



Hispanic Voices: Is the Press Listening?

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**HISPANIC VOICES:
Is the Press Listening?**

by

Jorge Quiroga

**Discussion Paper D-18
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The Joan Shorenstein Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government



INTRODUCTION

In earlier times communities were defined by their members, and the boundaries of a community were typically coextensive with the daily physical movements of their members. A few years ago my wife and I spent a summer in a remote Vermont hamlet called Lilliesville, which at the time had a population of approximately twelve. A hundred and fifty years earlier, however, its population was closer to a thousand than it was to twelve, and there were shops, taverns, and a thriving lumber industry. Yet given the state of transportation and communication in the middle of the nineteenth century, the area in which most of Lilliesville's population lived was quite small, and we can imagine most of the population in close physical proximity with each other on a daily basis. Membership in the community was determined largely by geography.

Lilliesville may be much smaller in 1994 than it was in 1844, but the communities that most of us inhabit are considerably larger than they were in the last century. For those of us who live in communities like the Boston metropolitan area with its several million people, physical proximity is no longer the only or even the most important definition of the community. Although in a strict sense the area that we call the "Boston metropolitan area" may be defined geographically on the map, the size and scope of the modern community is defined in other ways as well. The questions of who talks to whom, who listens to whom, who is taken seriously and who not, who leads and who is led, who is central to the community and who is on the margins, who is important and who is insignificant, who counts and who does not, are all determined by mechanisms other than face-to-face physical encounter.

In this modern world, the media, in the broadest sense of that word and including entertainment as well as so-called "hard" news and opinion, takes on an increasingly important role in the building—indeed in the very definition—of a community. The images that appear in newspapers and magazines, on television and radio, in the movies and in popular music, serve to define our communities in increasingly important ways. As a result, the power of the media to admit and to exclude, to render visible and to render invisible, to highlight or to ignore, is one of the most important components of community definition, and consequently one of the most important functions that the mass media serves.

In light of the media's role in community definition, media exclusion of categories of people is a source of great concern. And in a

country overwhelmingly populated by successive waves of immigrants, those with the power to admit play an especially important role in defining the community. It may have been an immigration officer at Ellis Island who officially and legally admitted my mother to this country, but it was a series of cultural institutions and social decisions that told her she belonged, and told her that she was a member of the community. Among these institutions, these days, few is as important as that amalgamation of news, entertainment, and information that we call the "media." When we discover that the media is slower to admit people to full community membership than is the Immigration and Naturalization Service, therefore, we ought to worry, and we ought to pay careful attention.

Jorge Quiroga, an investigative reporter for WCVB-TV in Boston, has spent most of his more than twenty years in journalism as a "beat" and investigative reporter. Little if any of his professional background has been devoted to covering issues of special concern to the Hispanic community. Yet when he came to the Joan Shorenstein Center as a Fellow in the fall of 1993, he wanted to take the opportunity to think, study, and write about the intersection of the press and the Hispanic community that represented his own ethnic and cultural background. As he reflected on his own life, as he studied the academic literature, and as he interviewed members of the press and leaders of the Hispanic community, he became increasingly convinced of the community gate-keeping function that the media served, and equally convinced that the gates had yet to be opened substantially to those of Hispanic background. This study, which combines the skills and experiences of Quiroga as journalist with his academic researches as a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center, is at one level an important analysis of the role of the media in continuing to deny members of the Hispanic community full membership in the American political and social community in which they reside. Even more broadly, it is an important case study in the role of the media in community definition generally, and we hope that it receives the careful reading and wide attention it so richly deserves.

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HISPANIC VOICES: Is the Press Listening?

INTRODUCTION

It wasn't so long ago that Hispanics in the United States read with great hope that the 1980's would be the "Decade of the Hispanic."¹ Cover stories in weekly magazines, newspapers and network television examined demographic increases and concluded that Hispanic clout would be felt both in the ballot box and the shopping mall. Certainly Hispanics attained some significant achievements during the 80's and their political influence did increase. But the predictions turned out to be vastly exaggerated and the milestones bittersweet. Hispanic political impact on the presidential elections of 1984 and 1988 was not conclusive. The income gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanics increased. And the expanded numbers created a backlash among non-Hispanics that produced the official English movement and a bipartisan anti-immigration sentiment.

The unfulfilled potential of the 80's has pushed Hispanics into the 1990's with even greater expectations. The U.S. Census projects that early into the 21st century Hispanics will outnumber blacks as the nation's biggest minority. The extension of voting rights to include linguistic minorities is promoting the election of Hispanic lawmakers in record numbers. Despite these achievements, the 90's remains a paradox of increased opportunity and resistance to Hispanic growth in the U.S. In California, politicians say America has given too much away to its minorities, and Governor Pete Wilson suggests that to save money the government should strip citizenship from the children of undocumented Mexicans born in the U.S. In Texas, the federal government orders extra border patrols along the Rio Grande. In Somerville, Massachusetts, which had billed itself as a haven for new immigrants, school officials start demanding passports from students who have noticeable accents.

Hispanics in the U.S. are at a crossroads of economic and political assimilation. Yet the problems of underemployment, health and education remain great obstacles that threaten continued marginalization. How well Hispanics fare into the turn of the century will in part reflect how the press continues to cover their particular issues and concerns. It is the media

that shapes public awareness and political opinion. As the American humorist Will Rogers said many years ago, "All I know is just what I read in the papers." Add television, and there is still much truth in Rogers's statement.

Despite an occasional flurry of attention, press indifference toward Hispanics seems more the rule not the exception. Conversely, despite occasional attempts to engage public opinion through tactics such as boycotts, marches or strikes Hispanics have remained passive about to the inadequate press coverage. The problem itself can be traced to the process of reporting on Hispanics. Reporters and editors habitually seem to speak about Hispanics, not to Hispanics. Journalists are blind to the full range of diversity within this community. I call this the transparency of Hispanics before the American press. It is a curious attribute of being noted, not quite completely ignored but not fully seen or counted. As such, the media influences how Hispanics view themselves as well as how Anglos perceive Hispanics.

There is also a correlation between Hispanic communities where there is a lack of political or grass-roots development and the lack of qualitative and quantitative press coverage of Hispanics. Where there is a lack of Hispanic clout, the media encourages a homogeneous view of Hispanics.

Louis DeSipio is a political scientist and a visiting professor at Mt. Holyoke College. DeSipio studies press coverage of Hispanics in America. He says, "The press gives the Anglo audience the wrong impression which allows Anglos to do less for Hispanics because they are not seen as distinct populations that need to be socialized into the American culture."²

The broadest characteristics about the group are taken from the unadorned statistics that describe an Hispanic underclass. Hispanics are regularly presented by the press as uneducated immigrants who are unable or unwilling to help or speak for themselves.

I have been a television journalist for nearly 20 years. In 1974 I was hired by WCVB, Boston to create and produce "Aqui" a weekly program for and about the Hispanic community. Three years later I moved to the newsroom, becoming a reporter for NewsCenter Five, the highest rated

TV news organization in the Boston market. In an article about local TV stations in the early 80's the *New York Times* reported WCVB was the best TV station in the country. WCVB is one of a few television stations in the United States to have repeatedly won the Peabody Award, the DuPont Award, the Ohio State University Award and the Gabriel Award for news and overall excellence. The station is also a recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Award. And while the marketplace has become more competitive and the influences of tabloid news encroach on regular news shows, the quality of our news coverage day in and day out continues to distinguish NewsCenter Five as "the most sophisticated news station" in the city.³

But even the better news operations often fail to meet the challenge posed by a changing population. On those rare occasions the press feels compelled to report on Hispanics, be it Boston or even Los Angeles, the rift between this emerging group and mainstream society seems even greater.

Writing a discussion paper about press coverage of 25 million Hispanics in the U.S. is in and of itself a daunting challenge. While there are many similarities in experiences, it is important to note there is no steadfast Hispanic monolith. Miami, for example, is one of the most distinct exceptions. There, Cubans are the majority and define their own press coverage by exerting a dominating influence on the city's economy and politics. San Antonio is also notable for its deep-rooted Hispanic heritage. More than half the city's residents are Mexican-American and many can trace their ancestors to the early founding years, one hundred years before the Declaration of Independence. Boston, on the other hand, has a relatively small and diverse Hispanic community; only 10 percent of the city's residents.

For this discussion paper on the relationship between press coverage and Hispanic political development, I have chosen a case study approach. I have looked at the qualitative and quantitative coverage of events in various cities to establish a pattern of coverage of Hispanics as a whole. Some became national events while others received only local coverage. Among the factors that weaken the link between the press and Hispanics are newsroom attitudes, limited knowledge about Hispanics, stereotyping, and employment of Hispanic journalists and inconsistent efforts by Hispanics to hold the press accountable.

