



How Spanish Language Radio Became a Platform for Spreading Misinformation and Disinformation

In this special episode of Notes from America, host Kai Wright sits down with journalist Paulina Velasco to discuss “Frequency of Deception,” an investigation into the lies, rumors and propaganda that have been peppering Spanish language broadcasts in recent years. Velasco’s reporting includes egregious examples of attempts to manipulate listeners, ideas about who and what is behind these nefarious efforts, and a look at the ongoing push to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation among vulnerable communities.

Music

News Montage:

Ari Shapiro: Latino voters will be one of the most decisive groups in the 2024 presidential election, and according to a recent survey, they are bombarded with political falsehoods.

Roberta Braga: "There is nothing inherent to Latino communities that makes us more susceptible or less accurate in identifying disinformation."

Jude Joffe-Block: "But Latinos are more likely to get news from social media, where falsehoods often go unchecked, especially in Spanish."

Sacha Pfeiffer: "Groups that track the flow of disinformation say they've seen an increase in false messages about abortion, specifically targeting Spanish-speaking voters."

Speaker: "We see in English and Spanish and Latino spaces the metanarrative of election fraud and immigration-related disinformation."

Speaker: "They are not receiving the same quality of information, not from the government, not from the media."

Music

Kai Wright: It's Notes from America. I'm Kai Wright. Welcome to the show. We live in a post-truth

political world. It's almost a banal observation to make at this point as the lies have grown more outlandish. Immigrants eating dogs and cats, really, and as repeatedly debunk claims, keep finding new life in increasingly fantastic tales. Voters will yet again feel their way through a miasma of lies as they trod to the polls this fall. It's the not so new normal.

Kai Wright: This week, we're going to focus on one type of media, a particularly consequential one, where the fog of disinformation has grown thick. Spanish-language radio, a hugely popular medium in the US. Spanish language radio stations actually outnumber NPR stations by two to one.

[radio station plays]

Kai Wright: That's Radio Mambí, a longtime favorite with Latinos in Miami. Spanish-language radio stations include more than 100 different formats. We're talking Christian talk, music, sports news. They're eclectic. They're popular. They're trusted. Reports have been building for years that this trusted source of news and information is being used to spread misinformation and disinformation.

Kai Wright: Journalist Paulina Velasco has been looking into what this sounds like and what the stakes are for Latinos, for the coming elections, and for our democracy overall. Her reporting is part of an investigation by our partners at Feet in 2 Worlds. Paulina, hello and welcome to Notes from America.

Paulina: Hi, Kai. Thank you for having me.

Kai: You've uncovered a ton of stuff. You've analyzed a ton of stuff. Tell us what we're going to hear about today.

Paulina: First, a look at how misinformation spreads among Latinos, then where it might be coming from, and what it sounds like. Finally, why radio is such a powerful medium with which to reach people.

Kai: I said that radio is really popular with Latinos. How popular are we talking about?

Paulina: Pretty popular. Nielsen, which is the major source of data on media consumption in the US, said in 2023 that radio reaches 94% of Hispanic adults, compared to like 90% for the general population. Almost half of all Hispanics in the US tune into the radio at least sometimes for the news. That's according to the Pew Research Center. It's often a practice that Latino families bring to the US from their home countries, where they rely on radio as a trusted source of news and information.

Kai: The key word there is trusted. This is obviously tremendously important for an election year. Latino voters are going to play a huge role in November. They account for close to 15% of all eligible voters. That's over 36 million Latinos who are going to be eligible to vote in November. In some swing states, those voters are almost certainly going to be decisive. Paulina, your reporting also points to stakes that are maybe deeper than just one election, right?

Paulina: Yes. Spanish-language radio is speaking to Latinos, like, literally speaking to them in ways that relate to their culture and their history. For example, conservative radio show hosts are referencing socialist regimes in Latin America to claim that Democrats are bad for the US. Misinformation and disinformation gets mixed into these broadcasts with this rhetoric and these opinions. It's really about a larger battle to steer the conversation that Latinos are having about our society, our politics, everything.

Kai: How does all of this manifest in Spanish-language radio?

Paulina: Like you mentioned, there are many stations that speak to Latinos across the US in Spanish. Now, obviously, not all of these stations air disinformation, Kai, right, like a lot of it is super entertaining. These broadcasts are informative. They create community. They're accurate, but some radio stations regularly broadcast and amplify 'mis' and disinformation, very often from right-wing conservatives sources. It happens across the country, but especially at Spanish-language radio stations in Florida.

Kai: Oh, Florida. No shade to our wonderful listeners in Florida, but a lot of controversy starts there. This is another one then.

