

Report prepared for the

National Association of Hispanic Journalists

Network Brownout 2001:

**The Portrayal of Latinos
in Network Television News, 2000**

*A Report Prepared by
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DECEMBER 2001

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Executive Summary

The 2001 NAHJ “Network Brownout” report presents the results of a comprehensive content analysis of the network evening newscasts as summarized by the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives.

NAHJ’s sixth annual “Network Brownout” report examines news stories about Latinos that aired on ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN during the 2000 calendar year. This is the first year the report includes news stories about Latinos that aired on CNN. Stories about Elián González were tallied separately from stories about other Latino issues. In addition, the study this year for the first time analyzes a random sub-sample of stories to examine how Latinos are depicted on the news. Stories about the Elián González controversy were also not included in the random sub-section.

Findings of Quantitative Study

- Out of 16,000 news stories that aired on ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN only 84, or 0.53 percent, were about Latinos. Stories on the Elián González controversy are not included in the overall total. Out of 12,000 new stories that aired in 1999, only 162 stories, or 1.3 percent, were about Latinos.
- The length of time for stories about Latinos also declined from two minutes and 45 seconds in 1999 to one minute and 50 seconds in 2000, a substantial and significant drop of almost a minute.
- The number of story topics about Latinos covered on the nightly news dropped from 18 in 1999 to nine in 2000.
- Almost one-third of the stories (excluding Elián González stories) that aired about Latinos were devoted to the protests around the Navy bombing exercises on Vieques Island.
- There was an increase in the number of Latinos interviewed in news stories. Out of 84 stories about Latinos (excluding Elián González), a total of 69 Latinos were interviewed in 31 stories, an increase over 1999 when only 27 Latinos were interviewed.

Elián González

- The “Brownout Report” includes statistics on the number of Elián González stories that aired in 2000. But the Elián González story was an anomaly, so a separate total on the number of stories about Latinos (excluding the González case) was also included in the report.

- A total of 348 stories, or 2.1 percent of all stories that aired on the four networks, were about Elián González. The González controversy accounted for a total of 36.5 hours of news coverage (5 percent of the overall-programming total). Stories about Latinos made up 0.32 percent of the overall programming time when González stories were not included.
- As coverage of Elián increased, the coverage of other Latino stories decreased.

Findings of Qualitative Study

- Aural Signals: Salsa and Mexican mariachi music were used in several stories regardless of the seriousness of the story.
- THEM versus US: Network anchors and reporters built a linguistic distance, real and symbolic, between Latinos and mainstream members of U.S. society. The use of the term “they” is utilized often in describing Latinos in the United States.
- Ghettoization of Latinos: Latinos are generally presented as crowds and brown human hordes coming down narrow corridors or streets. Reporters often position themselves against the backdrop of these masses.
- Latino Transience and Immigration: Visual images that cue the audience of the transient nature of Latinos in the United States.
- Spanish Language: Networks emphasize predominant use of Spanish ignoring the fact that most U.S.-born Latinos are either bilingual or do not speak Spanish.
- In 2000, the networks attempted to examine the importance of the Latino vote in the elections by focusing on Gov. Bush’s campaign efforts to reach Latino voters.

Conclusion

Latino stories continue to be seriously underrepresented in television news and their portrayals are often stereotypical and highly divergent from the true essence of Latino society and culture.

About the Study

NAHJ would like to thank the **National Council of La Raza and Baldwin/Alverio Media Marketing** for making the annual report possible. NCLR has partnered with the NAHJ to help fund the study. Baldwin/Alverio Media Marketing has devoted personnel in assisting in researching the "Network Brownout" report. **NAHJ** is dedicated to the recognition and professional advancement of Hispanics in the news industry. Established in 1984, NAHJ has created a national voice and unified vision for all Hispanic journalists. **NCLR** is a private, non-profit, non-partisan, tax-exempt organization established in 1968 to reduce poverty and discrimination and

improve life opportunities for Hispanic Americans. **Baldwin/Alverio Media Marketing** is a minority-owned and-operated Connecticut-based company specializing in public relations, marketing and research for general and ethnic markets. The five-year old firm works with clients throughout the country. Its principal, Diane Alverio, writes and speaks frequently on media issues regarding the Latino community. The "Network Brownout" report, now in its sixth year, is a pro-bono project of this firm in keeping with one of its corporate goals of providing strategic media services to all.

Background and Introduction

The National Association of Hispanic Journalists has been monitoring the representation of Latinos in the evening newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC since 1996.¹

NAHJ has documented specific areas of improvement in the coverage of Latinos by the networks. The most significant finding has been the consistent underrepresentation of Latinos in the evening newscasts.

The portrayal of Latino issues and personalities has been disproportionately low when compared with the overall volume of stories aired by the networks.

The lack of a Latino presence in the news is troublesome in light of the fact that Latinos are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States. While Latinos make up 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, they have appeared in less than 1 percent of the stories aired by the networks.² There are 8.94 million Hispanic

television households in the United States. Latinos tend to watch more television throughout the three viewing periods of the day than any other ethnic group.³ More importantly, market researchers and advertisers consider the Latino market one of the most important emerging segments of the overall viewing audience. Consequently, the dearth of a Latino presence in network news has been hard to justify.

The NAHJ "Network Brownout" report presents the results of a comprehensive content analysis of network news, as summarized by the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives. In addition, the study this year analyzes a random sub-sample of stories to examine how Latinos are depicted. **Stories about Elián González were not included in the random sub-sample.**

Findings

The Representation of Latinos in Network News: A Quantitative Look

The analysis of the data from the 2000 network newscasts continues to support the existence of a significant brownout of Latinos in network news. This report analyzed the coverage of the evening newscasts of ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN only. Latino stories continue to be seriously underrepresented in television news; portrayals are often stereotypical and highly divergent from the

true essence of Latino society and culture.