A CROSS BURNS IN CHARLESTOWN

Twenty-three-year-old Marisol Abreu peered out her living-room window and could hardly believe her eyes. There, in the front courtyard to her apartment a five-foot wooden cross had been on fire.

"They make me feel like I don't have the right to live here," she said. None of the racial slurs, the hateful stares she'd endured during the time she'd lived in Charlestown hurt as much or seemed as threatening "as the powerful symbol of the burning cross, which is usually associated with the Ku Klux Klan."⁴

That hardened symbol of hate was hardly anonymous. At 7:30 P.M. a crowd of a hundred white teen-agers shamelessly gathered around the burning cross. Insults, taunts and racial slurs were directed at Abreu and other Hispanic residents in the public housing projects where she and her three-year-old daughter lived. No, this wasn't the 1950's in the deep South, nor was it the 1970's when court ordered busing stirred deep racial animosity in many Northern cities. This ugly scene took place in 1993, on a raw damp October evening in Boston, a city with its share of unhealed racial scars.

How the city's newspapers and TV stations covered this troubling episode reveals much about the media's detached relationship with Hispanics in the city and the profound degree to which Hispanic leaders perceive themselves alienated by the press.

NO HISPANICS IN THE ROLODEX

In Boston, the cross-burning incident capped a night of violence following the stabbing of three white youths by a Hispanic teenager as retaliation for alleged harassment. Several hundred angry white residents chased the 18-year-old Hispanic suspect into a friend's apartment in the Bunker Hill Projects in Charlestown. As dumpsters were set ablaze, the mob screamed obscenities and racial slurs. Dozens of police were summoned to the rescue. Under heavy security the Hispanic youth was arrested and whisked out of the building into a police vehicle.

The next morning the *Boston Globe* wrote of a brewing racial confrontation, "Police speculated that the stabbings came after some youths had slashed the tires of three cars believed to be owned by the suspect and his friends. White youths are believed to be responsible for the tire slashings."⁵

Press accounts dealt with the facts and the racial framework of the violence and the changing demographics in Charlestown's public housing. Once residents in the 1,111 unit complex were all white. Today they are 62 percent white, 17 percent Hispanic, 11 percent black and 9 percent Asian.

No one would excuse the bloody alleged attack of the Hispanic suspect or the frenzied reaction by the white mob. But had this "race riot" involved black victims and a burning cross or Jews and Nazi anti-Semitic graffiti, the press in Boston would have certainly contacted community leaders. The spontaneous reaction from those groups would have also been more fervent.

Curiously, while two Hispanic eyewitnesses were interviewed, reporters did not seek out opinions from Hispanic leaders. It seemed as if there were no Hispanic names in the newsroom rolodex. Reporters who felt the need to speak to Hispanic leaders were satisfied with simply interviewing the Hispanic director of the Boston Housing Authority, David Cortiella.

"Any community that is undergoing transition—where new neighbors are moving in—will have difficulties," Cortiella told the *Boston Herald* as he inspected the projects the next day.⁶

Speaking to a WCVB reporter Cortiella warned, "Don't make it more than what it is. This is kids fighting kids."⁷

That 'spin' came from Cortiella the city official looking to calm a volatile situation. Later, Cortiella expressed dismay that other Hispanic voices were not sought out by the press. "If this had been a black/white incident, the *Globe* and the *Herald* would have certainly flipped through their Rolodexes and invited reaction from a whole range of black community leaders and politicians" he said.⁸

Cortiella says when he didn't read any interviews with other Hispanic leaders in the city he called the *Globe* reporter covering the story and complained. "I even had to give him the names of three Hispanic leaders, but it was me giving him leads trying to help him write the story"⁹

The story Cortiella wanted was not written. Subsequent reports did not include Hispanics in Boston representing a larger constituency. It was a missed opportunity to build bridges between the press and Hispanics.

Equally damning was the passivity of Hispanic leaders themselves. Their silence was so deafening that a week later, it forced the *Globe's* Efrain Hernandez, Jr., one of a handful of Hispanic

reporters in the city, to write an analysis of it.

"For many in the city's Hispanic community, the lack of public outrage by Hispanic activists since the cross-burning and other racial unrest in Charlestown has itself been an outrage. Some residents saw a lost opportunity to highlight the complex barriers faced by Hispanics in the city because, at least in public, activists remained largely silent."¹⁰

Hernandez later explained why so many remained so silent, "Latino leaders were hesitant to get involved because they felt the Hispanic kids were no innocent bystanders, that they were partly to blame for the violence that first night. Some activists felt they had to be careful. They were frustrated about the cross burning. They really did not know what to do. It shows people are intimidated by the media."¹¹

When it comes to meaningful coverage of Hispanics in the United States, the American press chooses a passive role. The reasons and consequences have created a dysfunctional dynamic distancing the press and Hispanics from each other. At times Hispanic leaders and organizations have been indecisive in responding to specific events. Sometimes when they do react they demonstrate a lack of sophistication and knowledge about using the media. The press, likewise, has often shown a broad lack of understanding and awareness of Hispanics even in the aftermath of a confrontation thick with racial overtones, like the Charlestown melee and cross burning. Once again, reporters and editors opted to talk about Hispanics rather than to talk to them.

Maybe it seems simpler not to commit time and effort to understand a group that defies easy definition. What is a Hispanic after all? The answer varies.

Nearly 10 percent of the nation's population of 250 million is Hispanic. Although you can find Hispanics in every state, the majority or nearly nine of every ten, live in just ten states: New Mexico, California, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, New York, Florida, Massachusetts, Nevada, and New Jersey.

Mexican-Americans form the largest group accounting for 60 percent of the nation's Hispanic population. Puerto Ricans are the second largest group representing 12 percent of all Hispanics, followed by Cuban-Americans at 5 percent. The remaining fourth, or 23 percent, come from the Dominican Republic and the Spanish-speaking countries of Central and South America.

Almost two-fifths or 23 percent of all Hispanics are foreign born.¹² Others are multi-generation Americans and still others have ancestors whose residences predate the nation's birth. About 62 percent of the Hispanic population was born in the United States.¹³ Yet, influenced by the continued influx of immigrants, Spanish is the nation's second language, spoken at home by over 17 million people. Among native born Hispanics the use of English increases with each generation. Among the native born, 62 percent of Mexican Americans, 50 percent of Puerto Ricans and 31 percent of Cubans speak English predominantly or exclusively at home.¹⁴

Felix Gutierrez, a fourth generation Californian and former journalism professor, expresses a common sentiment among many Mexican Americans when he says, "My great-grandparents didn't cross the border. The border crossed them."¹⁵

For many it is also hard to understand the diversity within a series of groups who hold nationality above ethnicity. Dr. Rodolfo de la Garza, a prominent Hispanic political scientist and researcher writes, "Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans have little interaction with each other, most do not recognize that they have much in common culturally, and they do not profess strong affection for each other."¹⁶

Some even see the term Hispanic itself as a forced label. Richard Rodriguez writes in his book *Days of Obligation*, "Hispanic is not a racial or cultural or geographic or linguistic or economic description. It is a bureaucratic integer. A complete political fiction." But the reality is that the dictionary definition of Hispanic—as someone pertaining to Spain and its language, people and culture—no longer applies in the United States. Today the term Hispanic, along with its colloquial synonym, Latino, refers to people whose origins are traced to Spanish speaking countries of Latin America.¹⁷

Acknowledging the bureaucratic birth of the term Hispanic in the 1980 census, many see that within the context of an Anglo-Saxon majority in America, Hispanics through a common language and a similar history do have more in common with each other regardless of national origin.

"A group consciousness is emerging despite our differences," says Raul Yzaguirre, executive director of the National Council of La Raza, the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights advocacy group. "It is all contextual," he adds. "We are talking about these things as though they were opposite when in fact we are talking about a set of concentric circles."¹⁸

From Puerto Ricans in Boston, Salvadorans in Washington, D.C., to Mexicans in Los Angeles, from Chileans in Chicago to Cubans in Miami, from every country in Latin America, black, white, Indian, Mestizos, Hispanics, now account for one of every ten Americans. They are not a single monolithic community but rather a series of communities in concentric circles. It is a distinction lost on the mainstream press.

