

A History of Spanish Language Radio in the United States



Prepared for Arbitron Inc.
by
The Center for Spanish Language Media,
University of North Texas,
Denton TX

2009

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By

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Introduction

The history of Spanish language radio in the United States holds a unique place in American broadcasting. Spanish language radio overcame adverse beginnings to encompass rich cultures, personalities, and diverse geographic regions. Despite significant barriers to its creation, the medium of radio gave a voice to generations of Latino communities starving for native language content and access to news and information of cultural relevance.

Early Spanish radio personalities parlayed growing popularity into leadership positions and used their influence to shape communities and early broadcasts. Due to the rapid growth of the United States' Latino population, Spanish language radio will continue its ascent as a valuable marketing channel that influences community buying habits, as well as remain a uniting cultural force. Spanish language radio continues to serve as a vital tool for social and political development of Hispanics in the United States, tackling issues important to the Latino community. Spanish language radio will continue to have a bright future, as it provides a primary communication medium to reach the rapidly growing Spanish-language market in the U. S.

Early Spanish-Language Radio

The origin of Spanish-language radio in the United States was significantly different from its closest early counterpart, Spanish-language newspapers. The first Spanish-language publications, *El Misisipi* (1808) and *El Mensajero Luisianés* (1809), emerged from New Orleans shortly after the Louisiana Purchase (Kanellos, 2000). The expansion of Spanish-language publications continued and by 1850 there were

publications in Texas, Florida, California, and the northeast (Kanellos, 2000). Spanish-language publications were primarily funded by a supportive immigrant community, which differed from the beginnings of Spanish-language radio, which evolved gradually as its radio audience increased after facing such early challenges such as limited broadcast hours and competition from European foreign language programming. (Rodríguez, 1999).

The large capital requirements of owning and operating a commercial radio station created significant barriers to entry for early Spanish-language radio stations and potential owners. In the early years of radio in the U. S., the majority of owners were Anglos, and many of these radio station owners and advertisers assumed that the Spanish speaking audience would not be a profitable market. No doubt this early bias impeded the growth of early Spanish-language radio (Rodríguez, 1999). Gutiérrez and Schement (1979) recount the events of the 1920s and 1930s when Anglo stations sold blocks of time “off-hours,” often during early mornings and weekends, to brokers who in-turn created the first Spanish-language radio programs. These brokers served as on-air talent and sold advertising for their programs. The broker purchased blocks of programming from the station out of his or her own pocket and sold advertising time to local advertisers in the community.

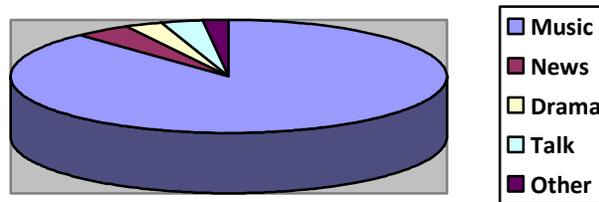
Early Spanish-Language Programming

While there is not an accurate historical record of the first radio station to offer programming in Spanish, we do know that Rodolfo Hoyos, an early on-air broker in Los Angeles from 1932 to 1967, was among the early innovators. Hoyos described his early programs as a mixture of live music, poetry, drama, and community discussion. Hoyos

paid \$180 a week for his daily hour-long program, and sold daily announcements for \$50-\$60 weekly (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979, p. 6).

The brokering system expanded Spanish-language radio programming to concentrated audiences across the Southwest. Arnheim and Bayne conducted a content analysis in 1941 focusing on Spanish-language programming in New York, Arizona, Texas and California. The study found that US broadcasts provided 264 hours of Spanish-language programming each week (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). The study also provided a detailed analysis of the type of programming appearing on Spanish-language radio (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Composition of Spanish Language Radio in 1941



Source: Gutierrez & Schement (1979)

In this early study, music was the primary content (88.1%), followed by news (4.2%), talk (3.1%), drama (2.6%) and other (2%). The authors identified medicines as the most frequent category of advertising, followed by movies and food. Other notable advertisers included clothing, furniture and bedding. The study also addressed the important cultural impact of Spanish-language radio with its emphasis on community

events, such as dances, church gatherings, clubs and letter exchanges (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979).

