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By Joe Mathews

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LOS ANGELES

Amid all the national debate over immigration, at least one firm consensus has emerged: Newcomers to the United States should learn English because it remains the lingua franca of our civic life. All three remaining presidential contenders say that the ability to speak English should be a requirement of U.S. citizenship. And last year, the immigrant governor of California [told](#) a convention of Latino journalists that immigrants should watch only English-language TV so they can understand the language and news of their home state. "You've got to turn off the Spanish television set," Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) [advised](#) the National Association of Hispanic Journalists.

Schwarzenegger is wrong, and so is this new consensus. The error is particularly obvious in cities with the largest immigrant populations, especially Los Angeles, the town the governor calls home. Schwarzenegger could discover ample evidence of this all by himself -- simply by turning on his television.

On most nights here, the most timely, serious and civic-minded local news is not available on the Internet, the radio or any of the half-dozen English-language stations that broadcast nightly shows that purport to be newscasts. At 11 p.m. each night here, the best newscasts in the market appear on two Spanish-language channels, Univision's flagship [KMEX](#) and [Telemundo](#) affiliate [KVEA](#).

This might come as a surprise to English-speaking Americans, who hear about the Spanish-language TV news only when its on-air personalities engage in soap-opera-style antics, such as the KVEA anchor-reporter who became the mistress of Los Angeles Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#). But I've been watching these two Spanish newscasts and their English competitors on the local ABC, [NBC](#) and [CBS](#) affiliates, and the content doesn't lie. If immigrants took Schwarzenegger's advice and flipped off Spanish stations in favor of English-language news, they wouldn't have nearly as good an idea of what was

happening in their adopted city, state and country.

Take a recent night, after a typical day of Los Angeles news. English-language TV led with the weather (it was raining, which is not as unusual as you might think during an L.A. winter), then moved into splashy reports with dramatic footage of a gang shootout and possible hostage situation in a city neighborhood. Less than eight minutes into the newscast, trivia took over. The CBS affiliate's third piece involved new questions about the death of [Marilyn Monroe](#). The NBC affiliate dwelled on a hepatitis scare at a party for celebrities and swimsuit models, then attempted a brief consumer-oriented investigation about people's need to replace their tires more frequently. The ABC affiliate gave five minutes to movies and entertainment, from an Oscar preview to a sit-down interview with [Jon Stewart](#).

In Spanish, viewers got fewer soft features and more deeply reported, longer pieces. KMEX mentioned the gang shootout but provided far more context, interviewing local residents about recent crime and about how local businesses and schools were affected by an hours-long neighborhood lockdown as police searched for a suspect. KMEX also aired a detailed report on a major beef recall from a local firm, a couple of pieces on local politics (including a roundup of what city and county leaders had done that day) and a four-minute examination of key policy issues in the presidential campaign. The Oscars went unmentioned. KVEA's half-hour newscast, "[En Contexto](#)" (which means what it sounds like), was even more substantive. It gave a thorough review of local political and government news, then delved deeply into nearly 20 minutes of explanation of rising home foreclosures and mortgage problems. (Yes, Spanish-language viewers were callously left to figure out that it was raining all by themselves.)

This was no fluke. The next night, KMEX broke the news that the [LAPD](#) had more Latino officers than white officers, and KVEA ran a piece on the pay and working conditions of security guards. Meanwhile, their English-language rival KABC was finishing another Oscar preview and beginning a heartwarming story involving dogs.

"There's no comparison in the coverage," says Josh Kun, a communications professor at the [University of Southern California](#) who closely follows Spanish TV. "For people here, there are two places to look for better news: [BBC News](#) and Spanish-language news."

Why the difference? As English-language news organizations -- desperate to stop the declines of their audiences and ad revenues -- cut back on

news-gathering, they devote their time and resources to entertainment, celebrities, pets and crime (or, best of all, stories that combine all four). But Spanish-language TV producers, who serve a clearly defined, growing audience, have space to tackle weightier topics.