"I do not attribute a maliciousness or an agenda on the part of the networks to 'dis' Hispanics. I really think there is a genuine pervasive and overwhelming ignorance on the part of the networks toward this community," say Lisa Navarrate, a spokesperson at La Raza's headquarters in Washington, D.C.¹⁹

Navarrate resists blaming the mainstream media of pernicious racism. "When you talk to the networks they think Hispanics are immigrants, recent arrivals, that we just got here yesterday and that most of us are here illegally. There are all kinds of myths and stereotypes that they take as the Gospel truth. When in reality two-thirds of the vast majority of Hispanics (Mexican-Americans) were born in this country. Their roots go back to before the English got here. But we can say that 'til we are blue in the face and it doesn't quite resonate," Navarrate says.²⁰

That is certainly the perception among dozens of Latinos interviewed for this report. From different countries of origin, foreign-born or U.S.-born, Spanish or English language dominant, from the East Coast or from the West, liberals or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans there is one consensus: Hispanics are ill-served by the American press.

"There is a lack of understanding as to who Latinos are. The press is still very much driven by the black/white equation. They tend to see us in that context. How are we like blacks and how do we differ from blacks? The census tells them we exist but they don't understand us in our own right," says Felix Gutierrez.²¹

Louis DeSipio believes the way the press fails to cover contrasts among Hispanics creates a stereotype among Anglos (a loose term for English-speaking American-born whites of European descent). "They get periodic statistics from the Census Bureau that say things are terrible. Or they give a picture that is accurate for just one person," says DeSipio.²²

From census reports, publishers and editors learn that Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. If census projections hold true, entering the 21st century

Hispanics will become the country's largest minority group, surpassing blacks. Due to immigration and high birth rates, the Hispanic population grew over seven times as fast as the rest of the nation's population during the 1980's. (Hispanics increased by 53, in contrast to growth rates of 6 percent for whites and 13 percent for non-Hispanic blacks)²³

Other snapshots show that Hispanics are the least educated, the poorest, least likely to be covered by health insurance. Hispanic children are twice as likely to be living in poverty as non-Hispanic children.²⁴

A growing population, extensions to the Voting Rights Act to specific language minorities, and court challenges to district boundaries during the 1970's and 1980's had considerable political impact. In the Southwest for example de la Garza and DeSipio write that, "By freeing the Mexican American vote, the parties—particularly the Democrats in the Southwestern states—have become dependent upon Mexican-American votes for victory."²⁵ In New York, Hispanic elected representation to city, state and Congress doubled from 11 to 22 between 1986 and the November elections of 1992. Hispanic representation to the 103rd session of Congress, increased 60 percent. The 7 new Hispanic seats expanded the Congressional Hispanic Caucus to 17 members; still only a paltry 3 percent of the 535 seats in the House of Representatives.

The Hispanic political potential continues to be undermined by weak voter participation. Even a record setting 5 million Hispanic voter registrations in 1992 reported by the Southwest Voter Registration Project, appears to be little more than treading water.²⁶ Voter registrations by definition include only voting age U.S. citizens. Expand the base to include the influx of new immigrants, along with the younger, poorer and less educated traits of Hispanics as a whole, and there is in fact little proportionate progress in voter participation. Rodolfo de la Garza and Louis DeSipio studied the effects of the Voting Rights Act on Hispanics. They conclude that, "Despite significant improvements in eliminating structural barriers to participation and in electing Latinos to office, however, Latino registration and voting rates nationally have not increased beyond pre-1975 levels."²⁷

Hispanic political influence is further diminished by the very nature of Hispanics who are elected. In Washington, members of the Hispanic Congressional Caucus represent the full political spectrum—liberals, moderates and conservatives. Fourteen members are Democrats and

three are Republicans. Unlike the Black Congressional Caucus, Hispanics on Capitol Hill rarely vote as a single block. Some of today's most pressing national needs, welfare reform, crime, national health insurance, jobs creation, substance abuse, immigration and AIDS, have a disproportionate impact on Hispanics, but when the Washington press covers these issues, Hispanics are seldom heard from. George Condon, Washington bureau chief for Copley News Service and the president of the White House Press Corps Association, does not mince words when he says, "The press seeks opinions from those it perceives to have influence, and in Washington Hispanics are not there yet."²⁸

Quantitative data provided by the U.S. Census has outpaced qualitative data available about this group. We know how many there are, how much they earn, where they live, their occupations, their legal status, the language they prefer, but we know much less about their opinions, feelings and values. Dr. de la Garza says, "The nation's knowledge about this group has lagged behind its interest in it, and this knowledge gap has become fertile ground for claims and counterclaims about Hispanics—who they are and what their presence portends for the nation."²⁹ Lacking substantive facts and/or interest, the press continues to pay minimal attention.

When Dr. DeSipio looked at the largest circulation daily newspapers in forty major cities in the United States over a six-month period, he found that, "Overall, approximately 60 percent of the paper/days reviewed had no coverage at all. . . of the remaining 49 percent, the average paper contained 1.6 articles. . . . In other words, one would see two articles over about a three-day period."³⁰

The population in each of these forty cities was at least 10 percent Hispanic. The sampling included at least 90 percent of the Cuban, Puerto Rican or Mexican origin populations.

"I was surprised. I actually thought that was low. I thought that because so many papers served cities with large Latino communities, you'd find more written about Latinos," says DeSipio.³¹

The stories written about Hispanics tended to be local. DeSipio found no "national" Hispanic coverage. "Among the papers that do have coverage, few cover the same stories. This finding suggests the absence of explicitly Latino issues that editors uniformly recognize as meeting their papers' criterion for 'national' news."³²

The relatively little coverage Hispanics do receive usually fits the typical definition of "news."

Emily Rooney, former executive producer of World News Tonight with Peter Jennings, is more blunt, saying, "Most news is about conflict."³³

David Shaw of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "News, as defined by the people who write, edit, publish and broadcast it, is about the unusual, the aberrant—about triumphs and tragedies, underachievers and overachievers, it's about the extremes of life, not 'normal everyday' life."³⁴

"It is only when the majority culture perceives the black cat is crossing its path that anybody says anything about Latinos," says Ray Suarez, host of National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation."³⁵ The former Chicago television reporter watches national and local press coverage of Hispanics from his unique vantage point as the only Hispanic host of a national radio show. "I am in pretty exclusive company."³⁶

Suarez says the conflict-driven nature of hard news offers rare opportunities for the public to see Hispanics in a fuller context, "It's either to highlight pathologies, drug sales, gang violence, school drop-out rates or to do a Margaret Mead turn on that night's 'Evening News,' by going over to the other side of town and to see what those Mexicans are like."³⁷

That is not the case for whites or Anglos who are routinely represented in many different types of news accounts. San Francisco State University journalism professor Erna Smith examined how the mainstream media covered different ethnic groups in the Bay Area.

"Whites were sources for all types of stories but this was not true for people of color. People of color were more likely than whites to be news sources of crime stories and as a group were cited more frequently in these crime stories."³⁸

The degree of one-sided coverage varies between newspapers and TV news. The Bay Area may have a 15 percent Hispanic population, yet Smith writes, "On television . . . 12 percent of the Latinos were sources on crime compared with 14 percent for whites. In newspapers 60 percent of Latinos were sources on crime stories compared with 18 percent of the whites."³⁹

The emphasis on news about Hispanic crime carries over from region to region. In San Antonio, Texas, Thomas Larralde looked at specific news coverage on KMOL-TV.

"Hispanics were overrepresented in crime stories and were generally portrayed as criminals, or victims. Thirty-one percent of Hispanic stories were crime related, while 21 percent portrayed Hispanics as victims of natural misfortunes. Within these stories Hispanics were rarely interviewed," Larralde writes.⁴⁰

Of all natural misfortunes afflicting Hispanics, poverty may be the worst. Nationally, more than a fourth or 29 percent of Hispanics live below federal poverty levels. The 3.1 percent increase in Hispanic poverty between 1991 and 1993 is the highest among any ethnic group in the nation. As Hispanic poverty rises, income drops. Per capita income for Hispanics in 1992 was almost half that of whites (whites- \$15,981, blacks-\$9,296, Hispanics-\$8,874).⁴¹

Curiously this emphasis by the press on Hispanic criminality and poverty does not temper an overriding impulse to overlook Hispanics. It is as if they possessed some unnatural quality of transparency to be noticed but not seen with certainty.

SYMMETRY OF EXCLUSION

The most racially charged incident of the decade provides an excellent example of the media looking through the Hispanic community. The police beating in Los Angeles in 1991 of 25-year-old black motorist Rodney King, and the subsequent riots in the Spring of 1992 were described by a Special Committee of the California State Assembly as the "worst multi-ethnic conflict in United States history."

Yet the image left from the news coverage of the riots was not really multi-ethnic. After viewing the police beating of King, the subsequent beating of the white truck driver Reginald Denny, and many other videotaped acts of arson and vandalism during the riots, viewers would be hard pressed not to describe the violence as something other than the rage of blacks against whites and Korean bystanders.'