Paulina: Yes, and it involves a group of voters that, despite their numbers, are really underestimated. Latinos account for one in five eligible voters in Florida.

I chose to go to Miami, in part, because it has a unique representation of cultures from all around Latin America. Residents have brought their accents, media consumption habits, and food from all over the world. In four days, I ate Cuban, Colombian, Mexican, Italian, Thai, and Venezuelan food. Miami is so central to Spanish-language media, that many major Hispanic media outlets in the US are based there, like Univision.

Jorge Ramos: [Spanish language] Vamos Al Punto, con Jorge Ramos... vamos al punto, intentaron matar a Donald Trump y con esto empezamos...

Paulina: That, of course, is Jorge Ramos, the host of the national newscast, Univision. Univision is the most watched TV network in Spanish in the US, trusted and professional. Its roots actually date back to the first full-time Spanish-language radio station, owned and operated by Latinos back in the 1940s. Today, Miami has at least 13 radio stations that speak to South Florida residents in Spanish.

If you scan the car radio on any given day, you'll hear a bad bunny song, the latest current events in Colombia, and talk show hosts quoting the Bible. A lot of these stations belong to networks that operate around the country. Now about 30 miles northwest of Miami is Weston, Florida. It's a residential community bordered on two sides by the everglades. Right off of Highway 75 is a gas station, and a Pana, a local chain of Venezuelan fast food and a car wash.

Pana means friend in a few countries in Latin America. It's kind of like an expression, "Hola, Pana." Everyone who was there was pretty friendly on this afternoon in May. It was about 90 degrees, extremely sticky outside. I had been listening to the radio in South

Florida already and had heard misinformation, so I wanted to know if it was something that residents noticed, too. Valeria Polonski was waiting for her car to be washed, and I asked her what type of media she follows.

Valeria Polonski: [Spanish language] CNN, que escucho mucho. La radio pública, NPR.

Paulina: NPR and CNN, she said. Valeria has lived in the Miami area for 20 years, and she talked about how worried she was about this year's election. She seemed to be trying to find the words to explain, like a sort of gulf in communication between the two political sides, For Valeria, it's personal.

Valeria Polonski: [Spanish language] Mi mejor amiga, la adoro la adoro..

Interpreter: My best friend, I love her, I do, but well, it's like she gives me a little extra information, telling me things that you obviously wouldn't say to someone you weren't close to. Sometimes I'm like, wow, where did that come from? Yes, she'll say, they're going to steal the election. This is going to happen. That is going to happen. I ask her where she gets this information, and she says, from my family, everywhere.

Paulina: Her friend hears these things via word of mouth at family get togethers, from her mom, her uncle, her grandfather. Kai, I'm sharing this anecdote because based on my reporting, this is a really good example of how misinformation is spreading among Latinos in the US.

Kai: It's really evocative, too. You can really get the idea of how this stuff gets passed on, but it's not about the radio, right? It's not about Spanish language radio.

Paulina: You're right, and it's because misinformation on Spanish-language radio is part of a unique ecosystem where information is shared in the form of family chats, opinions, gossip, and a lot of that moves through interpersonal communication.

Kai: Then how does this show up in radio?

Paulina: A good analogy would be to compare misinformation to, like, a wildfire. Once it's blazing, it's really difficult to put out. It hops from house to house, tree to tree, like how misinformation spreads from person to person and hops across platforms. Traditional media outlets like radio stations can fan the flames because they reach so many people. This is something I learned from Jo Lukito, a professor at the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin, and an expert on disinformation.

Jo Lukito: It's one thing if an average Twitter user, or even, a family or friend member on WhatsApp shares a link or a piece of misinformation. It's a totally different story when a radio show or a news organization or a politician shares it because their reach is so much larger.

Kai: We've been saying misinformation and disinformation kind of interchangeably. Which one of these things is more important, and what are we really talking about here?

Paulina: The difference between the two is that misinformation is inaccurate information shared without the intention to cause harm, and disinformation is inaccurate information that is meant to manipulate or mislead someone. Jo Lukito says it's really tricky to distinguish between the two.

Jo Lukito: For me, misinformation is actually the more dangerous of the two because people share it in goodwill, thinking that they are helping you, and it's much harder to persuade someone spreading misinformation that what they believe is false.

Kai: You would say that what Valeria's friend might be doing is sharing misinformation?

Paulina: Yes, I think so, because it's not like her friend is trying to do any harm, right? Like, she's probably trying to do the opposite. She's probably, like, concerned about something she read and wants to share that concern with her best friend, right?

