

How Journalists Can Change What TV Says About Latinos

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A study in the 1990s found less than 1 percent of the leading English-language TV news broadcast stories were either about or related to Latinos. A similar study, conducted from 2008 to 2014 by retired Kent State University journalism professor Federico Subervi, found there was no change in that number. Giving the lunch keynote address for the Education Writers Association's second annual Spanish-Language Media Convening in Orlando, Subervi told the gathered reporters that two-thirds of stories that were about Latinos discussed either immigration or crime.

"Latinos are presented primarily as people who have problems or who cause problems," said Subervi, who serves as an advisor to the Child Trends Hispanic Institute and secretary of the board of directors for the Latino Public Radio consortium.

The lack of positive Latino protagonists in the news, on television and in movies, as well as the relative dominance of negative models, teaches Latino children how to think about themselves and Latino culture. Many of these children, Subervi said, do not have a reference point for seeing their own culture in a positive light.

Repetition maximizes the effects of messaging and Subervi underscored the fact that the repetition of what is said is just as important as the repetition of what is not said. He urged reporters to find positive stories about Latinos, their achievements, their ambitions and their potential.

"Latinos are in a desert," Subervi said. "You are the gardeners." Journalists can grow flowers in the desert by telling those positive stories. But they don't just have to show the flowers:



Federico Subervi gives the keynote speech, "Countering Stereotypes and Vacuums: Inspiring and Mobilizing News for 'Sí, Se Puede'" at EWA's 2015 Spanish-Language Media Convening in Orlando. Source: Valencia College/ Don Burlinson

They can also get rid of the weeds by offering quality, contextualized reporting.

This type of work goes against stereotypes and offers alternative narratives from within the broad diversity found in the Latino community. It helps create new reference points, especially for children trying to figure out their place in the world.

“You are indispensable in creating this point of reference,” Subervi said.

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Consultant, Retired Professor