

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Day 2, April 18, 2015: Morning Session – 9:00-9:45 a.m.
Engaging New Audiences: Hispanics and Millennials

Keynote Speaker: Isaac Lee, President of News and Digital, **Univision Communications Inc. (UCI)** and CEO of **Fusion**

Chair: Jay Rosen, Associate Professor at **New York University** and Blogger at **PressThink.org**

Isaac Lee: Thank you, Jay. Thank you very much. The dude asked for forgiveness many, many times, not having to ask for anything, so it is a great thing. Thank you, Rosenthal. Thank you very much. Thank you for having me here. I have a lot of friends and colleagues. I don't know if Dulce is here. Dulce, she runs Animal Politico, which is a political website that I started with my very good friend and colleague, Danny Eilemberg. And it's great to see you here. And Borja Echevarria is here, who runs all the news and information for all of Univision Digital. And it's great to see him. Nando [Vila], who is my cofounder of Fusion, is also here. And there is Jose Zamora, who we stole from the Knight Center, and we're very happy to have him. And Paco [Alfaro], who's been running social media for us for a long time. So, it's really great to be here. And I know how relevant it is for all of us—this conference, where we come and meet with all of our colleagues from all over the Americas and exchange ideas, information, collaboration. We learn from each other. And so, it's really a great pleasure and an honor to be here.

Last year, the United States government was caught off guard with an unexpected search of unaccompanied children that were caught at the border trying to cross. It was almost 70,000 children coming from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala that were apprehended when they were trying to go through that treacherous 2,500-mile border, trying to flee from the horror of violence created by drug cartels and looking for a better life for themselves. This didn't happen from one day to another. It was a crisis that we saw happening slowly, but it reached a breaking point. And for a very brief moment, politicians in Washington decided to pay attention to this. Very concerned on, how is this going to impact the immigration debate? How will it play out in the mid-term elections? Mainstream media had it for a couple of hours as the breaking news.

And you know, for us at Univision, it was not about the mid-terms. It was not about the borders. Polls didn't matter. It was about the kids. If you look at the biggest news stories of the past year, if it was the Ebola crisis, if it was Ferguson, if it was the appearance of ISIS, or if it was the constant meltdown of Justin Bieber, [laughter], and, you know, if Brian Williams lied or not, and if Bill O'Reilly should be accountable or not for what he said, for us at

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Univision, metrics prove that the biggest story that we had was the crisis at the border.

We sent Maria Elena Salinas, who is our co-anchor of the most important news cast, and she spent a lot of time with dozens of families understanding what led them to risk it all and send their children by themselves, you know, risking death to escape the violence they were living, to choose the possibility of a life instead of the certainty of death, and seek to live in our country. For our audience at Univision, this wasn't abstract. It was not part of a debate in Washington. It was not something that surprised us. It was the families of our audience [and], the people we engage with every single day talk about sharable and why this became our most important story.

You think there is something more relatable than children of your friends, of your family, of your neighbors being stranded at the border without any assistance? You think that there is anything more relatable content than a human crisis like this one? Huh-uh. There isn't.

So, when people ask me about why Univision is successful and how do you engage with the Hispanic community, the answer is very simple: earn their trust. Univision's place in America is only because the audience trusts us. It is because we are trying to help them find a meaningful place in society, because we champion their cause with no shame.

And of course, I have to admit that it's a lot easier to champion anything when you have Jorge Ramos as your white knight and who just became the cover of *Time Magazine* and [was] chosen as [one of] 100 of the most important leaders in the world. He makes my job so easy. Talk about trust, you talk about Jorge Ramos.

Remember the presidential debate in the last campaign? We were not invited to participate in that debate. We were not white enough. And so, we did our own presidential forum. And I don't think it's hard to remember that Jorge asked the most important, relevant questions to the candidates. You will remember, "But Mr. President, you promised something and you didn't keep your word. A promise is a promise." And how that made the mainstream media.

