



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

On September 8, 2006, the *Miami Herald* ran a Page One story titled “10 Miami journalists take U.S. pay.” The story by Oscar Corral reported that Miami-area journalists had accepted money from Radio/TV Martí, a US government-run broadcast targeted at the communist nation of Cuba. Three of the 11 journalists named in the story worked for *El Nuevo Herald*, a Spanish-language newspaper also owned by the Miami Herald Media Company. Corral wrote that the three had been fired for violating conflict of interest rules.

The story, and the disciplinary action, unleashed a firestorm of protest from Cuban-Americans and others in greater Miami. Nearly two thousand readers canceled their subscriptions. The accused at *Nuevo Herald* protested that they had permission from a previous editor to work at Radio Martí. Those accused who did not work for *Nuevo Herald* wondered why the *Miami Herald* story had cast as reprehensible a practice which they regarded as professionally unremarkable, and also a moral duty. Charges of racism and anti-Cuban prejudice raced through the Cuban-American community and fetched headlines elsewhere.

Publisher Jesús Díaz, Jr., held ultimate responsibility for both newspapers. He had made the decision to fire the three *Nuevo Herald* reporters. As criticism mounted, he came in for scathing critique within both the *Nuevo Herald* and—to the surprise of some—the *Miami Herald* newsrooms. On September 15, nationally recognized *Miami Herald* columnist Carl Hiassen submitted for publication a column about the Radio Martí incident in which, Díaz felt, Hiassen made light of the situation. Fearing more backlash, Díaz spiked the column. Hiassen protested, and threatened to resign.

The McClatchy Company had bought the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, with its crown jewel, the *Miami Herald*, just three months earlier. Headquartered in Sacramento, California, McClatchy rarely interfered in the running of its properties. But when news of the Hiassen stand-off reached Vice President for News Howard Weaver, he got involved. Hiassen’s column, he agreed, should run—and it appeared in its regularly scheduled slot on September 17.

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But matters did not die down. Instead, McClatchy watched with dismay as outrage mounted at *El Nuevo Herald*, at least one of the dismissed reporters threatened a lawsuit, others of the accused went on the attack, and the *Nuevo Herald* itself published a story about American journalists who regularly worked for government-funded Voice of America and Radio Free Europe—with no consequences. The implicit question: why had the *Miami Herald* fired Cuban-American journalists for appearing on Radio Martí? As the situation continued to worsen into early October, Vice President Weaver wondered whether McClatchy should become even more involved and, if so, what it could do to restore calm and mend damaged relations both between its two properties, and between the *Miami Herald* and the wider Miami community.

### **The two Heralds—brief history**

The *Miami Herald* (TMH) was founded in 1903 as the *Miami Evening Record* (renamed in 1910), and emerged as the dominant newspaper in Miami. John and James Knight acquired the publication in 1937, and in 1974 the Knight Newspapers group merged with Ridder Publications to become Knight Ridder. As the Spanish-speaking Miami population burgeoned, the *Herald* decided in 1975 to create a Spanish-language insert to the paper, which it called *El Herald*. For 12 years, the insert featured mostly Spanish translations of *Herald* stories.

But in 1987, the *Herald* decided to create a separate Spanish-language publication, *El Nuevo Herald* (ENH). The Miami Herald Media Company owned both publications. The new paper was still an insert inside the *Miami Herald*, but it had its own staff and conducted original reporting. ENH's audience was, first and foremost, the influential Cuban-American community in Miami. But it also appealed to a growing immigrant community from the rest of Latin America. "Miami is in many ways sort of a New York of Latin America," says Clark Hoyt, former Knight Ridder vice president of news and a long-time Miami resident.<sup>1</sup>

ENH was seen until 1995 as primarily a "Cuban" newspaper. The non-Cuban Hispanic community resented the emphasis in ENH's early days on Cuban affairs. In 1996, however, that changed, and ENH came to cover Latin American news in greater depth than its parent publication. ENH had a lively writing style characteristic of Latin American newspapers. Miami was only the third largest Spanish-speaking market in the US after Los Angeles and New York, but in Miami-Dade County, roughly half the 2 million residents spoke Spanish; more than half of those were of Cuban origin, the rest from such countries as Nicaragua, Colombia and Venezuela. Many of them were educated and middle class. From the 1960s to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Miami's population went from majority Anglo (non-Hispanic white) to majority Hispanic.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Clark Hoyt in New York, NY, on January 7, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> It's worth noting that Miami also attracted a large number of New Yorkers, who made their own contribution to the local culture.

*Ibargüen*. In January 1996, the Herald Media Company hired Alberto Ibargüen as publisher of *El Nuevo Herald*. Ibargüen was born in Puerto Rico; his mother was Puerto Rican and his father Cuban. He had been raised in New Jersey, attended schools in the Northeast (including law school) and worked at the *Hartford Courant* and *Newsday*.<sup>3</sup> Hired as publisher of *Nuevo Herald* and vice-president for the *Miami Herald* international edition, in August 1998 he became publisher of both newspapers. Ibargüen recognized that Miami had a unique cultural blend of old-line Floridians and émigrés—dating back to Nicaraguan arrivals in the 1950s—who considered themselves in exile from their countries of origin. Later arrivals from Cuba in the 1960s and onward had swelled the émigré ranks. “The concept of exile here is much stronger than the concept of immigration,” comments Ibargüen.<sup>4</sup>

Ibargüen says he accepted the job of *Nuevo Herald* publisher with the understanding that the paper would have its own identify, separate from the *Miami Herald*. “If you want a newspaper that will give voice to a different community that happens to inhabit the same geography, then we’ve got something to talk about,” Ibargüen told then-publisher David Lawrence. Early in his tenure, Ibargüen (with Lawrence’s support) made a momentous business decision—to distribute *El Nuevo Herald* separately from the *Miami Herald*. It took two years, but by May 1998 readers could buy a separate edition of the paper. In its first year, the separately distributed ENH earned an additional \$2 million for the company and saved another \$2 million in printing costs.

