

RAID, REUNION, OR NEUTRAL COVERAGE: THE ELIÁN GONZÁLEZ STORY

By Deni Elliott and Paul Martin Lester

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lester@fullerton.edu

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Who can ever forget the saga of 5-year-old Elián González snatched from certain death off the coast of Florida? Certainly no one who was even casually aware of the media's onslaught of stories and opinions about the fate of the boy would fail to recall the story. From November 25, 1999 when Elián was rescued at sea until July 6, 2000 when his father was named a national hero in Cuba, *The Miami Herald* ran over 600 stories (chronicled at <http://www.herald.com/content/archive/news/rafters99/elian.htm>) that detailed the story of Elián and the custody fight between estranged family members that ensued.

A pair of sports fishermen found Elián along with two adults in inner tubes off Fort Lauderdale. His mother, Elizabeth Brotons Rodriguez, took him on the dangerous journey without telling his father, Juan Miguel González. She and 10 others drowned in the attempt to reach the US.

Elián soon became a symbol in the minds of Miami relatives and others wanting to show the repression of the Castro government in Cuba. Instead of immediately reuniting the boy with his father, a public legal battle commenced pitting the US Justice Department and Attorney General Janet Reno, the Cuban government, Elián's father, and Elián's family and supporters in Miami against each other with each step reported in detail by eager news media. Marisleysis González, 21, Elián's second cousin, was typical of the zealous nature of the family members when she said, "God wanted him here for freedom. And he's here and he will get it."

While the legal actions took place in various venues, the public relations efforts of the Miami-based family proceeded. Less than a month after being rescued, Elián was touring the Disneyworld amusement park in Orlando. And whether playing with friends from the neighborhood, going to school, or eating an ice cream cone, photographers took pictures and reporters wrote stories as the family allowed access.

After all the legal avenues had been exhausted for keeping Elián with the Miami family away from the boy's father, the family refused to give up the boy. Early Saturday morning on April 22, INS agents broke down the door of the family's house and took Elián away to be reunited with his father. Newspapers across the world printed images and stories on their Easter Sunday front pages.

But the story didn't end there. For even though Elián was with his father and Cuban family outside Washington, DC, what followed were more rounds of legal maneuvers by both sides to either keep Elián in the US or have him return to Cuba. Meanwhile, his father's lawyers started their own public relations campaign by allowing photographs of a happy Elián playing with his father or with schoolmates flown in especially from Cuba. Finally, at the end of June, all legal issues were resolved and Elián and his family returned to Cuba. Within a week, President Castro decorated Elián's father as a national hero of Cuba.

What captivated and summed up the story for most newspaper readers was the early morning raid on the Little Havana house to take Elián from his Miami family.

Although at least 10 photographers were at the scene of the INS raid on the house where Elián was staying, Alan Diaz's striking series of images from inside the house were the most obvious pictures to be considered by editors. Diaz, a freelance

photographer working for the Associated Press (AP) (he now works full-time for the AP) was born in New York City but lived in Cuba for many years and knew the Cuban culture and language. He befriended the family by covering the story every day from its beginning. When the early morning raid occurred, he was the only photographer let into the house in order to take the famous pictures.

Every picture, layout, and headline choice had political ramifications. As an editor, do you only use the famous picture of an anonymous INS agent holding a 9-mm MP5 submachine gun toward Elián and a family friend or of the agent running with a screaming Elián to a waiting white van? These choices may be viewed as being unfair to Attorney General Reno and President Castro. Do you only feature the image of a tranquil father and son reunited again, a selection that some may say leans too much in favor of Reno and Castro? Do you try to present both images equally to portray a sense of balance and fairness? Or do you try to use every image you can and let your readers decide which side they are on? Graphic design decisions concerned with how large to run a picture and its placement above, in the middle, or below the fold can also make a difference to a reader's perception of fairness. Finally, do you feature a huge uppercase headline concerning the raid, the reunion, or both?

A look at 20 newspaper front pages revealed three basic editorial approaches that influenced picture, graphic design, and headline decisions. Editors either emphasized the drama of the early morning raid, the emotional story of a father reunited with his son, or tried to show both stories. Which pictures were selected, how those images were displayed on a page, and what headlines accompanied the story all combined to

give the impression to some readers that the publication was either anti-Castro, pro-Castro, or neutral.

All 20 newspapers studied used the striking image by Diaz of an INS agent holding an automatic rifle toward a terrified Elián in the closet of his family's home somewhere in that day's edition. Another popular picture choice was a happy Elián reunited with his father. Other images included those taken outside the home as a woman agent ran with Elián to a waiting van, people protesting in the streets, distraught Miami family members, and government officials explaining their actions to the public.

Emphasizing the raid, some newspapers featured Diaz's picture across the entire width of the broadsheet. Other newspapers featured the reunion image large and on the top of the front page. One of the most common layout decisions by newspaper editors, however, was the use of the raid and reunion photographs above or near the fold. A couple of newspapers were even more objective by using both the raid and the reunion pictures above the fold and almost the exact size.

Headlines also demonstrated three approaches by editors. A few newspapers emphasized the raid in their headlines (upper and lower cases are used to simulate the actual headlines): "Armed agents seize weeping Cuban boy in night-time raid," "Agents seize Elián by force," and "QUE VERGUENZA! (HOW SHAMEFUL!)." Some papers featured the reunion: "Elián back in arms of Dad," "Raid Reunites Elián and Father," and "REUNITED." Several newspapers tried to tell both sides of the story in their headline: "CUBAN BOY SEIZED BY U.S. AGENTS AND REUNITED WITH HIS FATHER," "Raid Reunites Elián and Father," and "RAID ... REUNION."

An editor had to decide which pictures to use, how the pictures were presented on the front page, and what headlines to include for the emotionally driven and highly politicized story. The decision became a tricky balancing act with an editor knowing that someone on one side of the affair or the other would ultimately criticize any decision.

[NOTE: To read more details about this case and see 20 newspaper front page layouts and the photographs taken by Alan Diaz during the raid, see *News Photographer* magazine, June, 2000 (call number TR820 .N273 in most libraries).]

MICRO ISSUES

- Is the Elián story one that warranted coverage on a daily basis?
- Since most of the subjects of the story spoke Spanish, should Spanish-speaking Latino reporters be assigned to the story?

MID-LEVEL ISSUES

- Do pictures, headlines, and stories above the fold signal to readers that the story is the most important on the page?
- Can too much coverage inflame already incensed readers and cause a further split among various cultural groups within a community?

MACRO ISSUES

- What news personnel can do if they suspect that those involved with a story are manipulating the press in order to gain publicity?
- Should the news always be objective, or should an organization take a side in a controversial issue?
- Is it ever a good idea for a reporter to become personally involved with the subjects of a story?