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On February 10, 2015, Antonio Zambrano-Montes, a Mexican national who had settled 10 years earlier in Pasco, a city of 70,000 people in Washington state, died after being fatally shot by police officers after a frantic chase in a busy intersection. The 30-second video of the chase and shooting was seen and shared by millions of viewers in the United States and abroad in the days after the incident, prompting many to speculate that Pasco, Wash., would enter the national consciousness and debate about race and police brutality much in the same way Ferguson, Mo., had managed to do half a year before (Oliver Laughland, The Guardian, February 17, 2015). Despite some significant street protests in Pasco and elsewhere in the weeks that followed, somehow the “Pasco moment” never really solidified, and the collective conversation about human rights, which these days seems to be mostly taking place on (and being steered by) social media, moved on to other topics, such as the so-called “religious freedom” laws in Indiana, Mississippi, and other states.

The shooting by police officers of an unarmed Mexican-American man in Pasco packed all the punch of a significant race/media/human rights event. Pasco’s population is 56 percent Hispanic (Census Quick Facts 2010), and yet only one of the seven elected city council members is of Hispanic descent, with Hispanics making up only 22 percent of the local police force at the time of the incident (Laughland 2015). The shooting was captured by an amateur photographer and widely disseminated over the Internet and social media, much in the same way the video capturing the death of Eric Garner during a confrontation with the New York City police had been in July 2014. Additionally, NBC News reported on February 16 that Zambrano-Montes’ fatal shooting was the fourth police shooting incident in Pasco in 6 months, prompting Latino leaders to ask the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate the case (NBC News 2015). A similar pattern had been observed in the aforementioned confrontations and court cases involving shootings of African-American citizens in Missouri, Florida, Ohio, New York, and elsewhere, with the Ferguson incident prompting a scathing report from the U.S. Department of Justice. And yet the Pasco shooting was all but forgotten by the public sphere after a few weeks.

When the Pasco case resurfaced again in early September 2015, news organizations across the country reported that the Franklin County prosecutor had declined to pursue
criminal charges against the three police officers involved in the fatal Zambrano-Montes shooting (Helsel 2015). Once again, the public reaction was a deafening silence.

Communication researchers who have studied the representation of Latinos in both news and entertainment U.S. media have been arguing for decades that this portrayal is characterized by negative stereotyping, severe underrepresentation, and general ignorance about the community (Fujioka 2011). If that assessment still holds true, the Zambrano-Montes case would be highly emblematic of a decades-long phenomenon, which could in turn help to explain why the incident failed to galvanize a larger national audience in the same way the Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner cases did.

Indeed, an academic discussion about Latinos and the media could hardly fail to acknowledge how scholars have dealt with three main issues: stereotyping and its effects on popular perception; underrepresentation and its pitfalls; and ignorance about the group and the potentially negative consequences of that ignorance. This chapter aims to discuss those issues by examining data gathered in previous research studies as well as scholarly and professional articles and books that have discussed the topic.

**Stereotyping and Its Effects**

In their book *Racism, Sexism, and the Media*, Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao (2013) give a compelling and vivid account of how stereotypes surrounding the portrayal of Latinos and Latinas in U.S. entertainment media have changed along the decades. From “greasy” Latin lovers to quick-tempered “banditos”; from sensual dancers and temptresses to spit-fire home wreckers; Latinos and Latinas have often been portrayed as people lacking honorable values, stable relationships, or even meaningful professional careers (74–5). Similarly to what happened to other minorities, such as the heroes (and villains) from Middle Eastern and Asian backgrounds, throughout the twentieth century, the portrayal of Latinos on large and small screens was often conveniently linked to the political and economic alliances of the day. When it comes to Latinos specifically, the worst stereotypes of the 1930s (when it was convenient to scapegoat “others” for the Great Depression and economic problems) gave way to more positive portrayals in the 1940s and 1950s, when Latin Americans became big U.S. allies in WWII and the ensuing Cold War against communism. At their most benign, however, those images still portrayed Latinas and Latinos as exotic bombshells and Latin lovers (Lupe Velez, Carmen Miranda, Cesar Romero), or bumbling, heavily accented comic relief (Cantinflas, Desi Arnaz).

Perhaps more troubling, since most people rely on the news media to help them make sense of the world, is the way Latinos and Latinas are portrayed in the news. As media scholar Michael Schudson pointed out, mass media news is “a dominant force in the public construction of common experience and a popular sense of what is real and important” (2003: 3 and quoted in Santa Ana 2013: 24). As a dominant force creating our collective understanding of the world, news media have also become perhaps the dominant way in which most citizens come into contact with Hispanic culture in the US.