Kai: What about social media? I have to imagine it's a huge part of this, too.

Paulina: Definitely. It's really important to remember that misinformation crosses these platforms, social media, radio, and it crosses borders, and it's often coming from trusted sources like family. That's just trying to stay in touch.

Kai: Yes, I think a lot of us can really relate to that dynamic. Unfortunately, we need to take a break. I'm Kai Wright, and I'm talking with investigative reporter Paulina Velasco, about the spread of misinformation and disinformation through Spanish-language radio. Just ahead, we'll actually hear some examples of what's happening in these broadcasts. It's Notes from America. Stay with us.

Music

Kai: This is Notes from America. I'm Kai Wright, and I am joined by investigative reporter Paulina Velasco. She has been working with our partners at Feet in 2 Worlds on a deep dive into Spanish-language radio, and how misinformation and disinformation targets Latinos in the US. Paulina, I feel like we've got a good grasp on just the facts and definitions around what we're talking about here. I want to hear what it sounds like.

Paulina: Yes, I have a really powerful example. This is a recording of a person calling into a radio show in South Florida to call the host out for saying something inaccurate.

[recording plays]

Paulina: He says to the host, with all due respect, the other day you said that the people at the insurrection on January 6 were from Black Lives Matter. The host pushes back, saying they were. The caller responds, no, there wasn't, and the host cuts him off.

Kai: Well, first off, mad props to that caller. This is a typically live call and radio show ourselves, and dear listener, I welcome any of you to fact-check me in live on radio if you need to. Paulina, why did you choose this example?

Paulina: Well, partly because I love hearing this caller kind of be a bit nervous. It's clearly, he's being very brave in, like, trying to confront this host. It really, it shows how persistent misinformers can be in spreading false information. It also ties into one of the first reports I read about disinformation airing on Spanish-language radio stations in Miami.

In early 2021, over 100 Latino community leaders and residents put together a letter expressing concern about what they were hearing on Spanish-language radio. The problem was they had little concrete evidence to back it up.

Kai: Why is that?

Paulina: Because radio mostly airs live, 24/7, it's really hard to monitor. It's in Spanish, so there are fewer resources to monitor it. Basically, a coalition of progressive organizations in Miami set out to analyze the content on four news shows on the week after the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6. Their report shed light on how hosts and callers were spreading false narratives about fraud in the 2020 election, among other conspiracy theories, and it included the lie about Black Lives Matter being involved in the insurrection.

Kai: Okay, so they found their proof. What did they do with it?

Paulina: What the report did was highlight a few specific ways that misinformation and disinformation were amplified on these radio stations. First, they noticed the huge role the hosts played. The hosts were moving back and forth between news and commentary, blurring the line between information and opinion. They often neglected to cite their sources or used right-wing media sources like Epoch Times, Newsmax, and Daily Caller. These were given a mixed reliability rating by an independent media monitoring organization that I checked with.

Kai: Mixed reliability is generous, if you ask me, but so here's the thing. This all sounds similar to what we hear on mini right-wing radio stations and mini right-wing podcasts in English. What about it is specific to the Spanish-speaking audience?

Paulina: The report talked about how a lot of what's being aired is specific to their listeners' backgrounds. Like, for example, when a show claims that Democrats are shutting down free speech the way governments did in Cuba or Venezuela. This tracks with what I heard in my reporting, despite the thousands of Spanish-language radio stations and other Hispanic outlets, many Latinos still live in news and information deserts. There's a huge need for information that's multilingual and specific, like really specific to geography, cultural communities. For example, not just like directed at all Latinos, but for example, like Venezuelan-Americans in South Florida or Mexican-American hospitality workers in Las Vegas.

When these needs aren't met with current, accurate, and relevant information, this void is filled with dis- and misinformation oftentimes. Many of the interests that spread disinformation really, really understand that it's important to provide culturally relevant content if you want to influence public opinion.

Kai: Right. That's all really striking to take in. Then who is sort of missing the mark on reaching Spanish-speaking Latinos, and who's hitting the mark?

Paulina: There's lots of answers to that question, but let's go back to Valeria, the woman I met at the gas station in western Florida, who talked about her friend who sends her unsubstantiated information.

Valeria Polonski: [Spanish language] Es como mucho desinformación. Y lo que más me preocupa...

Interpreter: It's a lot of disinformation. What worries me the most, it's not that people think differently from me or anything. I'd love to have more of a conversation, like an authentic and genuine conversation, and not like, okay, what impacts me the most is how I'm seeing like a copy of Russia.

Valeria Polonski: [Spanish language] Es como que estoy viendo una réplica de Rusia.

