

## Building a “New Latino” in the Post-Network Era: mun2 and the Reconfiguration of the U.S. Latino Audience

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Significant developments in communications technologies and industry practice have led to a proliferation of regional and global television networks targeting U.S. Latinos. Focusing on the bilingual network mun2, I examine the degree to which traditional iterations of the audience are challenged. I focus on mun2 because of its relationship with Comcast and NBC Universal, from which it draws a variety of material resources. Using a case study approach, I found that mun2 defines its audience along three dimensions: biculturality, youth, and proficiency in emerging technologies. I argue that the construction of the audience has been reconfigured to better align with NBC Universal’s expanding product portfolio and its strategic vision of distributing television programming across multiple platforms.

### Introduction

In 2007, a promotional spot aired on behalf of mun2, a bilingual music and lifestyle cable network designed for an audience of young, acculturated Latinos.<sup>1</sup> The commercial plays with the stereotype of U.S. ethnocentrism and centers on its Latino protagonist Mike, a participant in a game show. The spot begins with the show’s moderator asking the contestants a series of questions intended to test their knowledge of world geography. After Mike incorrectly identifies France as a country located in Minnesota and Rio de Janeiro as a city located near Kansas, a heavily accented voice-over asks him (implicating the viewer), “Are you becoming too gringo? Does the rest of the world no longer exist for you?”

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<sup>1</sup> This project follows in the tradition of other scholarship that utilizes dual terms: *Latino* and *Hispanic*. Although both labels are pan-ethnic and have contested histories, scholars have been particularly critical of the term *Hispanic* for its privileging of Spanish over indigenous origins. The term *Hispanic*, however, is the label of preference within the media industry. For this study, I limit the use of *Hispanic* to terms that are specific to the industry.

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The spot then cuts to an animated graphic of mun2, represented as a pill, entering the bloodstream and being absorbed by the human body. The voice-over continues:

Don't worry, now you have mun2. mun2 has videos and TV shows that give your body what it needs. So take one mun2 per day and instead of knowing things about one country, know things about two.

The commercial then cuts back to Mike, who is asked the location of the Eiffel Tower, to which he responds, "Guadalajara." The implicit joke here is, of course, that while Mike may have answered the question incorrectly, at least he can no longer be accused of becoming too White.

The commercial is remarkable for the brazenness with which it rejects White cultural hegemony, which is a notable break from the traditional industry practice of positioning U.S. Latinos as perpetual immigrants who openly seek assimilation into the U.S. mainstream as good consumer-citizens (Dávila, 2001). But the spot is also noteworthy because it, along with the network it was designed to promote, purports to represent a more multifaceted picture of what it means to be a U.S. Latino.

mun2 may be considered part of a growing trend of alternative, Latino-oriented networks that have emerged in the wake of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Scholars of Latino media studies have pointed to profound developments in communications technologies, deregulatory policies, and shifts in industry practices that have led to a proliferation of national, regional, and global television networks targeting U.S. Latinos (Castañeda, 2008a; Piñon & Rojas, 2011). The degree to which these newer niche-oriented networks hold the promise of more competition within the media landscape and more inclusive representations of U.S. Latinos, however, has been an issue of debate.

Using a case study approach, I examine the degree to which mun2 presents alternative programming within the Hispanic media landscape and complicates traditional representations of Latino identity. I focus on mun2 because of its relationship with the media giants Comcast and NBC Universal, from which it draws a variety of institutional resources. As a product of recent deregulatory policies that have resulted in consolidation, I am interested in how mun2 achieves the FCC mandate of promoting diversity, locality, and competition within the landscape. I argue that this relationship has been ambivalent. In the case of mun2, by infusing the network with material resources, NBC Universal ensures its long-term viability in ways not available to competing networks. However, as a subsidiary of a much larger organization, the mission of mun2 is ultimately beholden to the economic imperatives of its parent company, NBC Universal.

### **Background**

Despite pretensions of artistic excellence and social importance, Ang (1991) reminds us that television is, first and foremost, a profit-driven enterprise that is structured according to marketplace logic. Television stations develop programming primarily as vehicles for advertising that is embedded within those programs. In turn, the advertisers whose products are featured in commercials pay

significant amounts of money to television stations in exchange for the airtime they acquire to disseminate persuasive messaging.

Although often characterized as a relatively recent phenomenon, scholars of Latino communications studies have found that the practice of constructing U.S. Latinos as a cohesive, identifiable audience has evolved significantly over the past century (Rodríguez, 1999). As early as 1920, Silvestre Terrazas, editor of the Spanish-language newspaper *La Patria*, addressed the Ad Club of El Paso urging Anglo marketers to invest in Spanish-language media. In doing so, he advised mainstream advertisers to make direct appeals to consumers' sense of solidarity for their country of origin. In a written account of his speech, Terrazas (1920) provides specific strategies for exploiting the audience's collective memory:

Showing Mexican heroes, saints of their devotion—like the Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Mexican scenes, Mexican songbooks, especially those in vogue: the Mexican national hymn, La Paloma, La Golondrina, and in fact, so many folk songs which remind one of one's absent fatherland. Also dream books, wall calendars with some picture and the firm's name, etc. would wonderfully bring good results.