The result: The sharpest coverage of state and local issues -- government, politics, immigration, labor, economics, health care -- is now found on Spanish-language TV. They compete hard on serious stories. As a labor reporter for the [Los Angeles Times](#) in 2006, the only competitors I routinely saw at major union stories were reporters for KMEX, KVEA and La Opinion, a Spanish-language daily newspaper. These outlets tell their viewers more about how the state and the region work, they are more persistent in demanding explanations from public officials, and their reports routinely include more interviews with more sources from more perspectives.

The Spanish-language TV broadcasts are, for lack of a better word, more American.

They get ratings, too. KMEX's 6 p.m. program has ranked either first or second for years among newscasts in the market in any language; its 11 p.m. newscast leads the ratings among nearly every adult demographic. KVEA lags behind, but its audience is increasing. "There's such a thirst for news," says Maelia Macin, vice president and general manager of Univision's Los Angeles stations.

And there's profit, too. KVEA and KMEX don't report separate financial results for themselves or their newscasts, but their networks -- KVEA is part of NBC Universal's Telemundo, and KMEX is part of Univision, which is owned by private equity investors including billionaire Haim Saban -- have each been purchased in recent years for billions of dollars and report strong growth in cash flow and advertising revenues.

To be sure, these Spanish-language broadcasts often look good only by comparison to their English competitors. The stations sometimes seem to use sex to sell the news; a blouse worn recently by KMEX anchor Fabiola Kramsky was so tight that it left little to the imagination.

Journalistic ethics have not been sterling. KVEA's political reporter and anchor Mirthala Salinas was not only Villaraigosa's mistress; she also had a romantic relationship with Assembly Speaker [Fabian Núñez](#), probably California's second most powerful politician. Seemingly clueless about the ethical problems of dating sources, she complained in an [interview](#) in this month's Los Angeles magazine that the station had attempted to reassign her to less glamorous beats.

She resigned instead -- as, she said, "a matter of dignity."

But the most serious complaint about Spanish news is that the reporting and commentary often feel more like advocacy than traditional journalism. It's a fair point, and one that those who work in Spanish news don't dispute. The two stations' immigration coverage is deeply sympathetic to undocumented immigrants, with on-air reporters encouraging viewers to join national immigration rallies. Macin, the KMEX general manager, notes that her station's philosophy is "a su lado" (on your side).

The upside of the advocacy approach is serious reporting and newscasts with broader perspectives. Viewers are engaged more as citizens than consumers.

On KMEX, the advocacy is also matched by impressive production values. Jerry Perenchio, the former Univision chairman and chief executive, liked to say that with the sound turned down, viewers should not be able to tell the difference between his Spanish-broadcasts and those on English-language competitors. KVEA newscasts can lag in production values. (During one recent interview, the camera kept leaving half of the subject's face out of the picture.) But KVEA also produces by far the most substantive newscast in Los Angeles in any language: its 11 p.m. program, "En Contexto."

Its host and lead reporter, Rubén Luengas, arrived from his native Mexico City six years ago and is still uncomfortable being interviewed in English. Staffers refer to the program privately as a "30-minute Spanish '[60 Minutes](#).'" Luengas is an aggressive host, conducting detailed interviews and sometimes offering his own opinions. "The idea was to put the news in context, to see if we could combat the tendency for infotainment," he says in Spanish. "I didn't want to be part of infantilization of the news."

On a recent night, KVEA did eight minutes on the Iraq war, spent five minutes on deplorable working conditions in Southern California car washes and had reports on narco-traffickers and the latest key legislation in the state legislature and Los Angeles City Hall. Meanwhile, the CBS affiliate had a reporter doing a trend piece on "night spas" that are open until midnight, and ABC was running an item on high-tech fitness equipment.

It's enough to make one wonder if it isn't time for our political leaders to turn off the English-language TV and encourage good citizens to learn Spanish, the language of civic-minded news.

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