Paulina: That last remark is what really struck me. What impacts me the most is that I'm seeing like a copy of Russia.

Kai: Right. Did you bring up Russian disinformation to her to lead her to that, or--

Paulina: No, no, it was her own independent observation, and she might be on to something.

[clip plays]

Paulina: This is a clip from the end of July 2024. It's the start of a show, greeting listeners, and they're saying--

[clip plays]

Paulina: We're airing from Buenos Aires in a production by the international news agency, Sputnik.

Kai: Sputnik, like the first Soviet satellite launch into space, right? Is this radio Sputnik?

Paulina: Yes, this is a Russian radio service in Latin America, in Spanish. As you may know, Russia has been using disinformation to undermine the US since the Cold War. Sputnik and RT, which used to be called Russia Today, are longtime Russian outlets that own or influence proxy outlets all around the world. We're talking newspapers, blogs. Obviously, in this day and age, it's YouTube channels, social media accounts.

Just two months before the November election, the US Justice Department revealed that it had interrupted Russian directed campaigns to influence voters. It also announced a criminal case against RT employees who used a us company to publish pro-Russian content on social media. The US State Department calls RT and Sputnik "critical elements in Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem."

Kai: Connect that to what's happening among Spanish speakers in the US, not necessarily that specific investigation, but Russian propaganda in general.

Paulina: Right, so there are so many sources of information that US Latinos take in here and from abroad. If Russian propaganda has infiltrated media ecosystems in Latin America, it's also reaching many Latinos in the US.

Kai: Okay, so you played us that radio Sputnik clip in Spanish. They're clearly doing this propaganda on the airwaves. Where else in the media ecosystem might this Russian propaganda be reaching Latinos in the US?

Paulina: Social media, right? Russia, China, and others spread disinformation all over Latin America, in Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Venezuela. For instance, Russia is spreading disinformation in these countries about Ukraine. In April 2022, just two months after Russia invaded Ukraine, RT en Español was the third most shared account on Twitter that was giving out information about Ukraine in Spanish, and so here's the thing. All of that opinion based on disinformation is filtering its way up to Latinos in the US.

Kai: Especially, I would imagine, in Florida, right?

Paulina: Definitely. South Florida is home to the largest Venezuelan, Nicaraguan, and Cuban communities in the US. Almost one-third of US Latinos of Colombian origin are in Florida. All of these links that exist among these communities in the US and abroad are potential pathways for the misinformation wildfire to spread. Let me illustrate once again how interwoven this all is by taking us back to my reporting in Miami.

Paulina: I listened to a lot of radio while driving around in my interviews in Miami, Kai, and I heard a lot of different accents in Spanish. More than half of the residents in Miami-Dade County are foreign born, and more than two-thirds of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino. The references to Latin American politics stood out to me right away. Here's a clip, for example, of a caller on America radio, a conservative talk radio station at the end of May.

[clip plays]

Paulina: The caller was talking about something he said was happening in Washington, DC, but his reference points were Argentina and El Salvador, two Latin American countries who currently have right-wing populist leaders. He went on various tangents about the threat of the left. He said, "We're Hispanics. We resisted the left in our countries and lost." He said, we learned valuable lessons to avoid the left taking over democracy in the US. This

sounds like the caller's opinion, right? This isn't necessarily inaccurate information, but the fear mongering about the "left" and these anxieties about a takeover of democracy, they really stood out to me.

Kai: Well, yes, and when I hear that kind of opinion, as you've put it, like I do think about how I keep hearing from the Trump campaign over and over again, communist, all of this language that feels a little archaic to me in our political discourse, but maybe doesn't sound so archaic to someone like that caller. That's opinion still. Give me some examples of actual misinformation and disinformation that's happening on these radio stations.

Paulina: Yes. Okay. I have two examples for you about immigration and about elections. In this program on WAXY in South Florida, the host, Jorge Bonilla, is talking about immigrants and crime in the US. It's from late June of 2024. Remember, Joe Biden is still running for President.

Jorge Bonilla: [Spanish language] Joe Biden abrió la frontera de este país.

Paulina: He claims Joe Biden opened the border, which is misleading. After Congress failed to pass a bipartisan border security bill, President Biden actually used his executive power to issue an order that restricted entry at the southern border.

Jorge Bonilla: [Spanish language] Joe Biden, básicamente importó al país una ola de feminicidios.

Paulina: Bonilla says that by undoing Trump's border security measures, some of which Biden did do, he imported a wave of femicide to the US.

Kai: Femicide?