A careful look shows that was hardly the case at all. Hispanics experienced a symmetry of exclusion from beginning to end in the press coverage. They were excluded as perpetrators, victims and as a community affected by the melee.

The first subtle omission by the press was a failure to consistently report that one of the four "white" officers charged in the beating of 25-year-old Rodney King was of Latino descent. Only one early article in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that as a youth, Officer Theodore Briseno was routinely "teased about his Latino heritage by white friends in high school."⁴²

Peter Skerry, a noted scholar on Mexican-Americans writes of this omission, "Yet in its news columns and editorials the *Times* has—with this notable exception—consistently referred to Briseno as one of "the whites" who assaulted King. Indeed, in the continuing furor

over this incident Briseno's ethnic background has been almost universally overlooked."⁴³

Neglecting to identify one of the officers as an Hispanic, the media framed the conflict from the outset in the familiar black/white American paradigm of racial conflict. This pattern persisted almost a year later, when the L.A. riots erupted following the acquittal of the four "white" police officers by a Simi Valley jury.

On April 29, 1992, TV cameras zoomed in at the intersection of Florence and Normandie Streets in South Central L.A., the epicenter of the riots. From the minute the TV crews went "live" with the images of black rioters venting their anger against their unsuspecting victims, to the trial in October, 1993 of the two black suspects accused of beating white trucker Reginald Denny, the perception created by the media belies the facts. The press overlooked substantial evidence that the riot was a "class rebellion as well as a race revolt."⁴⁴ Selective reporting and preconceived notions in the press coverage left Hispanics on the cutting room floor.

"The problem with the race-tells-all explanation is that it overlooks the central, perhaps even dominant role that Hispanics played in the violence and suffering. According to the Los Angeles Police Department, Hispanics accounted for half of the 8,700 people arrested city-wide during and after the riots; in fact, the L.A.P.D. arrested *more* Hispanics (4,307) than blacks (3,083). Nineteen Hispanics also died during the civil disorders, just three short of the number of black fatalities. And while newscasts featured embittered standoffs between blacks and Korean shop owners, the L.A. mobs ravaged about as many Hispanic businesses as Korean-owned ones."⁴⁵

TV news accounts projected a one-sided picture into living rooms around the world. Looking carefully at how the press framed the story reveals how little journalists knew about the city's neighborhoods and the complexity of urban tension that existed.

Being familiar with the coverage of minorities in the press from her research in San Francisco, Erna Smith decided to examine local and national TV news of the L.A. riots beginning April 29, 1992. Her study included a Korean-language news program and the nation's number one Spanish-language TV network, Univision.

"There were significant differences in the coverage on different stations. The network news coverage framed the story more in terms of blacks and whites than did the local stations in Los Angeles. . . . Blacks and whites were the

central focus of 96 percent of the network news reports compared to 80 percent of the stories aired on stations in Los Angeles. . . . Conversely, Latinos and Koreans were the central focus of 4 percent of the stories aired on the networks and 18 percent of the stories aired on the Los Angeles stations," writes Smith.⁴⁶

The visual images and the framing of these news stories contrasts with the actual participants and the ethnic diversity of the affected neighborhoods. The areas of Los Angeles most decimated by the riots were heavily populated by Hispanics: Koreatown (80 percent), Pico Union (70 percent) and South Central Los Angeles (45 percent).⁴⁷ Those numbers, according to Smith, correspond with the arrest totals which showed Hispanics, "comprised half the rioters arrested in the city of Los Angeles and possibly 30 to 40 percent of the store owners whose businesses were destroyed by the violence."⁴⁸

But in TV news the L.A. riots had a vastly different face. It was not Hispanic. Smith found that, "Latinos only comprised 17 percent of the residents and 10 percent of the store owners interviewed in the coverage."⁴⁹

The Tomas Rivera Center in Claremont, California also conducted a comprehensive study of the L.A. riots and the aftermath. This project specifically tracks the Hispanic presence in the 14 most highly damaged neighborhoods (including Koreatown, Pico Union and South Central Los Angeles). In this broader geographical area Hispanics still accounted for 49 percent of the residents.⁵⁰ Analyzing the most highly damaged neighborhoods helps trace the roots of Hispanic omission in news accounts.

East L.A. is the city's largest and best known Hispanic neighborhood. Because it was largely untouched by the violence, there was an initial assumption that, "Latinos scarcely participated in and were mostly unaffected by the unrest."⁵¹

The result is that Hispanics in the newly emerging barrios that were in the eye of the storm were seen but unheard in the news coverage. The framework created by this type of reporting was a double edged sword. On one side, lack of prominence spared Hispanics' public and official condemnation. On the other side, the failure to be visible initially kept Hispanics out of the round table of negotiations after the riots.

As city, state and federal agencies began work to rebuild South Central Los Angeles, the initial effort mirrored the black/white framework of the coverage. None of the three commissioners who initially headed the "Rebuild L.A. Committee" was Hispanic.

The oversight became so glaring it forced a group of Hispanic business and social leaders to stage a rally outside of City Hall. They complained that Hispanics were being shortchanged in riot aid. "Joe Sanchez, president of the Mexican-American Grocers Assn., said he remains convinced that African-American organizations have received disproportionate attention and post-riot aid because they have stronger ties to City Hall and because the news media often paint riots in a black-versus-white or black-versus-Korean conflict, in which Latinos were primarily looters instead of victims."⁵²

"We were left out of the reconstruction even in South Central L.A. which is nearly 50 percent Latino. It has grown to be a divisive issue. People still see the area as black and resources still go predominantly to Afro-Americans. There is a real lack of comprehension of the demographic changes in these areas," says Magdalena Duran, spokesperson for the La Raza office in Los Angeles.⁵³ After one year a Latino was finally added to the commission.

"When groups started to coalesce and develop strategies (to address the damage and destruction from the riots) the general feeling was that Latinos were not represented to the degree one would expect among groups like Rebuild L.A.," says Barbara Cox an editor for the Tomas Rivera Center in Los Angeles.⁵⁴

So how is it possible that with a predilection to see Hispanics in stories of criminality and poverty, the press could have left Hispanics out of the L.A. riots story? How could there be no voice given to Hispanics in Los Angeles even when they were in the throes of a riot?

One Hispanic observer said part of the problem is that historically Hispanics have been slow to mobilize and demand public attention. "When you abuse a Mexican he leaves the room because he doesn't want to be where he's not wanted. We've got to wake up the system...we're going to bug everybody. We're here, and that ain't going to change," said Fernando Oaxaca, the owner of an L.A. public relations company.⁵⁵

The pattern of exclusion also reflects the reporters and news executives listening in the newsroom and the fact that too few of them are Hispanics who know this community and its language.

DOES ANYBODY SPEAK SPANISH IN THE NEWSROOM?

It was a typical afternoon in the *Washington Post* newsroom, May 5, 1991, as reporters and editors worked toward deadline. At the assign-

ment desk, the police radios came alive with calls for backup in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of D.C. Soon, radio reports told of a major confrontation between police and Hispanic residents. Apparently a cop had shot an Hispanic immigrant and people were angry.

"At the *Post*, people started to gather around TV monitors when the local stations cut in with live reports from the scene," says Greg Brock, Front Page Editor, "Then someone in the newsroom suddenly asked, 'Think we should send somebody down there?'"

Brock says there was no reporter in the city room who spoke Spanish, so the editors called the International Desk and borrowed a Spanish-speaking correspondent who was sent to the disturbance.

The *Washington Post*, which prides itself on its national and international reporting, was now covering a local disturbance in its own backyard as a foreign war. The scene is hardly surprising to one of the few Hispanics who worked at the *Post* before 1991.

"When I left the *Post* in 1989 I was one of only two Latino reporters and the other one did not speak Spanish," says Zita Arocha, a staff reporter from 1985 to 1989.⁵⁶

Prior to her stint at the *Post*, Arocha reported for the *Tampa Times*, the *Miami Herald* and the *Miami News*. In Washington, she specialized in immigration and Hispanic affairs. Arocha says before she left the paper she warned her Anglo editors that tensions between the city's burgeoning Hispanic community and the police department were near the breaking point.

"I spelled it out for my editors that the Latino community was a time bomb for the city and that the *Post* did not have the resources to cover it."⁵⁷

Two years later the lid blew off. The violence began after Daniel Gomez, a Salvadoran immigrant, was shot by a black female officer trying to arrest him for disorderly conduct. Police say Gomez had been drinking and lunged at the police officer with a knife.