In his study of the representation of Latinos on network news (2013), Santa Ana focused on the “immigrant” as a metaphor employed by news organizations to talk about Latinos, showing how that metaphor morphed from “immigrant as animal” up to the 1990s to “immigrant as criminal” in the early 2000s (159).

By consistently referring to unauthorized immigrants as illegal immigrants, Santa Ana noted, network anchors and correspondents used a crucial adjective to semantically alter the original meaning of the word immigrant, painting immigrants as lawbreakers and creating
the prevalent metaphor “immigrant as criminal.” As shown by decades of research on the cultural and political power of discourse, news frames and metaphors carry a lot of weight in determining how we form our opinions around people, groups, and issues. That is particularly true (and devastatingly more powerful) when the metaphor is widely adopted and disseminated by mass media:

Now portrayed as criminals, immigrants remain the lowest form of humans. In one sense, it is an improvement, since immigrants are no longer characterized as lower forms of life. For anti-immigration partisans, however, it was also a shift of political tactics, because while over the previous century they had been able to publicly excoriate immigrants with racist terms without repercussion, in the late 1990s their language increasingly diminished their moral standing in the eyes of the general public.

(Santa Ana 2013: 159)

Media stereotypes can also have much more serious consequences, which go beyond creating a general negative sentiment around an ethnic group and specific political tactics. Examining the 1943 Los Angeles “zoot suit riots,” Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao (2013) showed how the violent mob attacks by WWII servicemen on mostly Hispanic youths in downtown L.A. were perhaps triggered (or at least implicitly justified) by a barrage of negative news coverage of Mexican Americans in Southern California in the previous decade (41–2). Analyzing the coverage of Mexican Americans by the Los Angeles Times between 1933 and 1943 (and how it could have contributed to create a negative view of Mexican youths), Turner and Surace (1956) found a steady decline in the use of the term “Mexican,” which had tended to be employed in a more favorable or at least neutral way, and a corresponding increase in the use of the expression “zoot suiters,” which became an unambiguously negative term describing Mexican youths wearing baggy, oversized, striped dark suits.

Most of those articles portrayed “zoot suiters” as delinquents and young criminals. Turner and Surace hypothesized that the steady decline in positive portrayals of downtown Los Angeles’ “romantic” Mexican past, combined with the increase in negative stereotyping of Mexican-American zoot suiters, especially in the three years prior to the beatings, could indeed have become the “basis for unambiguous community sentiment supporting hostile crowd behavior” toward the group (quoted in Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao 2013: 44). That analysis of events and media coverage that took place more than 70 years ago brings to mind the negative stereotyping of African-American youths for their affinity for baggy jeans and other apparel associated with hip hop music and fashion—which has been around at least since the 1980s and 1990s—and extended in recent years to their preference for hooded sweatshirts, which became a notorious (and somewhat media-generated) pejorative signifier in the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin case. Likewise, 2016 presidential candidate Donald Trump’s inflamed rhetoric around Mexican immigrants—as of this writing, he had not yet apologized for characterizing them as “murderers” and “rapists” during his official campaign launch event—may have contributed to a general rise in anti-immigrant sentiment around the country, since it may have tapped into an existing fear of immigrants and immigration, stoked by decades of negative stereotyping and the widespread media use of negative metaphors such as the one described by Santa Ana in his study (Lind 2015).
In their study comparing official crime statistics with the results of a content analysis of cable and network news programs, Dixon and Williams (2014) hypothesized that Latinos suspected of committing a crime would be overrepresented in the news as undocumented immigrants. After analyzing 146 cable and network news programs between 2008 and 2012, they found that Latino suspects were indeed significantly more likely to be seen as immigrants on television news (97 percent of the time) compared to the official statistics from “real life” (47 percent of the cases, according to data from the U.S. Department of Justice for the same period). Using a quantitative methodology, the researchers arrived at the same “immigrants as criminals” metaphor reached by Santa Ana via discourse analysis.

