

Ex-Pat TV

Bianka Ballina, UC-Santa Barbara

The position of Latinas/os and of Spanish-language television in the United States begs that we question the very notion of an expatriate and/or immigrant community and what it means to assign these labels to a particular group. On this premise, my analysis of the history of Spanish-language television in the United States, specifically of Univision, is an attempt to underscore the complexities that arise in any attempt to clearly define in strict terms ex-pat television when seen through the lens of U.S. Spanish-language broadcasting.

Univision was developed into one of the major networks in the United States under the control of the Azcárraga family, owners of Televisa, the largest television network in Latin America. The Azcárragas acquired their first U.S. broadcasting license in 1962, subsequently establishing the Spanish International Network (SIN) and Spanish International Communications Corporation (SICC), which distributed Televisa programming to SIN stations and affiliates. As it started developing its own definition of the “Hispanic market” and selling it to advertisers, SIN/SICC envisioned its audience in the United States as merely an extension of Televisa’s audience in Mexico. This notion was possible largely because the majority of U.S. Latinas/os at the time were of Mexican descent, thus allowing SIN/SICC to capitalize on nationalistic nostalgia.¹ The profitability of Televisa programs meant that network executives had no interest in producing programming in the United States. SIN/SICC’s approach during this first decade coincided with dominant Anglo-American characterizations of Latinas/os as foreigners living in the United States. In this context, even U.S. born Latinas/os were characterized as expatriates—as not entirely part of the nation.

On one hand, the construction of the Hispanic market as a profitable and substantial group of consumers has been important to the inclusion of Latinas/os into the U.S. socioeconomic structure as informed by corporate liberalism. In other words, SIN/SICC produced the image of a good Hispanic consumer—young, brand loyal, spends a large percent of his/her income on consumer goods—and thus a good citizen. On the other hand, this inclusion was limited by the very need to define Hispanics as separate from the general market, especially linguistically. This framework presents Hispanics as a nation within the nation, thus reinforcing their marginalization.

As the Latina/o population grew and became both more diverse and more vocal, SIN/SICC was forced to accommodate demands for a television network attuned to the realities of the community it served. Domestic production became a significant concern in this process. In the late 1980s, SIN/SICC was sold to a partnership between Hallmark and Televisa, instigated by the FCC. Now known as Univision, the network began producing a number of shows in the United States and moved its headquarters to

¹ See Gutierrez, F. F., and J. R. Schement. 1984. "SPANISH INTERNATIONAL NETWORK: The Flow of Television from Mexico to the United States". *Communication Research*. 11 (2).

Miami. Some of the most successful shows were then exported to Latin America, establishing a dual flow of programming across the U.S.–Mexico border. Among them were shows that continue to be staples of Spanish-language broadcasting like *Sábado Gigante* and *Noticiero Univision*, as well as the recently cancelled *Show de Cristina*. Despite this shift, telenovelas imported from Mexico and other Latin American countries are still the center of Univision's programming. Moreover, U.S.-born Latinas/os have often expressed concern over the network's tradition of importing talent from Latin America, rather than hiring local presenters, for programs made in the United States. With these flows of talent and the and the privileging of so-called Walter Cronkite Spanish, an upper class and mestizo ideal of Latin America becomes the basis for Spanish-language television representations.

Despite intra-ethnic conflicts and disagreements between U.S. Latinas/os and Latin Americans in relation to U.S. Spanish-language broadcasting, Univision's strategy to mitigate the diversity of its audience has been the promotion of pan-Latinidad. Ultimately, this had not translated into a more inclusive view of U.S. Latina/o identity. Instead, the mestizo and upper class ideal of the Hispanic consumer has become even more central to U.S. Latina/o identity, as it is transmitted now through a discourse of inclusion and unity. The turn to pan-Latinidad stems largely from the need to maintain the appearance of a unified market to advertisers, lest the recognition of internal divisions discourages them from investing in Hispanic advertising. The construction of this pan-ethnic identity illustrates the liminal position of both U.S. Latinas/os and of Latin Americans living in the United States. In both cases, inclusion into the larger U.S. socio-political structure is predicated on and limited to their role as consumers.