

FLOW Conference 2008 (October 9-11, 2008)

Nielsen Media Research's Battle of the Alamo: The Consequences of Ignoring the Hispanic Market

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While *American Idol* and *CSI* continue to do battle for Nielsen Media Research's (NMR) stamp-of-approval as the most watched television program in America, an ugly backlash for equal representation in TV programming is ready to ignite. If content analysis research is any indication, there is a troubling disparity between the sheer population of Hispanic television viewers and the way Hispanics are depicted on television. Despite a U.S. population of 39 million and an estimated buying power of \$653 billion, the Latino/a television audience has been both disparaged and undercounted for years by NMR. This oversight is particularly troubling, given that the English-speaking Hispanic television audience is not even accounted for at all in its numbers. Both the media and advertisers are being led to believe that the Hispanic market watches only telenovelas or soccer games on Spanish-language goliaths like Univision or Telemundo. The tragic irony of this statistical sleight-of-hand is obvious. If the numbers only show that Latinos/as watch Spanish-language TV, why should any of the TV networks change their programming to reflect Latino/a faces and identities? Case-in-point: *The George Lopez Show*.

Aired on ABC from March 2002 to May 2007, *The George Lopez Show* was launched by Sandra Bullock to address the lack of diversity and dearth of Hispanics on network television. In spite of surviving four different time slots and consistently being aired against top-rated *American Idol*, the show was cancelled in 2007 due to poor ratings. In response, George Lopez bitterly complained that the cancellation was a racial conspiracy.

Another TV sitcom that starred only one Hispanic actor suffered a similar fate in 2008. Aired on CBS from September 2006 to March 2008, *Jericho* was prized in the Hispanic community, given its' positive portrayal of Essai Morales (as Major Edward Beck) in the serial drama. Following its cancellation (again, poor ratings), an official protest group named Jericho's Nutty Fans launched a boycott specifically against Nielsen Media Research (NMR). They bombarded CBS studios with over 50,000 pounds of peanuts and launched major advertising campaigns in *Variety*, denouncing the suspect cancellation of another quality TV program. Since the number of English-speaking Hispanics far outnumbers those who speak Spanish only, this conundrum is especially suspicious given NMR's cozy relationship with Univision, the Spanish-language television network that maintains a monopoly over Spanish-language TV comparable to NMR's own stranglehold over the television ratings system.

With a market share of over 70%, or 23 million of the 35 million that comprise the Hispanic television viewing market, Univision is easily the fourth-largest network behind ABC, CBS and NBC. Boasting quarterly profits that more than tripled from 2006 to 2007, Univision's fourth-quarter net income rose to \$99.7 million in 2007 compared to earnings of \$27.4 million in 2006. Univision has a particular interest in convincing the rest of America that Hispanics are only interested in watching Spanish-language TV for an obvious reason: all of its programming

is in Spanish. As such, Univision is making concerted efforts to assure NMR and the rest of the advertising world that Hispanics only watch Spanish-language TV for another less obvious reason: advertising dollars. If Univision can convince Hallmark, General Motors and Proctor & Gamble that Hispanics only watch Spanish-language television, why should they spend any of their dollars with ABC, CBS or NBC to reach the Latino/a market? As Univision grows more and more popular, many of their programs (primarily novellas, the Spanish-language steamy, low-budget soap operas or melodramas) are sweeping the Nielsen's and unseating stand-bys like CBS, ABC and NBC in scattered television programming slots. In 2005, Univision signed a multi-million dollar contract that allows NMR to monitor ratings for 34 Univision and Telefutera stations via the Nielsen Station Index and the Nielsen's Hispanic Station Index. In April of 2008, Univision unveiled a new research tool, developed in conjunction with NMR, that is designed to sell sponsors on the benefits of advertising on its Hispanic broadcast network if they expect to reach the Latino market.

What happens? Not only do second and third generation Hispanics (who either speak very little or no Spanish in the home) never see faces and people who look like them on network television, neither do blacks or whites or any other ethnic group residing in the U.S. The media, in general, and television, in particular, are ubiquitous in the sense that they both help us to create beliefs about other people based on what we see on our television screens. If we never see Latino/a men and women in positive roles as professionals, how can we be motivated to trust them in leadership positions?

Consequences

Univision, Galavision, Telemundo and a myriad of other Spanish-language networks are segregating Latinos and the Hispanic population from mainstream America. And given that the Nielsen's arguably maintains a controlling monopoly over network television ratings (read: survival of network programs and sitcoms), their ratings are complicit in the death of positive TV images of Hispanic Americans nationwide. Since 99% of the U.S. population is not going to turn their television dial to a Spanish-language channel, they won't see Hispanics in positive or redeeming television roles. The few Hispanic actors and actresses that are depicted on mainstream networks like CBS, NBC and ABC will continue to be relegated to stereotypical, subservient roles as either the maid or the prison gang member unless specific, targeted action is done to reverse this trend.

If America (read white America) never sees Hispanics in progressive, challenging roles as an attorney, medical doctor or U.S. President, how can one expect this country to even fathom the notion of a Latino President let alone elect one?

BIOGRAPHY

Connie Johnson is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Ms. Johnson's research interests include feminist theory, ethnography, and understanding the role of power and identity in marginalized communities. In addition, she has written several papers on Barack Obama and the rhetoric of a black president. Her research focuses on the politics of the construction, representation, and performances of marginalized ethnic groups within the media.