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## Spanish radio: Line of decency blurs

**On-air words construed as insulting by some might not be offensive to other cultures.**

By ERIC DEGGANS, Times Media Critic  
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It was the last straw for Birgit Van Hout: A caller to the morning show on Tampa's only FM Spanish-language radio station, La Nueva, had phoned in to express his disgust with homosexuals. She remembers the host saying "let's exterminate them all" before playing the sound of a machine gun.

Officials at the station, CBS Radio-owned WYUU-92.5 FM, say Van Hout misunderstood the June 9 incident; the caller was insulting a friend and the sound effect was a regular part of the feature. But Van Hout wrote a letter of protest to WYUU, forwarding the missive to area media outlets when La Nueva failed to respond.

Along the way, she has sparked a local debate over the friction between traditional Spanish-language radio style and mainstream values - as such radio stations become bigger businesses with larger audiences and federal officials face more pressure to referee it all. In some cities in Texas and California, Spanish-language stations dominate their markets.

"Instead of working to ... create a community that is more inclusive, they're just reinforcing old stereotypes," said Van Hout, executive director of the pro-tolerance group Community Tampa Bay, who is married to a Cuban man and speaks Spanish around her home.

Van Hout criticized WYUU, which flipped formats from country to Spanish-language in August, for offering material filled with macho references, sexist language and numerous derogatory references to homosexuals - particularly the Spanish word *maricon*, which many people translate as an anti-gay slur.

Ricardo Blanco, program director for La Nueva, admitted that on air personalities may use the word *maricon*, but he insisted the word doesn't translate as a slur, only as "gay." Still, he has told his personalities to "back off" performing the segment Van Hout criticized. Dubbed *El Paredon*, for the wall where you place those facing a firing squad, it features listeners calling in to express what they dislike.

CBS Radio officials declined to provide an audio copy of the exchange, citing company policy. "We do take our role in the community very seriously," said Charlie Ochs, senior vice president and Tampa Bay market manager for CBS Radio. "We never have any intent to offend our listeners."

Blanco said La Nueva executives didn't respond to Van Hout's letter initially, because she also suggested the station hire her group to provide sensitivity training.

"It's almost like a shakedown," said Blanco.

Van Hout denied she was trying to leverage the incident into business for her group, and she isn't the only listener who is concerned about La Nueva's content.

Others have criticized how the radio station talks about women, and differences between area Hispanic groups.

It's an issue that has emerged nationally: Spanish-language stations often touted as the voice of the Hispanic community have faced complaints from some listeners about the mix of anti-gay, overtly sexual and profanity-filled material featured in some shows.

Last year, an arbitrator ordered Univision Radio to pay \$270,000 to a San Francisco man who was revealed as gay during a prank call by a DJ aired without his knowledge the Federal Communications Commission also levied a \$28,000 fine.

Gay activists across the country have begun to protest insulting commentary by Spanish-language DJs, who they say are rarely disciplined by federal broadcasting authorities.

"If I were to put on a scale the sensitivity of Spanish-language radio to gay and lesbian issues, I would have to put it at less than 1 on a scale of 1 to 10," Ivan Roman, executive director of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, told the San Francisco Chronicle last year. "It's seen as perfectly normal to ridicule gays and lesbians, to see them as less than human."

Carlos Macias, the Spanish-language media manager for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, said his group has reached out to station owners such as Univision Radio and Clear Channel, in an effort to convince them to abandon homophobic language on air.

"It doesn't matter what country you are in, in Latin America that word is offensive," said Macias, who disputed Blanco's interpretation of the word maricon. "(It's) used to denigrate a gay person, especially a gay man."

The San Francisco incident led Univision Radio to enlist GLAAD last year in training radio personalities at select stations on how to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues on air - an effort which was expanded to the company's 10 largest

markets this year. Univision Radio stations in New York and Los Angeles have also featured programs devoted to LGBT issues, Macias said.

The Sacramento Bee noted that Spanish-language stations were handed three indecency-related fines between 2001 and 2005, compared to 12 such fines issued for English-language stations in 2004 alone.

But FCC spokesman David Fiske denied that the commission fails to regulate Spanish-language radio content closely enough.

He noted many listeners don't realize the agency doesn't monitor radio broadcasts, but only rules on complaints made to their office by the public - levying fines for any material it judges obscene (overtly sexual or involving bodily functions) or profane. The commission is expected to soon issue notice of a huge package of radio fines which may include some Spanish-language outlets, Fiske said.

Determining whether a term is offensive can be tricky because some words may have different shades of meaning for different nationalities, said Jackie Madrigal, Latin formats editor for Radio & Records magazine.

"(The FCC) needs people who ... know the difference between a word that's offensive to Colombians or to Mexicans," Madrigal said. "Ultimately, it's the audience that decides what they want to listen to."

Franco Silva, a volunteer who hosts an English-language show featuring Spanish-language music for Tampa community radio station WMNF-88.5 FM, decided a while ago La Nueva's approach was too divisive - saying that the El Paredon segment sometimes featured listeners from one Hispanic nationality complaining about another group.

"Latin radio the way they're doing it hasn't really evolved," said Silva. "(And) I don't think you need to resort to that kind of abuse and shock."

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