

THE ELIAN GONZALEZ CASE: THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER;
Newspaper in Sea of Outrage Over Coverage of Elian Case - Correction
Appended

The New York Times

 **Correction Appended**

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Body

The first e-mail message opened at noon today by Tom Fiedler, the editorial page editor of The Miami Herald, began, "I am ashamed of The Herald -- focusing your front page on the tragedy of little Elian."

The front page of the newspaper's Sunday issue was dominated by the word SEIZED in three-inch letters. The photograph of the boy, smiling with his father, was next to it, and below, across the page, was the now famous photograph of an armed agent confronting the family friend who held a clearly frightened Elian Gonzalez in his arms.

Mr. Fiedler was beginning one more day of absorbing outrage at the newspaper, which is wrestling with the biggest and most emotional local news event since the Mariel boatlift from Cuba in 1980. On Saturday, after agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service took the 6-year-old child from the home where his Miami relatives were keeping him, 500 emotional e-mail messages and faxes poured into The Herald, sometimes at the rate of one a minute.

Since Thanksgiving, The Herald's journalists have been walking barefoot over the shards of pent-up resentment that litter this poly-lingual, poly-cultural, poly-angry place. For the new editor and almost new publisher, the forced march of Elian coverage -- 1,000 articles and counting -- is a chance to rebut the longtime criticism that The Herald shrinks from tough, fair and comprehensive coverage of Miami's powerful Cuban-American majority. Or a chance to give critics the evidence they crave. Or both.

"It is such a huge story and a story that a portion of the population has such a fixed view of that it's almost inconceivable that The Herald could cover it in a way that satisfies the audience in Miami," said James M. Naughton, the president of the Poynter Institute, a journalism research and training organization in St. Petersburg, Fla. "It's an opportunity to say: That's not our standard. We're going to cover it in a way the community deserves and hope that we cover it in a way that is always respected, if not always accepted."

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Along the way, however, the newspaper is being buffeted by attacks from within and without. Its newsroom of 400 people, which is 21 percent Hispanic, 12 percent black, 2 percent Asian-American and 65 percent non-Hispanic white, is growing accustomed to -- though not necessarily comfortable with -- open second-guessing of coverage, second-guessing that often breaks down along ethnic lines.

Last week, the black columnist Robert Steinback was answering e-mail messages from Cuban-Americans angry about the gulf between Little Havana and the city's other ethnic enclaves.

In general, Mr. Steinback said, his critics offered variations of the theme: "Who are you to talk to us? You should talk to your own people."

An article one week ago by Manny Garcia, profiling Elián's great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez, mentioned everything from his mercurial behavior and his two convictions for driving under the influence of alcohol to his fierce affection for Elián. It brought its Cuban-American author 100 e-mail messages on Monday. "Half said, 'You're anti-Cuban, a bad Cuban,' " Mr. Garcia said. "The other half said, 'You're a suck-up for your own people.' "

Recent polls provide graphic evidence of the ethnic chasms among Herald readers. While nationally, a CBS News poll in mid-April showed that 58 percent of Americans said Elián should be returned to his father, a Herald poll the first week in April showed far greater polarization here. While 83 percent of Cuban-Americans thought the boy should remain in Miami, 76 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 92 percent of blacks thought he should be returned to his father. Among non-Cuban Hispanics, 55 percent said the boy should remain in South Florida.

Those polled in Miami-Dade County represent the bulk of the readership of The Herald, whose daily spring and summer circulation is about 314,000, and whose winter vacation-season numbers rise to about 340,000 daily.

That does not count The Herald's Spanish-language sister newspaper, El Nuevo Herald, which mostly uses its own reporters' material and tends to frame its coverage with partisan flair. On Saturday, El Herald sold out 25,000 copies of an eight-page, 25-cent special issue bearing the headline "¡Que Vergüenza!" (How Shameful!) superimposed over the picture of Elián facing the agent with an assault rifle.

The back page of the issue had a full-page picture of Elián's cousin, Marisleysis Gonzalez, sobbing.

Carlos Castaneda, the editor of El Nuevo Herald, is pleased with both the coverage and the way it has pumped up his circulation, whose street sales have risen between 750 and 2,500 copies over the average. For the six months ended in March, El Herald's circulation was 96,897, an 8.4 percent increase over the same period a year earlier.

Asked whether the coverage in the special issue was objective, Mr. Castaneda said the paper mirrored its readers: "The people have reacted that way all around. It's how the people feel. We are interpreting the feeling of our readers. A newspaper has to reflect the feeling of its readers."

Since January, the English-language Herald has written so many articles that it will have to cut back its news space later in the year to meet its budget.

Earlier this year, the editors sent Frances Robles, a reporter of Puerto Rican heritage, to Cuba for six weeks to cover the boy's hometown. Ms. Robles, who had no visa because the Cuban government opposes visas for Herald journalists, was eventually detained by the police, interrogated for five hours, then sent home.

