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## If You Are Not Elian--Forget It!: Local TV News and Latino/a Representation

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# If You Are Not Elian—Forget It!

## Local TV News and Latino/a Representation

“America is guilty of image making through the press to justify anything they have in mind to do.”

Malcolm X

As people who have a passionate interest in the Americas, it is important for us to try to understand how the average TV viewer might perceive Latin America and Latinos in the US. Doubtless, many residents of Western Michigan have limited contact with Latinos and it is safe to say that most have not ventured to Latin America. Therefore, it is my contention that the images and messages about Latinos/as and Latin Americans that the public gets from nightly newscasts are their primary source of information and representation. For those of us who work on issues in the Americas it is extremely important that we critique these representations from TV newscasts in order to have a better understanding of the context in which our work will impact the broader community.

From September 1 1999 through February 29 of 2000 I conducted a study of the 6:00 & 11:00 p.m. newscasts for WOOD TV 8 and WZZM 13, and the 10:00 p.m. newscast of WXMI-FOX 17. In examining those newscasts, I looked at racial representation in local news stories and published a report entitled “Racial Profiling: TV News and Racial Representation.” I also looked at international news stories that appeared on local newscasts and critiqued those stories in the report “A View of the World: International News on Local Newscasts.” The findings from both of these reports tell us a great deal about how the public views Latinos/as and Latin Americans. (Both reports can be found online at [www.grcmc.org/griid/reports.shtml](http://www.grcmc.org/griid/reports.shtml))

Before explaining the results of my study, I want to make one point about media research and the impact of media images and messages

on viewers. What's important in looking at the issue of representation is not so much what one story tells us, but the cumulative effect of images and messages over a period of time. This is what media researchers are most concerned about—what is the long-term effect of certain images over a period of time in the formation of perceptions? This is why I conducted a six-month study, in order to have a fairly representative picture of how local TV news represents non-whites and the rest of the world. We will begin with local representation of Latinos/as.

In the racial representation study, I documented whom we actually heard in the news stories, who was given a voice. Out of the more than 9,000 stories I looked at only 126 had Latinos/as speaking, roughly 1.93% of voices that were heard in the six-month study. This alone tells us something—that Latinos/as are insignificant to news directors and reporters. This point is underscored by the fact that even a prominent Latino like Juan Oliveras, the President of Grand Rapids Community College, was only heard three times in local news stories over a six-month period. You can imagine the kind of coverage given to Latinos/as who are not in high-profile positions.

During the time when I was undertaking the study, several Latino/a cultural events occurred and again very little coverage was given. In fact, most news stories that dealt with cultural events featured no Latino/a spokespersons, just footage of festivals or dancers. In effect, it was the newsreaders who were telling us about the culture of Latinos, not Latinos themselves. This muting or omission also occurs in what I call non-race specific issues such as economics, health care, the environment and education. Here Latino/a voices are practically non-existent. It is as if they have no opinion on these matters. Now, this is an important point, because most local TV viewers are white and middle-class. If they don't hear Latinos/as address issues important to all of us, how do you think that will affect their perceptions?

One area where there was a proportionately significant representation of Latinos/as was with crime coverage. Remember, Latinos/as were only heard in 1.93% of all news stories, but when it came to crime reporting the number involving Latinos/as was 11.4%. Here you can see that an average viewer may conclude that Latinos/as are more prone to crime, since they are disproportionately represented as committing crimes. There was one example of representation in the six-month study that had great potential to offset the perception of high criminal behavior.

On November 5, WZZM 13 ran a 9-minute piece on both the 6:00 and 11:00 p.m. newscasts. The piece was about a group of Latino/a migrant workers who were being subjected to harsh working conditions and potential fraud by a local farmer. The reporter showed viewers the workers' living conditions, spoke with lawyers and with the State Department of Agriculture, and even attempted to speak with the farm owner. It was a fairly thorough piece, except that we never heard the migrant workers' voices. Nor did the reporter tell us that most migrant workers in the area are Latino/a. In addition, there was no follow-up story to draw the audience in further and inform them about the ongoing plight of these workers. This technique is common in news reporting when it comes to street crime,

but rarely is used with business fraud/crime. How much more effective would the story have been if it was part of a series that would engage and inform viewers about a very serious issue in our part of the state?

In international news stories about Latin America some of the same biases with local news occur. Most stories that dealt with Latin America only gave us the perspective of US diplomats and "experts." Of the 124 stories that aired on Latin America in the six-month study only nine times did we hear Latin American voices. Seven of those voices were either Elian Gonzalez's father or grandmother; the other two were Latin American heads of state. If it weren't for the Elian issue, we never would have heard from normal everyday citizens of Latin American.

The Elian case constituted nearly the entire Latin American coverage. Out of a total of 124 stories on Latin America, 74 were devoted to the Cuban boy's custody case. The saturation of stories about this one boy is typical of broadcast news reporting in recent decades, beginning with O. J. Simpson and going up to Monica Lewinski. In all these cases there was a tremendous opportunity to inform the US viewers in such a way as to create substantial public discourse on important civic matters. With the Elian case the news media had a tremendous opportunity to put the current US policy into context and call it into question. Unfortunately that did not happen. Instead, viewers were left with an impression that the boy and his mother were leaving repressive conditions in Cuba and that life in the US would certainly be better for the boy.

The only other significant type of Latin American coverage that emerged from the study was what we could call disaster reporting. In all, there were 43 stories that had to do with plane crashes, mud slides or volcanic eruptions. Video footage often showed horrendous circumstances with people in a panic. These types of images could easily lead viewers to the conclusion that life is awful throughout Latin America, even uncivilized.

What we didn't see in the news coverage was also quite revealing. Major US policy decisions that affected Latin America were not the subject of news stories. We saw no coverage of the Congressional debates on the \$1.6 billion dollar aid package to Colombia, or of the states of emergency in Ecuador and Bolivia. Nor did we hear any more on the fate of former Chilean dictator Pinochet. We did, however, see a story about violence at a soccer match in Chile. Apparently that story was more interesting than commentary on the attempts to prosecute one of the hemisphere's worst dictators.

So it is easy to see how average TV news viewers may harbor certain perceptions about Latinos/as and Latin Americans. It is not that viewers are ignorant or naturally biased. In fact, one could argue that many viewers have been conditioned to view minorities in the US and people from other countries in the ways in which the news media have portrayed them. This is what we are up against. These are the stereotypes and misperceptions that we must face in our work in this community. The kind of news representation that I examine in my study, a type of representation that also exists in other media such as film, advertising and fictional TV programming.

So what can those of us concerned by this kind of (mis)representation do? Short of listing all the recommendations included in both my studies, let me conclude by saying that two broad responses are possible. First, we need to hold the media more accountable. Unless they hear from large numbers of us, the way they report is not going to change. In both reports I have included the names and numbers of each of the three TV station news directors. Please call them! You could also become involved in the Racial Justice Institute's Media Action team, which is developing Media Congresses. The Media Congresses are designed to have members of the community meet quarterly with local news media outlets for dialogue and accountability. Secondly, we need to support independent media and begin to cre-

ate more of our own. This response probably has more promise since in the end it teaches us to be not just consumers of media, but producers. Either way, unless we recognize the role that media plays in the arena of representation we will never be able to change public opinion in the direction of embracing cultural diversity and respecting all people's civil and human rights.