"What began as a largely Hispanic disturbance on May 5 in Mount Pleasant, grew on May 6 into a free-for-all that spilled over into adjoining neighborhoods. At its peak 1,000 police in riot gear were involved and up to 600 black, Hispanic and white youths were engaged in running battles with the police. As of May 8, some 160 adults and juveniles had been arrested. Thirteen police officers had been injured, and six police cars, a handful of businesses, stores, and a

city bus were set afire. While the shooting of 30-year-old Daniel Gomez set off the violence, Hispanics claim the eruption was the result of a history of mistreatment and neglect by police and the city administration."⁵⁸

"The news organizations in general missed the boat on covering the Latino community and didn't take the opportunity to cover it adequately before the riot so that there was no anticipation on the part of the greater community that this could happen," said Milagros Jardine, a radio reporter for WMAL who covered the Mt. Pleasant riot.⁵⁹

Jardine was one of several dozen journalists, city officials and community leaders who met almost two months after the riots to review how well the city's news organizations responded. There was general agreement that the media had missed the circumstances of the community's rage prior to the event and in its wake.

"Once the reporters got there I think they started generalizing and started taking in lots of theories and sort of projecting what they thought had happened rather than really listening to what the people in the community were telling them had happened. If there is a fault to be placed, it's the fact that the big news organizations have ignored this (Hispanic) community and for some reason don't see it in their best interest, don't see it as an interesting, exciting, stimulating story to cover," Jardine said.⁶⁰

The capital's Hispanic population exploded during the 1980's with the arrival of thousands of Central Americans fleeing political unrest. The biggest influx came from El Salvador.

Despite Hispanic growth the city's politics and demographics remain overwhelmingly black oriented. Apparently there were few reporters who had a working knowledge of the city's newest immigrant groups. Reports during the three-day melee included gross exaggerations, rumors and misinformation.

TV news reports, during live-shots from the scene, provided the most glaring unsubstantiated misinformation. "Some Anglo journalists went so far as to suggest a link between rioters and Central American leftist guerrillas, reporting that the reason the protesters were so successful in burning police vehicles and doing so much damage was because they had prior training and connections to guerrilla movements somewhere in a foreign land," said Clavel Sanchez of National Public Radio.⁶¹

Hispanic reporters blamed the misrepresentations of the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood on the lack of Hispanic staff in the city's major media outlets.

"I think it became very self evident to each of the media organizations just how out of touch they were with this particular community," assessed Carlos Sanchez, a reporter at the *Washington Post* who was later assigned to cover the disturbances.⁶² Even Sanchez's boss could not disagree.

"Our coverage prior to the disturbances in Mt. Pleasant was inadequate," said Milton Coleman, the *Post's* Metro Editor. "I think our coverage got much better the day that Carlos Sanchez was assigned to do this full time. Having reporters who were culturally in tune with the community, or who spoke Spanish became a necessity."⁶³

Coleman said that the *Post* was able to recruit as many as six or seven Spanish-speaking staff to cover the story. "Not all of them were Latino. Many of them were Anglos," Coleman recalled.⁶⁴ The *Post* only had two two Hispanic reporters at the time. Today, 12 Hispanics work in the newsroom; they make up 2.2 percent of the staff.⁶⁵

The employment picture for Hispanics in the news media 25 years after the Kerner Commission Report remains bleak despite recent gains.

Hispanics argue that more Hispanic journalists in newsrooms minimize distortions, exaggerations, and misrepresentations of their Hispanic communities because they understand the vast differences and commonalities among them.

"Employment is a vehicle toward coverage. The end result of diversifying the newsroom is supposed to be coverage and content, what is coming off the TV screen or pages of the newspaper. If you do not have Latinos working in the newsroom you are not going to be able to influence the coverage," says Felix Gutierrez, a former journalism professor now working at the Freedom Forum.⁶⁶

Hispanic employment in America's newsrooms remains a thorny issue. Underrepresentation remains substantial despite modest gains. Even in markets with a substantial Hispanic presence, Hispanic employment in the newsroom remains low. You wouldn't expect many Hispanics at the *Wichita Eagle* or the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. Yet in New York City, which is 25 percent Hispanic, the *New York Times'* newsroom staff is 3.6 percent Hispanic. Los Angeles is 40 percent Hispanic, yet the *Los Angeles Times'* news staff is 6.46 percent Hispanic. Locally or nationally underrepresentation of Hispanics is broad. The U.S. is nearly 10 percent Hispanic yet only 4 percent of the news staff at the top 57 daily newspapers in the country is Hispanic.⁶⁷

"That is nothing to write home about. The increases should be much higher than that considering the fact that there have been recruitment programs for nearly a dozen years," says Zita Arocha, now a free-lance journalist who conducts an annual survey and report on the status of Hispanics for the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. She says the typical excuse offered by news managers that able Hispanic reporters are hard to find does not hold true any more. "We have many young Latino journalists working in smaller markets who are ready and good enough to get up to the next rung in medium and large market newspapers. All they need is the opportunity."⁶⁸

Hispanic news managers, the decision makers in the newsroom, are an even rarer breed. Only 2.3 percent of news managers in the top 57 newspapers are Hispanic.⁶⁹

On the broadcast side of news the raw numbers imply Hispanics have made slightly better gains.

"The minority share of the newsroom workforce edged to a new high in television last year, but moved backward a bit in radio. Hispanics made substantial gains. The Hispanic share of all TV news personnel went up from 3 percent in 1990 to 5 percent in 1991 and 6 percent in 1992," writes University of Missouri journalism professor Vernon Stone after reviewing employment records from 411 TV stations and 296 commercial radio stations for the Radio and Television News Directors Foundation.⁷⁰

Yet Hispanic journalists analyze the same numbers and see in them more than meets the eye. Aggregate industry totals are misleading.

"Before you go out and buy another TV set, consider the fact that the network news still doesn't look like America, and neither does its prime-time programming," writes Zita Arocha.⁷¹ "The University of Missouri study finds the proportion of Latino employees still smaller among television stations affiliated with the three major networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—than among "other" stations sending up Spanish speaking fare generated by Univision and Telemundo."⁷²

Arocha says, "The statistics do not break out differences between English and Spanish language TV but it is my gut feeling that a great part of the aggregate increase is due to the recent boom in Spanish language TV."⁷³

"Most of us are the only one in the newsroom," says Diane Alverio, a TV reporter in Hartford, Connecticut. "And the people in the newsroom making decisions, what stories, what angle and how to cover them are not Hispanic."⁷⁴

Hispanic reporters tell stories that have a familiar ring to other minorities.⁷⁵ They say that pushing aggressively for Hispanic coverage beyond crime and welfare is like putting on a "sombbrero" in the newsroom that delegates the reporter to the so-called "taco beat."

"The hardest part is striking a sense of balance in your work. You do not want to neglect the community you care about, but you also have to show that you can cover anything if you are given the opportunity," says the *Boston Globe's* Efrain Hernandez, Jr.⁷⁶

In most markets where Hispanics have yet to make substantial economic and political gains Hispanic reporters say the balance they are forced to strike tilts away from Hispanic coverage.

"If you are one of those rare Latinos in a newsroom you will also have to make a career decision. You know that to rise in the system you do the front page stories or the lead stories in the broadcast and that Latino stories are not going to get that play," says NPR's Ray Suarez. He says many Hispanic reporters choose professional survival. "So there you are, one of the only people on the inside who can pitch for a different look at the news, and if you do that and become perceived as an ethnic novelty act, you limit your own future opportunities. So you either whitewash yourself to get ahead or you become an advocate inside the newsroom and become marginalized."⁷⁷

"They are struggling to be mainstream," observes Rita Elizondo, executive director of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute.⁷⁸ At the Institute, it is Elizondo's job to convince reporters to write stories that have a specific Hispanic interest, and to include Hispanic opinion in reporting about the U.S. Congress. It is never an easy job, but often Hispanic reporters make it even harder to do.

"They are finally at the *Washington Post* or they are finally at NBC, and they are struggling so hard to be part of the team and the mainstream that they rarely venture out into covering Latino issues because they don't want to be tagged Latino. It is very disappointing because we certainly don't get the coverage from the non-minority reporters."⁷⁹

Without a concerted advocacy inside and outside the newsroom for more complete coverage of Hispanics, the impression and myths perpetuated are of a people lumped together as a monolith despite vast differences; a people unwilling and unable to help themselves.

"Indicative of that national mood is a 1990 national poll that found that compared to Jews,

blacks, Asians and southern whites, Americans perceive Latinos as second only to blacks in terms of being lazy rather than hard-working and living off welfare rather than being self-supporting. The survey also reports that Hispanics are seen as the nation's least patriotic group."⁸⁰

The low opinion of Hispanics makes perfect sense. Most people base their feelings about minorities from what they read or watch on TV.