Out of 16,000 news stories that aired on ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN last year, only 84 stories, or 0.53 percent, focused on Latino-related stories. A total of 348 stories, or 2.1 percent, of all stories were on the Elián González controversy. CNN — included in the study for the first time this year — aired 130 stories about Latinos, 110 of which were on the Elián González controversy.

In 1999, out of 12,000 news stories that aired on ABC, CBS and NBC, 162 or 1.3 percent, were about Latinos.

In 2000, the four television networks broadcast approximately 728 hours⁴ of news, with only two hours and 34 minutes of news programming devoted to Latinos and Latino society and culture. (See table 1.) This constitutes 0.32 percent of the overall time, the lowest percentage that has been documented since the study was first conducted in 1996. While we acknowledge that there were 36.5 hours of coverage devoted to the Elián González case (5.01 percent of the overall programming time), the data point toward the existence of an inverse relationship between the coverage of the González' story and the scope of coverage of the rest of Latino news. As coverage of Elián increased, the coverage of other Latino stories decreased.

Among other relevant findings:

- While Latinos constituted 12.5 percent of the population in 2000, the number of stories devoted to them dropped from 162 in 1999 to 84 in 2000.
- The length of time of stories about Latinos also declined. Even with the inclusion of CNN's evening

news in the sample, the average story length dropped from two minutes 45 seconds in 1999 to one minute, 50 seconds in 2000, a substantial and significant drop of almost a minute.

- ABC aired the largest number and the longest stories. It aired a total of 26 stories averaging two minutes and six seconds in length. CBS aired 23 stories which averaged two minutes and two seconds in length.
- CNN and NBC had a combined total of 35 stories. The report also found that stories dealing with Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rico often aired on CNN's World Minute, which devoted less than 20 seconds to the presentation of a specific Latino story. CNN presented only 20 stories dealing with Latinos. It, however, aired the most stories about the Elián González case with the longest length of time. The average length of CNN stories was one minute and 20 seconds. In contrast, CNN covered 110 stories about the Elián controversy, averaging 3 minutes and 39 seconds in length.

Table 1 — Number of Stories about Latinos by Network

	ABC	CBS	CNN	NBC	Total
Number of Stories	26 30.95%	23 27.38%	20 23.8%	15 17.85%	84
Total Number of Seconds	3280	2810	1600	1590	9280
Average Seconds per Story	126.15	122.11	80	106	110.3

Elián González

	ABC	CBS	CNN	NBC	Total
Number of Stories	82 23.57%	82 23.57%	110 31.6%	74 21.26%	348
Total Number of Seconds	15180	12030	24090	14350	65650
Average Seconds per Story	185.12	146.71	219	193.92	186.18

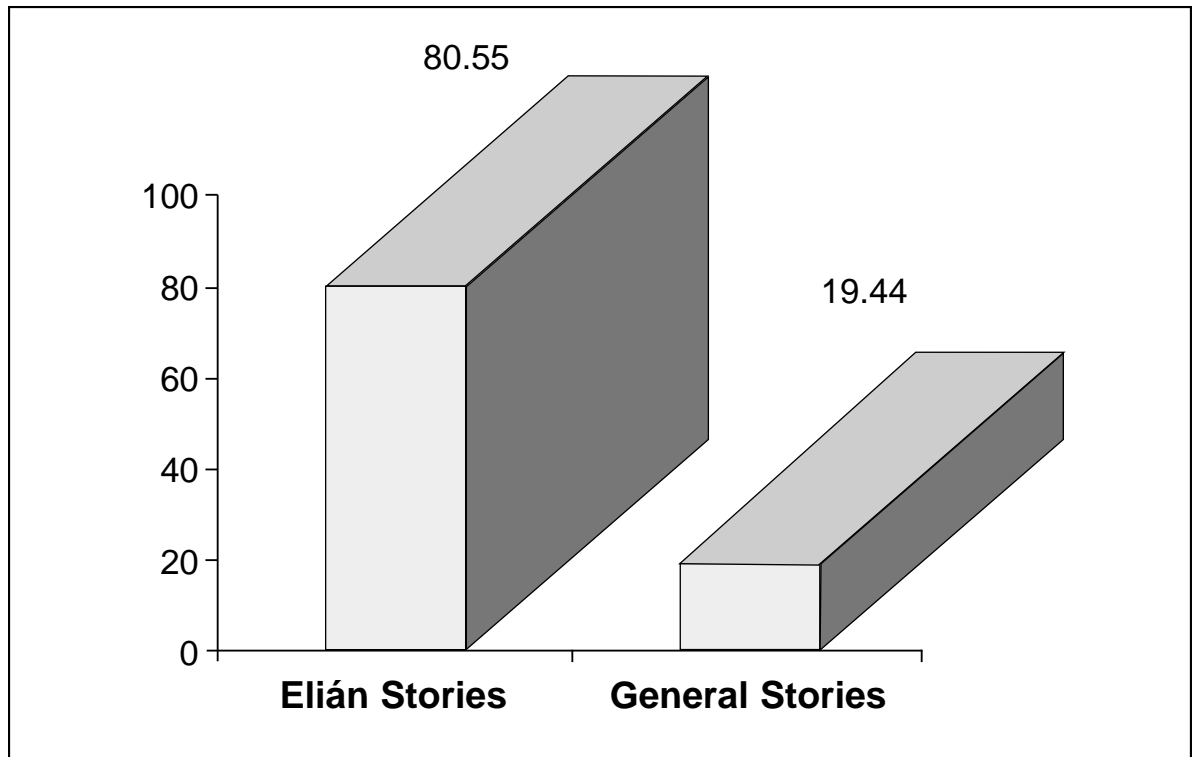
¹ The NAHJ Network Brownout Reports have been authored by Rod Carveth and Diane Alverio starting in 1996. The 2000 research, data analysis and research report was conducted by Dr. Serafin Méndez-Méndez and Diane Alverio following the same overall parameters and methodology established in previous years.