Trust is something that takes time to build. And when I arrived to Univision, we were already wildly successful. So, you have the responsibility to think about the future and how you are going to keep that trust and how you're going to improve and make it better. In the past couple of years, I am very proud that Univision as a company has invested materially in creating a first-class investigative unit led by some of the best journalists in the world.

We have created a documentary unit. When we got there, we were told that the audience really doesn't care about documentaries. Not true. Ratings for documentaries are spectacular. We [have] *Aquí y Ahora*, our Sunday news

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

investigative program at 7:00 p.m., a very valuable news property doing amazing journalism every week, having more than a million viewers 18 to 49. Sometimes beating 60 Minutes. And we are investing heavily in local, because the contact with our communities happens every day at our local news stations. Our LA station, KMEX, is the number one television station in America regardless of language period.

So, the relationship between the audience and Univision is a very different one. They call our newsrooms to ask which school should they send their kids to. Which doctor can we recommend? It's a huge responsibility to know that there is that level of trust.

When the 2010 Census came out and I was just arriving to Univision at the beginning of 2012, the end of 2011. I don't remember if those are the right dates. I think it's the other way around. It's the end of 2010, the beginning of 2011, right? So, this was just published and everyone woke up and decided that there are a lot of Hispanics living in America, that we are a force to be reckoned with, and that we should pay attention to that. It was great timing to think about the future, think about a diverse America, [and] to partner with the most important media company in the world, the Walt Disney Company, and create an experiment like Fusion to think about the future.

To me, Fusion is a bet to stay ahead of the curve. It's a bet to have the ability to experiment, to create a real digital-first culture, and to be able to work in a different environment with different responsibility without the ratings being part of what you have to take care of.

I'm sorry if I am disorganized, but I am not very good at giving speeches. I just say whatever, you know, so I'm sure this was all perfectly planned. [laughter] And it's my fault that I'm not just following. That graph [laughter] was to show you that today children entering K-12 are now more than 50% non-white. And there was another graph, the one that shows how this was mainly a white Anglo country with 87% of the population being white Anglo, and how we are very, very soon the majority, the diverse majority of this country. No wonder why some people are panicking. It's understandable. It's a huge tectonic demographic shift.

This graph that I just showed you, I promise that it was scientifically researched. But the one I'm going to show you now, it's even better. It shows the face -- the changing face of diverse America. This is how we looked in 1971 when I was born. This is an American. And this is the way we look today, and it's so much better. [laughter] And this one was made with a sophisticated algorithm. It's what we all rely on. And we forget that sometimes it's all about storytelling.

As president of news, my job is to adapt, to be flexible, to understand where things are going, to bet, to innovate, and to build the best possible team.

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

And that's what we have been doing. And we are happy with the results. When other networks are declining in ratings, we are seeing growth. Our newscasts are being watched more than ever. Univision was the number one network in the July sweeps of last year—number one. And number one in the July sweeps of the year before. We are happy with that.

You know that the growth in mobile is staggering and that we cannot change the trends. Let's all start to prepare [for] what's going to happen with wearables and get at ease with the fact that apps such as Facebook or Snapchat are going to be what people will prefer to look at their news, to watch their news, instead of logging into clunky websites like the ones we used to have. Facebook's new feature is putting the final nail in the coffin to pretending to create a website where people will come and stay. It's over. If we are not prepared to go and search for the audience wherever they live, we will lose. It's for us, as content creators, to win that fight.

To tell you a little bit about Fusion, after a lot of research, we decided we needed to have a different approach to create content for millennials, to have a lens for us to be able to see things in a different way. And we found that there were four main pillars to do this.

The first one is humor, because humor is what the millennial generation respects, and what they strive to be is funny. So, if we don't accept that humor is a very engaging way to connect with the audience, we're not going to be able to be successful.