Paulina: Femicide. Now, this is incredibly misleading. Bonilla is implying something we hear from Donald Trump and others, that immigrants crossing the border illegally are murdering women in the US.

Kai: That's just a lot, and there's a lot to unpack there. Why don't we focus on this one piece of it, this idea of femicide? How is that a culturally specific or relevant example of disinformation or misinformation?

Paulina: Femicide, the murder of women by men because of their gender is a deeply sensitive issue for Latin Americans, and femicide, which is the word Bonilla uses, is an even more political word. It implies government structures that normalize misogyny and permit femicide to happen. Fourteen of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world are in Latin America. There are incredible feminist movements, movements across Latin America, against gender-based violence in many of these countries. It's a really sticky word to use for Latino listeners.

Paulina: Something else Bonilla is doing is reinforcing the idea we have in the US, that femicide is

an issue that's imported from elsewhere, that's able to be imported, right? We should note the US already has one of the highest rates of femicide among high-income countries, and it's homegrown.

Kai: How widespread is this messaging?

Paulina: This anti-immigrant rhetoric is pretty common, even when the audience is itself mainly immigrants. I spoke to Adelys Ferro. She's the executive director of the Venezuelan-American Caucus. It's an organization that advocates for Venezuelan immigrants and Venezuelan-Americans, who are usually considered pretty conservative, especially in Florida. Her organization is part of an umbrella nonprofit that supports progressive Latino candidates and causes. Now Ferro says she spends a large part of her day monitoring Spanish-language radio in Miami.

Adelys Ferro: [Spanish language] Esas mismas personas reciben la información...

Interpreter: Those same people receive anti-immigrant information, and those same people reject their own immigrants. That matrix of opinion is caused by disinformation.

Paulina: Ferro said she regularly hears inaccurate statements in the media about the numbers of immigrants at the southern border, even as encounters with people crossing illegally are going down. She hears a lot of disinformation about immigrants being criminals.

Adelys Ferro: [Spanish language] Simplemente esa frase...

Interpreter: Just that phrase that all immigrants coming here are criminals. That's false. That's a lie.

Paulina: She's right, Kai. There's a lot of data to show that this is false. Undocumented immigration does not lead to an increase in violent crime, and immigrants are actually less likely than native-born Americans to commit crimes. The people listening to all of this are still taking it in, and that includes the older Cuban population and other conservative voters, like I mentioned, like the Venezuelans who have fled the country's socialist regime over the last two decades.

Kai: Right. Do we know how this does, in fact, impact people's feelings when they go to the ballot box?

Paulina: Yes. This matrix of disinformation, which is how Ferro puts it, I think it's a really good phrase. It continues to be a tactic to scare and divide voters. We already explained how Russian propaganda makes its way to and from Latin America to US Latinos, right? Now what if I told you that the anti-immigrant messaging I was just explaining also has ties to Russia?

Kai: How so?

Paulina: In March, the Associated Press reported that Russia's disinformation machine was targeting the US, specifically by pushing false narratives about rising crime here committed by immigrants.

Kai: Just spell out why that helps Russia, like, why is that in their interest?
Paulina Velasco: It's related to elections, and this is elections across the globe. Here's Professor Jo Lukito, who I spoke to in the spring.

Jo Lukito: I am already seeing election fraud claims in English, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish across different social media platforms. All of those strategies are flowing from one country to another. It's informing our diaspora communities. It informs the way our parents vote. They think about the safety of elections both in our home countries and in the United States.

Paulina: Here's Adelys Ferro again.

Adelys Ferro: [Spanish language] Porque cuando tu vas a votar en una elección.

Interpreter: Because when you're going to vote in an election, the fact that you have to vote not based on your principles or for what you think is best for you, for your family, but from an unfounded terror, absolutely sick and false, that you have in your head. It's terrifying.

Paulina: Kai, I don't really have the tools to say definitively where misinformation and disinformation originates. It's extremely complicated, and it's probably a lot of sources. Those include, but aren't limited to foreign countries. I can analyze the impact that it has on people, and that's the fear and division it sows.

Kai: Well, just ahead, we'll look at the division it sows on a particularly potent issue, abortion. I'm Kai Wright. This is Notes from America. Stay with us.

[music]

Regina de Heer: Hi. I'm Regina, a producer here at Notes from America with Kai Wright. I hope you're loving this episode. As you know, we cover a lot of issues and ideas on this podcast, and we don't want to do it without you. Having your questions, stories, and experiences in the conversation is so important to us, so let me tell you how to be in touch.