² U.S. Census Bureau. "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: Census 2000 Brief." March 2001.

³ Nielsen Media Research. "Hispanic-American Television Audience." <http://www.nielsenmedia.com/ethnicmeasure/hispanic-american/>

⁴ Each of the networks transmits approximately 182.5 hours of news in their evening newscasts per year.

Chart 1 — Percentage of Latino Stories on Network Evening News: 2000



Story Topics

The overall number of stories about Latinos — excluding those on Elián González — declined from 162 in 1999 to 84 in 2000. There were 346 stories about Elián González. The number of Latino story topics (excluding the Elián González case) also declined from 18 in 1999 to nine in 2000. Almost one third of the stories (32.14 percent) were devoted to protests around the Navy bombing exercises in Vieques island in Puerto Rico. The three other largest categories were 1) Immigration issues with 16 stories (19.05 percent); 2) Campaign 2000 and politics with 13 stories (15.48 percent), and 3) Crime with eight stories (9.52 percent). Other important findings in this category were:

- In 2000, the networks attempted to examine the importance of the Latino vote in the elections by focusing on the Bush campaign efforts to reach Latino voters. The number of stories dealing with Latinos in politics increased from five stories (3 percent) to 13 stories (15.4 percent) in 2000. The report also found that the three primary networks provided more in-depth coverage of political issues than in the previous year as well as airing more stories on the changing trends in U.S. demographics. CNN focused on more transient topics.
- Immigration continues to be a pivotal and defining issue for Latinos in network news. While undocumented immigrants make up an overwhelming minority of the Latino population in the United States, almost one fifth of the stories that aired in 2000 dealt with this issue. Reports often centered on illegal immigration from Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Colombia to the United States.
- Crime continues to be one of the most prevalent story topics portraying Latinos. Stories dealing with crime — primarily drug related — accounted for almost 10 percent of all news stories about Latinos. CNN aired half of these stories.
- Bilingual education resurfaced again as a Latino topic in 2000. In 1999, there were no stories about Latinos and bilingual education. There were four in 2000.
- Some noteworthy topics — affirmative action, health and safety and sports — were lacking from the 2000 coverage when compared to previous studies.

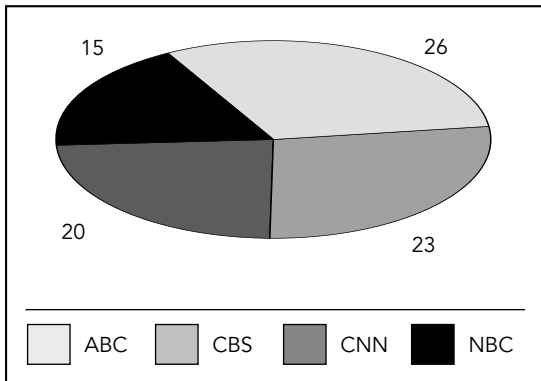
Table 2 — Subjects of Stories Covered by Network News

Topic	Frequency	Percentage	Total Number of Seconds Devoted to Subjects	Average Length of Stories in Seconds
Arts & Entertainment	5	5.95	260	52
Bilingual Education	4	4.76	1020	255
Campaign 2000/Politics	13	15.48	2350	180.77
Census/Demographics	3	3.57	720	206.66
Crime	8	9.52	890	111.25
Economics/Businesses	2	2.38	310	155
Migration	16	19.05	1610	100.6
Vieques Island Bombing and Protests	27	32.14	1480	54.81
Weather	6	7.14	740	123.33
	84	100	9280	110.35

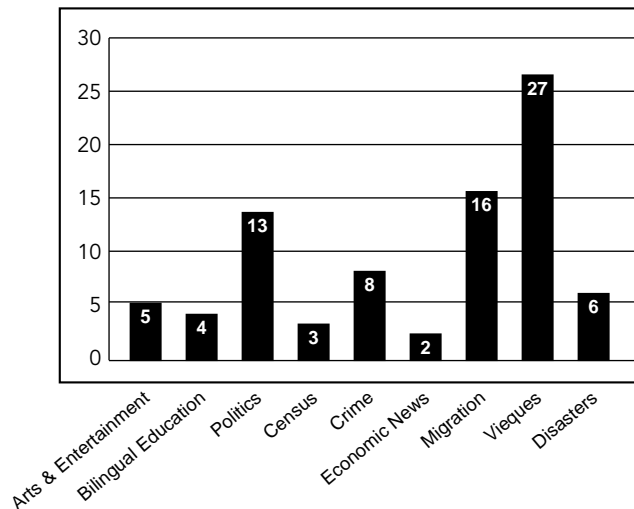
Table 3 — Subject of Stories by Networks

Topic	ABC	CBS	CNN	NBC	Total
Arts & Entertainment	1	1	1	2	5
Bilingual Education	2	1		1	4
Campaign 2000/Politics	5	5	0	3	13
Census/Demographics	1	0	1	1	3
Crime	3	1	4	0	8
Economics/Businesses	1		1	0	2
Migration	5	6	3	2	16
Vieques Island Bombing & Protests	7	8	9	3	27
Weather	1	1	1	3	6
	26	22	20	15	84

**Chart 2
Number of Stories by Network**



**Chart 3
Distribution of Stories by Topics:
2000 Brownout**



Geographical Peg

Many U.S. cities were underrepresented in the origination of Latino stories. While there were 11 stories originating from Los Angeles, cities such as New York and Chicago were underrepresented. Most of the coverage of the Elián González case originated in Miami (see table 4).