The second one is journey, because people expect us to take them to places where they cannot go themselves, and show them things as if we were telling the story, not with an over-elite correspondent on the rooftop of a hotel with a standing position, you know, telling us what is going on without even being there.

The third one is context. And I think that the John Oliver Show is a great example of how context works, because sometimes people really want to understand an issue. They want the whole story to be told. We thought that for videos to be successful, they couldn't be longer than two-to-three minutes, and television segments were just getting shorter. Well, no, it's not true. He has been able to prove that a 15-minute explanation of what is going on with net neutrality is something that people are going to watch and care and share. That is context. And it's context with humor. So, we see two pillars there intersecting.

And the fourth one, which is a very important one, is cojones. [laughter] If we are not willing to be bold, if we are not willing to challenge orthodoxies, you know, get out of the game.

These content buckets all share a mission. One important mission for Fusion, which is to champion a diverse and inclusive America. Because when we talk

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

about the great divide in this country, some people think that it's because we don't get along between Republicans and Democrats, black or white, gay or straight, but the truth is that the divide in this country is between people that are comfortable being in a room with other people that are different than them and the ones that are not. And Fusion's mission is to end that divide. It's to produce irresistible content for a new diverse generation that doesn't identify people with labels. It sounds crazy that it's possible, but that's what we will do. And we will work very hard innovating and storytelling, using data to learn about the audience, to produce content that is exciting, that is important, that is irresistible, and that people will share.

Ending this divide, approaching and tackling this issue is one of the most fundamental questions that we are facing today in this country. And the way we move forward will determine who we will be as a society. And that's all I'm going to talk boringly [about].

[Applause.]

Q&A Session:

Jay Rosen: Thank you so much, Isaac. Please have a seat over here.

Isaac Lee: The first important thing for all of you to know is that I should be the one making the interview, because I am the supporting actor in this film. [laughter] It's a waste of all of your time to have Jay Rosen ask *me* questions. And I'll do my best to interview him. [laughter]

Jay Rosen: I'm pretty good at asking questions. I think I can handle this assignment. Here's my first question. What is Univision's and Fusion's, as an experiment as you called it, theory of trust? You did mention a little bit about how trust at Univision is with Hispanic audiences, and I get that. But when I say 'a theory of trust,' this is what I mean. Most of the mainstream news organizations in the U.S. would say, "We are trusted because we are not anyone's champion." Right? "We are trusted because we just present the news. We don't support this group or that group. We're not partial to anyone." Right? So, you obviously have a different view of trust. So, what is Univision's theory of trust?

Isaac Lee: That's a great question, Jay. It is not a position without controversy. When people see Jorge Ramos interviewing someone, they know Univision's audience knows that Jorge is representing them. That he is not asking the questions to be celebrated as a fair and balanced journalist. [laughter] He's asking the questions to represent *them*. He's going to ask the person whatever is necessary to push the agenda for a more fair society, for a more inclusive society, and for the Hispanic community to be better. We are pro-Hispanics. We want our community to have a better life. Because we believe that if the Hispanic population, with the growth that you see today, if that community is well-educated, has access to healthcare, embraces

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

technology, the future of America will be better and vice versa. If you white people in this country do not understand that the education and the advancement of the Hispanic community will end up affecting the GDP of this country, you have a problem.

Jay Rosen: Hmm. OK. So, let me just follow-up on that. Journalism is about truth telling.

Isaac Lee: Yes.

Jay Rosen: You have said you are the champion of the Hispanic community. You actually have a kind of cause you're trying to achieve to make sure this group is part of American society and to change attitudes about it. So, what happens when Univision has to tell a hard truth to this community?

Isaac Lee: We do.

Jay Rosen: And sort of, what is involved in that?

Isaac Lee: We do. We do. I think that if you are an American journalist covering the second world war, it's not a problem for you to want the Nazis to lose. And I don't think that you need to be saying, "Well, you know, the allied expedition air force commander says this, and on the other hand, the furor says that."

Jay Rosen: Mm-hmm.