It is important to recognize that Terrazas is invoking a distinctly Mexican American audience with significant ties to their home country. The industry practice of emphasizing the foreignness of the Latino audience continued with the emergence of broadcast radio as Latino "brokers" in the Southwest attempted to entice Anglo marketers to subsidize Spanish-language programming (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). By emphasizing the audience's reliance on Spanish and their continued ties to their home country, Spanish-language radio stations could make the case that they alone offered a unique vehicle for accessing Mexican American buying power.

The modern construction of a panethnic, Hispanic audience, however, may be tied to the emergence of national Spanish-language television, which itself has strong connections to the Mexican broadcast industry and specifically to Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, a Mexican television producer (Gibens, 2009; Stilling, 1995). Seeking new markets for programming that had already been amortized through Mexican broadcasts, Azcárraga Vidaurreta approached U.S. broadcasters about syndication opportunities. When he encountered little interest in broadcasting Mexican programming, Azcárraga Vidaurreta founded his own television network—Spanish International Network (SIN)—in 1961. This network would later evolve into Univision.

The original composition of the network included stations in Los Angeles and San Antonio along with five border stations located in Mexico. SIN soon expanded into Eastern markets through its acquisition of stations located in New York and Miami (Rodríguez, 1999; Stilling, 1995). Given the new configuration of SIN, however, the audience had to be reconstituted in new ways that would accommodate the network's national reach. With greater frequency, the industry adopted the term *Hispanic*, a designation used by governmental agencies to indicate Spanish surnamed or Spanish-speaking (Rodríguez, 1999) citizen-consumers. This construct served the institutional objective of suppressing

unique differences that exist among Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and other distinct groups while constructing an imagined audience of viewers based on linguistic and cultural unity.

For almost 25 years, Univision operated in the media marketplace with almost no competition, but in 1986 the Reliance Capital Corporation, headed by financiers Henry Silverman and Saul Steinberg, formed the competing Spanish-language network, Telemundo (Gibens, 2009). By focusing more specifically on the experiences of U.S. Latinos, the new network attempted to differentiate itself from Univision, which imported most of its programming from Mexico. Telemundo made a concerted effort to produce much of its programming domestically with production centers in Hialeah (Florida), Los Angeles, and Puerto Rico along with foreign production centers located in Mexico City and Bogotá.

NBC Universal acquired Telemundo in 2001, but, according to Gibens (2009), Telemundo's mission of providing a truly bicultural experience never tangibly materialized; the network has continued to broadcast almost exclusively in Spanish and continues to rely on programming produced in Latin America. Given both Univision's and Telemundo's continued focus on Spanish-language programming, the media landscape has been framed along a false binary: a mainstream audience that consumes English-language media and a Hispanic audience that consumes Spanish-language media.

In her discussion of current developments in the media industry, Lotz (2007) describes three eras in the history of television. The first of these is the "network era" in which television industries essentially adopted radio-network models for program creation, audience measurement, and advertising sales. Beginning in the 1980s, the network era gave way to the era of "multichannel transition," associated with the emergence of cable television and the development of devices such as the videocassette recorder and the remote control. These technologies gave viewers more programming options and greater control of their viewing experience.

Lotz (2007) argues that we are currently in the midst of a "post-network era," characterized by profound developments in communications technologies, shifts in industry practices, and changes in the ways that viewers engage television. Furthermore, the digitalization of media content has empowered viewers to consume television programming across various platforms. Consequently, audiences can now view what they want, when they want, where they want, and in whatever format they want (Carey & Elton, 2010). Given these changes, television may be seen as an entirely different medium than the medium that existed originally in the network era.

The impact of these developments on the Hispanic media industry has been multifaceted. Like the industry in general, massive consolidation has taken place in the field, as demonstrated by the 2003 merger between Univision and the Hispanic Broadcasting Corporation. By combining the largest Spanish-language television and radio industries, the merger essentially consolidated the power of Spanish-language media, despite protests from both legislators and competing entities (Navarro, 2003; Núñez, 2006). At the same time, more radio stations, television networks, magazines, newspapers, and Internet portals are geared toward Latinos (Castañeda Paredes, 2001).

Media scholars have differed in their assessments regarding the current state of Latino-oriented media. On the one hand, Piñon and Rojas (2011) have argued that the reconfiguration of the Hispanic media landscape has created new forms of inclusion and has emboldened competing players to provide new products that speak to the market in new ways. On the other hand, Castañeda Paredes (2001) has argued that, although the proliferation of new media promises greater participation and democratic forms of inclusion, the Hispanic media landscape ultimately reflects old patterns of dominance.

Currently NBC Universal is poised to capitalize on developments in the television landscape by developing a project that began during Lotz's era of multichannel transition. In 2001, Telemundo acquired the cable network GEMS and relaunched it as mun2, a complement to its Spanish-language offering. Targeted to young, acculturated Latinos, the network was designed to use the network's existing properties, including news entertainment programming developed by Telemundo Internacional and the Mexican music-video channel Videorola, acquired as part of its acquisition of GEMS (Pesselnick, 2001).