Table 4
Geographic Distribution of Stories

There were 39 stories that originated in the studio. Forty-five other stories were reported from cities in the field and several of them included multiple locations.

City	Number of Stories
Ajo, AZ	1
Douglas, AZ	2
Phoenix, AZ	1
Rogers, AR	1
Washington, D.C.	8
Fairfield, CA	1
Los Angeles, CA	11
San Diego, CA	1
Miami, FL	1
Des Moines, IA	1
New York, NY	2
Bedford, NH	1
Manchester, NH	1
Philadelphia, PA	2
San Juan, PR	2
Vieques, PR	5
Austin, TX	1
Dallas, TX	1
Laredo, TX	1
Spokane, WA	1
Foreign:	
Okinawa, Japan	1
Mexico City	2

Reporters: Monolithic Voices Within the Networks

The report found that out of 45 Latino-related news stories that aired on location, none were covered by a Latino reporter. There were 39 stories that were covered from the studio. ABC's Elizabeth Vargas presented only one of those stories (2.5 percent).

Judy Muller (ABC) and Bill Whitaker (CBS) each covered three stories about Latinos, the most of any reporter.

Table 5
Network Correspondents

Correspondents Reporting from the Field	Number of Stories
Deborah Amos	2
Jim Axelrod	1
David Bloom	1
Mike Boettcher	2
Tom Brokaw	1
Frank Buckley	1
Phil Claiborne	1
Morton Dean	1
Drew Griffen	1
Dan Harris	1
Erin Hayes	1
Sandra Hughes	1
Phil Jones	1
Andrea Koppel	1
Gregg Lamotte	1
George Lewis	1
David Martin	1
Jamie McIntyre	2
Bob McNamara	1
John McWethy	1
Jim Miklaszowski	1
Russ Mitchell	1
Terry Moran	1
Judy Muller	3
Byron Pitts	2
Bill Redecker	2
Dean Reynolds	1
Brian Rooney	2
Kerry Sanders	1
Richard Schlesinger	1
Bob Sjeffer	1
Betsy Stark	1
Anne Thompson	1
Kelly Wallace	1
Bill Whitaker	3
Harris Whitbeck	1
Fredricka Whitfield	1
Jim Wooten	1
Charles Zewe	1

Interview Subjects

A positive trend in the profile of Latino issues and Latinos in the news related to the use of interview subjects. (See table 6-8.) Of the 84 stories that aired about Latinos in 2000, Latinos were interviewed in 31 stories (24.4 percent). A total of 133 interviews (many reports had multiple interviews) were conducted, including 69 with Latinos (51.9 percent). A total of **27 Latinos** were interviewed in 1999.

ABC and CBS profiled the largest number of Latinos in their interviews. CNN and NBC used fewer Latino

subjects. A noteworthy pattern was that more Latino professionals, who encompassed a broad range of professions such as law enforcement agents, college professors and analysts, were interviewed. Chart 4 and table 8 illustrate the increasing use of Latino college professors and analysts to contextualize stories. This is a favorable trend in network coverage of the stories. It was also encouraging to see a favorable sample of career professionals across the interviewing spectrum.

Table 6 — Interview Subjects

	Number of Stories that Interviewed	%	Number of Latinos Interviewed	%	Number of Interviews	%
ABC	13	41.93	31	44.92	51	60.8
CBS	8	25.80	16	23.18	38	28.6
CNN	6	19.35	8	11.59	14	57.14
NBC	4	12.90	14	20.28	30	46.7
Total	31		69		133	

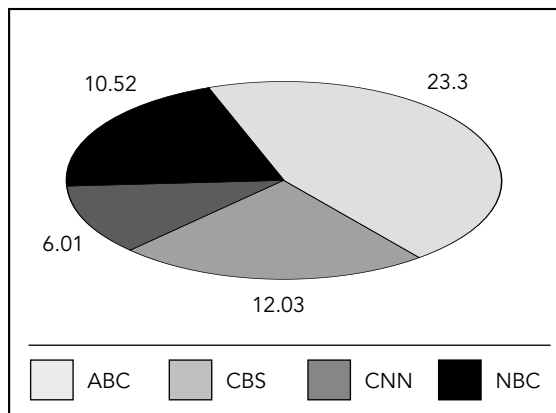
**Table 7
Percentage of Latino Interviews
by Total Number of Interviews**

Network	%
ABC	23.30
CBS	12.03
CNN	6.01
NBC	10.52

**Table 8
Labels Affixed to Latino Interview Subjects**

Label	Number
Activists	3
Attorney	1
Business Owners	3
College Professor and Analysts	4
Government Administrators	1
Illegal Immigrants	5
Journalists/Publishers	3
Law Enforcement Officers	4
Latino Politicians	7
Priest/Clergy	1
School Administrators	2
Students	5
White Collar Jobs	2
Total	41

**Chart 4
Percentage of Latino Interviews
by Total Number of Interviews**



Trends

There have been some interesting patterns in the coverage of Latinos throughout the years. In 2000, there was a substantial drop in the number of stories about Latinos, as well as in average story length. Charts 5 and 6 present the overall trends in these areas since 1995. Although the trends appear to be fairly stable between 1996 and 1999, there was a major decline in 2000. Once again, this may suggest that the Elián González story affected the way the networks covered other Latino stories, both in topic selection as well as qualitatively.

