

No habla Español

The new Latino media universe is young, political, and all-American

BY RUTH SAMUELSON

Lalo Alcaraz has always embraced the word *pochito*. It refers to Mexican-Americans who have lost their Mexican culture and speak English, and it's what relatives occasionally called Alcaraz when he was growing up in San Diego. He has leveraged it ever since. In the 1990s, Alcaraz and a friend founded *POCHO Magazine*, which led to pocho.com. Both projects used English when, for years, "Hispanic media" usually meant Spanish-language content. They satirized Latino issues and poked fun at biculturalism. "We had the National Pochismo Institute," he says, "where we would

send out a fake survey and 'rate your pochismo.'" Currently, Alcaraz hosts a radio show called the "Pocho Hour of Power" on *KPFK* in Los Angeles.

He was ahead of his time. *Pochito* is popping up everywhere these days, from Twitter handles to bands and performers. Not surprisingly, a new crop of news websites has emerged to tap the bicultural Latino market, too. Fox News Latino, HuffPost Latino Voices, and the start-up NewsTaco all were born between mid-2010 and 2011, to cite some of the more prominent entries. This summer, NBC Latino launched an English-language website, and Univision, which had created a news Tumblr to generate buzz for its own new English-language site, says it plans to go live by the end of the summer.

Alcaraz shuttered his magazine in the late 1990s, and his website petered out around 2004. But he kept the domain name, and earlier this year he re-launched pocho.com, now called Pocho: News y Satire. "It's sad that it took everybody so long," he says.

IT'S NO SECRET WHY THERE'S A BOOM IN THESE WEBSITES. The US Latino community now exceeds 50 million—16.3 percent of the population—and accounted for more than half the country's growth between 2000 and 2010, according to Pew Hispanic Center's census analysis. "That certainly was a moment that converted a lot of people," says Miguel Ferrer, editor of HuffPost LatinoVoices about the census.

More important, native-born Hispanics outnumber their

foreign-born counterparts roughly 32 million to 19 million. They also are younger (the median age is 18), more likely to own a cellphone, and more comfortable with and immersed in the digital media culture than foreign-born Latinos. In short, they are squarely in the sweet spot for marketers and the media. Carlos Pelay, president of the Charlotte-based Media Economics Group, said in an email that younger Latinos tend to be more educated and affluent, and their purchasing habits are more influential on the broader culture than those of older generations.

The census numbers also highlight Hispanics' importance in the 2012 election.

In the last presidential election, Hispanics favored the Democratic ticket over the Republican one "by a margin of more than two-to-one," according to Pew. But that hasn't dissuaded presumed Republican nominee Mitt Romney from courting Latinos. He's targeted them with Spanish-language advertisements, a Spanish-language website, and an outreach team, *Juntos Con Romney*.

That newfound political power certainly struck the late Carlos Guerra, a former columnist for the *San Antonio Express-News* who'd been a youth leader in the Chicano civil rights movement. He co-founded NewsTaco in 2010 (he died later that year).

"Carlos came from a time and place where Latinos were disenfranchised," says Sara Inés Calderón, another co-founder and former editor of the site. "He was really excited



Original pocho The MSM are catching up with Lalo Alcaraz (seen here in a self-portrait), who was speaking to bicultural Latinos 20 years ago.

about what [the election] would mean for Latino empowerment, Latino media, and Latinos having a voice."

Today, campaign news looks similar across the sites. Yes, HuffPost LatinoVoices has HuffPost's usual channel of opinion writers—some prominent, some not. And N B C Latino builds its brand by sending its commentators onto MSNBC, and those clips are then featured on the site. But in general, the approaches vary minimally—they all track the candidates' views on the DREAM Act, Arizona SB-1070, and the Hispanic vote.

While the readership and influence of these sites is growing, Univision, which in 2007 hosted the country's first Spanish-language presidential debate with the Democratic primary candidates, is still the biggest name in Latino political coverage. Univision has the fifth-largest primetime audience in the country, occasionally besting the other major networks in ratings, according to data from Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

But even this powerhouse realizes its audience is evolving, as evidenced by its new English-language website and plans to launch an English-language channel with A B C News by 2013.

TO SOME, THE ENTIRE CONCEPT OF "LATINO NEWS IN ENGLISH" is misguided. When journalism professor Moses Shumow showed HuffPost LatinoVoices to his students, they

weren't sure "why the site was going to be entirely relevant to them," he says.

Shumow teaches at Florida International University, and roughly 70 percent of his students are Hispanic—not terribly surprising for a Miami-based institution. In that majority-minority city, people don't favor broad labels. "There are huge Puerto Rican festivals, huge Dominican festivals," he says. "There are gigantic Cuban celebrations. There are tremendous Colombian and Peruvian activities that take place."

You don't hear about "Latino festivals," he says. Nevertheless he adds: "I definitely think it's still a relevant term in other parts of the country."

