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Where are Latinos?

They're a sizable US minority,
but on TV they're mostly invisible

BY CLARA E. RODRIGUEZ

Disney's recent multicultural television production of "Cinderella" reflected much the same reality as the networks' fall line-up of regular shows. As much as I enjoyed this new Cinderella and thought it real progress, I was again struck by the contrast between the virtual invisibility of Latinos on prime time and the increasing numbers of Latinos in the real world.

New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, for example - favored prime-time television sites - have had large, stable, and growing Latino populations for some time. Yet when was the last time a Latino was detected as a major, even a minor, character in "Seinfeld" or "Friends?" Indeed, when was the Latino component of these cities ever visible?

This is part of a larger paradox that preoccupies me. On the one hand - and this will not come as a revelation to most - Hispanics are increasing dramatically in number and are projected to become the nation's largest minority group.

What is surprising is that this may occur sooner than anticipated. According to a recent US Census study, Hispanics may "surpass African-Americans as early as 2005," or only eight years from now. And it may be even sooner, for this is a conservative estimate, that does not include many of the undocumented, nor does it correct for the estimated undercount of Latinos in the census, which historically has had trouble tracking residents of urban areas.

The other side of this paradox is the dearth of Latinos in the media, as well as in national debates and public discussions. When was the last time we saw a Latino commentator addressing issues that greatly concern Latinos such as immigration, welfare, or education?

The appearance of an occasional Latino voice on television underscores their general absence in this arena. The invisibility of Hispanics in television, news, and film has been documented often. The National Council of La Raza, a nonprofit Hispanic policy group, recently

found in a survey that Hispanics made up 9 percent of the United States' total population in 1990, yet they received only 3 percent of film roles.

In the news, Latinos hold few "gatekeeper" positions in network operations, and they are underrepresented as correspondents and anchors. A recent analysis of news stories presented on the three leading networks found that only 1 percent focused on Latinos and issues related to Latinos.

In addition, and also in contrast to coverage of other news stories, Latinos aired on camera in only about half of these stories. In half of the stories that were about Latinos, Latinos were missing.

The vast majority of these Latino news stories fell into four "problem" categories: crime, immigration, affirmative action, and welfare. Clearly, there are problems. The question is: Where are the other stories? Why is the focus so narrow, so problem-oriented?

But most striking of all is that Latino representation should decrease precisely at a time when this population is increasing rapidly. Beginning with the Kerner Commission's examination of television characters during the 1960s, Hispanics have consistently been the least likely to appear in entertainment programs.

And now, the proportion of Hispanic characters in those programs has actually declined, from 3 percent in the 1950s to 1 percent in the 1980s, according to a study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. Moreover, many of the Latino characters on television and in film are depicted as "problem" people; that is, they have problems or they are a problem to others.

This has led some to question what relationship these portrayals and the more general situation of invisibility have to the fear of continued immigration. Perhaps we need another Kerner Commission Report?

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