Trends

Chart 5
Longitudinal Trends: Average Story Length by Year

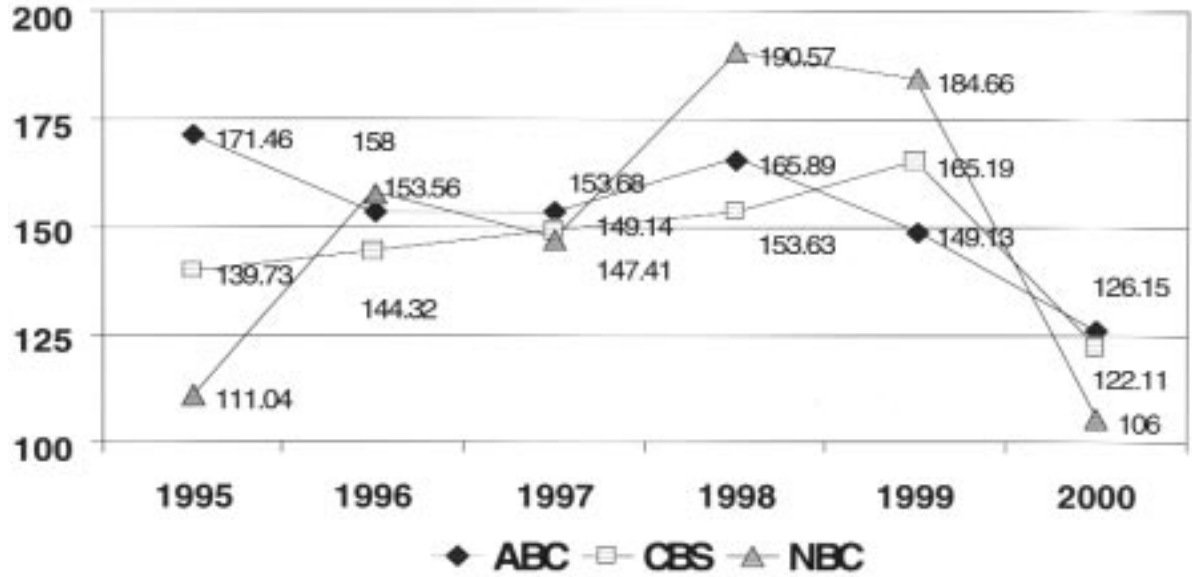
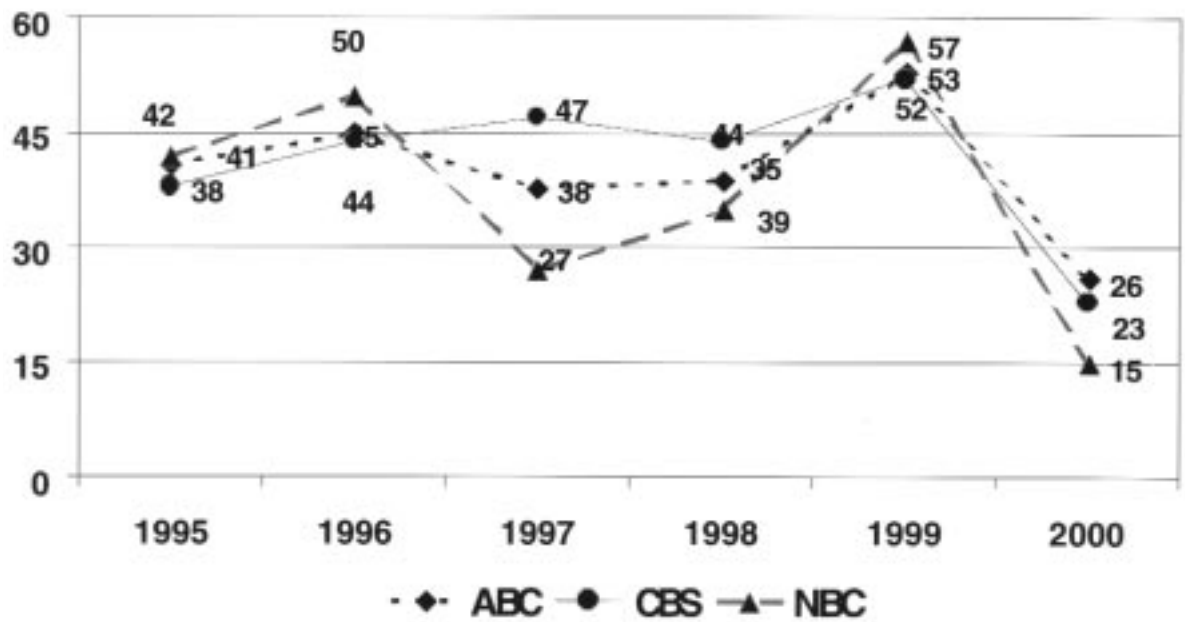


Chart 6
Longitudinal Trends: Number of Stories Covered by the Networks by Year



Critical Reading of Television News

A Different Look at the News: A Latino Critical Reading of Television News Stories

A total of 84 stories about Latinos or Latino issues appeared in the network news in 2000. This is an insignificant number when we take into account that there were nearly 16,000 stories aired last year on the evening broadcasts on ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN. News departments do not seem to acknowledge the Latino presence in the United States. Although there were a few stories dealing specifically with the growth of the Latino population in the United States — most prominently the projections issued by the U.S. Census Bureau and the role of Latinos in the 2000 elections — U.S. television networks in general were slow to recognize the social, political and economic roles that Latinos play in the United States. A detailed analysis of 15 stories aired by the four networks revealed an even more troublesome picture about how Latinos are depicted in the media.

In examining these newscasts, we assessed the themes, storylines and images shown by network news against the subjects, objects, social, economic and political forces that describe or define U.S. society. The Elián González story was not included in this examination.