Hispanic Magazine looked at all stories published by the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Antonio Light* and the *Washington Post* during a week in August, 1992. Despite the fact that all the cities serviced by these major dailies have sizable Hispanic communities, the authors, "had to look carefully in each paper to find any story positive or negative, about or including Latinos. When Hispanics were mentioned in news articles they were more likely to be found in a crime story as the perpetrator, victim or police officer."⁸¹ The survey found a distinct absence of Hispanic political priorities and opinion, either from grass roots or mainstream political leaders.

In another survey, Unabridged Communications of Arlington, Virginia reviewed 4,000 articles published in seven major newspapers and three newsmagazines during July and August, 1992. Unabridged Communications notes that, "There was no coverage devoted to Latino political priorities," and that the stories, "failed to reflect positive contributions Latinos are making to society." The study's author concludes, "If you only had the articles that I culled over these two months you would not have a feel for who the (Hispanic) leadership was or what the needs of this particular community of interests were."⁸²

Newspapers provide slightly better coverage of the political priorities among Hispanics. DeSipio's survey found that of those stories with Latino relevant political content, 30 percent dealt with electoral politics. But even this figure obscures an underlying indifference. "In one of the largest categories, electoral politics, mention of Latinos was limited to the inclusion of a Latino surname in 41 percent of the coded articles."⁸³

The overwhelming number of articles made reference to Hispanics in a political context without interviewing Hispanics. That pattern can be detected even in cases where Latino political importance is widely recognized.

FROM INVISIBLE TO A CRITICAL VOTING BLOCK

January 2, 1993 saw New York City covered with bright blue skies as the thermometer dipped below freezing. In Times Square sanitation crews swept away the last remnants of 1992. Across the city the novel calm of New Year's Day gave way to the usual traffic din. For many New Yorkers the luxury of a long holiday weekend and the prospect of bargain shopping during post holiday sales tempered the day's chill. For the city's Mayor, David Dinkins, however, this was not a day free from politics.

Three thousand miles away, Mayor Dinkins scorched under a tropical midday sun during the inauguration of Dr. Pedro Rosello, Puerto Rico's newly elected governor. "For two hours the Mayor sat in the hot mugginess on a dais facing the sea behind the domed marble capitol in San Juan," wrote the *New York Times*, describing how the mayoral race had taken a brief detour to the Caribbean.⁸⁴

In fact, for Dinkins, a jaunt to San Juan was hardly out of the way. This was his third trip to the island in less than a year. Preparing for a rematch with former U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani, Dinkins was vividly aware that New York City's black and white voters were sharply divided over his performance during his four year term in office. The schism left the city's burgeoning Hispanic electorate in a position to make or break his re-election. This time around, the "voto cafe con leche" or brown vote would not be taken for granted.

So there Dinkins sat in San Juan, listening to speeches in Spanish. The final election was still eleven months away but in the political game of symbolism it is the image that often prevails. In the pursuit for Hispanic support, another Dinkins trip to Puerto Rico seemed as natural as a ride across the Brooklyn Bridge. By the beginning of 1993, 15 percent of all registered voters in New York City were Hispanic, with the overwhelming majority, 80 percent, being Puerto Ricans.⁸⁵

The mayor told reporters, "How can you not come? Politics aside it would have been an affront for me not to come."⁸⁶ That was the flattery of a politician who already sensed he was vulnerable among key constituents.

The 1993 New York mayoral race, was the political coming of age for the city's two million Hispanics who found themselves in the right place at the right election. "We know that all the candidates are salivating for the Latino vote, and it's not clear how that vote will go," said Angelo Falcon, president of the Institute for Puerto

Rican Policy, a nonpartisan think tank based in New York City.⁸⁷

The *Washington Post* observed, this was an election where, "race ripples just beneath the surface of the contest...and the electorate remains sharply polarized...the overwhelming percentage of blacks support Dinkins, while an almost equally high percentage of whites support Giuliani."⁸⁸ In this highly charged setting the city's newspapers began writing about Hispanics as a "swing vote," as a "weak link" in the Dinkins coalition, or as a "crucial block" needed for either Dinkins or Giuliani to win.

By the time the final election neared, *Newsweek* wrote, "Latinos are not a formidable voting block, but in this close contest it can make a difference, adding that, "As the election approaches, Latinos are being intensely wooed by both candidates—bombaraded by television and radio ads in Spanish and English and with a direct-mail campaign."⁸⁹

When Angelo Falcon noted, "Ten years ago we were invisible. Now it is almost like we are being over-hyped," he was referring specifically to the barrage of appeals from Dinkins and Giuliani.⁹⁰ But Falcon could just as easily been talking about Hispanic press coverage during the 1993 campaign. And he only had to go back four years, not ten, to note the dramatic difference. If in 1993 Hispanics were over-hyped in news accounts, they were nearly invisible in 1989 when Dinkins received 70 percent of the Hispanic vote, helping him eke out a 2 percent victory over Giuliani. (In 1989 13 percent, or one of every nine voters in the Democratic primary, were Hispanic.)⁹¹

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE IN 1989: NEW YORK CITY

As part of the research for this project, nearly 500 articles written about the 1989 and 1993 New York mayoral campaigns were reviewed. The articles appeared in the *New York Times* and *Newsday* and were written between January 1 and the November final election of each year.

In 1989 Mayor Ed Koch was upset in the Democratic primary by the then Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins. Dinkins then defeated former federal prosecutor Rudolph Giuliani in a rancorous final election. In 1993 the bitter rematch was won by Giuliani.

The contrast in press coverage of Hispanics in the two elections is significant.

In 1989, 209 articles made specific mention of

the candidates and their respective campaigns. Of these, 153 articles (73 percent) mentioned Hispanics in the context of the election. At first glance this figure suggests a high degree of inclusion in the press coverage. Upon closer examination one detects a transparent if not invisible quality in the way Hispanics are covered and presented.

In 127 articles (60 percent) the reference to Hispanics was so limited, the term was used only as a noun or adjective such as in: "Hispanic voters," "Hispanic leaders," "Hispanic neighborhoods," "Hispanic police officers," "Hispanic community," "Hispanic agenda," "Hispanic teen-agers" and the distinctive "non-Hispanic white Catholics."

For example, when David Dinkins announced his candidacy, a reporter wrote Dinkins made "a special appeal to Hispanic Democrats, whose votes are likely to be critical in the September 12 primary."⁹² And when Koch began to lose ground, another reporter wrote of, "drastic disaffection coming from the Hispanic community."⁹³

Articles like these did not quote Hispanics. Their opinions were ignored. They included no analysis of the Hispanic vote or descriptions suggesting how the varying Hispanic communities fit into the fabric of the city politic. Such omissions are glaring given the fact that Hispanics are a very visible segment of the city. Two million New Yorkers or 25 percent of the population is Hispanic.

Only 26 articles (8 percent) of the 209 reviewed included interviews with Hispanics and analysis. But even here, on closer examination, these articles presented a limited range for Hispanic voices. Some of these interviews offered little more than brief quotes about support or endorsements, such as this comment from Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, a Dinkins backer, saying, "In the main Latinos would rather cut off their right hand rather than reach for a Republican lever."⁹⁴ Or this quote from a Koch sympathizer along a parade route, "To me he is a great man," said Jaime Hernandez of Brooklyn.⁹⁵

A few insightful articles however, included sharp observations about the fragile character of Dinkins' Latino/black voter base. After the Dinkins' primary victory the *New York Times* read, "His coalition (Dinkins') included Hispanic voters who . . . finally decided economic or class interest was more important than their political competition with blacks."⁹⁶

The subsequent fraying of the Rainbow Coalition would change both the quantity and

the quality of the coverage about Hispanics four years later.

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE IN 1993: NEW YORK CITY

In 1993 over 300 articles appeared in the *New York Times* and *Newsday* that mentioned Hispanics in the framework of the mayoral election. This represents *more than twice* the number of articles mentioning Hispanics than in 1989. During the same period the percentage of Hispanic voters increased only slightly from around 13 percent to around 15 percent.

Not only were Hispanics referred to more often by the press in 1993, but there was also a spectacular contextual difference. Day-to-day reading of newspapers left the distinct impression that Hispanics carried more political clout. Of all the articles that mentioned Hispanics, 90 articles (30 percent) referred to them as a critical "swing vote" in the election. And 45 provided interviews with Hispanics and/or analysis of the Hispanic voting block. These articles included more detail and insights and far more interviews with a broader range of Hispanic politicians, pundits, political scientists, partisan voters, business persons and neighborhood residents.

