

OCT/NOV/DEC 2014

The Activist Anchor

Questioning celebrities, presidents, and dictators, Jorge Ramos isn't just reporting the news, he's influencing it as well

By Matt Alderton



Next to his silver hair, the first thing one notices about Univision news anchor **Jorge Ramos** is his eyes. Their hue is distinct—a shade of blue reminiscent of the color of a frozen lake—but despite their icy hue, they're warm. A viewer watching him anchor the evening news or a world leader answering his questions during an exclusive interview can only wonder about everything they've seen.

Since becoming a journalist 30 years ago, Ramos has covered five wars, interviewed scores of world leaders, and reported some of the most significant events of the modern era, including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, and now the political battle over immigration reform in the United States.

In 2000 *Wall Street Journal* called Ramos "Star newscaster of Hispanic TV" and "Hispanic

TV's No. 1 correspondent." *Time* magazine included him on its 2005 list of "the 25 most influential Hispanics in the United States." And a 2010 survey conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center found that Ramos is one of the four most-recognized Latino leaders in the country. He has anchored Univision's evening newscast *Noticiero Univision* since 1986 and hosted its weekly current affairs program, *Al Punto*, since 2007, but his newest role as the host of *America With Jorge Ramos* on the Fusion network is perhaps his most significant. Launched in October 2013 on fledgling cable TV network Fusion (a partnership between ABC News and Univision) *America* is Ramos's English-language debut. A weekly news outlet aimed at the millennial generation, it gives the revered newsmen a unique opportunity to interface not only with the nation's 37 million Spanish-speakers, but also with the next generation of young Americans—Hispanic and non-Hispanic alike.

RAMOS: UNCENSORED

Ramos, 56, was born in Mexico City in 1958. Originally, he wanted to be an Olympic athlete. When a back injury sidelined him from his track-and-field team, however, he set his sights on journalism.

He realized that as a journalist he could do three things: witness the world change, talk to those changing it, and travel. "During that time in my life I really wanted to travel and go as far away from Mexico as possible," says Ramos. His resolve to flee Mexico reached a boiling point in 1982 when, at 24 years old, Ramos worked as a television reporter for the Mexican media conglomerate Grupo Televisa. Known as a mouthpiece for the ruling party, the company censored a report he'd filed criticizing the corrupt government of Mexican President José Lopez Portillo, expunging from it all segments and interviews critical of Portillo's administration. Furious, Ramos destroyed the censored tape and promptly resigned.

"The story never aired, so before they could fire me, I presented my resignation," says Ramos. "It was impossible to be a free, uncensored journalist in Mexico. So, I sold my car"—a red Volkswagen Beetle—"for \$200, and with that money I went to Los Angeles."

When he arrived in Los Angeles in January 1983, Ramos, a graduate of Mexico's Ibero-American University, was accepted into UNEX, the continuing-education program at the University of California, Los Angeles. There he spent a year studying television and journalism before landing his first job in American news, as a reporter for KMEX-Channel 14, the Los Angeles affiliate of Univision.

"Before I got that first job, I remember a news director in Los Angeles told me I would never work in this country because I have a very big accent in English, and nobody would understand me," Ramos recalls. "He said I should 'forget about working for a Spanish-language station, too, because all Mexicans are going to assimilate and Spanish-language media will disappear.' In the end, he lost his job, and I got mine."

His career was then set on an accelerated trajectory. In 1986, Ramos moved to Miami to anchor the national morning show *Mundo Latino*. Just a few months later he was named anchor of *Noticiero Univision*, which now attracts two million nightly viewers. He was just 28 years old and the youngest national news anchor in the history of American television. "What I thought was going to be a one-year adventure in the United States," says Ramos, "has turned into an incredible 30-year journey."

NEWS WITH A POINT OF VIEW

His three-decade career as a television journalist has had countless highlights. For Ramos, however, three in particular stand out.

The first is having had the opportunity to cover wars from the front lines: the civil war in El Salvador (1980-1992), the Gulf War (1990-1991), the Kosovo War (1998-1999), the Iraq War (2003-2011), and the War in Afghanistan, which began in 2001 and is scheduled to conclude this year when US troops complete their withdrawal.