THEM versus US

Even when there is some **textual** acknowledgment of the importance of Latinos in the United States, network anchors and reporters still build distance between them as members of the mainstream U.S. society and Latinos as a whole. The mainstream press, made up mostly of white males and females, often views Latinos as a foreign group difficult to explain or analyze. There were several specific examples of this.

The study found that one anchorman stated, "Now to Latinos" when transitioning to a story about Latinos that created a linguistic distance, real and symbolic, between him as a representative of the ethnic majority and the subject matter he was about to discuss.

Other comments made by anchors and reporters covering Latino stories were:

"Spanish is the one thing **they all** have in common."⁵
"**Their** numbers are such already that **their** future seems

to be with **them** for better or for worse depending on **who** is being affected."⁶

"**They** are not an **ethnic lump**."⁷

"Five years from now there will be more of **them** than there are black Americans."

"Many Latinos say that it is about time that **we** get to know **them** better."

Many of the statements presented in the news built a barrier between "them" and "us." This sharply contrasted with the attempt of many Latinos who were interviewed to acknowledge and legitimize themselves in the news as members of the larger U.S. society. For example, a Latino Republican activist typified this pattern when he said: "Latino values are American values." A female Puerto Rican president of a dot-com company strongly affirmed that she hoped to see a Latina president of the United States during her lifetime.

Aural Signifiers: Between Salsa and Mariachis

There were several instances when the sound of salsa music and the music of Mexican mariachis was used to contextualize, allude and refer to Latinos, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. Regardless of the seriousness of the story, whether it dealt with census data, with the impact of the Mexican elections in California, or with the role of Latino voters in the U.S. presidential elections, Latinos are often accompanied by the sound of their music. Music is used more often with stories about Latinos than any other ethnic group.

Ghettoization of Latinos

There was a disproportionate number of video sequences that provided a visual signifier to the verbal scripts where Latinos were "ghettoized." In the coverage of many topics, Latinos were generally presented as crowds of brown human hordes coming down narrow corridors or streets. Reporters often positioned themselves against the backdrop of these masses. Latinos are constructed in terms of the stereotypical "barrio." One of the most significant instances of this was the coverage of the death of famous musician Tito Puente. Even when Puente was a musician of international stature who transcended national boundaries, he was contextualized

⁵ There are multiple generations of Latinos living in the United States. Millions of them do not speak Spanish.

⁶ The broadcaster seems to suggest that the increase of the Latino population may have a detrimental effect on someone, possibly the white "majority," and that the strength of Latinos relies only on the size of the population, not necessarily the quality of their contributions to U.S. society as a whole.

⁷ This is an extremely negative metaphor that in itself constitutes a powerful and negative label to characterize Latinos.

in relation to the Puerto Rican barrio with scores of Puerto Rican people with flags surrounding the chapel where his body was being viewed. The closing statement from the reporter was “the hearse will travel through New York Barrio in a final salute.”

The Transient Nature of the Latino Population/Immigration

There were a series of visual images that tended to cue the audience about the transient nature of Latino people in the United States. A powerful visual sequence of a Latino jumping a fence and crossing the border between Mexico and California characterized this pattern. There were two independent instances of separate reporters standing in front of clearly legible signs saying “Giros a Mexico” (Money Orders to Mexico) and “Agencia de Viajes” (Travel Agency). Even if the majority of Latinos are stable ethnic groups with little mobility, in these portrayals they tend to be a highly mobile and transient.

The theme of immigration, regardless of the topic of the story, was a powerful subtext in many of the broadcasts. Immigration, and more often illegal immigration, is a powerful **terministic screen** used to depict Latinos. Once again, Latinos are featured as having a special volatility and transience that is unlike any other group. This implies a lack of knowledge, or perhaps fear of dealing with Latinos. This is characterized by one reporter: “[immigration and Latinos] will test new ways of America to assimilate newcomers.” The verbal cue was accompanied by visuals of hundreds of Latino immigrants waving little U.S. flags while being sworn in as U.S. citizens. This statement implies that the United States has a challenge in having to deal with Latinos.

Puerto Rican Minutes are Twenty Seconds Long

An interesting pattern in the broadcasts was CNN’s tendency to include many of the Vieques Island stories, which is directly related to U.S. citizens residing in Puerto Rico, as part of the Worldview Minute. These stories, generally no longer than 20 seconds in length, were covered haphazardly most of the time. There was almost no use of interview subjects, with CNN just summarizing the events of the day. The coverage of the Vieques issue was of significance because there were no efforts to contextualize appropriately the situation in Vieques by giving historical background information. There was no inclusion of U.S. Navy or Puerto Rico government officials as sources for the stories and there was only one instance where one of the leaders of the protest was interviewed.

Disasters by the Beach

Natural disasters have been story topics for many years. This year the stories that were covered related mostly to the passing of Hurricane Debby through the

Caribbean. These stories are included as part of the study because they made reference to the potential impact of the storm on Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Two of these stories were part of the random sample selected for the qualitative analysis. As in the case of Vieques, the stories are more significant for what they excluded rather than for what they included. Reporters generally stand in front of a sea landscape filled with tropical palms being blown by hurricane winds. Chaotic visuals of people making last minute shopping trips and securing their households were interspersed with the story. There was a sequence of a Puerto Rican man surfing his way into the strong waves created by the storm. There were no takes of the interior of the island, where storms generally have a devastating impact on agriculture. There were no interviews with Puerto Rican government officials telling the audience the measures that were being taken to protect the people. Once again, there was a general superficiality in the coverage of the weather, just as with the Vieques protests.

The Use of Statistics in Latino Stories

A trend in the newscasts was the frequent use of statistics to show the audience the importance of Latinos in the United States. The news broadcasts were interested in conveying the “potential” power of Latinos through the use of statistics. Whether the stories reported on the educational achievement of students who had left bilingual programs, the size of the Latino viewing audience, U.S. Census demographic projections, or the 2000 election campaign, there were a plethora of statistics used in these broadcasts. In the meantime, there was a dearth of information explaining the evolution of the nation’s Latino communities in the United States.