That's debatable.

On N B C Latino, syndicated columnist Esther Cepeda declared, "'Latino' bugs me to no end. It's like nails on a chalkboard to me, especially when I've been asked where I'm from and the answer 'Chicago' doesn't stop the questioner from insisting on guessing my ethnicity."

She was discussing the Pew Hispanic Center's report "When Labels Don't Fit: Hispanics and Their Views of Identity," which found that only 24 percent of survey respondents "prefer a pan-ethnic label."

Cepeda and Shumow's complaint raises a question that is becoming more relevant with America's young, English-speaking Hispanics: What is "Latino news," anyway?

Lalo Alcaraz says the threshold for relevance seems low among the new Latino sites. "They'll run a story about some woman that, whatever, beheads her baby or husband or something," he says. "And they'll just run it because the person's Latino. That's not what the Internet's for, if you're trying to talk about Latino life."

Here, for example, is a representative headline from HuffPost LatinoVoices: "Brazil Cannibal Empanadas: Brazilian Women Murdered, Eaten And Made Into Human Pastries." Fox News Latino also ran a story on the flesh-eating incident.

That's another thing: There tends to be a lot of redundancy among the sites. Not only do they cover the same topics, they'll often use the same AP stories. Sometimes, that's unavoidable, says Chris Pena, executive editor of N B C Latino. "There are going to be some parallel rails here, especially when it comes to news and politics," he says, pointing as an example to the reporting earlier this year on Florida Senator Marco Rubio's vice-presidential prospects.

Nevertheless, stories on food, education, and parenting will stand out, Pena says, N B C Latino also unearths "firsts," like Carmen Ortiz, "the very first Hispanic—and woman—to be named Massachusetts chief federal prosecutor," he says. "Frankly, if we're not finding those stories, who's going to find them?"

In fact, though, Fox News Latino has a similar feature, "Our American Dream," which profiles inspiring Latinos. (The network declined my interview request.)

Another issue: The sites often "fall under clichés," says

Univision social-media editor Conz Preti. "They just upload a video of Sofia Vergara on *Saturday Night Live*," she says. "Of course, that made news, and there's a lot of ratings. But what else? It's not just throwing names out there or targeting entertainment only."

Overall, she's glad there's more Latino news. "But we do feel that we know our audience better," she says.

The skepticism isn't limited to competitors like Preti. The business community also is unconvinced that English-speaking Latinos are a true market niche, says Rosa Alonso, a marketing consultant who's studied this group, and who used to run an English-language site of her own, MyLatinoVoice.com, which has been on hiatus since late last year. Businesses know how to target Spanish-speakers, but bicultural Latinos are often considered part of "a general market pool," she says. "Well, that's ridiculous. African-Americans speak English. There's this cultural element—that's what you're trying to get to."

These criticisms in part reflect the fact that the new English-language sites are young and still trying to differentiate themselves, win a larger share of the audience, and pay the bills. As of June, comScore was only monitoring Fox News Latino and HuffPost LatinoVoices, so reliable, comprehensive numbers on traffic are hard to get. Between April and June, LatinoVoices drew 18 million unique visitors a month on average, while Fox News Latino attracted just over 2 million.

N B C Latino hopes to gain a competitive advantage, in part by creating a "superior mobile experience," says editor Pefia. Compared to non-Hispanic whites, Latinos are more likely to use the Internet via their phones than at home, says the Pew Hispanic Center.

To compete with Fox News and companies with "all the resources in the world," NewsTaco editor Victor Landa says his site offers stories ignored by the mainstream media—pieces by food bloggers, activists, political consultants, and other professionals, not just journalists. He also partnered with voxixi, another English-language site aimed at Latinos, and says he hopes to form relationships with nonprofits and other publications.

In May, AOL Latino became HuffPost Voces, a Spanish-language sister site to HuffPost LatinoVoices. The two operations will increasingly link to each other, regardless of whether the pieces are in Spanish or English. "Let those who can slip between the two languages do so," says editor Ferrer, who oversees both sites. "Let those who only want to stick to one language have that ability."

As for Lalo Alcaraz, he has big plans for pocho.com, too. He'd like to produce original videos, collaborate with a "major site and/or TV network," and farm out his writers as on-air pundits. He's already started contributing video and written commentaries to N B C Latino.

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Spicy! The *pocho* audience is educated and affluent, and satire of Latino issues and icons (like this one by Lalo Alcaraz) is part of their cultural diet.

The audience will broaden beyond Latinos, Alcaraz believes. Case in point: In addition to an Argentinian and half a dozen Chicano and Chicana contributors, his staff includes a Jewish guy and the "whitest white dude I think I ever met," he says.

As the media have finally evolved, so have the readers. "It just goes to show," Alcaraz says, "that the English-language Latino thing is becoming a pop-culture thing."

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