Severe Underrepresentation

Negative stereotyping of Hispanics is just one of the facets in the complex ways the country’s largest and fastest-growing ethnic minority is portrayed in the media. Severe underrepresentation of Latinos in news and entertainment media, coupled with the underrepresentation of the group in newsrooms and production companies, has also contributed to define how we perceive this ethnic group. The American Society of News Editors (ASNE) has been tracking the ethnic and gender diversity in U.S. news organizations since 1978, and the results of ASNE’s annual diversity census provide valuable insight into the ethnic and gender composition of newsrooms across the country. In 2000, for example, Hispanic journalists represented only 3.68 percent of all journalists working in U.S.-based newsrooms, a dismal number if compared to the 12.5 percent of Latinos among the general U.S. population, according to the 2000 U.S. Census (ASNE 2000; U.S. Census 2000). The numbers had improved slightly for Latinos by 2003—to 4 percent of all U.S. journalists—and that was also the year ASNE stopped listing the percentages for each race or ethnicity in its annual summary of the survey findings.

The 2015 ASNE diversity newsroom census revealed that only 12.7 percent of all U.S. journalists belonged to any ethnic or racial minority, still a minuscule number compared to the numbers for the general U.S. population: 37.4 percent of U.S. residents were estimated by the U.S. Census to belong to a racial or ethnic minority in December 2015, with 17.2 percent of them being of Hispanic descent (ASNE 2015; U.S. Census 2015).

Does it matter that Hispanics (and other racial or ethnic minorities) are so underrepresented in U.S. newsrooms? Along the past decades, some media scholars have tried to establish a connection between the predominantly negative (or inexistent) coverage of racial minorities by the media to the dearth of minority journalists and decision-makers in news organizations.

Borrowing concepts from political theory, Coffey (2013) showed the importance of descriptive, proportional, and physical representation, echoing previous scholars’ assertion that the presence of members of underrepresented groups—both in political and media contexts—has a positive effect on the way those communities see themselves, also providing salience and a voice to their concerns and interests. Ultimately, seeing your group represented in media reports—as on-camera sources and/or reporters, for example—might have the effect of stimulating democratic participation for members of those groups, while contributing to the perception by the general public that those groups and their issues and concerns are worth listening to. In her study, Coffey found that television’s designated market areas (DMAs) that had larger percentages of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian populations tended to have a greater presence of members of those
groups as on-air personnel, a positive recent development if compared with similar studies done by Campbell (1995), Heider (2000), Poindexter et al. (2003), and other researchers in previous decades. Coffey also found that the representation of some racial categories (Native Americans, Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders) in television newsrooms was still lower than the percentages for those groups within the actual population. She pointed out that future studies should focus on the impact of that higher representation on news content and on the communities themselves.

Similarly, in his book *White News: Why Local News Programs Don’t Cover People of Color*, Heider (2000) showed that even in a state as ethnically diverse as Hawaii, people of color are only sporadically represented in local television news.

In his seminal book *Race, Myth and the News*, Campbell (1995) examined 40 hours of television news programming (900 stories total) and found that African-American journalists made up 11 percent of the news anchors and reporters that appeared in those shows, while other studies showed that 13.3 percent of all TV journalists were members of ethnic minorities in the late 1980s (Campbell, citing Stone 1988b). Putting aside for a second the shocking fact that, by that logic, only 2.3 percent of television journalists belonged to other ethnicities (presumably Hispanic and Asian American), Campbell notes that although the percentage of on-camera African-American TV journalists was close to the percentage of blacks in the general population, the numbers were “probably misleading in terms of the overall representation of minority journalists and of their impact news coverage,” since other “[studies have found that minorities are largely employed either in high profile, on-camera positions or as camera operators, rather than in editorial decision-making capacities” (Campbell 1995: 38, citing Schultz 1988; Stone 1988a). As also pointed out by Campbell, at the time only 4 percent of local television news directors were people of color, with whites then holding 92 percent of the supervisory jobs that usually lead to managerial positions (38).

In the early to mid-1990s, the ASNE newsroom diversity surveys found that more than half of all daily newspapers in the US still did not employ any journalists of color, with African-American journalists making up less than 5 percent of all newspaper journalists in 1992. As we pointed out above, almost 24 years later, that overall number is still stuck in the low two digits (12.7 percent for all ethnic minorities in 2015). Why is it relevant to discuss these numbers in such detail? As Campbell (1995) observed, leading up to (and in the aftermath of) the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, news organizations themselves had used “scarcity of minority journalists in the newsroom” as an explanation for the severe under-coverage of minority communities and neighborhoods (31). Despite placing an extra burden on minority journalists to cultivate sources and come up with story ideas focusing on ethnic communities, there seems indeed to be some truth to the claim that those communities are perhaps more accurately covered by reporters whose ethnicity provides them easier access and better rapport with the sources they cover. That has been confirmed anecdotally through interviews done by Reis, Sheerin, and MacMillin with *Miami Herald* journalists for their book *Writing and Reporting for Digital Media* (2015).