Spanish as a Barrier

The relatively frequent use of English voiceovers, heavily accented interviewees, and people speaking in Spanish were powerful elements in the construction of Latinos in the news. The networks tend to punctuate the predominant use of Spanish as a defining feature of Latinos and Latino immigrants. This ignores the fact that most U.S.-born Latinos are either bilingual or do not speak Spanish. One anchor noted, “Spanish is the one thing they all have in common,” a blatant generalization that creates a vision of Latinos as being strangers in their own land and subtly undermines that the majority of Latinos were born in the United States. In the view of the networks, the ability of many Latinos to speak Spanish is a weakness rather than a strength.

A Fragmented Minority

Latinos are still portrayed as being weak and fragmented **ethnic groups**. The examined broadcasts revealed that viewers received a highly reduced and simplified symbolic image of Latinos. (**Broadcasts of Elián González were not viewed.**) Most stories visually divided Latinos into two distinct subgroups residing in two dissimilar geographical areas; Latinos of Mexican-American heritage in

the Southwest, and Puerto Ricans in the Northeast. They visually and verbally characterized Mexican Americans by their transience and immigration problems, and Puerto Ricans were visually constructed as a somewhat chaotic, salsa-dancing and flag-waving ethnic group. In the eyes of the networks, their command of Spanish weakens rather than strengthens them. Scores of other Latinos with roots in nearly two dozen nations were ignored by the networks

in 2000. News coverage failed to acknowledge, in images or in words, the valuable contributions that other Latino groups make to the fabric of U.S. society. Even if we take into account that many hours of coverage were devoted to Elián González, there was not a cohesive, comprehensive or positive image of Latinos emerging from network news coverage.

Conclusions

In presenting a report about Latinos in the United States last year, ABC anchor Peter Jennings explained that 11 percent of the United States population watching television received their news from Spanish-language outlets. He underscored that in the Los Angeles market alone, Spanish-language radio and television stations have the highest ratings of the overall market.⁸ These statistics are highly meaningful to the extent that they point to the fact that in the beginning of the 21st Century, the majority of Latinos do not watch the news on English-language television networks.

When we look at the data outlined in this report it is easy to understand why Latino audiences may not rely on the English-language television networks for their news. First and foremost, English-language networks are not fulfilling the informational needs of Latino audiences, consistently excluding them from news coverage. In addition, the Latino images presented by the English-language news media are likely to have little reciprocity or consonance with the images they hold of themselves or about their cultures.

The 2000 report brings some highly distressing information about the involvement of Latinos in network news. The Elián González custody case boosted the coverage of Latino stories to its highest number since the inception of the study. However, when the hours of coverage about Elián were excluded, the amount of time devoted to Latino news drops to its lowest total ever (2.57 hours). There are some provocative questions that emerge from this fact. Is there a glass ceiling or a quota in the coverage of Latino news? Do producers and editors consider the Elián story to be either representative of the entire Latino community or believe the story has saturated the market on the number of stories that can air about Latinos? This data suggests the need to do further studies on the criteria that producers have when covering the Latino community.

Another distressing piece of information relates to the

limited amount of story topics used to portray Latinos. The number of topical stories about Latinos declined, with most stories dealing with highly constraining and stereotypical topics such as crime and immigration. The exclusion of many important cities and geographical areas with large populations of people of color as sources of important stories about Latinos is also a reason for concern. The U.S. Southwest was the leading source of stories about Latinos in the United States. Areas such as Chicago and New York were underrepresented in news.

Network operations have increased efforts to secure Latino interview subjects who accurately depict and represent Latino audiences and issues in the United States.

The critical reading of a sample of broadcasts, which is just a limited snapshot of the overall coverage, suggests that there are still many stereotypes and biases in reporting about the Latino community. While there was an effort by the network to cover Latinos more in depth during the election and Census 2000, there were still some stunning negative portrayals of Latinos in those reports.

The construction of Latinos in the news during the year 2000 was limited to three specific Latino subgroups. These were Mexican Americans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Many other important members of the Latino society were excluded from the coverage of the news, thus limiting a complete portrayal of the Latino image.

Puerto Ricans in the United States were denied access to in-depth coverage of issues that affect them. The coverage of the Vieques Island protests was shallow at best and the networks failed to provide enough historical and sociological data to contextualize the issues that affect this very important segment of the Latino market.

The overall findings of the study suggest that much progress still needs to be made in the reporting offered by U.S. English-language network news operations about Latinos and Latino issues.

⁸ Peter Jennings, ABC's World News Tonight, January 21, 2000.

Methodological Framework

As in previous years, the data for our study came from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archives.⁹ Since 1968, the archives have videotaped each story aired by the networks during their evening newscasts. The stories are then indexed and summarized by the archives, which prepares abstracts for each story and each newscast aired during the calendar year. Each abstract contains “story level summaries” of the evening news which provide descriptors such as the: 1) network on which the story aired; 2) date of the broadcast, 3) running title or topic of the story; 4) beginning and ending time of the story; 5) the city where the story originated; 6) name of anchor or studio correspondent who introduced the story; 7) field correspondents who were part of the reports; 8) names and titles of persons interviewed for the story; and 9) a brief summary of the story. The archives have a powerful search engine, available through the World Wide Web, that allows users to search stories by date by inputting specific keywords. Through the use of a boolean search engine, the archives identify each story containing the keywords. An abstract is shown in the screen with the above-referenced descriptors. The unit of analysis for this study is not the story aired by the network per se but the “summarized abstracts” prepared by Vanderbilt.