In addition, the news provided by early Spanish-language broadcasts focused overwhelmingly from foreign countries (80%), primarily Mexico (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). The large amount of foreign news coverage illustrates that Spanish-language radio programmers were in tune with the bi-nationality of the communities they served and thus featured key programming targeted to this group, including a significant number of performances by Mexican musicians and actors (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979; Rodríguez, 1999). Rodríguez (1999, p. 360). The on-air talent often “assumed the informational and political advocacy role more commonly associated with immigrant print journalists of the period.” Early Spanish-language radio clearly had an impact on the immigrant population.

Perhaps the best example of this type of host was Pedro González, host of *Los Madrugadores*, (“The Early Risers”) on KELW, Burbank, California which began broadcasting in 1927 (Rodríguez, 1999). Described by *The New York Times* as a “folk hero and social advocate” at the time of his death, González was “one of the best known Mexican-American political figures of his generation” (Rodríguez, 1999, p. 360). *Los Madrugadores* was an extremely popular program that combined live musical performances with public service announcements such as job opening (Rodríguez, 1999). The station was satisfied with Gonzalez’s ratings results, turning formerly “dead” airtime from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m., into an appealing time slot for new advertisers hoping to reach Hispanic consumers, such as Folgers Coffee (Rodríguez, 1999). This new influx of

advertising dollars is but one example of the viability of the “new” Spanish market that had been neglected for so long in the U. S.

However, González soon paid the price of the double standard that was emerging in regards to the Hispanic community. While stations saw the advertising potential of the community, the government was stepping up action against Mexican immigrants during “Operation Wetback” from 1928-1929 when thousands of Mexican immigrants were deported (Rodríguez, 1999). *Los Madrugadores* began to feature interviews with community leaders that informed the audience of their rights before González was arrested in 1934 (Rodríguez, 1999). González’s arrest had a serious impact on the radio industry, as stations began to reduce their Spanish-language programming because of pressure from local government as well as tougher radio licensing regulations (Rodríguez, 1999). After community protests, González was eventually released from jail and deported to Mexico in 1940 (Rodríguez, 1999).

Meanwhile, the Mexican broadcast entrepreneur Emilio Azcárraga Viduarreta was shaping the future of Spanish-language broadcasting. Azcárraga’s dominance over the medium was twofold. First, Azcárraga was the exclusive representative of ninety percent of Mexico’s talented performers, including musicians and actors (Rodríguez, 1999). More importantly, Azcárraga had been able to establish the first and dominant Mexican radio network in his home country through meticulous negotiations with both the Mexican government and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) (Rodríguez, 1999).

In the 1930s Azcárraga’s Mexico City station XEW, *La Voz de América Latina* (The Voice of Latin America) began transmitting to a Los Angeles station which in-turn

relayed the broadcast to other American stations (Rodríguez, 1999). Azcárraga also owned five stations along the U.S./Mexico border that broadcast directly into the U.S, allowing him to supersede the new American regulations that restricted Spanish-language programming (Rodríguez, 1999). This allowed Azcárraga to broadcast into U.S. territory without being on U.S. soil. The reach of these broadcasts combined with Azcárraga's "feel" for the sensibilities and taste of his audiences led to huge success for his radio network (Rodríguez, 1999). Azcárraga's control over popular Mexican talent and his unparalleled distribution resources are the perfect example of vertical integration and allowed him to single handedly influence the future of Mexican pop culture.

Spanish-Language Radio in the 1940s-1960s

The commercial availability of pre-recorded content paired with changing perceptions of the Spanish audience led to continued growth of Spanish-language radio in the 1940s (Rodríguez, 1999). By the mid 1940s there were about 200 foreign language stations in the United States, with Spanish appearing on 58, often in block programming (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). Scholarly research began to investigate the impact of Spanish Language Radio on its audience. Stations and advertisers began to understand the benefit of reaching an underserved audience in their native language, publishing station profiles and trade figures for Spanish-language stations. It was only in the late 1970s that marketers and advertisers "demonstrated any real interest in this group of consumers (O'Guinn, 1980, p. 9). One early broadcaster explained that when properly paired with music or drama "the emotional impact of an advertising message delivered in a listener's first learned language . . . evoking the most nostalgic memories of a listener's

far away birthplace was infinitely greater than the same message in English” (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979, p. 6)

One of the first successful brokered programs was on San Antonio’s KONO-AM, which began Spanish-language programming just four years after the first radio broadcasts in the city (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). San Antonio continued to be a frontier for Spanish-language radio programming and is widely recognized as the home of the first full time Spanish-language station owned by a Latino (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). Successful broker Raul Cortez appealed to the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) that a full-time Spanish-language radio station would help inspire passion amongst the Spanish-speaking community towards World War II (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979). Many saw Spanish-language radio as a threat to American culture and natural unity, but industry leaders believed Spanish-language radio was the most effective method to “infuse the American view” into their lives (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979, p. 9). Cortez’s station did not debut on the air until 1946 but it proved to be a key turning point in Spanish-language radio history. Cortez broke the mold of Anglo-owned stations and set a precedent that Latinos could own and program their own stations.