One commentator wrote about the demographic changes within the Hispanic community describing, "The city where Latinos once meant 'Puerto Rican' is however in the process of a staggering redefinition," because of the huge recent influx of Dominicans who are mounting an economic and political challenge of their own.⁹⁷

Political and social attitudes were explored. A poll of Hispanics reported, "There are a lot of worms in the Big Apple for many Latinos . . . more than 84 percent believe race relations are 'not so good in the city'. . . about 61 percent say police mistreat Latinos . . . More than 64 percent oppose the teaching in public schools of tolerance of gays and lesbians."⁹⁸

The Latino/black rift was written about in lengthy articles that included rich detail, and history. One reporter observed that, "Perhaps the strongest indication that Latino politicians do not want to be taken for granted by their black colleagues came during the recent race for State Comptroller," when the Hispanic delegation refused to support the black candidate.⁹⁹ Dinkins eventually received the backing from most the city's Hispanic elected officials, but the endorsement was lukewarm. According to another article, "Critics say there has not been enough

progress in appointments, jobs, and city contracts for Hispanic people."¹⁰⁰ The striking transformation from a voting block largely ignored by the press in 1989 to one covered consistently in 1993, reveals two important changes: a new level of sophistication among Hispanic political activists and an increase in the employment of Hispanic reporters willing and able to recognize a good story in their own community concerning the city's politics. The re-emergence of Herman Badillo, the Democratic Puerto Rican born former Bronx borough president and congressman also added to the mix. Badillo ran for city comptroller on a fusion ticket with Giuliani.

Hispanic politicians appreciated that the dynamics in 1993 were ideal for the emergence of a new political force. The highly publicized confrontations between blacks and Jews in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood and the Mayor's acknowledged mishandling of the incident had left the city racially polarized. Hispanic activists vied to fill the middle. "There was a new story to be told. The white/black dichotomy had been played out in the press," says State Assemblyman Roberto Ramirez.¹⁰¹

Two years earlier, the bitter struggle over redistricting had left Hispanics disenchanted with the depth of commitment from a black dominated alliance. Assemblyman Ramirez says, "Reapportionment brought out a lot of tensions between Latinos and blacks. Some of the mayor's appointees suggested that the goal was to work toward a final map that maximized black districts even at the expense of Latinos."¹⁰²

By the time the 1993 mayoral election came around, the Latino/black alliance was weakened, even after the final redistricting plans had given Hispanics greater representation.¹⁰³ Hispanic politicians said they were not going to be taken for granted again. "We got stiffed again after 1989 by the so-called Rainbow Coalition," says City Councilor Antonio Pagan, "Dinkins wins with the promise of equal access to Latinos and we got shut out."¹⁰⁴

The final election on November 2, 1993 was a mirror image of the 1989 match between Dinkins and Giuliani. It was just as close but this time it was Giuliani who eked out a win by less than four percentage points (47,000 votes). Giuliani carried the narrow victory with more than a third of the Hispanic vote (38 percent), an 8 percent increase from 1989. The shift in this electorate confirmed the swing vote and demonstrated that Hispanics are learning to play one candidate off the other. They also learned the art

of ticket splitting. The same Hispanics who helped elect an Italian-American Mayor, rejected Badillo, his Puerto Rican running mate for comptroller.

Hispanic pundits say the changed Hispanic profile in 1993 was the result of two factors; timing—a city in the throes of racial tension and effort—and an organized Hispanic political agenda. City Councilor Antonio Pagan says, “Latino politicians and activists made a concerted effort to show the political establishment well before the ‘93 mayoral election took place that Latinos could be and would be a significant swing vote.”¹⁰⁵

The New York mayoral election was an example of how the city’s Hispanic political community, representing a small voting block, maximized its own stature and significance. Hispanics in New York today believe that they were able to influence the campaign agenda and press coverage by establishing a strategy to position Hispanics as the hard to assess but crucial swing vote. They understood the political synergy of the moment: the more the candidates perceived Hispanics as a voting block that could decide the election, the more they actively campaigned in that community and the more the press would cover issues important to Hispanics. The increased media coverage reinforced the candidates decisions to woo Hispanic voters.

The lesson learned from the New York campaign is that a media strategy is crucial to the success of Hispanic political interest groups whether they be national, city-wide or community-based.

GETTING THE STORY TO PAGE ONE

It was a slow news day in Boston. Massachusetts Governor William Weld had scheduled a morning press conference to introduce Deborah Ramirez, a Northeastern University Law Professor, as the chairperson of the newly appointed Hispanic-American Advisory Commission. The group was formed to examine the status of Hispanics in the state and make recommendations to improve their economic conditions.

When it came her turn to speak on that April morning 1993, Ramirez remembers looking out across the packed conference room. Present were Hispanic judges, business people, government officials, educators, along with regulars of the State House press pool. “I looked up,” Ramirez recalls, “and I noticed that the old press hands at the State House, the political reporters, were not taking any notes.”¹⁰⁶

From her carefully prepared text, Ramirez, a former assistant U.S. Prosecutor who was hired

by Weld when he was U.S. Attorney, spoke with passion about the plight of the state’s Hispanics. Preliminary findings gave cause for extreme concern: Hispanics had surpassed blacks as the largest minority in the state; Massachusetts, not generally regarded as a Hispanic hub, had in fact the tenth largest concentration of Hispanics in the country; Hispanics in Massachusetts suffered the highest Hispanic poverty rate in the nation. Ramirez said the purpose of the commission was to find much needed ways to help Hispanics help themselves.

That evening only one TV station carried a brief voice-over on the news. The next morning not a word was printed about the commission and its mandate in either of the city’s two dailies, the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*. Ramirez was flabbergasted. “What do you do when the problem is that no one will cover you? The story only got reported in the Hispanic press. But in the English language press, which is where we have to get our story out, there was absolutely nothing.”¹⁰⁷

Angry and disappointed, Ramirez phoned the *Boston Globe* to complain. She says she was assured an article had been written and it would be published. It was printed several days later. But the article had been buried, literally and symbolically in the back pages of the Saturday edition next to the obituaries. The headline read, “New panel leader cites roots.”¹⁰⁸ The article highlighted Ramirez’s graduation from Harvard Law School and, “her promise to her mother never to forget her roots.”¹⁰⁹

The “Rose Grows in Spanish Harlem” angle was not the emphasis Ramirez had hoped for. “The focus was on me personally and my story. It’s as if this was a piece for the feature section. They didn’t cover it as if this was a real news story,” Ramirez says.¹¹⁰

The Hispanic-American Advisory Commission scheduled four hearings across the state in the spring and summer of 1993. Planning efforts netted events that were well attended. Hundreds of residents were offered an opportunity to talk about the dire conditions faced by Massachusetts Hispanics. Problems were discussed in detail. Solutions centered around jobs and economic opportunity. Through it all, press coverage remained sporadic. Newspapers in smaller cities and towns tended to play up the hearings while the Boston press continued to ignore or bury the story.

Ramirez realized then that time was running out. The final report and recommendations were

due to the Governor in September. An important story was no story at all if it did not get on the front page. In Massachusetts that meant the front page of the *Boston Globe*.

"It is not as if the newspapers were not covering us at all. I couldn't quite say that. But it is the bad placement of the stories, the weak emphasis given and the misleading captions that diluted our efforts," says Ramirez.

What became apparent to Deborah Ramirez and the 28-member commission would seem obvious to professional lobbyists and public relations specialists. Yet it is one that many grass-roots, community-based or voluntary organizations miss. They are so busy working on "the cause," that little time and effort is given to getting the message out. The fact of the matter is that today the voices heard in the media are often individuals or groups who understand how to lobby or work the media. They know how the game is played.

Ramirez had to make her case not with the reporters who had covered the hearings, but with their editors who decided story placement and emphasis. A week before the final report was due, Ramirez persisted and was able to schedule a meeting with the *Globe's* senior editorial staff. Using the skills of an experienced prosecutor she argued for better coverage showing that the findings were substantive. "I presented the group with a copy of the report and the executive summary," says Ramirez recalling how she was able to seal the agreement, "I offered them an exclusive on the story if they covered the Commission's final presentation to Governor Weld."¹¹¹

Two days before the final press conference, a front page story article appeared in the *Boston Globe*. The headline read, "Report on State's Hispanics seeks services, business aid."¹¹² The article covered various recommendations for economic and social empowerment, emphasizing a proposed economic center to provide assistance for small businesses. Ramirez had succeeded.

