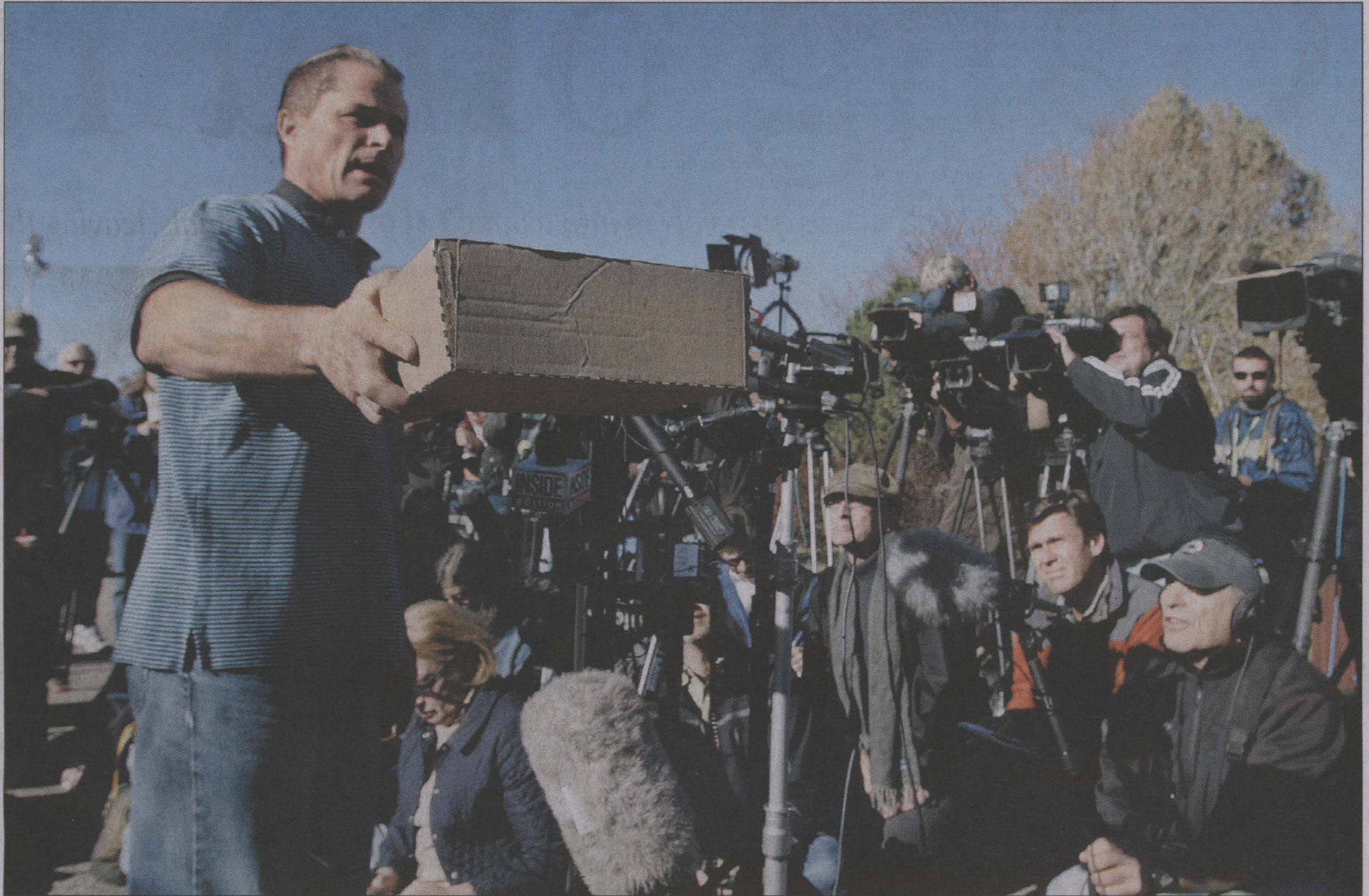


Balloon boy's parents face legal action



Suspicious of a hoax: Richard Heene holds a box for written media questions about his claims on his son's supposed balloon flight

Pictures: AP

FORT COLLINS: After searching an 80km area of Colorado for a boy they thought had been trapped in a UFO-style balloon, the police hunt was reduced to the home of Falcon Heene yesterday — to prepare charges against his parents.

Richard and Mayumi Heene met Larimer County investigators amid questions about whether the father perpetrated a publicity stunt when the six-year-old vanished into his garage while the world thought he was hurtling in the sky.

Sheriff Jim Alderden declined to say who would be charged or what the allegations would be. His deputies showed up at the Heene's Fort Collins home with a search warrant, and at least three began a search.

Sheriff Alderden refused to call Friday's drama a hoax but expressed disappointment that he was unable to level more serious charges in the incident.

"We were looking at Class 3 misdemeanor, which hardly



Charges: Sheriffs raid the Heene house

seems serious enough given the circumstances," he said. "We are talking to the district attorney (and) federal officials to see if perhaps there aren't additional federal charges that are appropriate in this circumstance."

Suspicion that the balloon saga was a hoax arose almost immediately after Falcon was found hiding in a cardboard box in his attic.

Mr Heene, a storm chaser and

inventor whose family has appeared on the reality show *Wife Swap*, and his wife had claimed one of the boy's older brothers had said Falcon was aboard the homemade balloon when it took off. Authorities questioned the Heenes after Falcon turned to his dad when asked by CNN why he stayed in his hiding place. "You said we did this for a

show," the boy said to his father. Over the weekend, Falcon was sick during two TV interviews when asked again why he hid.

Richard Heene knocked on the windows of journalists camped outside his home yesterday, promising a "big announcement". A few hours later, he did an about-face, telling journalists to leave questions in a cardboard box on the front doorstep. A circus-like atmosphere formed

outside, including men holding signs and occasionally yelling "balloon boy." One sign read, "Put balloon boy on TV: America's Most Wanted."

The Heenes have said the balloon was supposed to be tethered to the ground when it lifted off, and no one was supposed to be aboard. A video of the launch shows the family counting down in unison, "3, 2, 1" before Richard Heene pulls a cord, setting the balloon into the air.

"Whoa!" one of the boys exclaims. Then his father says in disbelief, "Oh, my God." He then says to someone, "You didn't put the (expletive) tether down" and he kicks the wood frame that had held the balloon.

Falcon's brother said he saw him inside the compartment before it took off and that's why they thought he was in there when it launched. Heene said he had yelled at Falcon before the launch for getting inside.

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