Gutiérrez and Schement (1979) describe the 1950s as the peak of “personality radio” of Spanish-language stations, yet we know that a number of Spanish language radio personalities rose to prominence during the 1990s and in to the 21st century. Early broadcasters were able to develop their own personal style which was complimented by their selection and balance of music and drama (DeMars, 2005). Some stations continued the broker-system while other broadcasters had been hired as station employees. Audience loyalty was affiliated with the talent as opposed to the station which led to

immense power for the on-air talent, a trend that continues today with popular talent like Piolín, El Cucuy, Dra. Isabel, El Pistolero, and others. These influential broadcasters would charge additional fees for personal dedications or special endorsements for advertisements (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979).

Another early influential broadcaster was Manuel Gonzales Davila. Sr. Davila began his career in 1935 as a broker in the San Antonio area, first for KUKA and later KEDA-AM, and is often credited for establishing the Tejano music genre. Davila purchased KEDA-AM in 1967 and brought Tejano programming to the forefront breaking the mold of early broadcasts that relied on Mexican national music (DeMars, 2005; Richter, 2006). While some argue the exact origins of Tejano music, Davila was a groundbreaking radio talent and gave opportunities to local and regional Tejano groups that were often ignored by other stations (DeMars, 2005).

The popularity of Spanish-language radio continued to grow in the 1950s while the appeal of other foreign-language radio broadcasts diminished. Political events, such as the World Wars, affected the flow of European refugees while immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries continued to grow (Rodríguez, 1999,). A steady influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants to the United States represented individuals needing news, information, and music from their home countries which Spanish-language radio provided. Spanish radio thrived, accounting for two-thirds of all foreign language broadcasts by the 1960s, taking advantage of the void left by European-language broadcasts (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979).

The popularity of Spanish language-radio rose tremendously in the 1960s as the media and scholars began to follow the trends of the industry. More stations were turning

to the format and more advertisers began to realize the potential of the Hispanic audience. By 1966 there were more than 300 radio stations broadcasting in Spanish in the United States with a renewed emphasis on music programming (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979, p. 11).

The Continued Growth of Spanish-Language Radio: 1970s and 1980s

The 1970s and 1980s proved to be an important period for Spanish-language radio, as the quality of programming and marketing improved significantly. The time when the broker would visit local businesses ended as more corporations began to invest in Spanish language radio advertising (Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979) Corporations such as Caballero Spanish Media, Katz Hispanic Radio and Spanish Broadcasting System were among the first to enter the Spanish-language space as these companies realized the benefit of narrowcasting to the influential market of native or bilingual Spanish speakers to “maintain, reestablish or simply remind audiences of a cultural or sub-cultural identity” (O’Guinn, 1980, p. 10). A 1972 study found that nearly 75% of Latinos in the greater Los Angeles area were dependent on their native Spanish language as their primary means of communication (Gutiérrez, 1985).

Valenzuela (1973) conducted research in the San Antonio and Austin area that concluded that low-income and older people were the heaviest users of Spanish-language radio, while younger and higher socioeconomic groups were more frequent users of English-language radio. Dunn (1975) analyzed the same data and concluded that “traditional” Hispanics preferred Spanish-language radio while less “traditional” Hispanics preferred English-language radio.

The mid-70s saw a number of stations collaborated to form a number of regional Spanish language radio networks. While the long-term stability varied among these networks it is evidence of a solidification of the format and a forecast of future success.