Isaac Lee: I think it's okay to understand that sometimes you have to be on the right side of the issues in history. That does not mean that if as a journalist you see the allied expedition air force, you know, committing acts of crimes against humanity, you will denounce them.

Jay Rosen: Hmm. OK.

Isaac Lee: That's your job as a journalist.

Jay Rosen: All right. A lot of people here are researchers. They are academics who study the news industry, study digital transformation of journalism. What questions could academics who come to this conference answer or research that would really help you in what you're trying to do with Univision?

Isaac Lee: Oh, um, am I gonna get the answers?

Jay Rosen: Well, you might. We've got some enterprising people here.

Isaac Lee: I think that we all want to know what makes sharable content, spreadable media. We all want to understand that. We all want to move from

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

a model of stickiness to a model of spread-ability. I think that we would love to know what is the secret to create shareable content. If it's really an algorithm, if it's related to storytelling, if it's related to very important things, or if you're perceiving the color of a dress one way or the other, what makes content shareable?

Jay Rosen: So, help us compete with BuzzFeed.

Isaac Lee: No. No.

Jay Rosen: Isn't that what they know?

Isaac Lee: I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I think that they are very good at certain things. And I think that they run a company in a very professional, successful way. I'm not sure they could make a very serious, important issue viral. It's different.

Jay Rosen: What else? What else besides what makes content shareable?

Isaac Lee: Personalization. What are the things that we have to do as a company to have an engine that learns more and more about the user and we give *that* user the information *they* want according to *their* preferences using all the possible data that we have?

Jay Rosen: You said in your remarks that it was prevailing wisdom at Univision that the audience isn't interested in documentary, in the context of mentioning that you had invested heavily in investigative journalism and document long-form journalism. And I want to go back to that first statement. So, who believed this? Why did they believe it? They were a metrics-driven company, so what metrics were telling them that? How does such a belief, which I agree is false, how does it come to be? And maybe this is hard for somebody in your position to answer, but who's interest did that belief serve?

Isaac Lee: I think it's very easy not to change when you're doing well. And why do something new and invest if you don't have to or if you perceive that you don't have to. The company has changed dramatically. I think that we were relying a lot on telenovelas content coming from Mexico, already proven to be successful, and we did not know that we could be amazing content producers and that our proximity to the audience, our understanding of the issues would allow us to have a look and to tell a story in a way that no one else could.

Jay Rosen: Hmm.

Isaac Lee: But that creates risks, because when you are running a network, ratings matter. And so, if you produce a documentary and the documentary

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

after a year of investment and work is a flop, then there will be no second documentary.

Jay Rosen: Mm-hmm.

Isaac Lee: So, we took risks. And what we learned is that television is definitely for long-form, that people want to see comprehensive stories, that they will learn about the news of the day on Twitter, but when they sit down and watch television, it better be worth it.

Jay Rosen: So, if I understand your answer—and you guys can line up for questions, because we will get the audience soon—if I understand your answer, when people don't want to take the risk to change a successful operation, they execute that through statements about the audience.

Isaac Lee: Yes.

Jay Rosen: Correct?

Isaac Lee: Of course.

Jay Rosen: OK.

Isaac Lee: Of course. And I think it's what also happens today in mainstream media and legacy media—they will always be telling you all kinds of excuses to prove that the audience is really not in digital [and] that the revenues are coming from this place or the other. That is what collapsed the newspaper industry.

Jay Rosen: You are making a move into English language service. Why are you doing that?

Isaac Lee: Because the future of America is in English and is diverse and because it would be a terrible call not to do it. Only when you are in a position of strength, when you have 80% of the audience of a market like Univision does today, when you're being incredibly successful, when you're selling \$3-billion, you can bet on different things and decide to interact with a younger audience that is relating every day with their peers, their friends and their family in English too.

Jay Rosen: Are you ready for a question?

Lola: Hi.