Given the promise of mun2, I examine the following two questions. First, to what degree does mun2 provide alternative and competitive programming for U.S. Latinos? I am particularly interested in how the relationship between mun2 and its parent company, NBC Universal, both enables and constrains its ability to act in this capacity. Second, to what degree does mun2 fulfill its mission of challenging traditional conceptions of U.S. Latino identity? In its press materials, mun2 positions itself as "the leading bicultural network that amplifies the Latino experience. mun2 is culturally relevant and *uniquely American*" (Telemundo, 2012). As a bilingual network, I am interested in the degree to which mun2 reconstructs the audience in ways that defy the traditional Spanish-English binary.

### **Method**

To examine how mun2 functions as a competitor within the media marketplace, I have employed a case study approach, conducive for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009). In selecting the case for this project, I focused on the bilingual network, mun2, for two reasons. First, I selected mun2 because of its viability within the media industry. In a highly competitive marketplace, the lives of new media products are frequently uncertain. Industry data indicating that mun2 is the number-1 bilingual network, however, suggests that the network represents something more enduring. A second reason for choosing mun2 is that it is a product of consolidation and thus represents larger trends occurring within the media industry as a result of regulatory policy.

For this project, I focus on institutional discourses rather than on the content of television programming. In doing so, I follow in the tradition of other scholarship that presumes that media content reflects power relations that often go undetected by those involved in their production. From this perspective, my analysis of the evolving nature of Latino identity is not necessarily based on representations in media programming, but rather on how U.S. Latinos are constructed as television audiences. Here, I draw from Ang's (1991) definition of the audience as a structural position within a network of institutionalized communicative relationships. Ang argues that audiences are discursive figures

that allow media institutions to attempt to understand those with whom they must enter into a relationship.

Because case studies are designed to reveal details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data, the data generated during this investigation included both external and internal forms of communication. External discourses included media market research as well as industry press regarding mun2. Fifty-two articles were analyzed and were generated from the LexisNexis database using the search term "mun2" between 2001 and 2012.

Internal data included corporate communications intended for an audience of stakeholders, media analysts, subscribers, and potential advertisers. This included press releases generated on behalf of mun2 by Telemundo's Media Center as well as proprietary research on the target audience generated for potential advertisers. Although programming was not the focus of this study, I did review 28 hours of mun2 programming both online and on-air. Furthermore, to assess how mun2 has positioned itself within the media marketplace, I analyzed five years' worth of on-air promotions, which are said to be crucial to network strategy. According to Eastman, Newton, and Bolls (2003), promotional spots draw interest in the network, thereby increasing ratings. Increased ratings, in turn, have an impact on advertising revenues. Because promotional spots are designed to position the network in a way the targeted audience will find appealing, I accounted for how the intended audience was represented, but also the taglines and copy points used by mun2 to position itself in the marketplace. The promotional campaigns generated on behalf of mun2 were identified through trade press and subsequently located via YouTube.

Interpretation of the data was grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), a research tradition that centers on how practices of discourse enact, confirm, legitimate, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society (Fairclough, 1995). A presumption of CDA is that, while individuals may have agency over private discourse, only a few elite, powerful institutions have agency over public discourse. Through public discourse, these institutions exercise power by promoting particular schematic representations and semantic macrostructures (topics and topic change) that favor existing power relations while excluding rival forms of thought (Van Dijk, 2008). The goal, then, for researchers working in this tradition is to demystify ideologies and power through the systematic investigation of semiotic data.

As it relates to this study, mun2 has unique access to public discourses regarding U.S. Latinos, which itself may be seen a form of power. But I am specifically interested how media discourses reflect commercial ideologies, or those which support (implicitly or explicitly) the interests of the dominant groups who socially, politically, economically, and culturally benefit from the prevailing economic organization of society (Storey, 1993). As part of this process, I attempted to identify which topics were considered important to the Latino community and how these topics might be related to economic interests. In addition, because discourses are said to favor particular representations of reality, I was interested in which classes, areas of Latino life, forms of speech, and experiences were privileged, and which others are left out, silenced, and rendered invisible.

### Findings

In its original form, mun2 launched in 1993 as GEMS Television, a pan-American cable service with feeds in the United States and throughout Latin America. With a niche focus on women in both the United States and Latin America, GEMS' programming lineup included Spanish language novelas, situation comedies, and documentaries that were primarily produced in Venezuela (Paxman, 1995). In 2001, the channel was bought by Telemundo Communications and relaunched as mun2, a channel aimed toward younger, Latino viewers (Sutter, 2005).

The network's name, pronounced like the word *mundos* (worlds), has multiple meanings. By integrating the number two into its title, the name can be seen as a nod to its sister company, Telemundo, or a second world. But the alphanumeric treatment of the brand name can also be interpreted as two worlds, which is consistent with Telemundo's original corporate mandate of providing the "best of both worlds" (Dávila, 2001). From its inception, Telemundo targeted an audience of U.S.-born Latinos by creating programs that were produced domestically. Initially, mun2's lineup included programs from its former owners, including Spanish-language versions of *Charlie's Angels* and *The Dating Game*.

