THE SOUND OF EXCLUSION

NPR and the Latinx Public

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HEAR EVERY VOICE 50
What was NPR meant to be?

What has it become over time?

How is it changing in response to a “public” that is become more racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse?
Whose Stories Get to be Told?  
Who Gets to Tell These Stories?
Q&A: Illegal Immigrants and the U.S. Economy

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ADAM DAVIDSON

Nearly 12 million illegal immigrants are estimated to be living in the United States. The vast majority work in low-skill, low-wage jobs. More than half work in construction, manufacturing or leisure and hospitality.

Advocates on both sides of the immigration debate predict dramatic change if illegal immigration is drastically curtailed. Supporters of a crackdown argue that the U.S. economy would benefit if illegal immigrants were to leave, because U.S. employers would be forced to raise wages to attract American workers. Critics of this approach say the loss of illegal immigrants would stall the U.S. economy, saying undocumented workers do many jobs few native-born Americans will do. NPR business correspondent Adam Davidson explores the issue.

Q: What is the impact of illegal immigration on the economy?

By the Numbers

• By increasing the labor supply between 1980 and 2005, illegal immigration is estimated to have raised the nation's GDP by 0.5 percent and the national income by 0.2 percent.

A migrant worker picks oranges at a grove in Bradenton, Fla. Many of the agricultural products in the area are planted, harvested and processed by immigrants, both legal and illegal.

Photo by Phillippe Diederich/Getty Images
Why NPR?
Why Latinxs?
Part One:
Who is the “Public” in Public Radio?
"National Public Radio will serve the individual; it will promote personal growth; it will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness."

BILL SIEMERING, 1970
Public Radio’s Two Mandates

- Public radio would serve a broader, more inclusive, definition of the public
- Public radio would engage listeners in public life
Off to a Rocky Start

- Almost immediately, it becomes apparent that NPR is not serving listeners of color.
- Carnegie Commission blue ribbon panels identifies Public Media’s lack of diversity as a problem.
- By 1977, the Task Force for Minorities in Public Broadcasting issues a scathing report titled “A Formula for Change,” describing public media as “asleep at the transmitter.”
- NPR establishes Department of Specialized Audiences (albeit briefly).
Then Come the Financial Pressures
Programming is a lot like bait. What we catch depends on what we set out. Honey draws bees, worms lure fish, and a hunk of liver will bring stray cats to your door… In the same way, certain kinds of listeners are attracted to certain kinds of programming. So, when we choose what we air, we select who will listen – and also who won’t.

– David Giovannoni, NPR researcher
Public Media Begins to Adopt Commercial Practices
For much of their history, public radio stations defined their mission in terms that were highly idealistic, broadly inclusive, frequently paternalistic, and often naive with respect to the opportunities and limits of radio broadcasting. Most stations’ missions were, at bottom, only vague directives for actual operations, seldom translated into measurable standards suitable for performance evaluation. As audience researcher Tom Church put it, many stations could fulfill their mission without so much as a single person ever listening.

– Audience 88 Report
Step 2: Identify Your Ideal Listener

"Listeners who have more money can give more money"  ARA 1998

Values and lifestyle segments (VALS)
Step 3: Take a Colorblind Approach

NPR framed it as a *Strategy of Targeting* vs. a *Strategy of Transcendence*

“The strategy to transcend racial heritage and the strategy to target it are at direct philosophical odds. The targeting strategy emphasizes differences in our racial and cultural backgrounds. The transcendence strategy emphasizes similarities in our characters.”

“Driven by the strategy to transcend, the single most defining characteristic of public radio’s audience today is its college education. If it remains so into the future, public radio can expect to serve even more minority listeners tomorrow. As the number of well-educated minority citizens grows, so grows public radio’s minority audience.”
When the Sound is Silence
I realized that, as I was speaking aloud, I was also imagining someone else’s voice saying my piece. The voice I was hearing and gradually beginning to imitate was something in-between the voice of Roman Mars and Sarah Koenig. Those two very different voices have many complex and wonderful qualities. They also sound like white people. My natural voice—the voice that I use most often when I am most comfortable—doesn’t sound like that.

Chenjarai Kuminyika (Transom, 2015)
We now have a certain type, or rather a carefully chosen band of types of English, broadcast over the length and breadth of our country, so that although many listeners hear daily a type of speech with which they are familiar, and which they habitually use, many others hear a type that is different from that which they usually hear and use. This is, in itself, enough to ensure abundant criticism.

– Arthur Lloyd James (1926)
Early on, NPR Reflected a Wider Range of Voices
NPR’s Broadcast Voice Has, Over Time, Become More Restricted

• NPR has cultivated in idealized dialect, one that is intended to mimic spontaneous conversation, but which is, in fact, highly scripted

• NPR on-air speaking style is one that is generally devoid of regional and ethnic accent, what sociolinguists refer to as Standard American English (SAE)

• This, in turn, has shut out speakers of “stigmatized varieties”

“The standard of popular perception is what is left behind when all the non-standard varieties spoken by disparaged persons such as Valley Girls, Hillbillies, Southerners, New Yorkers, African Americans, Asians, Mexican Americans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans are set aside” (Milroy, 2001)
How Language is Policed

• Informal mechanisms
  – Linguistic habitus
  – Self-correction
  – Listener feedback

• Formal mechanisms
  – Style guides
  – Voice coaches
  – Editors/producers
  – Time limitations
Part Three: By Us for Us
• Each of these programs demonstrates the ways in which Latinx cultural producers have negotiated NPR’s system to their advantage
• Each has embraced commercial practices
• And at times, taken advantage of technological and political changes in the media marketplace
Questions?