Chart 2: Regional Spanish-language Networks in the Mid-1970s

National Spanish Language Network	26
AAA Español Network	15
Amigo Spanish Group	14
Texas Spanish Language Network	14
All Spanish Network	12
AAA California Spanish Network	11
Latin Network	10

Source: Quaal & Brown (1976)

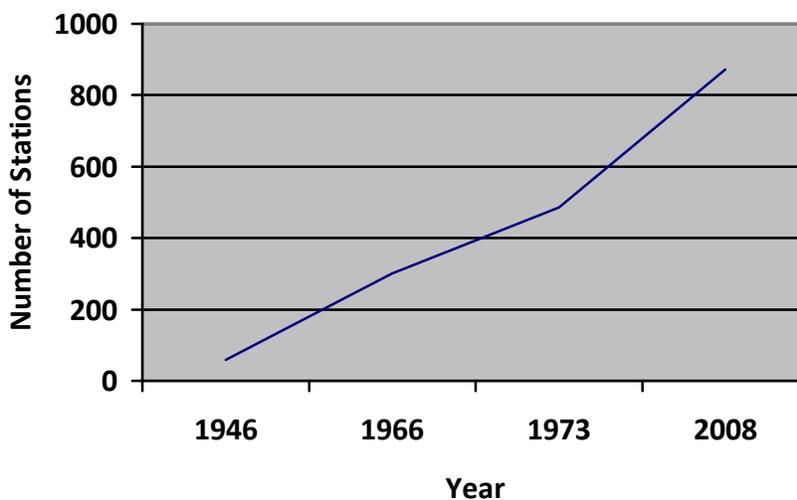
A 1978 Arbitron study analyzed the viewing habits of five Hispanic markets. The research recognized at the time that the Hispanic market rises to its highest point during the midday hours at a time when the traditional Anglo market decreases significantly. This research proved to be useful for advertisers looking for a specific audience to segment their advertising message towards.

According to a 1979 Gallup study, 58 percent of Hispanics between 18 and 34 listened to SLR each weekday. Each of the 35 to 49 and 50+ groups had a percentage of approximately 65 percent. The Gallup study supplemented other research at the time, indicating a parallel between age and culture towards radio listening habits within the community.

The Explosive Growth of Spanish-Language Radio: The 1990s and Beyond

Spanish-language radio has continued to grow rapidly as a dominant market force since the 1980s, with the radio market growing nearly 1000% percent from 1980 to 2002 (Paredes, 2003, p. 5) (See Figures 3). “Sub-Ethnic” marketing became common as Spanish-speaking audience became the ideal niche market, described as the “Sleeping Latin Giant” or the “Latin Pot of Gold” (Paredes, 2003, p. 6-7). Spanish-language stations began to leap to the top of the rankings in large Hispanic markets such as Los Angeles, San Antonio and Miami (Adelson, 1993).

Figure 3: Number of Spanish-Language Radio Stations 1946-2008



Source: Data compiled from Gutiérrez & Schement (1979); Arbitron (2008)

Other popular genres emerged as Hispanic audiences continued to grow. Complimenting the traditional Regional Mexican and Tejano stations were formats such as Tropical and Spanish Contemporary. Tropical drew influences from the Caribbean region as well as South American and Central American countries. Spanish

Contemporary is similar to contemporary hit radio drawing upon a variety of popular Latin styles (Eastman & Ferguson, 2006).

Spanish-language radio's popularity continued to grow for several decades before making a huge impression in some of the largest markets in the country by the mid-1990s. In Los Angeles, Spanish Ballad station KLVE-FM soared to number one in the fall 1995 Arbitron ratings, and by winter 1998 Regional Mexican station KSCA-FM leaped to the top spot. This gave Spanish-language radio stations in the LA area the top two spots for the second week in a row. Meanwhile, in New York, tropical station WSKQ-FM moved into the second place in the market. Other top markets such as Miami, San Antonio, Chicago and Houston showed significant gains for Spanish-language radio stations during this time period (Knopper, 1996; Lannert, 1998).

The 2000 U.S. Census indicated there were 35 million Latinos in the United States and that number has risen considerably the past several years (Paredes, 2003, p. 7). The U.S. Census estimates that by 2010, the Hispanic population will reach 50 million and could reach nearly 25% of the U.S. population by 2050 (Advertising Age, 2009). In addition, Latinos purchase \$485 billion in goods and services annually, and that number could soar to more than \$975 billion over the next two decades (Paredes, 2003, p. 7).

The combination of high ratings, rising population and increased spending power was simply too much for advertisers to ignore. Large corporations such as Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Burger King, 7-Eleven J.C. Penny and many more began to increase their advertising budgets towards the Hispanic market. Although advertising revenues change year-to-year many of these companies remain heavy players in the contemporary Hispanic radio market (See Table 4) (Adweek, 1995; Wilke, 1998).