With the newly revamped ownership rules expanding the number of broadcast, radio, and newspaper outlets that companies could own, large media conglomerates began entering additional niche markets to complement their primary properties. In 2001, shortly after launching mun2, Telemundo was acquired by NBC Universal for \$2 billion. Today, mun2 broadcasts both original and acquired content in both on-air and digital formats. mun2 is the only nationally measured bilingual cable network by Nielsen and is currently distributed to more than 36 million households (Telemundo, 2012). In the media marketplace, mun2 competes directly with Univision's UniMás, MundoFOX, nuvoTV, LATV, Voy TV, and Viacom's Tr3s.

NBC Universal's investment in mun2 appears to be part of a larger strategy to cultivate the Hispanic market. The company has launched a formal sales initiative called "Hispanics at NBCU" designed to increase advertising dollars targeting U.S. Latinos. Furthermore, mun2 is one of several properties that NBC Universal is using to reach U.S. Latinos, including Telemundo, which broadcasts almost exclusively in Spanish, as well as the English-language website NBCLatino.com, which bills itself as "the new voice of American Hispanics" (nbclatino.com). In 2012, Comcast Corporation gained a controlling share in NBC Universal, giving mun2 greater access to an array of programming and production and distribution assets. Its relationship with NBC Universal has given the network access to a built-in sales infrastructure as well as to NBC's existing clients.

Within NBC Universal's product portfolio, however, mun2 is positioned more as a subsidiary of Telemundo than as a stand-alone property, which is certainly a strategic choice. As a component of Telemundo Media, mun2 maintains a significant presence on Telemundo's website and is integrated within Telemundo's media kit, a resource for potential advertisers to gain information about the networks and their offerings. In addition, mun2 has access to Telemundo resources, including the network's Research Solutions Group and Integrated Marketing Solutions. Both are divisions designed to assist advertisers with

their media planning by aggregating syndicated and proprietary research data and by working with advertisers to ensure that their products can be integrated in multiple platforms.

By positioning mun2 and Telemundo as complementary vehicles, the network avoids cannibalization of existing properties. Telemundo also gets to position itself as a more comprehensive media destination for U.S. Latinos than its rival, Univision. The benefits of packaging mun2 with Telemundo as a single unit was particularly evident during the 2012 upfronts, in which networks present their upcoming programming lineup to advertisers and discuss partnership opportunities. The annual upfront process is one of several discursive practices within the industry designed to define the audience and to position the television network in ways that meet audience needs. The process presents unique opportunities for advertisers who want to buy into the NBC Universal system.

In 2012, Telemundo invited advertisers to “harness the power of T,” by offering “a high-quality, contemporary and relevant branded experience across all touch-points” (Telemundo, 2012). This may be appealing to advertisers seeking to achieve efficiencies through integrated buys. The possibilities for advertisers to use the network’s Spanish and English properties were demonstrated in Telemundo Integrated Marketing Solutions’ creation of the “Pensemos Positivo” (Think Positive) campaign, designed on behalf of Post Foods’ Honey Bunches of Oats. The product was prominently featured in on-air promotions and within programming on both networks as well as in their online properties, telemundo.com and holamun2.com. The campaign prominently featured musician and actor Jencarlos Canela, a Cuban American who is contracted with Universal Music and who has been a recurring actor in several Telemundo novelas. As part of the campaign, Canela produced a song based on the theme of positive thinking. The song was recorded in two languages. The Spanish version aired on Telemundo, and the English version aired on mun2.

### ***Industrial Discourses Regarding the “New Latino”***

Despite their growing economic importance, advertisers have traditionally been disinclined to invest in Hispanic media (Chávez, 2012). Thus, the upfront process serves the important function of convincing marketers to invest advertising dollars in Hispanic media by invoking a consumer audience that advertisers may find profitable. In doing so, they draw on industry research as a way to invoke and legitimize the market. The following quote from a Nielsen report (2012) on the Latino audience was a typical way of articulating the U.S. Hispanic market:

If it were a standalone country, the U.S. Hispanic market buying power would make it one of the top twenty economies in the world. What’s more, the per capita income of U.S. Hispanics is higher than any one of the highly coveted BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China). (p. 3)

By placing a consumer market in the company of independent nation-states, Nielsen continues the tradition of positioning the U.S. Hispanic market as a de facto country whose resources may be exploited. The finding that Latinos are defined primarily within the context of their economic capacity is not necessarily a new finding. Scholars of Latino media studies have long argued that media and marketing



institutions have cultivated the perception that Latinos are what Dávila (2001) describes as a "nation within a nation" (p. 83). The process of bracketing Latino consumers from the general population, however, appears to be a necessary step in situating Hispanic media as the sole arbitrators between marketers and Hispanic buying power.

What has changed in recent years, however, is the reconfiguration of the Latino audience to better align with the expanding product portfolios of Hispanic media in the post-network era. This construction of the audience, referred to within the industry as the "new Latino" (Cobo, 2006), appears to be defined according to three main characteristics: their biculturalism, their youth, and their heavy use of emerging technologies. The network's version of the audience is informed by its own proprietary research in dialogue with government and media research, including the U.S. census and Nielsen research. For example, Telemundo and mun2 launched their 2012–2013 programming schedule on the same day that Nielsen released its 2012 "State of the Hispanic Consumer" report, a study designed to provide a current perspective on the role of the Hispanic market in the consumer economy. Furthermore, Telemundo's proprietary "Familia Americana Moderna" study was overt in its description of the "ambicultural" nature of U.S. Latinos and was highly consistent with Nielsen's description of Latinos as a bicultural and bilingual audience (Nielsen, 2012).