To identify the stories portraying Latinos, we replicated the sampling method that has been used since 1996. One new addition to the study is the inclusion of CNN evening news into the sample along with ABC, CBS, and NBC.¹⁰ The sampling consisted of the following procedures:

Searches of stories containing the general and most important Latino designations were used. These were “Latino”, “Latin Americans,” “Hispanic,” and “Hispanic Americans.” Approximately 60 percent of the stories were found through this procedure.

A broad list of specific Latino subgroups was prepared. Examples were “Cuban,” “Cuban American,” “Puerto Ricans,” “Colombian,” “Ecuadorians,” “Chileans,” etc. Approximately 15 percent of the stories were found by following this procedure.

A comprehensive list of keywords such as “bilingual education,” “crime,” “undocumented laborers,” “border” and the like was prepared. This list consisted of more than 150 descriptors associated with Latino

society in the United States, Latino surnames, etc. They yielded approximately 25 percent of the stories found and used.

The criteria followed in the selection of the stories were narrowed so that they had to focus on issues facing Latinos in the United States. For example, there was extensive coverage of the election of Mexico President Vicente Fox. If the story centered around Mexican politics in Mexico, it was excluded from the study. When the story focused on Fox talking about immigration and Mexican Americans in the United States, it was included as part of our sample.

To verify the integrity of the process, we selected 20 stories at random (i.e. using a computerized random generator program) from the overall universe of stories indexed by Vanderbilt in 2000. Those story abstracts were indexed to verify if they dealt with any Latino issues. No additional stories were found.

The sampling procedures this year yielded 432 stories that contained at least one the descriptors used. Eighty-four stories (19.44 percent) in the sample were general stories having to do with nine discreet categories of Latino issues such as arts and entertainment, immigration and similar issues. Surprisingly there were 348 stories (80.55 percent) dealing with the Elián González custody issue (See Chart 1). While these stories were quantitatively analyzed, we segregated the results from the general sample as this issue was an anomaly that doesn’t represent the normal distribution and frequency of stories found by this research initiative since 1996. Statistical descriptors for the coverage of González’ story are provided separately.

The 84 story abstracts were categorized according to the descriptors available in the summaries. They were stored into a computerized database management program. Each story was sequentially numbered according to date of airing and later sorted by the descriptors that characterized them. All the frequency distributions and statistics presented here were achieved by analyzing these descriptors.

For the first time since the inception of first network brownout study, NAHJ decided to add an additional level of analysis to the study. Using the list of stories dealing with Latinos in the news and Latino issues, 15 stories were selected at random from the list. Once again, those stories were selected using a computerized

⁹ <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu>

¹⁰ The decision to include CNN evening newscasts in the study was motivated by the growing importance of CNN as provider of news, as well by the repeated concern of many researchers that CNN be included to have a base for comparison with the three other networks. In addition, CNN stories are now available for researchers to use and analyze. When the studies began, CNN story summaries were not available for analysis.

program. In this portion of the analysis, the stories dealing with Elián González were not included in the sample. Videotaped copies of the broadcasts were ordered from Vanderbilt and submitted to an in-depth critical reading to unravel the qualitative dimensions of the Latino portrayals by English-language networks. The guiding question in this analysis was: What is the nature of the image of Latinos portrayed by the networks? The analysis assessed the selection of interview subjects, the level of understanding that reporters demonstrated about Latinos, the physical settings of the field stories, the statistical data used to substantiate the arguments, the symbolic properties of the stories, the tone of the stories and themes that were selected. A broad range of theoretical perspectives commonly used in the analysis of media texts, and which will be explained later, guided our readings.

There were two theoretical research perspectives that were particularly useful in this analysis. Semiotic analysis informed our analysis about the way in which Latinos were constructed through specific symbols prevalent in U.S. society.¹¹ The easiest way to elicit a meaning in the

audience is to provide them with visual and verbal cues (signifiers) that they are familiar with. These cues have the capacity to influence and guide the audience into a particular direction when they are giving meaning to a story. In order to represent Latinos, news operations have frequently used a series of visual symbols that convey, but at the same time limit and stereotype, the Latino issues that they attempt to represent.¹² Our analyses were also guided by the use of several critical perspectives esteeming from the field of rhetorical criticism. Kenneth Burke's usage of the concept of terministic screens was particularly useful. A terministic screen occurs when a rhetor or an opinion leader manages to generate a term, symbol or image which is so powerful that it causes the receivers of the message subsequently to associate any further rhetorical act coming from the speaker or actor with the initial term. An example of a terministic screen related to Latino coverage in the media is the concept of "South of the Border." This is a powerful terministic screen used often to refer to Mexico and which immediately sways the audience in a direction when it is used.¹³

Limitations of Study

One of the limitations of this study is that the unit of analysis used for the quantitative content analysis portion was the story index rather than the story itself. The introduction of a qualitative component this year helps offset this limitation as it gives the researcher access to a limited amount of actual stories. However, in order to continue assessing the nature of the media

coverage about Latinos, there is a need to increase the survey of actual broadcasts. Another limitation is the dearth of network data about the personnel involved in the process of manufacturing the news. It will be important to have data that will help us to assess the role of those gatekeepers that may be involved in this process.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of semiotics and semiological criticism refer to Serafín Méndez-Méndez, "On Seeing of Communication and the Visual Image", in Sarah S. King, Serafín Méndez-Méndez and Andrew Moemeka *Effective Communication: Theory into Practice*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1996. 10-1-10-7. Also refer to Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson *Sign Wars*, New York, the Guildford Press. 1996.

¹² Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. New York. Prentice Hall. 1945.

¹³ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. New York. Prentice Hall. 1945.

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