationalization

It was in the 1980s and 1990s that observers first noted pan-latinidad. Interest precipitated from census reports that headlined a “Latino boom.” The 1990 census had shown a doubling of the US Latinx population, to 40 million, during the preceding ten years. The Census Bureau itself contributed to emerging recognition of pan-latinidad. Beginning in 1980, rather than distinguishing Latinos by nationality, the Bureau lumped them togther into a single group, officially designating them as “Hispanics.”

Yet the concept of pan-latinidad did not congeal from observers’ fascination with the census. Nor was there conclusive evidence of the effect in audiences tuned to Univision that swelled in the 1990s or the premiere of a second Spanish-language network, Telemundo, in 1987. That which sealed understanding of pan-latinidad was an extremely visible development that grew out of Spanish-language television: the networks’ manufacture of a so-called “Latino market.”

<Fig. 10.3 here> *A US “Latino market” was galvanized in the 1990s when Latinx viewers flocked to Univision’s María trilogy. Starring Thalía Sodi, the 1996 novela* María la del barrio *was seen by 85 percent of Latinos in the US. It remains one of the most-watched programs in US television history. Courtesy Mario Rodríguez.*

At Univision and the new Telemundo, no tasks had greater priority than those directed at establishing and promoting a Latinx market. The networks’ prospects and treasure depended on persuading large corporations to spend money on advertising. Big business was aware that growing numbers of Latinos resided in the US However, large companies could not sell products by appealing separately to multiple Latinx groups Accustomed to a single and homogeneous market delivered by English-language TV, businesses demanded the same in Spanish-language television. Univision and Telemundo complied with ceaseless measures that finally convinced big business, and more directly its advertising directors and creators on Madison Avenue, that a single Latinx market did exist.

A key measure was a 1980 research project commissioned by SIN. It culminated in a series of books titled *Spanish USA*. For many years, the *Spanish USA* project was considered the most authoritative source of information on Latinos’ lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviors. Assembled by acclaimed social scientist Daniel Yankelovich, researchers who spanned the country emphasized findings consistent with a theory called “acculturation.” The theory proposed that, regardless of nationality, Latinos absorbed American culture in the course of adapting to life in the United States. Acculturation was unmistakable, they maintained, and was most fostered by Latinos’ extensive use of television. In succeeding volumes, *Spanish USA* reiterated that the viewing of Spanish-language television accomplished “a blurring of differences in the way Hispanics of varying nationalities feel about each other” (Yankelovich, 1981, 15-28).

Measures intensified from the event that brought SIN’s rechristening as Univision. In 1986, the FCC banished Emilio Azcárraga and Televisa for violations of US laws prohibiting foreign ownership. Under pressure to “Americanize” the network and further promote the concept of a single Latinx market, new owner Hallmark Cards adopted the name Univision. It meant “one vision.” Hallmark consolidated Univision’s network personnel at a newly-built headquarters-studio in Miami. From there, Hallmark coordinated a national campaign called “Vision of America” that instilled among Latinos a perception that, guided by Univision, they no longer hailed from a foreign country. Instead, they formed a single and rising US Latinx citizenry. Efforts not only to reinforce Latinos’ sense of US identity but to have Latinos extol their opportunities in a booming Latinx market expanded still further when US television mogul Jerry Perenchio (1930-2017) acquired Univision in 1992.

While Univision boomed, the second network, Telemundo struggled. Upon its launch by financier Saul Steinberg (1939-2012) in 1987, Telemundo countered Univision with programs that targeted largely Puerto Rican, Cuban, and South American-identified viewers on the East Coast. A tailspin of low ratings forced Telemundo’s bankruptcy in 1993. Reorganized, Telemundo shifted toward emulating Univision’s multi-nationality strategy. Telemundo partnered with Televisa’s Mexican rival, TV Azteca, which had perfected *novelas* comparable to Televisa’s high quality, nationality-generic productions. Telemundo followed by pioneering “domestic production.” Occasioned by a series of US-themed telenovelas produced at Telemundo’s studios also in Miami in 1993, the second network used promotional messages and public affairs programs to press the idea that Spanish-speaking individuals were “American,” not individuals transplanted from another country.

An iconic Univision program called *Sábado gigante* perhaps had done the most to galvanize scholars’ and observers’ concept of pan-nationalization. Launched in 1962 on Chile’s Canal Trece, its host, Mario Kreutzberger, moved the program to Univision’s Miami studios in 1986. Broadcast on Univision for three hours every Saturday night, the combination talk-quiz-skit-comedy show while nationality-generic nevertheless showcased identification of the numerous nationalities brought by the program’s performers and studio audiences. Frequently the No. 1 Spanish-language television program in the US, *Sábado gigante* affirmed its pan-national appeal from its success when syndicated in virtually every Spanish-speaking country. Kreutzberger retired in 2015 after hosting the broadcast for fifty-three years. In the *Guinness Book of World Records*, *Sábado gigante* is distinguished at the world’s longest-running and most-viewed television show (Television Academy Foundation, 2011).