The duality of the Latino audience is conducive to Telemundo's current product offering of both Spanish- and English-language networks. This has motivated Telemundo to take a more flexible position on language, which is a deviation from the traditional industry practice of advocating for the superiority of Spanish over English language among Latinos. By selling both mun2 and Telemundo, the network must balance competing objectives. First, Spanish-language media still accounts for a disproportionately large percentage of advertising dollars. Therefore, Telemundo must continue to reassure marketers that Latinos demonstrate what Nielsen (2012) refers to as "culture sustainability," an insistence on maintaining cultural ties, retaining the Spanish language, and consuming ethnic media. However, given Telemundo's expansion into English-language media, there has been a more direct acknowledgment of the linguistic complexity of U.S. Latinos. By defining the consumer as bilingual rather than as Spanish dominant, the network avoids the inherent contradictions posed by convincing advertisers to invest in mun2.

The second defining characteristic of the new Latino is its relative youth compared to the population in general. Within the media landscape, mun2 positions itself as a lifestyle cable network targeting young Latino Americans ages 18 to 34 (Telemundo, 2012). This decision to target Latino youth is certainly driven by data which indicate the median age of the U.S. Latino population is 27 years old, nearly 10 years younger than that of non-Latino Whites (Pew Research Center, 2012). The demographic composition of the Latino community will have profound implications for governmental, educational, and commercial institutions. As an instrument of the media industry, however, television research is designed primarily to frame Latino youth as ideal consumers for advertising. For example, Nielsen (2012) claims that "the overall U.S. population is graying, but the Latino population remains young and the primary feeder of workforce growth and new consumption" (p. 5).

Finally, the new Latino has been defined in terms of its proficient use of emerging technologies. Nielsen's research on the media practices of U.S. Latinos indicates they are comfortable with consuming

television content in various media, pointing out that, compared to non-Latino Whites, Latinos spend 68% more time watching video online and 20% more time watching video on their mobile phones (Nielsen, 2012). The research has pointed to the proliferation of HDTV, laptop computers, smartphones, and gaming consoles within Latino homes. Telemundo's own "Familia Americana Moderna" study contextualizes this data in ways that lend themselves to the company's overall vision of providing more content across platforms. In a presentation to advertisers, Telemundo indicated that Latinos consume television content in both languages using diverse technologies. For example, it found that Latinos watch novelas on television as well as on their tablets and on DVR playback. At the same time, they consume news on both television and their smartphones.

It is the combination of youth and fluency in emerging technologies that makes the mun2 audience conducive to particular product categories, including retail, financial services, automotive, and entertainment. When Toyota Corporation sought to market its subcompact vehicle, the Yaris, it established a partnership in mun2. Drawing on the same industry data, Toyota articulated its own target audience as "a new breed of Latino" (Effie Worldwide, 2007, p. 1) who lives in multiple worlds and speaks both Spanish and English. When designing the campaign, Toyota made the overt decision to place its messaging in "experimental youth media," a term the company uses to refer to English-language media that target young Latinos. Based on this articulation of the consumer, Toyota and mun2 collaborated on several promotional opportunities, including the integration of the car into the travelogue program *On the Road* and by developing a sweepstakes promotion called "Mixín' la Musica."

This construction of the new Latino appears to drive the programming decisions made by mun2, which primarily airs music videos, reality and dramatic series, sports events, and comedy shows. Much of mun2's programming is a combination of content derived from NBC, Telemundo, and programming specific to mun2. For example, proprietary mun2 programming includes *Larrymania*, a reality show about the life of Larry Hernández, a Mexican regional star. Similarly, in conjunction with *DUB* magazine, mun2 produces *DUB Latino*, a show that combines Latino celebrities with car culture. Music that is featured on the network usually consists of a mix of English- and Spanish-language songs in various genres.

But the network also airs a significant amount of Telemundo programming. For example, three popular novelas—*La Reina del Sur*, *Pablo Escobar*, and *El Patron del Mar*—are set in the context of the drug-trafficking industry. These shows are produced primarily for Telemundo, but they all find a second life on mun2. Furthermore, mun2 benefits from existing agreements generated by its parent company, which was particularly evident in its sports programming. Because Telemundo owns the U.S. rights to show all Mexican qualifiers from Mexico's Azteca Stadium, mun2 was the English broadcast home of a 2010 World Cup qualifier between the United States and Mexico, edging out ESPN. Attempting to capitalize on the interest in this game and recruit new subscribers, mun2 offered a free preview on the day of the game. As part of NBC Universal's sponsorship of the London Olympics, mun2 also had access to several Olympic properties. Consequently, mun2 developed a program to profile Latino athletes and feature daily highlights from the games.

mun2's online component, [mundostv.com](http://mundostv.com), complements the television component by serving as a resource for consumers to access information about the on-air programming. It generates additional

revenue by serving as a space for advertising. Users can access unique content such as headline news, music videos, slide shows, and video shorts. Original material found on the website ranges from light fare to more substantive programming. For example, the website includes a slide show that explores potential candidates for actor-singer Selena Gomez's next boyfriend and has hosted documentaries on social issues, such as *Naco, Pocho: cultural, clase, raza*, which explores the cultural attitudes within the Mexican American community.