In the show notes of this episode, there's a link that takes you to our website, notesfromamerica.org, where you can record a message for us. Plus, our inbox is always open at notes@wnyc.org. You can write us, or even better, record a voice memo on your phone and send it to us there. That's notes@wnyc.org. I'll be looking there for a note from you soon. Thanks for listening.

[music]

Kai: Welcome back. It's Notes from America. I'm Kai Wright. Before we get back to Paulina Velasco's reporting on misinformation spreading in Spanish-language media, a note about our show next week. We're going to talk about both Republican and Democratic efforts to connect with the hugely important and growing Latino electorate. We'd like to hear from our Latino listeners. What's important to you in this election? What kind of outreach have you received from the presidential campaigns, and what do you think of it?

Call and leave us a voicemail at 844-745-8255, that's 844-745-TALK. Just be sure to tell us your first name and where you're calling from, and then tell us what you think. Okay, thanks. This week, I'm here with journalist Paulina Velasco. For the past several months, Paulina has been investigating myths and disinformation on Spanish-language radio. Paulina, we have arrived at the third and final chapter of your reporting. What are we going to cover?

Paulina: Besides the fact that there's these great radio stations in Miami to listen to, I was also interested in hearing the discourse that was circulating there about a particular measure on Florida's ballot this November.

Kai: What's that ballot measure?

Paulina: It's a constitutional amendment called Amendment 4, and it would protect the right to an abortion before fetal viability. This would be determined by the patient's healthcare provider, but it's usually around 23 weeks, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Right now, abortion is extremely restricted in Florida. You can only get one when you're less than six weeks pregnant. The amendment would restore abortion rights that existed in Florida before the US Supreme Court struck down Roe v. Wade.

Kai: Obviously, abortion is a huge issue in many states this year and for many campaigns. To be honest, in Florida, like and among Latinos, I have to assume this is pretty much a done deal.

Paulina: Florida does lean conservative, I'll grant you that, and in polling in the spring of 2024, Hispanic Floridians were less likely to support the amendment than white Floridians, but Latinos have more nuanced views on abortion than we're often given credit for. Nationally, 59% of Hispanic adults in the US say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, according to the Pew Research Center. That's pretty close to the number for white, non-Hispanic Americans, 60%. Overall, in Florida, 57% of registered voters support the measure to restore abortion rights, and it needs 60% to pass. Latinos could play a pivotal role in the outcome of this vote.

Kai: Okay, got it. Then how is this showing up with radio, and mis- and disinformation?

Paulina: It's showing up a ton. One hot morning in May at an adult daycare center in Doral, a neighborhood of Miami, the seniors playing dominoes and eating lunch were scheduled to meet Democratic candidate Debbie Mucarsel-Powell. She's originally from Ecuador, a former US representative, and in 2024, she's running against Republican Rick Scott for his seat in the US Senate.

Paulina: Mucarsel-Powell walked around the center greeting the seniors. Meanwhile, I talked to Miriam Kuki Almer. Her company organizes these events for candidates to meet hard to reach voters, like working parents, or in this case, senior citizens.

Miriam Kuki Almer: We bring it to them because sometimes they don't know how to go about in a computer, find out who is who, what are the platforms.

Paulina: The group of people in the room were actually exactly who I wanted to know more about. A lot of the women I chatted with were older Cubans. Foreign-born Latinos are twice as likely as US-born Latinos to get their news from Hispanic outlets. That's any news outlet that addresses Latino audiences could be in Spanish or English. Immigrant Latinos are way more likely to get their news in Spanish, and older Latinos follow the news more closely than younger ones. I asked Kuki where the folks at the senior center might be getting their news.

Miriam Kuki Almer: Latins do a lot of TV and a lot of radio, a lot. That's how they get their information, especially the seniors. There's certain programs on radio that they don't miss.

Paulina: Can you give me an example? Do you know off the top of your head?

Miriam Kuki Almer: WQBA is one. La Poderosa.

Paulina: I recognize the name of the stations Kuki mentioned. I actually had La Poderosa on in the car the day before I talked to her. It's a conservative talk station. The name in Spanish means the powerful one. At Feet in 2 Worlds, we used a specially developed web tool to scan radio broadcasts and look for mis- and disinformation, and La Poderosa popped up several times in our scans.

Paulina: This show, however, I tuned into totally accidentally. I was driving around Miami, and I pulled out my phone as fast as I could to record it on voice memos. That's why it sounds so janky, because they were talking about Amendment 4. The show on La Poderosa was saying things, like, 95% of abortions are for convenience. Abortions lead to the sexual liberation of irresponsible men.