"There is nothing like going to war," says Ramos. "And there is nothing like the feeling of coming back alive." It's a different universe with a particular set of rules. To be able to report from war zones and survive has been the most significant career success for the veteran journalist.

For people like Ramos who report them, wars are transformational. So, however, are the people who start and end them. "I have been able to talk to the most interesting men and women on Earth," he says, "from American presidents George Bush Sr., Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama to the dictators such as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez." The unique ability to call the most powerful people in the world and talk with them—Ramos's second highlight—has earned him eight Emmy awards for excellence in journalism.



His third highlight has been using his platform as a journalist to not only deliver news to the Hispanic community, but also to be an advocate for it. "As an immigrant, I speak for other immigrants who don't have a voice in [the United States]. I've taken on an unexpected role" Ramos says. It's not something the de facto spokesman looked for; it's something that evolved out of the lack of political representation that Latinos have in America. "For such a large and rapidly growing percent of the population," says Ramos, "we only have three senators who represent our background." Ramos feels an obligation to defend fellow immigrants who don't have a voice and haven't been as lucky as he has been.

Because his viewers respect and rely on him, Ramos often has been called the "Walter Cronkite of Hispanic news." However, while Cronkite and his contemporaries rejected the idea of "advocacy journalism," Ramos embraces it. Journalism has a responsibility not only to inform, he believes, but also to influence.

"What I am doing is what I call 'news with a point of view,'" Ramos says. "For that I have no apologies. I think of Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. She once said that an interview is always a war between the interviewee and the interviewer. I like that concept. I think the most important role I have as a journalist is to confront those who are in power and prevent their abuse of it."

Confrontation is a fixture on *Al Punto* and *America*, as well as in Ramos's weekly columns for the New York Times Syndicate. In a 1991 interview with Fidel Castro, for example, Ramos questioned the infamous dictator about the lack of democracy in Cuba. In 2007, Ramos questioned Bolivian president Evo Morales on coca leaf production in relation to drug trafficking. In a 2012 interview with Hugo Chávez, Ramos asked the late Venezuelan leader why he stayed in power for 14 years—despite his promise to abdicate the presidency after five. And just last year, Ramos asked President Barack Obama, who promised to deliver immigration reform during his first term, why he reneged on his promise.

"I think the most important role I have as a journalist is to confront those who are in power and prevent their abuse of it."

—Jorge Ramos

Whether it's speaking for undocumented immigrants, criticizing oppressive governments, or being tough on Latin American presidents who are not used to being questioned, Ramos's viewers expect him to have a point of view and to defend it. "When talking to dictators, I feel a responsibility to take the position of their victims—those who have no power and are suffering because of [dictators'] abuses."

Likewise, he's confronting public figures at home, challenging them as both a journalist and an activist on issues such as immigration reform. "Barack Obama has deported almost two million undocumented immigrants—more than any other president in the history of the United States. [Speaker of the House] John Boehner and the Republicans are blocking immigration reform that would benefit 11 million immigrants. I think it's my duty as a journalist to make sure they know people are not happy with what they're doing."

AGENT OF CHANGE

The goal of confrontation isn't just ruffling feathers, Ramos insists. It's inciting change. And things are, in fact, changing for the Hispanic community—rapidly and dramatically. "When I arrived [in the United States] there were only 15 million Latinos," Ramos says. "Right now there are 55 million, and in 35 years, they're going to be at least 150 million strong. In other words, one in every three Americans is going to be Latino. We are growing fast, gaining power, and going mainstream for the first time in history."

For many decades, Ramos observes, the Hispanic community was called a "sleeping giant." "Well, in the year 2000, the giant woke up, and now it's running," he continues. "What you're going to see in the near future is Hispanics with much more authority in almost every single industry: from baseball and soccer, to food and music, to politics and media. We're seeing incredible growth for the Hispanic community, both in English and in Spanish."

For the children of Ramos's generation, the Hispanic community's rapid growth is an opportunity. By providing the younger generation with knowledge and perspective, Ramos believes the news can help them make the most of that opportunity—provided it's presented when, where, and how they want it. Enter *America With Jorge Ramos*.

