Don't Blink: Hispanics in Television Entertainment

National Council of La Raza

A study released by the Center for Media and Public Affairs for the National Council of La Raza, a group that represents more than 100 Hispanic community organizations, suggests that negative portrayals of Hispanics has declined but Latinos are still underrepresented and stereotyped on television. To conduct the study, more than 373 episodes of 96 prime-time series on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, and the new networks WB and UPN were analyzed.

Another aspect of the study was that Latinos being shown as criminals declined from the 1992-1993 season to the 1994-1995 season. The study also noted that only 2 percent of all prime-time characters on the air during 1994-1995 were Latinos, and of the network and syndicated programs reviewed, only 18 had continuing Hispanic characters, and most of those roles were minor.
1. What were the major findings of the report released by the National Council of La Raza concerning the representation of Latinos on television?

2. Why do you think the negative portrayal of Latinos shown on television declined during the 1994-1995 season?

3. What can be done to increase the number of Latinos shown on television in major roles?

4. Why do you think the National Council of La Raza is concerned about the portrayal of Latinos on television?

The 1994-1995 television season included some breakthroughs for Latinos, although it did little to change long-standing patterns in television portrayals. Several new series, like “House of Buggin” (Fox), “My So-Called Life” (ABC), and “New York Undercover” (Fox), offered some of the most interesting and intriguing Latino characters to date.

“House of Buggin” had the distinction of being the first Latino sketch comedy show on the air—sort of a Hispanic version of “In Living Color.” Led by comedian John Leguizamo, the predominantly Latino cast rolled through a series of satirical skits. For instance, the recurrent “Chicano Militant Minute” sketch lampooned militant calls for racial pride. Despite some very creative work, the show failed to survive.

Another ratings failure was “My So-Called Life,” which offered one of the most complicated and controversial portrayals of Latinos in Ricky Vasquez. Ricky was a very confused high school student wrestling with his possible homosexuality and a neglectful dysfunctional family. Before audiences could learn how Ricky resolved his problems, ABC canceled the show.

One of the few new shows with Latino characters to survive the season was “New York Undercover.” This urban cop drama focuses on an interracial pair of detectives: Eddie Torres is Puerto Rican and J. C. Williams is black. Generally their partnership is free of racial tensions, but some cases open a rift between them. The series is particularly good at exploring the social and personal pressures confronting minorities in everyday life. For instance, Eddie Torres has a host of problems with his family, who do not approve of his work. He is frequently made uncomfortable by their traditional demands on him. J. C. Williams is divorced but tries to maintain a close paternal relationship with his young son. The series, now in its second season, has remained one of the top-ten-rated shows on Fox.

Another interesting development in the 1994-95 season is the inclusion of deracinated Latino characters. These characters may have a Hispanic appearance or drop some vague clues as to their ethnicity, but their background remains murky. Examples included Dr. Philip Watters on “Chicago Hope” (played by Hector Elizondo), Mr. Shepherd in the canceled “Heaven Help Us” (played by Ricardo Montalban), and Detective Bobby Simone of “NYPD Blue” (played by Jimmy Smits).

Overall, the proportion of Latino characters doubled from the 1992-93 season to the 1994-95 season. Unfortunately, this involved a rise from only 1 percent to 2 percent of all characters. Within this small group, however, the percentage of starring roles for Latinos has also risen (from 24 to 34 percent). The addition of shows like “House of Buggin,” “Medicine Ball” (Fox), “New York Undercover,” “Chicago Hope” (CBS), and “My So-Called Life” created several new continuing roles. Unfortu-
nately, only “New York Undercover” and “Chicago Hope” survived the ratings war. These new series joined shows like the “John Larroquette Show” (NBC), “NYPD Blue” (ABC), and “seaQuest DSV” (NBC) in boosting the prime-time visibility of Latinos.

This seeming progress masks the concentration of Latino characters in a few series. Slightly more than one quarter (27 percent) of all episodes included a Latino character in some role, but only 11 percent of regularly scheduled series included a Latino in a continuing role. In fact, the majority (51 percent) of all Latino characters in our sample appeared in just two series: Fox’s “House of Buggin’” and “New York Undercover.” By contrast over nine out of ten (92 percent) episodes included a black character, and 57 percent of these series included an African American in a continuing role. Thus, the rise in Latino portrayals is evidence of niche programming rather than increasing integration in prime-time television entertainment.