<Fig. 10.4 here> *Pan-Latinidad was driven by Univision’s immensely popular three-hour Saturday night spectacular* *Sábado gigante. Mario* *Kreutzberger hosted Sábado gigante for fifty-three years. Seen is a segment from his farewell program in 2015. Courtesy Mario Rodríguez.*

As they had nearly from the beginning of Spanish-language television, telenovelas defined the character and social impact of the endeavor. In Mexico, Televisa passed to Emilio Azcárraga Jean (1968-) in 1997. Under the third Azcárraga, Televisa rose further as the worldwide epicenter of *telenovela* production. During the 1990s, a trilogy of Televisa *novelas* shown on Univision and which were capped by the blockbuster “*Maria del la barrio*” were seen by 75 percent of all US Latinos. More ratings records were set with Univision’s broadcast of Televisa’s *El privilegio de amar* in the early 2000s.

### Whither Spanish-Language Television

Yet the millennium’s turn had ushered uncertainty. The 2000s began auspiciously. Telemundo’s breakout came in 2000 with its telecast of a Colombian telenovela called “*Yo soy Betty, la fea*.” Relating the comedic travails of an unattractive teenage girl, “*Yo soy Betty, la fea*.” generated huge ratings and rose to iconic stature. As Crystal Camargo observes in Chapter 2, the Colombian *novela* that spurred Telemundo in 2000 inspired an English-language series in 2006. Under the name “Ugly Betty,” the English-language version became a hit series on the US English-language network ABC. In 2001, NBC’s purchase of Telemundo opened a floodgate of finance that at last made the second network competitive. Money poured into co-production agreements with studios in Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela. The agreements propelled a new generation of hip, contemporary *telenovelas*. They contrasted with the traditional, fantasy *novelas* that Televisa produced and which continued to dominate Univision’s programming. Telemundo’s ratings soared.

<Fig. 10.5 here> *Telemundo’s 2000 premiere of Yo soy Betty, la fea changed the direction of Spanish-language language television. For the first time, telenovelas departed from traditional storybook story lines and introduced unconventional characters involved in contemporary plots and themes. The program starred Colombian actress Ana María Orozco (Photo courtesy Mario Rodríguez)*

Nevertheless, two developments challenged Spanish-language television. First, broadcast television was in decline. The introduction of the Internet, online streaming, and social media fragmented broadcast audiences. By the 2020s, Univision’s average audience, once in the tens of millions, had shrunk to five million.

Second, accumulating evidence suggested a decline in use of the Spanish language in the US After long tracking expansion of the language, demographers reading the 2010 census issued revised predictions. The 2010 census showed more expansion, US Latinos then numbering 75 million. Yet notably, two-thirds were under the age of thirty-five. This meant that growth of the Latinx population no longer was driven by immigration but by expanding birth rates among Latinx families already settled in the United States.

During the 2010s, altered to a “generation gap” in media consumption habits, scholars and market researchers concentrated on the mass of younger Latinos. Recurrently, upwards of 95 percent of younger Latinos said they did not routinely speak Spanish but favored English. They were born and raised in the US, attended English-language schools, made friends who spoke English, took jobs in English-language workplaces, and used English in posting on social media (Carter, 2018). Older Latinos, many having immigrated, were weaned on Spanish. But because larger numbers of younger English-speaking Latinos would replace diminishing older Spanish-speaking Latinos, questions about the future of Spanish multiplied. Surveys showed that fewer than 15 percent of younger Latinos viewed Spanish-language television (Simmons, 2018).

Another development, the first extensive criticism, also stung Spanish-language television. Conservative groups published evidence alleging that news broadcasts on Univision and Telemundo were biased and devoted to persuading Latinos’ support of liberal causes. In 2007, Republican California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger urged Latinos to “turn off the Spanish TV.” President Donald Trump was vehement in complaining that Spanish-language television spread divisions in US society. Confronted by Univision news anchor Jorge Ramos at a news conference in 2015, Trump called security guards and had Ramos removed.

Criticism reached beyond the political arena. Public review of Spanish-language television that brought increasingly awareness of “Pan Latinidad” fomented concerns. Influenced by Arlene Dávila’s 2001 exposé *Latinos, Inc.* (181-215), scholars and opinion-leaders joined in criticizing Univision and Telemundo for their years of “Americanizing” Latinos while perverting their customary national identities. Hector Amaya (2013, 130) and Christopher Chávez (2015, 9-10) concurred that the networks’ quest for a “Latino market,” and the billions of dollars they extracted from it, had forced Latinos into false self images that punished Latinos at large. In a 2019 forum, researcher Miguel Salazar warned observers of “problems with Latinidad.”

Gradually, Univision and Telemundo reacted. Both shifted priorities from broadcasting to online streaming. In 2021, Univision announced the then largest-ever venture in Spanish-language television, a Netflix-scale streaming service that combined both its and Televisa’s troves of programming.

Yet looking ahead, little was clear. The shift from mass-unifying broadcast channels to infinitely-programmed and audienced streaming services tended to sound the death-knell of “big” Spanish-language television and the pan-latinidad that accompanied it. The future will determine whether the experience of Spanish-language television has lasting meaning—or is meaningful only as history of an iridescent era in Latinx affairs.

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