

The New York Times

WHITE HOUSE FOCUSES ON REACHING LATINO VIEWERS

By Michael Shear
July 16, 2013

WASHINGTON — On Tuesday it was “En vivo desde la Casa Blanca” — “Live from the White House” — as four local anchors from America’s biggest Spanish-language television networks roamed America’s most famous address.

They interviewed President Obama in the Blue Room, called it “surreal” to see the portrait of George Washington in the East Room and got briefings on immigration and health care from senior staff members in the West Wing.

“They want to make sure they reach this part of the population in their own language,” Maria Rozman, the news director for the Telemundo station in Denver, KDEN, told her viewers in Spanish during her stand-up on the South Lawn, as the White House gleamed photogenically behind her.

The White House is reaching beyond the Beltway’s traditional media and tapping into a huge and politically powerful audience: the millions of viewers who watch Univision and Telemundo. They easily surpass the audiences of cable news programs and, in some demographics, the broadcast networks themselves. In February, Univision beat out NBC as the third-most-watched network among adults 18 to 49 years old.

Much as he did in his presidential campaigns, Mr. Obama has assembled a growing but still-stealthy operation inside the White House to speak directly to Latinos. A multimedia public relations campaign pushing for an overhaul of the nation’s immigration system — delivered in Spanish and in English on a daily basis — is reaching millions of Hispanics across the country, even as it goes largely unnoticed in official Washington.

Ms. Rozman of Telemundo was flanked on the sweltering White House lawn by three colleagues — from stations in New York, Los Angeles and Dallas — who had been invited by White House officials pushing hard for the immigration overhaul. Mr. Obama did his part: In an interview on Tuesday with one of the anchors, Leon Krauze of KMEX Univision 34 in Los Angeles, he said emphatically that he would not compromise on his position that the legislation include a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants.

“It makes no sense to me for us to say that we’re going to take a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fix our immigration system and leave the status of millions unresolved,” the president said. “If we’re going to do this right,” he added, “it does not make sense for us not to resolve that situation.”

Tuesday’s events followed six lengthy sit-down interviews by Mr. Obama on Telemundo and Univision in January, March and May, along with months of regular appearances by Cecilia Muñoz, the director of the White House domestic policy council. Online, the White House office of Hispanic media posts messages on Twitter in both English and Spanish from @lacasablanca, which has more than 40,000 followers.

Mr. Obama's weekly Internet address is matched each Saturday by a corresponding one in Spanish by an administration official, which last week was given by Jose W. Fernandez, the assistant secretary of state for economic energy and business affairs. In his "Mensaje de la Casa Blanca" — "White House Message" — Mr. Fernandez argued the administration's economic case for the immigration overhaul.

The Latino outreach effort is an essential one, according to the president's aides, who said that delivering their immigration message on a program like "Noticiero Univision," Univision's prime-time news program, reaches more than two million people. That is about equal to Fox News's cable prime time average and almost triple the number of viewers watching CNN at the same time. The average nightly audience for "NBC Nightly News" was about 7.8 million earlier this month.

"We are making the case for why it should happen and making sure everyone knows we are fighting for it," said Dan Pfeiffer, a senior adviser to Mr. Obama. "We will continue to use that megaphone."

Mr. Obama is not the first president to focus on Spanish-language media. Members of President George W. Bush's cabinet sometimes spoke Spanish on television networks or wrote op-ed articles in Spanish. Mr. Bush himself occasionally managed a few Spanish phrases for Latino audiences. But Mr. Obama has greatly expanded the effort.

Mr. Pfeiffer said that any politician who pays attention only to "Meet the Press" on NBC and dismisses Jorge Ramos, the host of Univision's "Al Punto" program on Sunday morning, has "a fatal flaw" in communications strategy.

Although the White House sees Hispanics as natural supporters, the anchors do not always fall in line. Anchors on both Univision and Telemundo have been aggressive in pushing the president to demonstrate his commitment to an immigration overhaul, and have grilled him on the high number of deportations during his first term.

In an interview on "Noticias Telemundo" last March, Lori Montenegro repeatedly pressed Mr. Obama on immigration. "What more are you willing to do to make sure that you can fulfill your promise?" she asked at one point. When Ms. Montenegro asked the president what would happen to the Democratic Party if the immigration overhaul did not happen, he appeared perturbed.

"Lori, I'm not going to presuppose failure," Mr. Obama said. "I don't know why you keep on asking about failure, because I think this is going to succeed."

On Tuesday, in addition to briefings on immigration, the four local anchors had interviews with top White House health care officials. Under white tents on the South Lawn, they spoke to Ms. Muñoz and other administration officials in Spanish.

But for the journalists, the main event was their interview with the president, a rare opportunity for their viewers to see the president questioned by anchors they see every day. Norma Garcia, the news anchor for KXTX Telemundo 39 in Dallas, used her five minutes with Mr. Obama in the Blue Room to press him on the fate of the immigration legislation, which faces a difficult fight for passage in the Republican-controlled House.

The four anchors waited their turns in the East Room, with the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington looming on the wall above. "It was surreal," Mr. Krauze said. "And so much fun."

Mr. Krauze recalled being at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 when Mr. Obama delivered the convention's keynote address. "Today, I got to meet him nine years later, like a proper journalist," Mr. Krauze said. It was good for me."

His colleagues at the other stations were equally enthusiastic — but drew a line.

"Maybe we are more sympathetic to the issue because we live it; we are immigrants," said Ms. Garcia, an immigrant from Juárez, Mexico. "But we ask the president tough questions because that's what our viewers want us to ask."