Jay Rosen: Introduce yourself.

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Lola: Yes. I'm Lola. I work at the Daily Dot, currently Brand Marketing Director there. And we love Fusion. You guys share our stuff on social and we share yours. I thank you for that.

Isaac Lee: Bad for your laws?

Lola: This has been fascinating. No. Pardon me?

Isaac Lee: No, just kidding.

Lola: OK. No, my question is really about something that Jay mentioned yesterday and you guys are touching on. When it comes to truth and what we think readers should know, how are you personally—it sounds like you're doing a good job of this—but give some of us a roadmap into how you use your measurement tools to make sure that people are engaging in important stories. Who gets to make that decision about what is important versus just what is popular? And how do we as the attention media continue to figure how we distribute the things that we think are right versus the things that work. So, sort of the Buzz Feed versus, you know, like you said, the border stories.

Isaac Lee: Yes. Great question. A couple of things that I can tell you to answer that, that are from different angles. The first one is, hire people that you admire and respect and give them the authority to make decisions. If you hire the right people, if you trust your editors, if the people leading in every vertical of your company are people that understand the mission and the job of a journalist, the best content will prevail. You know, I don't make those calls. My job is to hire the best people and make sure they have everything they need to work and succeed. That's it.

The second answer is not to be afraid of success, of traffic, of scale. Because if you want your important stories to be shared, you better have scale. It's distribution pipelines. The reason why I produce a documentary and it's wildly successful at Univision is because we are the winners, because we are number one, because we have scale. If the telenovela is a helpful conduit for that, celebrate it. Wonderful. But don't allow yourself to stay only in the easy things to do.

Jay Rosen: Question.

Mariana Marcaletti: Hi. It's Mariana Marcaletti. Thank you so much for your talk. I work at Buzz Feed as their International News Coordinator, and I'm an alumni of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at City University of New York.

Isaac Lee: Yes.

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Mariana Marcaletti: My question is, you were talking about being pro-Hispanic and about diversity and about not putting labels on people. And one of the things that I was wondering is, when you talk about Hispanics, we are not homogenous, we are very different. There are people who came here in different times. You have people from several countries, people from several backgrounds. Do you think that is a challenge? And how do you approach that challenge, especially with Fusion?

Isaac Lee: Yes, I completely agree with you. That's why I think we have to talk about a diverse new mainstream. We shouldn't be putting labels on people. When you see me, do you see that I am of Polish decent? Russian decent? Latino? Gay? Jewish? What do you see?

Jay Rosen: I see your sneakers. [laughter] That's how I judge you.

Isaac Lee: Good. [laughter]

Mariana Marcaletti: But how do you approach that diversity? Is it hiring a diverse team of people? How do you do content? Because it's very expensive to have people from so many different countries.

Isaac Lee: It's the only way. If you think that a group of white dudes can produce diverse content, you are lost. [laughter/applause]

Jay Rosen: That's perfect. That's perfect. We have a question over here.

Steve Taylor: Yes, Lee. Steve Taylor, *Rio Grande Guardian*. There was a recent column by Rubin Navarrette.

Isaac Lee: Yes.

Steve Taylor: Basically saying that Jorge was not impartial and that you're in the tank for the democrats. How did you respond to that?

Isaac Lee: He's entitled to his opinion. And I don't think Jorge wants to be impartial. I think that Jorge wants to be a responsible journalist.

Jay Rosen: Good answer.

Wendy Carrillo: Hi. My name is Wendy Carrillo. I'm with Reportedly. I saw the special that Maria Elena Salinas on the unaccompanied minors. I actually interviewed her on it. And I was so excited that it was available online and that I could share it, but it was only in Spanish. And I was trying to figure [it] out. And I talked to her and she said, "Well, hopefully, we'll be able to dub it in English." I'm curious if there are plans to do those specials in English so that it has a broader audience.

