

# The Impact of the Media on the Immigration Debate

By Richard J. Gonzales

John Quiñones, ABC News correspondent, told the LULAC audience how he hired a Mexican human smuggler to get him across the Mexican-U.S. border at Laredo. Working for a Chicago TV station at the time, Quiñones sought to provide an in-depth look at undocumented immigrants' entry into this country. After riding an inner tube across the Rio Grande, he said, he was probably the first Mexican to cross illegally and sleep that night in a Hyatt Registry.

Quiñones won an Emmy for his story and soon was hired by ABC. During the 78th LULAC National Convention in Chicago last week, Quiñones moderated a panel discussion in a workshop on media coverage of immigration issues. (In full disclosure, I'm president of Arlington LULAC Council 4353.

Olga Briseño, director of the Media, Democracy and Policy Initiative at the University of Arizona, said that many educators and reporters who write extensively about immigration have never been to the border.

"It's one thing to talk about immigration, and it's another to live it," she said. "The immigration story is a story about economics; it's about social history. It's not something that a reporter can jump into and jump out. Because this story impacts the Latino community and the country, we must demand that the newsroom cover this story with the depth that it deserves."

Briseño cited a UCLA study of news reporting by Otto Santana, instructor at the UCLA Department of Chicana & Chicano Studies, that described immigrants in animalistic, criminal and foreigner terms such as herding, illegal and alien. The stories slant the coverage to imply that Mexicans shouldn't be here, that they're uneducated and inferior, she said.

And, she said, this happens at a time when Latino youth should be encouraged to pursue education and well-paying jobs.

The panelists cited TV talk-show hosts such as Lou Dobbs who provide inflammatory entertainment but no real, in-depth immigration coverage. Quiñones

encouraged LULAC and other civic organizations to confront Dobbs and others who make their living bashing immigrants. He said that we need cable news outlets that counter right-wing commentators. Where are the Latino talk-show hosts?

Domingo Garcia of Dallas, the national co-chairman of LULAC's civil rights commission, said that he has asked U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to reintroduce the "Fairness Doctrine" in Congress to call for balanced coverage of controversial issues. He challenged Spanish news

viewers and listeners flooded congressional representatives' e-mails and phones with their opposition to the reform bill. The only major Latino voice was Eddie "Polin" Sotelo, the Los Angeles Spanish-speaking DJ who delivered more than a million petitions for a comprehensive immigration bill.

Briseño said that community organizations play a major role in balanced news coverage. After the April 2006 pro-immigration marches, President Bush's popularity ratings went down. However, she said that Latino presence in the news media



Photo by Iain Naino-Birnes



ABC Co-Anchor Primetime 20/20 John Quiñones, Author Paul Cuadros, Olga Briseño Director, Media, Democracy & Policy Initiative, College of Humanities at the University of Arizona, Editor of HOY, Alejandro Escalona, News Director of Telemundo, Esteban Creste and LULAC Activist and Attorney Domingo Garcia.

media corporations such as Telemundo and Univision to counter these attacks. Instead of showing telenovelas or R-rated entertainment that do little to change society, they should enter the immigration fray with counter-viewpoints.

Esteban Creste, news director for Telemundo Chicago, said that his station recently covered an unsuccessful attempt by the Illinois Legislature to allow driver's licenses for the undocumented. The bill failed, not for the lack of news coverage but because grassroots organizations and legislators offered weak political strategies, he said.

Garcia pointed out that as a result of conservative commentators' encouragement,

has declined for the last 10 years. She said Latinos comprise 4.4 percent of employees in newspapers and less than 2 percent in radio. They have a better showing in television because of Telemundo and Univision.

Quiñones said that as a son of a poor migrant worker family, he got his professional break when a San Antonio community organization demanded that the local news media start hiring people who looked like San Antonians. The group threatened that if the stations didn't hire more Latinos, it would go to the Federal Communications Commission and challenge their licenses.

"Thank God for them," Quiñones said. "I wouldn't be here."