### **Discussion** ***Shifting Binaries***

The mun2 target audience has been informed by media discourses that have trumpeted the arrival of the new Latino, an acculturated consumer-citizen who navigates easily between two worlds. But what the industry claims to have discovered is not so much a reflection of social relations as they exist in the real world, but rather a new way of institutionally defining the Latino audience. As Anderson (1991) points out, how can one purport to discover something that already exists objectively "there?" The sense of discovery expressed by modern media institutions is more reflective of an industry that has long defined the audience by its otherness, an insistence on continuing to see Latinos only as the foreign "other."

Describing the arbitrary nature of television industry practice, Ang (1991) points out that the audience "is not an ontological given, but rather a socially constituted and institutionally produced category" (p. 3). What began with Spanish-language newspaper editors and continued with radio brokers, then by television executives, is the practice of gaining entry into a competitive marketplace by invoking a consumer that was Spanish dominant. By defining the Latino audience in opposition to the mainstream, Spanish-language media possessed clear profits of distinction.

In the post-network era, this construct has evolved to reflect the shifting organizational structures of media institutions. In response to the developments in communications technologies and consolidation within the media industry, television networks have necessarily reconstituted Latino identity in ways that correspond with their expanding portfolios. As it relates to mun2, Telemundo's corporate mission of "the best of both worlds" seems less a reflection of U.S. Latino identity and more a programming strategy. The bilingual status of mun2 gives it greater flexibility to access content in both Spanish and English and to use properties of NBC Universal and Telemundo.

Insight into the network's current conception of the Latino consumer was revealed during the launch of Telemundo's new identity package that included the redesign of its logo, now a red *T* composed of two intersecting shapes. Discussing the rebranding effort, Jacqueline Hernández, chief operating officer of Telemundo Media, explains how the logo is designed to better capture the bicultural/bilingual nature of U.S. Latinos: "Hispanics living in the U.S. often transcend two worlds—roots in their home country and their lives here today. Our new positioning platform reflects our audience's duality of being in America and being Latino" (Telemundomediakit.com, 2012). Hernández' inclination to characterize "being in America" and "being Latino" as two mutually exclusive concepts is typical of how the Latino consumer is conceived. Thus, while the new Latino is meant to be an empowering construct for consumers, such discourses still

frame Latino identity within traditional binaries of power. While Telemundo (mun2) validates its audience using "objective" data, Beniger (1986) points out that media research is not a neutral instrument of study but a tool that more powerful institutions employ to control their publics. Thus, the construction of the mun2 audience is consistent with U.S. sensibilities that disconnect Latinos from the general population.

Furthermore, the American-Latino binary perpetuated by mun2 does not deviate from the traditional industry practice of defining identity panethnically. Rather, the Latinos that were featured on mun2 programming fit the description of what Renato Ortiz's (1994) describes as an "international popular culture," (p. 111) a polygot made from fragments of different nations. That said, not all Latin American countries were equally represented. Several of the network's featured lineup of shows centered on Mexican American artists and featured Mexican regional music. For example, mun2 programs *Larrymania* and *I Love Jenni* feature Mexican American musicians Larry Hernández and Jenni Rivera. Furthermore, as part of its online programming, mun2 ran a short documentary exploring issues of class and culture embedded in the Mexican-specific terms, *naco* and *pocho*. Given that 63% of all U.S. Latinos are of Mexican heritage (U.S. Census, 2010) this is likely a strategic decision.

Yet my case study revealed more representations of Black Latinos, which have traditionally been conspicuously absent in Hispanic media. This was not necessarily surprising given the network's focus on the music industry that draws on Afro-Latino talent from the Caribbean and South America. To this end, the network also ran a Web documentary called *Black and Latino* featuring celebrities who negotiate their membership in both groups. The documentary was honored in the category "Best Web Series: Reality or Information" at the 2012 Imagen Awards, a competitive awards show designed to recognize positive images of Latinos in television and film.

The diversity of artists featured on mun2, however, appears to be less a reflection of inclusive politics and more a demonstration of globalizing practices that homogenize diverse populations and brings them into the consumption process (Ortiz, 1994). Scholars of globalization have argued that the creation of communities of consumers based on shared media patterns rather than on fixed spatial concepts undermines national identity by weakening local traditions. For example, García-Canclini (2001) asserts that, given the waning relevance of physical space associated with rising global media, national identity is expressed simply in nominal gestures—what he refers to as "frivolous homogenization." This phenomenon was evident in mun2 programming in which differences between groups was only tacitly acknowledged.

### ***A Niche of Our Own?***

In *Up From Invisibility*, Gross (2001) examines the degree to which niche media serve as spaces of empowerment. In his discussion of LGBT-targeted media, Gross argues that the inextricable relationship between niche media and corporate dollars is ambivalent. On one hand, the courting of subcultural groups by commercial institutions is symbolic evidence of their accepted status within society. At the same time, the dominance of marketplace values has a mainstreaming effect. Beholden to the profit motive, niche media are diverted from their traditional role as advocates for marginalized communities.

