



When the story is us:
Miami Herald, Nuevo Herald and Radio Martí
Epilogue

On the evening of Monday, October 2, 2006, McClatchy Vice President-News Howard Weaver and Vice President-Operations Frank Whittaker convened an extraordinary meeting of the Miami Herald Media Company's executive committee at Miami's Mandarin Hotel. There, the McClatchy executives announced that the reporters fired from *El Nuevo Herald* (ENH) on September 7 would be rehired, that Publisher Jesús Díaz had resigned, and that David Landsberg—former general manager and advertising vice president—would be the new publisher.¹

Díaz resigned formally the following morning, Tuesday, October 3. He also announced the rehire of the ENH journalists; after further investigation, the *Miami Herald* had found that a total 49 Miami-area fulltime journalists or news contributors had been paid by Radio/TV Martí from October 2001-August 2006. That included eight *Nuevo Herald* staff members, and 29 of its freelancers.² Díaz wrote in a statement that he believed the journalists violated “widely accepted principles of journalist ethics.” But, he added:

Our policies prohibiting such behavior may have been ambiguously communicated, inconsistently applied and widely misunderstood over many years in the *El Nuevo Herald* newsroom... I realize and regret that the events of the past three weeks have created an environment that no longer allows me to lead our newspapers in a manner most beneficial for our newspapers, our readers and our community.³

¹ Details from author's interview with Humberto Castelló on April 13, 2009, in Miami. Some reported that Díaz had tendered his resignation two weeks earlier, but stayed on at McClatchy's request until they could name a replacement. See: Douglas Hanks, “A column, a quarrel—and change at the top,” *Miami Herald*, October 4, 2006.

² Christina Hoag, “Newsroom philosophies differ,” *Miami Herald*, October 4, 2006.

³ *Associated Press*, “Miami Herald publisher resigns over government payments controversy,” October 3, 2006.

This epilogue was written by Kirsten Lundberg, Director, Knight Case Studies Initiative at the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. The faculty sponsors were Assistant Professor Mirta Ojito and Associate Dean Arlene Morgan. Funding was provided by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. (0210)

Copyright © 2010 The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the Case Studies Initiative.

The McClatchy and Miami Herald Media Company executives also announced that in future no journalists from either publication would take payment for appearing on government-sponsored media.

Chihuahuas. Later on October 3, Fiedler called a *Miami Herald* newsroom staff meeting. He was asked how the *Herald* would defend Oscar Corral, reporter of the September 8 story, against attacks from Spanish-language radio. Flippantly, says Fiedler, he responded that the *Herald* did not have to worry because the radio station in question was like “little chihuahuas nipping at our heels.” Once the *Herald* learned that an *Associated Press* reporter in the room planned to report the comment, the paper ran it as an item itself. Again, the public uproar was intense. “It was just like throwing gasoline on the fire,” reports Fiedler; he was called a racist, anti-Cuban, anti-Hispanic.⁴ Fiedler apologized both to the newsroom, and on the front page of the paper. In December 2006, Fiedler announced his resignation from the *Miami Herald* effective February 2007. Fiedler made no mention of the Radio Martí incident. But many noted the coincidence of the timing.

Corral, for one, was grateful for the leadership Fiedler had demonstrated at the *Herald*. Corral was frustrated when the paper proved reluctant to run the other parts of his planned series. Fiedler rescued the pieces, which ran in November and December 2006.⁵ “Fiedler stood up for this. He gave me cover and he took a lot of the heat. He showed some very, very serious courage doing that,” notes Corral. The series, he felt, demonstrated that “90 percent of the money intended to promote democracy in Cuba never reached Cuba. It stayed in Miami and Washington and Radio and TV Martí. A tiny percentage of the actual funding or even of the products of that funding reached Cuba.” On the Radio Martí story, Corral found Fiedler to be “a very good editor, a very good journalist, and I think he did the best he could.”

I think he did it honestly. I don’t think there was a hidden agenda. Any shortcomings in the reporting or in the story were honest shortcomings. They were not intentional and they were not irresponsible.⁶

Hoyt report. One of Publisher Landsberg’s first acts was to engage Clark Hoyt, former head of the Knight Ridder Washington bureau, to come investigate the entire episode. Hoyt arrived on October 9, 2006, and published his findings on November 19. He concluded that Corral’s story was accurate and “raised a serious and legitimate issue.”

Journalists taking payment for appearing on government-run broadcast outlets put themselves in an inherently compromised position, because the

⁴ Author’s interview with Tom Fiedler on January 16, 2009, in Boston, MA. All further quotes from Fiedler, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁵ The articles ran on November 15 (“Is U.S. aid reaching Castro foes?”; and “Democracy money spent on cashmere, crabmeat”); November 16 (“Cuba thwarts U.S. efforts to help dissidents”); December 18 (“Unheard messages”); and December 19 (“Problems dog broadcaster”).

⁶ Author’s interview with Oscar Corral on May 21, 2009, in Miami. All further quotes from Corral, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

credibility of independent news media depends on the public's trust that we are free from outside influences, especially government influence.

But on balance, he found the process and the story flawed. Its placement was too prominent, its tone accusatory, and the photographs inappropriate. He questioned why, if the Herald Media Company knew in 2002 that some of its employees worked for Radio Martí, it waited until 2006 to investigate? Hoyt adds that, at the *Miami Herald*, "there was a feeling of bewilderment about [the entire episode] and a sense of deflation, [while] the *Nuevo Herald* was filled with anger and resentment and aggressiveness."⁷

The September 8 story continued to reverberate for a long time. In late November 2006, for example, a former cartoonist from *El Nuevo Herald* took over the ENH newsroom. Jose Varela had bribed a guard to let him in, and took an assault rifle (which proved to be a toy gun) to the sixth floor, where he took the newsroom hostage for several hours. One of his grievances was how the *Miami Herald* had treated the Cuban community, specifically in the Radio Martí story.

Wilfredo Cancio Isla returned to the *Nuevo Herald* on October 3, 2006. The paper set one condition for his reinstatement: that he sever ties with Radio Martí. He agreed. Pablo Alfonso also returned to the paper briefly, but left for good later that fall. Carlos Alberto Montaner, also named in the September 8 story, sent a letter to Publisher Landsberg on November 25, 2006, registering his dismay that the *Miami Herald* had never apologized for the September 8 story. He especially deplored the Herald's reputation among Hispanics:

TMH is perceived among an increasing number of Hispanics, and especially by many Cubans, as a newspaper bent on humiliating them and on placing them in a degrading position. This is the worse [sic] consequence of stories such as Mr. Corral's.⁸

On March 19, 2009, Humberto Castelló resigned as editor of *El Nuevo Herald*. He was replaced by Manny Garcia, then-*Miami Herald* senior editor for news and formerly metro editor.

⁷ Author's interview with Clark Hoyt in New York, NY, on January 7, 2009.

⁸ Excerpt from private letter from Montaner to Landsberg, made available to the casewriter by Montaner.