Univision Radio CEO Gary Stone compares the buying power of today's Hispanic family to the early days of the brokering system, "Just like a number of years ago, when you felt like disc jockey was your friend . . . that's why we do so many endorsements for our talent; they have the umbilical cord with the listener—they are connected—and it is a win-win situation for the consumer, the advertiser and the company" (Howard 2007). It is clear that the Latino population is soaring and their purchasing power is a key point of interest to advertisers. Guernica (1982) called Spanish-language radio a "culturally attuned companion," and a "direct electrical connection to the Hispanic culture and language".

Table 4: Top 10 Advertisers in 2008 on Hispanic Spot Radio

Rank	Marketer	2008 Ad Spending (Thousands)	% CHG
1	Broadcasting Media Partners (Univision)	\$23,646	24.5
2	Verizon Communications	\$10,215	1.3
3	AT&T	\$9,198	10.9
4	McDonald's Corp.	\$9,145	2.0
5	U.S. Government	\$7,794	94.1
6	Home Depot	\$7,785	49.9
7	Anheuser-Busch InBev	\$6,583	-8.1
8	J.C. Penny Corp.	\$6,481	3.6
9	Toyota Motor Corp.	\$6,374	-17.4
10	State Farm Mutual Auto Insurance Comp.	\$6,245	NA
Source: Advertising Age (2009)			

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 eliminated all national ownership caps, allowing large corporations to own up to eight stations in a large market. This Act led to industry-wide consolidation and paved the way for a number of mergers, the largest for Spanish-language radio being Univision's 2002 acquisition of Hispanic Broadcasting Corporation (HBC). With the acquisition Univision became the largest owner of Spanish-language radio stations in the United States (See Table 5). At the time of the merger Univision's television stations had a 90% penetration rate in Latino homes and HBC's radio stations provided a 60% penetration rate for the Latino radio listeners (Paredes, 2003). This merger created the first Spanish-language media giant that still dominates markets across the country with its ability to cross-promote via multiple platforms.

Table 5: Spanish-language Radio Ownership in 2008

Corporation	Number of US Stations
Univision Radio	70
Entravision Communication Corp.	48
Lieberman Broadcasting	21
Clear Channel	18
Spanish Broadcasting System	10

Source: Wilkinson (2009)

Spanish-language radio has thrived not only in the heavily Hispanic-populated Southwest and Southeast markets but continues expanding to new territories such as North Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, Tennessee, Nevada, Missouri, Washington and Pennsylvania (Albarran & Pitts, 2001, p. 94; Paredes, 2003, p. 5). This rapid expansion

challenged struggling English-language stations to rethink their strategy as the Spanish radio formats continue to grow across the United States.

The Current State of Spanish Language Radio

Despite a painful recessionary climate in the U. S., Hispanic ad spending finished 2008 at just over \$4 billion, a growth rate of 1.9%, while general market spending fell 4.1% (Advertising Age, 2009). Much like the rest of the broadcast industry, Spanish-language radio faces serious economic challenges through 2009 and 2010 as the nation moves forward from the financial woes that began at the end of 2007. Advertising Age states that spending on Spanish-language TV and print media fell between 15-20% in the first quarter of 2009 and radio advertising also faced declines.

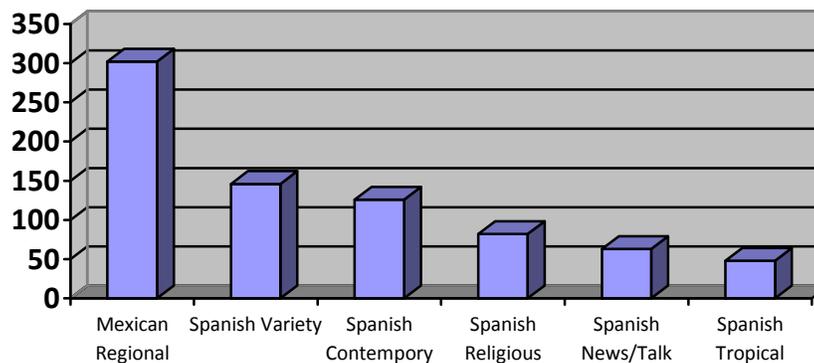
In a 2007 interview with *Radio Ink* magazine, Univision Radio CEO Gary Stone noted that 18-34 is the strongest demo for Spanish-language stations, and details the importance of attractive content to reach new listeners and describes several new formats including the bilingual “La Kalle” and hip-hop as being essential in attracting younger demos (Howard 2007). The Univision CEO also emphasizes the importance of cross-promotion and syndication for a media conglomerate such as Univision Radio. Univision uses its television, radio and online assets to bring focus on every aspect of its media family and to target Latinos through various mediums.