After Governor Weld received the report, another article appeared with the headline, "Weld vows to fund business center for state's Hispanic community."¹¹³ Various commission members were quoted outlining the commission's findings, cautioning that the document was only as good as its implementation. Deborah Ramirez got what she wanted; the Governor going on record in Boston's paper of record promising to help Hispanics. The Governor was quoted, "Our administration will use any recommendations in this report to call to action to empower Hispanics in Massachusetts

and to break down cultural, economic and racial barriers, Weld said."¹¹⁴

"Going into the final weeks of the commission's work I realized that 80 percent of what we were going to accomplish for the Hispanic community would come from getting our story in the *Globe*," says Ramirez. "When it hit the front page of the *Globe* everyone started calling. Congressman Joe Kennedy's office called, the Bank of Boston called, I even heard from the U.S. Attorney designate saying that he wanted to be responsive to the needs of the Latino community."¹¹⁵

Without the front page coverage in the *Boston Globe*, the issues raised by the commission might never have been noticed by the public or policy makers. Ramirez, for one, believes the prominent coverage may have prompted such swift action by the Governor.

EMPOWERMENT, PRESS, AND PUBLIC POLICY

When Hispanics reach 10 percent of the population it means they are found everywhere from the unemployment line to the corporate office. Yet the disparity between Hispanics and non-Hispanics remains significant and poses important public policy implications for the future in employment, education, and political empowerment. The Hispanic population is younger and has higher birth rates. Improvements in their social and economic condition is critical to the country's well-being predicts political researcher Robert Brichetto, "Hispanics in the United States will represent a larger share of the work force, of school enrollments and of the electorate. Non-minority whites will be a greater proportion of the elderly population."¹¹⁶

To discuss the nexus between empowerment, public policy and press coverage I talked to Ernesto Cortes, the renowned community organizer and political activist of San Antonio, Texas.¹¹⁷ Cortes is the founder of one of the most successful grassroots groups in the country. Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) writes Peter Skerry, "transforms informal, primary group ties between friends and neighbors into instrumental ties binding members of a formal organization."¹¹⁸ Since its first chapter was founded in 1974, COPS has spread to dozens of cities throughout the Southwest, West and Northeast. COPS' effort is single-mindedly about the empowerment of members to make local governments accountable to their communities. Cortes says, COPS efforts have

met with much success because members are tough on the importance of using the press.

INTERVIEW WITH ERNESTO CORTES

J.Q.: In your community organizing efforts there was an awareness of press coverage. What was important about the press coverage? How did it play out?

E.C.: The reason the press was important is that when you are going up against power which is often arrogant and unresponsive the press is an ally, particularly if you understand the press' self interest, and that is to inform and sometimes to expose. So much of what we taught our leaders is basically what good investigative journalists understand. We used to have our leaders read Woodward and Bernstein stuff on Watergate so they had a sense of how you dig at an issue, how you go at it slowly around the periphery and then move carefully step by step and how the whole point of asking a question is to get a reaction, which then generates the possibility of further action. So the whole understanding of how investigative reporters think was central to what we tried to teach people in how to carry out public drama.

J.Q.: Was part of the effort to include teaching journalists about Hispanics, and their issues?

E.C.: Correct. But we also taught reporters that even though there are distinctions and dimensions of the issues we were involved in that impacted Hispanics, we also taught them that Hispanics had interests that were quite similar to those of African-Americans and other groups. That our interests were not race specific, or ethnic specific. Therefore, even though the incidence of some of these problems impacted Hispanics inordinately, the solutions to them had ramifications beyond the Hispanic community.

J.Q.: Has the press learned not to see Hispanics strictly in the context of a black minority framework?

E.C.: Because the framework for race relations has been couched in terms of relationships between African-Americans and whites, it has been useful for Hispanics at times to work within it. Therefore for example on affirmative action, Hispanics can say we want to be dealt with in the same way. But unfortunately, there have also been dimensions of that framework that have not been as helpful in the sense that they don't explain or define how our situation, our history, our culture and our language is much different.

J.Q.: Many Hispanics complain that the message one often gets in the media about Hispanics is of people who are more often than not, poor and uneducated and are unable to help themselves.

E.C.: I have seen stories like that which are disconcerting. They make me think of an organizer I used to have in El Paso. When the media would come down to do a story on the 'colonias' she'd say to reporters, "There are three ways you can do this story. One, you can look at how dirty the 'colonias' are and look at how miserable the people are. Two, you can ask, 'isn't it awful?' Three, you can look at what the residents are doing to improve their conditions." And she'd say to the reporters, "If you are interested in the first story, I am not interested. I won't work with you at all. If you are interested in the second or third, then I am going to help you and I'll talk to you. But if you are not going to do the third, then don't talk to me at all."

J.Q.: How well are Hispanics learning the lesson to be more demanding in the way they are defined by the press?

E.C.: Not enough probably. But I'll tell you of my own experiences. We now have organizations in Hispanic communities in Los Angeles, East Brooklyn, El Paso, Tucson, San Antonio, Phoenix, the Rio Grande Valley, the Mexican border, Dallas, Ft. Worth, Austin, Houston, New Jersey, and the South Bronx. So there is an emerging understanding by Hispanics, Puerto Ricans, Mejanos, Central Americans in those organizations of the need to shape the message about Hispanics presented in the press. Clearly that's not enough. But I have seen people in Boston and other areas who want to get organized and are willing to be assertive and are willing to define themselves appropriately. So I have some reserved cautious hopefulness.

J.Q.: The mid-sixties through the mid-seventies was a decade of time of much Hispanic political activity. So much so that the press predicted the eighties would be the "Decade of the Hispanic." Looking back at the results, many Hispanics feel the expectations were exaggerated. Is the press coverage of Hispanics and its impact today substantially different?

E.C.: I remember years ago, Frank DeLomo doing an interview with me and asking about the "Decade of the Hispanic." I said then, that if Hispanics do not learn about politics and power and how to organize for power, the "Decade of the Hispanic" will be just so many beer commercials. Unfortunately, I was even more prescient

than I thought then. Frankly, while we didn't exactly miss the boat, we certainly didn't take advantage of the opportunity to organize that was available to us.

J.Q.: The nineties can be seen as a "decade of paradox" for Hispanics. The full effects of the Voting Rights Act offers greater political potential, while Hispanics continue to increase in numbers. Yet there is a simultaneous anti-Hispanic backlash brewing. The press calls it "compassion fatigue." What are the challenges to Hispanics?

E.C.: First of all, people have to see these things with some perspective. There has always been reaction to immigrants in this country, be they Irish, Chinese, Italian immigrants. Hispanics need to become much more immersed in American history and understand the struggles and difficulties that different immigrant groups experienced so we don't think it is uniquely happening to us. We can not become immersed in our own victimhood and lose sight of that perspective. That is not to take away from the fact that there are serious problems and dangers. Xenophobia is always present in American life.

J.Q.: As far as public policy and the press is concerned, what are your major concerns?

E.C.: There are several institutions that are really important. Schools for one. It's important for Hispanics to teach parents to become actively involved in bringing about appropriate school reform and support for public education. Two, is that our people are not going to be ready for the 21st century unless we get this administration to address significantly job training strategies for the long term. Third, Hispanic organizations and government are going to have to think very seriously about early childhood intervention strategies to deal with increased illegitimacy rates and teen-age pregnancy. Fourth, there is going to have to be much thought given to rebuilding some form of civic culture and community. From church, to workplace, to schools Hispanics have to be taught, in a non-partisan way, about the importance of political involvement. And fifth, the media must begin to pay attention to the efforts of heroic and important but not celebrity-type figures. People like the leaders in the COPS organizations, the ordinary men and women who are struggling to keep their families together. To write about what they are doing successfully and not just for the media stars.

J.Q.: Why is that so important?

E.C.: I think it is important for there to be legacies and stories and histories that inspire young people. It is important for them to have examples that come out of their experiences to point to.

J.Q.: Is it the press' role to inspire?

E.C.: The press' role is to report. And if there are people who are doing things that are real they should be recognized. The press' role is to tell relevant stories.

CONCLUSIONS

Public policy decisions are influenced by the quality and quantity of media coverage. Whether it is riots, a cross burning, a mayoral election or a commission's findings on the status of Hispanics, governmental response may be framed by media reporting. Hispanic political development occurs apart from news coverage and sometimes despite the negative or slanted reporting. When there is an increase in Hispanic political clout, the press, being a reactive medium, reflects it in both the quantity and quality of the reporting. There are several steps that both the press and Hispanic groups can take to improve the range of Hispanic voices heard in American newspapers and TV news.

Recommendations:

1. Increased employment of Hispanics in print and broadcast newsrooms.
2. Promote a sense of importance and priority to Hispanic coverage and inclusion of Hispanics in stories that are not specific about a Hispanic community.
3. Promote security among Hispanic reporters to explore their community without fear of being professionally tracked or stereotyped.
4. Hispanic political and social interest groups must learn more about the nature of the press and how it functions.
5. Hispanic political and social interest groups, nationally or locally, must develop a well organized press strategy and give it high priority in promoting the 'cause' the group is working for.
6. A media strategy must be a consistent and on-going effort.

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