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Isaac Lee: Yes, thank you, we are. Our documentary unit is producing documentaries in both languages from the get-go. It's not the easiest thing to do. We are working on it. We understand that it should be in both languages. Fusion is helping us a lot in that sense. The collaboration between the newsrooms and the DNA exchange is incredibly valuable. And we need to get better at that. Thank you.

Jay Rosen: Yes.

Monica: Hi. I'm Monica. I'm a graduate student in digital media at Texas State. I was wondering, because I haven't heard this be brought up yet, about the declining number of millennials watching live television. If that trend continues, how do you expect Univision and Fusion to continue having their success if more people are watching online instead?

Isaac Lee: Yes. I'm happy they can watch wherever they want. We are producing content to live on every platform. And we don't produce a television show or digital content. We have experts producing content for each digital platform. We are trying to reverse the pipeline. We are testing series in Snapchat, moving from Snapchat to Apple TV, from Apple TV [to] wherever we have the data and know that it's going to be successful. Then we release pilot for television. We are going to find *you* wherever you are. We are not going to sit down and expect you to come to us.

Jay Rosen: Yes.

Eduardo Suarez: Yes. Hello. It's Eduardo Suarez.

Isaac Lee: Hola, Eduardo.

Eduardo Suarez: Hola. I wanted to know—sorry to be similar to the other question—what's your approach to publishing in other platforms in terms of your business model? Because some of the other news organizations, especially newspapers, digital newspapers, are struggling with that and thinking if it is better to publish in other platforms or it is better to publish in your own. And I think it's a debate that is very much here in the ISOJ. I would like to know, what is your opinion on that? Thank you.

Isaac Lee: Good. Go to your Instagram account [and] check out "This is Fusion." Look at the different series we are producing that are specialized and only for Instagram. Go to your Snapchat International account. We are one of the partners there. We have series that are being produced every day especially and only for Snapchat. We understand that every platform is different, has a different language, has a different user, and we are striving to do the best possible job at understanding those audiences. In terms of the business model, I am grateful and lucky to be running a company funded by two really important media companies with a long-term commitment and

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

support for us to be successful without having to worry about the revenues of yesterday.

Jay Rosen: Last one. OK, last question.

Irving Washington: I'm Irving Washington with the Online News Association. I believe you answered this question. We had an interesting conversation about business models yesterday, which I was going to ask you, how did that change with the audience based on cultural identity, if that does the change the business model, all compared to other news organizations?

Isaac Lee: If we can prove to advertisers that we are successful at reaching a psychographic, we're going to make a lot of money.

Jay Rosen: I have one more question for you.

Isaac Lee: Yes, sir.

Jay Rosen: The people at ABC News, with whom you're partnering at Fusion, don't believe in being the champion of anything. I know because I've asked them.

Isaac Lee: Mm-hmm.

Jay Rosen: So, how does that partnership work if you believe in being the champion of the Hispanic community in the United States?

Isaac Lee: Respect.

Jay Rosen: But they don't respect that view.

Isaac Lee: They respect us. They respect our approach, and we respect theirs.

Jay Rosen: That doesn't answer my question.

Isaac Lee: Why not? One thing is ABC News, and a very completely different thing is Univision, and a different one is Fusion. Fusion's mission statement is to champion a smart, diverse, multicultural America, and that is it.

Jay Rosen: And ABC says, "Yes, we are fine with that. We are champions of a multi-cultural America."

Isaac Lee: ABC says whatever they want to say for themselves. They say, "We are..."

16th Annual International Symposium on Online Journalism

Jay Rosen: Ah. So, sort of like Iran and the United States. "You have your interpretation. We have our interpretation."

Isaac Lee: No. No. It is like when you and your wife decide to have a kid.

Jay Rosen: We did.

Isaac Lee: And it's great. It's not either you or her, it's him or her. And she has her own identity, and you cannot pretend for her to live your life or your wife's life.

Jay Rosen: My wife's gonna love that answer. OK, thank you.

[Applause.]