Paulina: According to the blurb on the station's website, this show describes itself as providing "relevant and timely information." I didn't manage to hit record in time, but I heard the host and her guest, a doctor, talk about how teen girls are easily swayed by bad influences, and they were encouraging listeners to vote no on Amendment 4, arguing that it would allow girls to get abortions without their parents knowledge. This "timely information" that the program is sharing about Amendment 4 was actually misinformation.

Kai: Spell out exactly why that is.

Paulina: Because Amendment 4 explicitly says that it would not change the state constitution of

Florida when it comes to parental notification. The state constitution requires that parents of a minor be notified before the termination of the minor's pregnancy. I spoke to Tamoa Calzadilla. She's the editor-in-chief of a Spanish-language fact-checking platform called Factchequeado.com, Factchequeado. To demonstrate how Factchequeado works, she chose an example of misinformation on the radio about Florida's Amendment 4.

Tamoa Calzadilla: [Spanish language] Esta fue una publicación que hicimos...

Interpreter: This was a publication we did after listening to the director for Hispanic outreach at Moms for Liberty on a Miami radio station. They said that Florida Amendment 4 proposed abortion until the last month of pregnancy for whatever reason, and that even people who tattoo their skin could perform abortions.

- Paulina:** An activist from the group Moms for Liberty was hosting a show on a local Spanish-language Christian radio show called Oasis Radio Miami, and she claimed that Amendment 4 would allow tattoo artists in Florida to perform abortions.
- Kai:** I mean, really? Wow.
- Paulina:** Suffice it to say, this is not true. The host also claimed that Amendment 4 would allow for abortion until the last month of pregnancy, which we know is false. It's until fetal viability.
- Kai:** One thing that I do wonder is how fact-checkers like Tamoa differentiate between all the different kind of things that are happening here, like, there's the deliberately false information, and then people who share wrong information that they believe is correct, and then people who just have strong opinions about abortion are any number of other controversial issues, like, how do they differentiate between these things?
- Paulina:** Right. It's a great question, and I asked Tamoa about it.
- Tamoa:** Everyone have an opinion, and this is very good. We understand that the First Amendment is something awesome that we lost in our countries, like Venezuela, for example. I defend that. I believe in that, but we want that the people vote or the people have opinions based in evidence, not in lies or disinformation.
- Paulina:** Tamoa has been a journalist for 30 years and counting. She was previously director of El Detector. That's the fact-checking platform for Univision News. El Detector from Univision, Tverifica from Telemundo, and Factchequeado are the three fact-checking platforms in the US in Spanish.
- Kai:** How does that compare to English-language fact-checking in the US?
- Paulina:** Tamoa said there are about ten fact-checking platforms in English, plus most news is already in English. You can check stuff out for yourself more easily.
- Kai:** Which is a lot to ask of the consumer quite honestly. Did any of the radio hosts you met

feel like they, or really I guess we, have a responsibility in this?

Paulina: I had the chance to talk with a radio talk show host in Miami named Juan Camilo Gómez. He works the morning shows at Actualidad Radio, a conservative station that airs on AM-FM airwaves and streaming online.

[radio station plays]

Paulina: Even the stations jingle is a nod to culturally sensitive messaging. One language, all the accents, one signal. Juan Camilo is from Colombia, where he studied journalism, and he's worked at several major outlets, including Univision and CNN en Español. He argues that radio listeners, as well as hosts, have a role to play.

Juan Camilo Gómez: [Spanish language] Nosotros realmente...

Interpreter: All we can really do is do the job responsibly, but then really the responsibility lies with the consumer. It's not enough to turn the radio on. You have to know what the radio station is that you are turning on. You have to know what the newspaper is that you read, who the journalist is, you follow, what are the sources you check, and you have to know what the intentions are of these sources.

Kai: He puts the responsibility with the people who are listening?

Paulina: Yes, and I feel like he's saying it's a shared responsibility, and that may be true, but stations have a lot of discretion in what they air, and a lot of power, and so do the hosts of each show. One of Actualidad Radio's shows was actually mentioned in that 2021 report about disinformation on January 6. Juan Camilo is not mentioned in the report, and I did not find evidence that his show aired dis- or misinformation.

Juan Camilo Gómez: [Spanish language] La emisora en la que yo trabajo, se...

Interpreter: The station I work at is characterized by a great deal of diversity airing on the same day. There is honored talent that varies a lot in their possessions, but they don't share time slots.

Paulina: This emphasis on how the different shows don't overlap came up a few times in our conversation.

Juan Camilo Gómez: [Spanish language] Entonces eso le ha dado a la estación una...

Interpreter: That's given the station a reputation for being really diverse on some topics. Some people don't like it because they say some of the programs are correct and others are blatantly wrong. Some people think it works really well.