Since Elián's father, Juan Miguel Gonzalez, arrived in Washington more than two weeks ago, Ms. Robles, who is covering him, has received e-mail messages from Cuban colleagues chastising her for not asking tough questions of him, even though the Cuban government's dislike of The Herald makes Ms. Robles an unlikely candidate to get an interview with Mr. Gonzalez.

The assistant managing editor, Mark Seibel, said in an interview on Thursday: "People think if you just explain things more, cover them more, people will understand. But that's where I talk about this in terms of articles of faith."

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On the issue of Elian's future, he said "there is noncommunication, a disconnect." To Cubans, he said, the decision to keep Elian from his father and a Cuban future "is obvious," but "to Anglos and African-Americans it is not obvious; this is a difference of belief."

Every article, every headline, must pass through the filter of two prevailing beliefs. For instance, when Herald reporters assigned to check out Lazaro Gonzalez's background failed to turn up the convictions for driving under the influence of alcohol, "we were accused of hiding this information by some people unsympathetic to the Miami family," said Martin Baron, who became The Herald's executive editor on Jan. 10, after nearly three years as an associate managing editor of The New York Times.

The Herald, which has since covered those issues, has also been criticized for failing to look into the source of the money supporting the array of lawyers for Elian's family in Miami -- reporting that is under way, Mr. Seibel said.

Those are seen as sins of omission by people unfriendly to the claims of Lazaro Gonzalez. But some Cuban-Americans take as sins of commission the Herald exclusives about the frequent stress-related hospitalizations of Marisleydis Gonzalez, Elian's cousin and primary caretaker, or the \$1 million Miami has had to spend because of the protests.

One article, by Meg Laughlin, a respected feature writer, brought internal complaints, which reached Mr. Baron and Mr. Seibel. One of the articles described out-of-town journalists' fondness for quoting a Florida International University professor abhorred by conservatives for saying Miami had some characteristics of "a banana republic." The piece quoted the professor, Dario Moreno, angering some of Ms. Laughlin's colleagues, who said the news columns would have been better off without his views.

Judy Miller, the newspaper's city editor, said in an interview that she was "very proud" of the newspaper's willingness to take a hard look at the issues and claims surrounding the controversy.

Prominent, though not alone, among the internal critics is Liz Balmaseda. Ms. Balmaseda, whose commentaries about Haitian and Cuban issues won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983, is Cuban-American. She declined to discuss her criticisms in detail, saying "We have conversations about our coverage." She has high-profile and prominent friends in the Cuban community; she is on leave working with the actor Andy Garcia on an HBO film about the Cuban-born trumpeter Arturo Sandoval. Sometimes a commentator, sometimes an internal critic, sometimes a reporter, she is also seen by some as a partisan, and was photographed taking part in an April 13 prayer circle outside the Gonzalez home in Little Havana, along with the singer Gloria Estefan.

"I'm a columnist," said Ms. Balmaseda, who has favored keeping Elian in Miami. "I didn't start out to make a political statement. Prayer is very personal. It's a personal conversation with God, and only God knows what I'm praying for."

Mr. Baron said he had talked with Ms. Balmaseda about the incident, adding, "I told her I thought it was inappropriate and we should maintain our distance."

On another front, Mr. Baron addressed the concerns of some journalists, instructing his lieutenants to tell their staffs to guard against insensitive comments on the Elian matter. In an interview, he said that while wisecracks were a newsroom staple, "this is one where people are in close contact with families, and it's very personal." He added, "Their families have left an authoritarian regime, and they take it very personally."

Negotiating the brittle sensibilities, in house and out, has been a strain, people in The Herald's newsroom agree. One who does not show it, however, is Alberto Ibarguen, who is the publisher of The Herald and El Herald and to whom both Mr. Baron and Mr. Castaneda report. In his job about 18 months, he said he was pleased with The Herald's down-the-middle coverage and as pleased with the more subjective alternative offered in El Herald. The variety, he said, "is just what I want."

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A slightly more distant observer, Michael McQueen, a former assistant city editor at The Herald who is now chairman of the journalism department at Florida International University, said: "I think the paper is doing pretty good on the **Elián** story. It is so explosive. Everything you do is going to be wrong." He added: "The output is fairly good, fairly balanced, fairly free of tilting one way or another. I don't know how they've done it."

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Correction

An article yesterday about The Miami Herald's **coverage** of the **Elián Gonzalez** situation misstated the year in which Liz Balmaseda, a Herald columnist critical of the paper, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. It was 1993, not 1983.

Correction-Date: April 25, 2000, Tuesday

Graphic

Photos: Front pages of The Miami Herald yesterday and of a special issue of El Nuevo Herald on Saturday.

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