As an arbiter of media ownership, reservations have been expressed about the political will of the FCC to deliver on its mandate of balancing the public interest with the demands of free enterprise (Núñez, 2006). To achieve this balance, media industries must negotiate what Ang (1991) describes as two competing views of the television audience. On one hand, the audience may be understood as a "market" in which television viewers are seen as potential consumers of programming as well as for the goods and services being advertised within those programs. An alternative paradigm, however, is that the audience is a public, in which television viewers are not seen as consumers but as citizens who must be reformed, educated, and entertained.

A primary objective of this study has been to ascertain the degree to which mun2 contributes to more competition, localism, and a diversity within the Hispanic media landscape. The findings of this study indicate that mun2 is a parity product in the media marketplace. Similar programming formats that target the youth market through music and lifestyle have already been successfully achieved by Viacom's MTV and VH1 and their various iterations. But neither is mun2 unique within the Hispanic television space. Several competing channels appear to target young Latino American consumers in very similar ways. For example, Viacom's Tr3s similarly positions itself as a "bicultural entertainment station rooted in the fusion of American and Latino music, culture, lifestyle and languages" (mtvTr3s.com). Likewise, LATV positions itself as

the only remaining Latino-owned TV network in the Hispanic television space. Its programming primarily targets U.S.-born Latinos, with content that features a combination of originally produced shows as well as licensed content that has never before been seen in the U.S. (PR Newswire, 2012, p. 1)

Telefuturo, recently rebranded as UniMás, targets Hispanic millennials with a mixture of sports, scripted, and nonscripted programming.

What distinguishes mun2 from its competitors, however, is the degree to which it can draw on resources from Telemundo, NBC Universal, and Comcast. It is this relationship, however, that limits its capacity to serve as a transformative agent within the media landscape. As one of several properties within NBC Universal's repertoire of media products, mun2 is not intended to compete with other properties, but rather to use new media to generate demand for existing programming. By simultaneously broadcasting programs whose production costs have already been amortized, the network achieves tremendous economies of scale.

The overall reliance on existing programming runs counter to arguments that the merger between Comcast and NBC Universal would provide unique incentives to deliver diversity, given that Comcast serves predominantly urban areas (Curtin, 2010). Conversely, by scaling back diversity programming in the marketplace, both entities would stand to lose their competitive advantage. Discourses surrounding the negotiations of the merger, however, reveal that diversity programming is not so easily achieved. NBC Universal was criticized heavily for the lack of minorities in its overall programming and the commitment to launch 10 new networks targeting African Americans and Latinos were made only under political duress (NPR, 2012).

Despite its claims of providing revolutionary programming, mun2 is simply following the long-standing tradition of appealing to youth markets through music and video. As a national cable network, mun2 does not feature local programming. Furthermore, the issues that impact everyday Latinos are addressed primarily through the lens of lifestyle and entertainment. This became particularly evident in the logic by which its online "news" was categorized. Current events were categorized by labels such as "funny," "celebrity," "lifestyle," "music," "sports," and "headline news" as well as a subsection labeled "wtf." The treatment of topical issues was also illustrated in the show *The New America Speaks Out*. The program is hosted by Yarel Ramos and Susie Castillo of *School Pride* (a show that airs on NBC) and asks young Latinos about issues such as immigration, education, and the perception of Latinos in the United States. Yet these issues are discussed within the context of the entertainment industry. For example, Dominican American fashion model Sessilee Lopez discussed her experience as a Latina in the fashion industry, and film director Cruz Angeles shared his story of being a Latino and making it in the film industry.

Martin-Barbero (1993) argues that, despite their cultural dominance, popular media may offer entry points into the dominant culture and power structure by subverting it if necessary and by appropriating it to other uses. Here, the findings are ambivalent. I did encounter attempts by mun2 to engage civic issues. During the 2008 presidential election, mun2 attempted to inform Latinos on current issues and increase Latino voter turnout. As part of an effort called Voto 4 Ur Futuro, the network aired one-hour specials reported from the Democratic and Republican national conventions while attempting to educate viewers on issues such as immigration, education, and the Iraq War. In 2012, mun2 seemed poised to build on its previous involvement with the presidential election. After four GOP candidates agreed to boycott Univision in the wake of the network's decision to run an unfavorable story on Republican Marco Rubio, Telemundo was given the opportunity to moderate its first primary debate (Auletta, 2012). The debate, however, was never a significant feature on mun2. Instead, mun2 promoted the "Make It Personal Campaign" in partnership with NonprofitVOTE, Project Vote Smart, and VotoLatino. Designed as a nonpartisan voter-turnout effort, the campaign was primarily limited to the online space.

While mun2's involvement in the general election was somewhat tepid, other issues were addressed more directly. During the debate around Arizona's controversial SB 1070 law, mun2 attempted to generate discussion in various ways. For example, the mun2 website featured a slide show titled "Can You Guess the Immigrant?" in which viewers were presented with two celebrities (one of which was White and the other either Black or Latino) and asked to guess the immigrant. By undermining the viewer's expectations, mun2 makes a point about racial profiling. The website also featured man-on-the-street interviews in a segment titled "Watchu Think About Immigration Law?" A more thoughtful approach included a documentary centering on an undocumented honors student in Los Angeles whose fate depends on the passage of the DREAM Act. The website also encourages audiences to contact their political representatives to express their viewpoints.