Paulina: I asked him what he thought.

Juan Camilo Gómez: [Spanish language] Yo la verdad me centro mucho en lo que hago yo...

Interpreter: I honestly just concentrate on what I do. In my time slot, I don't allow anyone to call in and criticize another program. If they call in to say, hey, in the program at X time, the host said this thing. I cut them off immediately.

Kai: That's interesting, but I wonder if listeners know that's how the shows operate.

Paulina: That's hard to say, yes. The reality is that each host runs their own show, like a little kingdom unrelated to all the other kingdoms. It seems that when it comes to mis- and disinformation, the guardrails against it can be held in place or entirely scrapped by the individual radio show hosts.

Kai: What about the stations themselves? What role do they play in this?

Paulina: I interviewed one station that had a robust programming team that monitored what was airing, especially when it came to advertising. I also interviewed hosts at another station that operated more like a landlord, like an apartment building or a strip mall. The station owner rents out airspace. My impression there was that whoever rents a time slot on the air just turns on the mic and talks about whatever pops into their head.

Kai: Where would you say Actualidad Radio falls on this scale?

Paulina: Somewhere in the middle, probably closer to the more journalistic side. I tuned into Juan Camilo's show the day after the verdict convicting Trump of 34 felony counts in New York. Juan Camilo was fielding callers. This caller said that Trump was being persecuted politically, and that meanwhile, nobody was impeaching Biden.

Caller: [Spanish language] La presidencia, a Biden no se lo ponen...

Juan Camilo Gómez: [Spanish language] Bueno, pero se lo pusieron. Solamente hay que recordar una cosa, el impeachment a Biden, se está siguiendo en la Cámara de Representantes...

Paulina: Juan Camilo cut the caller off, and patiently explained that any impeachment of President Biden had to go through the House of Representatives, where the majority are Republicans, so Republicans could impeach Biden if they wanted to.

Kai: I'm impressed. He did a good job there. That is not easy to do.

Paulina: Totally. That report on disinformation about January 6 on Spanish-language radio talked a lot about how this disinformation and misinformation comes from callers. They call into the show, and the hosts don't contextualize or correct them. I was also really impressed by this. I asked him about it, and he said, it's a good opportunity.

Juan Camilo Gómez: [Spanish language] Sobretudo para...

Interpreter: In particular, not to correct the person who said something wrong, but to insist on something, and it is this. You can have all the opinions you want in your heart. Nobody will try to change that, but it's one thing to have an opinion based on a lie and another to have an opinion based on a set of facts.

Paulina: Now, Kai, what struck me is that Juan Camilo, a conservative talk show host, and Tamoia Calzadilla, from the fact-checking platform, Factchequeado, agree on this point. Opinions are great, but they need to be based on facts, not misinformation. We Latinos love to argue.

Paulina: Another person I spoke to in Miami told me that every reporter at some point when there's a news story and they want to get like man on the street interviews, they go to the counter of a Cuban cafe in Little Havana called Versailles. It's where you'll find all these older Cuban men sitting, drinking coffee, and arguing passionately about politics. Her point was they're not agreeing. They're trading opinions.

Paulina: In order to form opinions, we want and need to be informed. We love to share what we know with other people. It's like the root of all the gossip and the cheesecake. We're telling our friends and coworkers and family. Knowing where our information comes from is becoming more and more difficult.

Kai: Where does that leave us, Paulina?

Paulina: I think that part of the answer to this problem is to support more Spanish-language journalism and more Latinos in the news, in newsrooms, and in politics, all of whom can speak to their communities, and help give us the quality of information that we're hungry for, that we need, and there's just not enough of it.

Kai: Yes. Paulina, thank you for this reporting.

Paulina: Thank you, Kai.

[music]

Kai: Paulina Velasco's investigation, Frequencies of Deception, was produced by our partners at Feet in 2 Worlds. Their editorial team includes John Rudolph, Mia Warren, and Quincy Surasmith. You can read more about mis- and disinformation on Spanish-language radio at their website, fi2w.org, that's fi2w.org. They have additional reporting in both English and Spanish, and tips that radio listeners and news consumers can use to identify false information.

Kai: Notes from America is a production of WNYC Studios. Follow us wherever you get your podcasts, and join our community of listeners on Instagram, too. We're @noteswithkai. Our Notes team includes Katarina Barton, Regina de Heer, Karen Frillman, Suzanne Gaber, Siona Petros, and Lindsey Foster Thomas. Mixing and sound design by Jared Paul. I'm Kai Wright. Thanks for spending time with us.

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