The most positive sign of change, however, is not the sheer number of Latino characters, but the manner in which they are portrayed. The increase in Hispanic visibility has been accompanied by a decrease in the proportion of negative characters generally and in criminal activity specifically. Negative roles for Latinos fell by almost half from 1992 to 1994 (from 18 percent to 10 percent of characters portrayed). The proportion of Latino characters committing crimes fell dramatically, dropping from 16 percent to 6 percent. (The portrayals of non-Hispanic characters were largely unchanged in these contexts.)

Despite this evidence of progress, Latino criminality continued to outpace that of whites and African Americans. Six percent of Latino characters committed a crime, compared to 4 percent of whites and 2 percent of blacks. An episode of “New York Undercover” provides an illustration. A Puerto Rican girl accuses a black member of a rival high school football team of raping her. Detectives Williams and Torres split along racial lines as they investigate the crime, with Torres supporting the girl and Williams backing the player. Eventually they discover that the girl filed false charges as part of a scheme with a local bookie, who planned to clean up on bets when the player was suspended due to the rape charges. In the end Torres and Williams overcome their own biases to exonerate the young man and close down an illegal gambling operation. The girl is put on probation for her part in the scheme (9/8/94).

Despite the continuing existence of such plotlines, positive Latino characters could be found in many other shows. Indeed, they outnumbered negative characters by more than two to one. For example, an episode of “Chicago Hope” provided a rare opportunity for the Dr. Watters character to exhibit his ethnic heritage to positive effect. A young Honduran girl is brought to the hospital for surgery to fix a severely cleft palate. Prior to surgery Dr. Watters visits the girl to reassure her. Speaking in Spanish, he comforts her and tells her that she will be beautiful. Unfortunately, another more serious birth defect (involving malformed blood vessels) threatens her life. As the surgeons try to fix the problem, Dr. Watters is called in to comfort the girl’s mother. Speaking in English and Spanish, he explains what is wrong and reassures her that they are doing everything they can. Sadly, despite Dr. Watters’ expertise and compassion, the young girl dies.

Although Hispanic characters were shown more positively in 1994, they were not seen as particularly successful. In fact, the percentage of Latino characters who failed to achieve their goals doubled, rising from 10 percent to 21 percent between 1992 and 1994. (The outcomes for both white and black characters were unchanged.) This increase in the portrayal of failures can be traced to two factors: the continuing criminality among Latino characters and the structure of “House of Buggin.” Since criminals don’t usually succeed on television, Latino involvement in crime lessens their chances of success. And a sketch comedy format like “House of Buggin” creates many characters during short vignettes who inevitably fail to achieve their goals. For example, at least one character in each sketch is the butt of the joke and so doomed to failure.

In addition, the social and economic status of Latino characters seemed to slip in the 1994-95 season. The proportion who were poor or working class increased from 28 percent to 55 percent. (However, the total number of Latino characters with an identifiable economic status dropped significantly.) In contrast, the proportion of poor and working-
class whites and blacks on network television declined from 1992 to 1994. This shift in the economic status of Latinos may be due to the cancellation of shows such as “L.A. Law,” which often featured wealthy and middle-class Hispanics.

In a similar vein, the proportion of Latinos seen in professional occupations or as business executives declined from 25 percent to 17 percent.¹ For white and black characters, on the other hand, their occupational proportions remained largely unchanged across the two seasons. Latinos were most heavily represented in law enforcement occupations. One out of every four Latino characters with a census-coded occupation worked in law enforcement, versus one out of eight of whites and one in six blacks. In this respect Latinos seem to be following the course set earlier by African Americans in prime-time entertainment. Police and espionage dramas were among the first to show signs of integration in prime time. So-called salt-and-pepper teams of detectives or secret agents opened the doors for later black characters to be featured in a broader range of roles.

Note

1. These percentages are calculated for characters with census-coded occupations only.