"There is a whole new generation of Latinos who feel more comfortable in English than in Spanish and who want content they can't find anywhere else," says Ramos, himself a father of two children (Nicolás, 16, and Paola, 27). "For instance, if you watch some of our shows you'll see that we are covering not only issues facing the nation's youth (like technology and sex) but also issues they care deeply about but can't find on other networks." These include updates on the countries their parents are from, especially nations suffering widespread violence or political unrest such as Mexico and Venezuela. "We are covering Venezuela as thoroughly as if we were Caracas's local news," says Ramos. "Political unrest in Venezuela is an issue nobody's covering in the mainstream media, but we are. The turbulence facing Venezuela is just as newsworthy as that in the Ukraine and the Middle East. That's why we're doing this program."

In order to connect with young Hispanics, Ramos has had to change not only the issues he reports, but also how he reports them. "Millennials are breaking all the rules of television," he says. "I grew up making an appointment every night at 6:30 to see what was going on in the world. When millennials watch my show *America* on Fusion, they already know what's going on in the world. They can get faster information from Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram than from regular networks. Social media is changing the way we are doing journalism." Consider, for example, one of the biggest stories of 2014: the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. "I can't be in Malaysia covering the disappearance of the flight," explains Ramos. "There are thousands of people in that part of the world with cell phones and computers reporting the news as it happens. I can't compete with that. But what I can do as a journalist is tell them what's credible, what's false, what's the truth, what's important, and what's relevant. That's my new role."

"[For many decades, the Hispanic community was called a sleeping giant.] Well, in the year 2000, the giant woke up, and now it's running."

—Jorge Ramos

Ramos the reporter is now also Ramos the interpreter. As news continues to evolve from traditional media to social media, his job is less about recording news and more about filtering and analyzing it. "Social media now presents us with millions and millions of facts and numbers with many different trends and opinions," Ramos says. "From my point of view, journalists are needed more than ever before to put order to that chaos." The problem with social media and the Internet is credibility. "Our role as journalists in this environment is to make sure we have the credibility to tell our audience what the truth is."

THE WAY FORWARD

Ramos isn't just a truth-teller. He's also a forecaster. The same eyes that have seen a remarkable past, also foresee a triumphant future.

"The young Hispanic community is only 27 years of age on average," Ramos says. "It's incredibly optimistic and hopeful and full of energy, and already changing the nation as we know it. More tortillas are being sold than hamburger buns," Ramos chuckles. Last summer, Univision was the most-watched television network, regardless of language. And Ramos predicts that in 2016, for the first time in history, there could be three Hispanic presidential candidates. "It's not a change that's going to happen someday in the future," he says. "It's already happening right now."

Along with opportunities, however, the burgeoning Hispanic community faces challenges. "We have to go from having just big numbers to having power reflective of our numbers," he says. "That's the whole game. It doesn't matter if it's in politics or music or media. We must leverage this incredible growth to gain incredible power. And we don't have that yet."

Ramos explains that "power" means more Hispanic leaders in government, more Hispanic CEOs in business, more Hispanic faces in media, more Hispanic stars in movies and music, and more Hispanic deans at colleges and universities. The means to that end, according to Ramos, is education. "If you see the media, you might think that [the easiest way to get power] is to be Miley Cyrus or a professional baseball player or a famous actor," he says. "But really, as a community the only way to achieve more success—more economic power and more political power—is through educational empowerment." More and more Latinos are finishing high school, going to college, and getting their PhDs. "It's a process that is well underway," says Ramos, "but it's only just beginning."

Check out all of *Hispanic Executive's* 2014 Top 10 Líderes [here](#).

Share This Story | Facebook Twitter Google+ LinkedIn

QUICK LINKS

Download Media Kit:
English Version

To Advertise:
E-mail Krista Lane Horbenko
(312) 256-8461

For Editorial Consideration:
E-mail Griselda Reyes
(312) 447-2352

iPad Edition:



SOCIAL LINKS



InPulseDigital
We get the audience

Score big in the Digital Game

Over **10** years experience

Currently managing **27** +million social media users.

Digital strategy and execution with in-house team

Over **800** projects in 15+ countries

Have the right team on your side.

1-888-880-8620
www.inpulsedm.com
sales@inpulsedm.com