However, in his study of those 900 stories broadcast by 29 television stations in small, medium, and large markets across the country, Campbell found that “although the stations devoted differing amounts of coverage to the [Martin Luther] King Jr. holiday, few covered any stories about minorities or minority communities on the following day’s broadcasts,” with minorities rarely serving as on-camera sources and news reports focusing by and large on “white people and activities in white communities” (39). Perhaps more shockingly yet, Campbell found that minorities were absent even from feature
stories (profiles, community activities and events, etc.) aired during the newscasts he analyzed. Of hundreds of feature stories aired by those 29 stations in the period studied, only one highlighted a person of color: a well-regarded African-American prison warden who was retiring. What all the other stories had in common, Campbell wrote, was that they “appeared to exhibit the same pattern that has been found in content analysis research—little coverage of the nonwhite community and the consistent use of white sources in stories on topics that affect audience members of all colors” (39).

In his extensive ethnographic study of two television newsrooms, one in Honolulu, Hawaii, and the other in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Don Heider (2000) was interested in finding out “what goes wrong” between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., so that even in heavily multicultural and ethnically diverse markets such as those two, newscasters still end up covering mostly white folks in their news and feature stories. Using a critical-cultural theoretical framework, Heider wanted to find the ultimate answer to his question by examining how story ideas are selected, how news is gathered and produced, and how news decisions are made. The lack of diversity in their newscasts, as well as the lack of consistent coverage of minority communities in general, was acknowledged by journalists and news decision-makers in both newsrooms, with a managing editor in Honolulu admitting that journalists sometimes shied away from those stories for fear of digging deeper into underlying racial tensions in the community, and a reporter in Albuquerque admitting to being troubled by the fact that the station was focusing on “traditional” stories and ignoring the richness and complexity of life in some of the communities they were covering.

Ignorance of Minority Communities

These last observations lead us to the third main issue mentioned by previous analyses of race, ethnicity and media: a general ignorance of minority communities, including entire Hispanic groups and neighborhoods, by journalists and media organizations. When he conducted his ethnographic study in those Hawaii and New Mexico television newsrooms, what Heider (2000) found—both in his direct observation of how those newsrooms worked and in conversations with his informants—was that coverage of minority communities tended to fall into two broad camps: festivals and crime. Coverage of racial and ethnic festivals and celebrations made for good television, portraying “colorful” human-interest events that stayed far removed from anything deemed controversial. However, members of those ethnic communities complained that the only other time they were “seen on the news was in crime reporting,” with a Chicano community leader in Albuquerque complaining that the news was too “focused on the negative” (39). That characterization was disputed by the television station’s assignment editor, who noted that they covered crime stories as they came through the police scanner: “The [police] scanner is color blind,” he told the researcher (40). In Heider’s study, community leaders “had no trouble naming a myriad of issues that received little, if any, coverage from the local television news operations,” (44) including gentrification of ethnic neighborhoods, education, and even environmental racism. That observation by community leaders reinforces the general claim that years of focus on “festivals and crime” may have blinded journalists and their news organizations to the richness and complexity of the positive and negative issues that really matter to and affect minority groups.

Besides confirming what the literature in the field already predicted—that ethnic minorities would be underrepresented in broadcast news and in the newsrooms that produced them—Heider tried to provide some explanations to help us understand the causes
of this phenomenon. Those ranged from geography (difficult access by media workers to some areas of Hawaii where minority communities lived) to a lack of political/historical/contextual knowledge about those communities. Heider also focused on the already mentioned lack of ethnic representation among news decision-makers, as well as on the lack of resources, access, and public relations savvy, all factors that may hinder those communities’ ability to “sell” their concerns and interests to news organizations. However, even when minority journalists “make it” into newsrooms across the country, there is no guarantee that their previous knowledge and engagement with those communities will directly translate into their daily coverage. Through in-depth interviews with black and Latino journalists working for mainstream newspapers, Nishikawa et al. (2009) found a “widespread acceptance of traditional journalistic norms,” such as accuracy, balance, and neutrality by those professionals, with minority journalists going out of their way to avoid anything that smacked of “advocacy” in their stories (248).