Overall, such gestures at political awareness were nominal, and overt political issues appeared to be more directly and credibly addressed by other NBC properties, including the online resources NBC Latino and Telemundo, which have dedicated news arms. When political issues were addressed by mun2,

they were generally limited to the online component, and they less frequently appeared in the on-air programming, where advertising dollars are more lucrative. By far, mun2 programming was consistent with Castañeda's (2008b) assertion that consolidation within the Hispanic media marketplace has led to more generalized programming such as variety shows, talk shows, telenovelas, reality shows, entertainment news, and sports.

Ultimately, these findings undermine the claim that mun2 serves as a transformative agent within the Hispanic media landscape. Certainly there are more products in the media marketplace than ever before, yet Univision and Telemundo continue to dominate the landscape. Furthermore, the relationship between mun2 and NBC Universal provides a disincentive to provide truly new and unique programming. This is symptomatic of the industry in general, in which consolidation has created fewer institutions with greater control of television programming along with its production and distribution channels. Thus, the decision to choose between Telemundo and mun2, or between Univision and UniMás, or between is MTV and Tr3s, is ultimately a false choice. Ang (1991) presents this fallacy well when she writes,

the 'freedom' they (audiences) have (to choose between programmes, to watch little or a lot, together or alone, with more or less attention, in short, to use and consume television in ways that suit them) can only be seized within the parameters of the system they have no choice but to accept. (p. 6)

### **Conclusion**

In the post-network era, the shared, unifying experience of watching television has given way to narrowcasting and niche marketing programs. In this environment, mun2 was never really intended to be a space of convergence, but rather a subcultural forum. To date, mun2 has found success in this niche category, but as the merger between Comcast and NBC Universal begin to take effect, the network is poised to bolster its position as the number-one bilingual network in the United States. Since it took majority control, Comcast has installed new management at Telemundo and increased its annual programming budget by 20% (James, 2012). Furthermore, mun2 has benefited from Comcast's expansive distribution network. According to NBC Universal Entertainment, the combined assets of NBC Universal and Comcast enable the network to reach 93% of all U.S. Latinos (de la Fuente, 2012).

Comcast's investment in mun2 may be seen as an attempt to address the concerns raised when the merger with NBC was proposed. Using its vast distribution channels to boost mun2's national presence legitimizes Comcast's claim that it possesses the "best infrastructure of inclusion" (Griffin, 2010, p. 2), thereby delivering ethnically oriented programming to communities that had been previously unable to access it. But these moves also validate claims made by critics of the merger, who have argued that the combined entity of Comcast and NBC Universal will favor its own content while creating an unfavorable environment for competitors.

Certainly, the resources invested by Comcast have positioned mun2 to maintain dominance within this space, but, as Bourdieu (1993) reminds us, fields are dynamic with new players continuously entering and seeking to disrupt the status quo. In 2013, two important players will enter the marketplace

and challenge mun2 for leadership position. The first is MundoFOX, a joint venture between FOX International Channels and Columbia's RCN Television Group. Like mun2, MundoFOX will target the younger U.S. Latino audience. Launching with the tagline "Latino entertainment, American attitude" (Littleton, 2012, para 1), MundoFOX will air primarily Spanish-language comedies, reality shows, and game shows. Hernan Lopez, president and CEO of FOX International Channels, describes the programming as "television that feels, looks, sounds like American shows, but just happens to be created in Spanish" (Malloy, 2012, p. 1).

Later in 2013, Disney will pursue the same audience by launching Fusion, a joint collaboration between ABC and Univision. Given the partners involved, Fusion is in a strong position to launch effectively, having secured cable distribution from Charter, Cox, AT&T U-verse, and Google Fiber. To date, Comcast has not agreed to carry Fusion, which is not surprising given its commitment to mun2. As the name suggests, Fusion targets Latinos who live in two worlds, describing itself as the "indispensible meeting place for English speaking Latinos" (Univision, 2013, para.1). In describing the network, Isaac Lee, president of Univision News, stated: "Fusion will bring together diverse cultures, voices and viewpoints. We will explore the realities shaping the world, give Latinos a voice in the American conversation and deliver personally relevant local, national and global perspectives" (Univision, 2013, para. 1).

By articulating the promise of Fusion, Lee is also articulating the argument for deregulation—that is, that minority interests are better served through the marketplace and that by removing regulatory barriers, media companies may be better able to create new kinds of programming for new kinds of audiences. The degree to which these networks will deliver on this promise of more diversity, locality, and competition, however, remains to be seen. Certainly, the entry of Fusion and MundoFOX will lead to more competition within the marketplace, but it must be recognized that competition remains limited to a few established players who have already dominated other areas of media. Furthermore, these players are bringing in material resources that make the possibility of success for nonestablished players unlikely. From this perspective, it is hard to make the case that Latino consumers are receiving anything truly new and diverse.



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