

IMMIGRATION RALLIES; Radio stations lead the charge for Hispanics

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Body

For Teodoro Maus, there are two heroes from Monday's successful march to protest immigration legislation under consideration in Congress: the Latino community and Hispanic radio.

Maus, one of the organizers of the rally and last month's protest --- when Latinos were asked to stay home from work and not spend any money --- said neither event would have been successful without the electronic grapevine.

"We would never have been able to achieve --- they're saying up to 60,000 people came --- without the media in general, but especially radio," said Maus, the former Mexican consul general in Atlanta. "There was no way we could have gotten the message out to so many people. They [Hispanic radio] were definitely there."

Indeed, in recent weeks the power and reach of Hispanic media --- radio in particular --- has become especially clear. Last month in Los Angeles, for example, an estimated 500,000 people in white T-shirts turned out to protest the proposed federal crackdown on illegal immigration.

That was followed on Monday by nearly 200,000 people in Washington and between 30,000 to 60,000 people in Atlanta, who joined thousands of others across the country in an unprecedented, coordinated demonstration on a controversial issue that has dominated Congress, the Georgia Legislature, the Internet and talk radio chatter.

In all these demonstrations, Hispanic radio was credited with mobilizing the masses.

"It was done right," said Ricardo Villalona, general manager of the hugely popular Viva (105.7 FM) in Atlanta. "We told people to do it with dignity." Since the debate over illegal immigration has heated up in recent months, Villalona said his station, which was launched in September 2004 and is owned by Clear Channel, has been inundated with calls. "People are calling like crazy."

He said people feel comfortable talking with some of the station's on-air personalities, who speak the same language and understand the culture.

"We are there for them," he said of Viva's listeners. "We let them know what's going on on a daily basis."

Just ask Sergio Acosta, a Norcross construction worker.

Though he is fluent in English and Spanish, Acosta said he prefers to get his news from Hispanic radio. He listens to Viva in the morning and another Hispanic station in the afternoon.

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Acosta said Spanish-language radio brings him more news from his native Mexico, which he left 16 years ago, and also keeps him informed about the Latino community.

For instance, Acosta said he first learned the details of Monday's rally from the radio. "They know everything that's happening," said Acosta.

Speaking through an interpreter, Rosa Cardona, who works in a bakery, said she listens to Spanish-language radio throughout the day. "It's very important," said Cardona, who lives in Norcross but moved here 10 years ago from Mexico. "Sometimes I'm very busy, but the radio will tell me what's going on."

Intense competition

Competition is intense. Sammy Zamarron, program director for La Favorita (1600-AM in Atlanta, 1460-AM in Gwinnett County and 1130-AM in Gainesville) said his station has "been the medium where people can express their concerns and their point of view" about the immigration legislation.

The morning show has fielded calls from business owners talking about their concerns, non-Latinos and Latino workers, people who are here illegally and legally.

"The No. 1 issue for Hispanics here has always been immigration," Zamarron said. "It's always been a hot topic, even before these bills came up. People have always been concerned. People are trying to speak up now."

He sees his role as giving people an opportunity to express their opinions, the same way mainstream media does for its audience.

"I don't consider myself to be an advocate," he said. "I consider myself just a communicator. There are a lot of things at stake here. Our job is to really inform people what is going on and to basically hear them out. I know English radio is not going to do that."

Maritza Alfaro, vice president of the Christian-based Radio Vida (1100-AM in Atlanta and 1040-AM in North Georgia), said that as the debate grew, so did listener calls.

Latino media coordinated the message:

"Show up," Alfaro said. "Wear white T-shirts and bring the American flag. . . . White because white means peace, and we want to go in peace."

Ethnic media preferred

According to a recent survey sponsored by New America Media and conducted by Bendixen & Associates, 45 percent of African-American, Latino, Asian-American, Native American and Arab-American adults prefer ethnic media over their mainstream counterparts.

"The reach of Spanish-language media is almost universal" among Latinos, the survey said. Eighty-seven percent of Latino adults use Spanish-language television, radio or newspapers on a regular basis.

The significant role Hispanic media, radio in particular, played in helping organize and spread the word about marches and boycotts across the country is not unlike that of the black press in the 1960s and 1970s.

The black press

"The black press played a pivotal role," said Chuck Stone, the Walter Spearman Professor Emeritus at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina --- Chapel Hill and the former editor at several black publications, including The Chicago Defender and the Washington Afro American.

"You got news from around the county. The mainstream press didn't really cover it fully. You would just get a scattering of news."

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That's not lost on individuals and groups who want to reach the rapidly growing Latino population.

A second generation Mexican-American, born in the Midwest, Tisha Tallman regularly listens to Spanish-language radio. And she turns to it even more in her work as the regional counsel for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), a leading Latino civil rights organization.

"I listen to it for the music, but I also find that on the Viva commentaries in the morning, people say what's on their minds," Tallman said. Hispanic radio has really "risen to the occasion of bringing information to the people."

Staff writer Yolanda Rodriguez contributed to this article.

Graphic

Photo: JOHN SPINK / StaffViva Radio was on the scene at the pro-immigration rally Monday in DeKalb County. Thousands of Hispanics gathered at Plaza Fiesta in DeKalb to protest stricter immigration laws being considered by Congress. Hispanic radio stations helped inform the public.

Photo: JOHN SPINK / Staff"We would never have been able to achieve --- they're saying up to 60,000 people came --- without the media in general, but especially radio," said Teodoro Maus, an organizer of Monday's Atlanta rally.

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