In their study of misrepresentation of race and crime on network and cable news, Dixon and Williams (2014) found that while “blacks were actually ‘invisible’ on network news, being underrepresented as both violent perpetrators and victims of crime,” Latinos were “greatly overrepresented as undocumented immigrants” (24). More than two decades of research studies have confirmed that, when it comes to the coverage of Latino communities and Hispanic citizens, by over-focusing on crime and immigration, news media are by implication ignoring most other issues that affect or are relevant to those groups. In her book *Media and Minorities: The Politics of Race in News and Entertainment* (2006), Stephanie Larson echoes those claims that the story of Hispanics in mainstream news is one of exclusion and selective exclusion (119). Even in places where larger Latino populations require news organizations to dedicate more of their coverage to Hispanic communities, stories still tend to focus on crime and conflict, ignoring all other issues of importance to them. The invisibility of Hispanics as news sources gets to be almost bizarre—Larson mentions findings in the National Association of Hispanic Journalists’ (NAHJ’s) annual report, “Network Brownout,” indicating that Hispanics are used as sources in only half of network stories about Hispanics (120–1).

Larson also reiterated an observation made by other researchers that mainstream media stories tend to ignore the diversity within the Hispanic community itself:

> The terms “Hispanic” or “Latino” are used to represent a multitude of people: legal and illegal aliens, the native born and the foreign born, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Although this projects a greater national presence and image of solidarity, it overlooks the uniqueness of the subgroups.

That generic grouping of disparate communities under one big umbrella might have the effect of producing other types of distortions and stereotyping by the news media, as well as what Larson calls “selective exclusion,” whereby communities such as Cuban Americans in South Florida end up receiving much more national coverage and attention than other Hispanic groups (121).

The results of a study done by Marchi (2008) seem to buck this trend in an interesting and promising way. Starting with the premise established by previous studies that the coverage of multicultural festivals by the media tended to fall under the “journalistic realm of the *sphere of consensus,*” where ethnic communities were presented in apolitical and
exotic ways (925, citing the work of Hallin 1994; Campbell 1995; Entman and Rojecki 2000; Wilson et al. 2003), the researcher chose to examine news coverage of two large representatives of those celebrations, Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos), to find out if overtly political or controversial issues—such as racial inequality, immigration, and racism—were included in the coverage of those events. Examining the coverage of those two events by two large California newspapers (San Francisco Chronicle and Los Angeles Times) over a 10-year period, Marchi found that those news organizations did devote a significant number of Martin Luther King Jr. and Day of the Dead-related stories to discuss issues such as racial inequality, affirmative action, migrant deaths, violence, and labor struggles. In the case of Latino communities and Día de los Muertos celebrations, for example, a significant number of stories focused on issues such as environmental racism, exploitative labor conditions, anti-immigrant violence, gang violence, and other “forms of death that disproportionately affect low-income, minority populations” (933).

Observing that “the mass media have played an important role in popularizing the Day of the Dead within mainstream America through coverage ranging from the Associated Press and NPR, to local TV stations,” Marchi also noted that, besides having an inherent cultural aspect, Day of the Dead celebrations have assumed a markedly political tone among Chicano and Latino communities in the US, reflecting the most immediate concerns of those groups (932). As promising as these results are, it is important to remember that the study only analyzed the news coverage of the two most prominent daily newspapers in California, a more politically liberal state that is home to the second largest Latino population in the country (38.1 percent of the general population, behind only New Mexico’s 46.7 percent), according to a 2013 Pew Research Center tabulation of the 2011 U.S. Census results.

**Conclusion**

When it comes to the portrayal of Latinos in the news and entertainment media (and the presence of Hispanics in those industries), is it all bad news? As we just saw above, there seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. As the Latino population grows in the country, and as the group starts to exercise more overall political influence, it is only natural that changes in media attitudes may start to accelerate. Negative stereotypes, ignorance, and underrepresentation of Latinos and their communities in the media are still problems that news and entertainment companies will have to remedy. Recent media events such as the vitriolic rhetoric within the Republican presidential camp and the police shooting event that opened this chapter show that those issues are still a significant part of the national media and popular discourse around Hispanics and their communities. It is possible to anticipate, however, that similarly to the way in which media coverage and popular discourse around other minority groups has shifted over the years, the same process may occur very soon with Hispanics. It may be a more gradual process, starting, for example, in cities and states that have significant percentages of Latino populations, and slowly spreading around the rest of the country. In this context, it is also possible to anticipate the day in which different groups within the larger “Hispanic community” umbrella will receive coverage—and be portrayed—in a way that respects their uniqueness, while also letting the good (and the not-so-good) shine through in all their colors and possible combinations.
References


**Further Reading**


Santa Ana, O. (2013) *Juan in a Hundred: The Representation of Latinos on Network News*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. (Comprehensive semiotic and textual analyses of network news stories focused on Hispanic groups.)