Former Univision President and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros, agrees that the growth of Spanish-language radio will continue. Cisneros makes a bold prediction that Spanish-language stations could double in the next

decade and a half (Radio Ink, 2007), although this prediction occurred before the economic crisis of 2008. Cisneros claims Spanish-language radio is successful because of diverse programming and community outreach (Radio Ink, 2007).

Cisneros also discusses the expansion of Latinos into less traditional markets and how radio stations emerge to meet this new demand. He describes the willingness of Latinos to work unfilled jobs which has led to expansion in states like North Carolina, Michigan and Arkansas and the expansion of Spanish Language radio to reach this audience.

Table 6: Number of Spanish-Language Stations in 2008



Source: Arbitron Hispanic Radio Today, 2008

Spanish Language Radio's Impact on Culture

While Spanish-language radio continues its' evolution, the impact and importance of radio to Hispanic/Latino culture over the past sixty-plus years represents an amazing

story that is still in progress. From the very early days of the broker-system, most audiences shared a bond with radio through their favorite radio personality along with news and entertainment. Audiences valued the radio personality's opinions on music and advertising but also depended on them for valuable information in the community ranging from local announcements, news from their native countries and information on politics and their political rights. Many early stations solidified their audiences with Mexican national news as well as community events and information.

The non-profit Radio Campesina network is a great example of political activism at work in Spanish-language radio. Founded by the United Farm Workers labor leader and political activist César Chávez in 1983, the network has six stations in the Southwest area. Radio Campesina broadcasts entirely in Spanish and the programming is about 70 percent music with the rest of the station's programming focused on education on topics from workers' rights to domestic violence. CEO Anthony Chavez explains that "it is our social responsibility to help organize and let the workers know their rights." The network helps transmit information regarding meetings or strikes as well as broadcasting to remote ranches. Cesar Chavez wanted the radio station to be "the voice of the people" and his impact on the Spanish Culture continues many years after his death (Cardenas, 1996, p. 8; Reinhart, 2006).

Stations soon learned the emotional impact of advertising messages in the listener's native language. A majority of listeners, especially in the early years of radio, were dependent on Spanish language, and an advertiser's message was much more affective in their native language "evoking nostalgic memories of the listener's far-away birthplace"

(Gutiérrez & Schement, 1979, p 6). A 2006 Radio Ad Effectiveness Lab study concluded that radio's advertising environment is strong among Hispanics, especially those that use the language as their primary means of communication (Radio Ad Effectiveness Lab, 2008). The viability of the Spanish consumer is arguably the main reason for the explosive growth of Spanish-language radio and the importance of hearing an advertising message in the listeners' native language allows advertisers to reach a unique audience.

Raul Cortez argued to the FCC that a full-time Spanish-language radio station would help build enthusiasm amongst Hispanics for World War II. This led to Cortez launching the first Latino owned Spanish-language station, never realizing the large impact radio would have on the Hispanic culture and the entire industry.

Conclusion

Spanish language radio's successful history comes from a combination of its varied cultures, hard-working radio personalities, and the recognition of the Hispanic community as an economically viable market. Spanish-language radio is a unique and intriguing industry to analyze from a historical perspective because of its large audiences, huge revenues and cultural impact. After overcoming many obstacles throughout its history ranging from fair funding and broadcast opportunities to viewing the Hispanics as a viable audience, Spanish radio has solidified itself as a strong force in today's radio industry, often ranking among the top five stations in many heavy Hispanic-populated markets.

It is difficult to estimate whether Spanish-language radio will continue its meteoric rise as the Latino population continues to grow or if the large variety of formats and stations will further fragment the audience. As Spanish-language radio evolves with a variety of digital platforms via HD radio, the Internet, and satellite radio, there will be natural migration of the audience to these platforms as the general market has experienced. Even if the number of stations begins to flatten, Spanish-language radio has proven that it is a legitimate player against the general market, a leading option for many national advertisers, and a valuable resource of entertainment, news, and information for many Spanish-speaking audiences.

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