### **Castañeda era**

Building on that success, Ibargüen engineered a complete editorial re-imagining of *Nuevo Herald*. In November 1998, he hired as editor and publisher the respected Carlos Castañeda, who had helped the Puerto Rican *El Nuevo Dia* grow from 16,000 to 230,000 circulation, and consulted to dozens of fledgling newspapers in newly democratic Latin American countries. “The only thing I require of you is a newspaper that cannot be confused with the *Miami Herald*,” Ibargüen recalls telling Castañeda .

Castañeda delivered. With a staff of 84, including 11 general assignment reporters (compared to 425 on the *Miami Herald* editorial staff), *El Nuevo Herald* set out to cover its community in-depth. ENH had never published editorials per se, but it did run signed opinion pieces every day—a prominent outlet for forceful community views. Located on the sixth floor of the *Miami Herald* building, it prided itself especially on outperforming the *Miami Herald*. “It was absolutely my intent that they should compete,” comments Ibargüen. “Why in the world would you make them play well together? They should be competing for the story.” He adds:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibargüen had just come from the painful closing of *New York Newsday*

<sup>4</sup> Author’s interview with Alberto Ibargüen on April 14, 2009, in Miami. All further quotes from Ibargüen, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

[*El Nuevo Herald*] had a much livelier sense of the community. The Arts & Culture Section was significantly more sophisticated than the *Miami Herald*. The sense of sports and entertainment as key parts of the community, as things that ought to be on the front page of a newspaper, was important.

Castañeda stepped down in December 2001, replaced by Humberto Castelló, who had joined the paper in 1997. The paper Castelló inherited boasted bold graphics, color pictures and catchy headlines. The *Columbia Journalism Review* admiringly termed it “a hybrid, a flashy mix of Latin élan, Cuban exile political fervor, and *People* magazine. It’s a broadsheet with a tabloid mentality.”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, “El Nuevo can be sensational, hyperbolic, pandering to the worst instincts,” noted Jim Mullin, editor of the alternative weekly *New Times*.<sup>6</sup>

During Castañeda’s tenure, *El Nuevo Herald* had developed an ever-stronger following. In three years, circulation had climbed to some 98,000 on Sunday (from 90,000 in 1999) and 91,000 daily (from 76,000). Its revenues grew from \$20 to \$30 million.<sup>7</sup> In May 2002, ENH continued to attract plaudits when it won the prestigious 2001 Ortega y Gasset Journalism Award, given to the best Spanish-language daily newspaper in the world. By 2006, as the ills of the newspaper world gathered force, circulation fell to some 87,000 daily.<sup>8</sup> But it was still an important player in the Miami community.

## Separate cultures

Meanwhile, the *Miami Herald* continued to be a much larger, and separate, operation with a circulation in 2006 of 294,000 daily and 390,000 Sunday.<sup>9</sup> Tom Fiedler, a veteran TMH reporter and editor who became executive editor and vice president in 2001, says there was a “determination [by management] to make these two separate newspapers, that happened to be owned by the same corporate parent, and that’s the way we operated... We didn’t view *El Nuevo Herald* as a competitor because we were so much bigger, and our aspirations were so much larger.”<sup>10</sup> As of 2006, the *Miami Herald* had won 18 Pulitzer Prizes.

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<sup>5</sup> Mike Clary, “Would you create another newspaper to compete with your own?” *Columbia Journalism Review*, May-June 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Clary, *CJR*.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Shoer Roth, “Nombran a Humberto Castelló director de El Nuevo Herald,” *El Nuevo Herald*, December 6, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.stateofthedia.org/2007/chartland.asp?id=523&ct=line&dir=&sort=&coll\\_box=1&col2\\_box=1&col3\\_box=1](http://www.stateofthedia.org/2007/chartland.asp?id=523&ct=line&dir=&sort=&coll_box=1&col2_box=1&col3_box=1)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.burrellesluce.com/top100/2006\\_Top\\_100List.pdf](http://www.burrellesluce.com/top100/2006_Top_100List.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> 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.

But the Cuban-American community, at least a vocal part of it, was convinced that TMH neither understood nor served its members. While TMH held a held staunch editorial position against the rule of Cuban strongman Fidel Castro, the paper nonetheless for years came under consistent attack from Cuban-American leaders for allegedly ignoring their affairs. In the 1970s, Cubans chained themselves to the columns in front of the newspaper building to protest that TMH never wrote about political prisoners in Cuba.

While some of the anti-*Herald* feeling abated in the 1990s as the generation of Cuban-born Miami residents gave way to their American-born children, there were still incidents. In the 1990s, the powerful Cuban-American National Foundation launched a campaign against TMH, pasting stickers across the city warning residents not to believe the paper. In late 1999, another furor erupted over the case of Elian Gonzalez, a child claimed both by his Cuban father and his US-based relatives. Members of the Cuban community felt TMH editorials did not adequately push to keep Elian in the US. One Cuban-American journalist tried to explain the depth of feeling:

Here the Cold War is not a distant memory and Elian is not just a little boy. He is the embodiment of 40 interminable years of rancor and bitterness toward Fidel Castro—and toward the United States government, for failing to depose him or take a harder line... Here, politicians are judged first and foremost by how much they despise Fidel and Communism, not by where they stand on education and Social Security.<sup>11</sup>

The same could be said about how many influential Cuban-American residents judged the *Miami Herald*.

By 2006, the two papers and their staffs felt in some ways like different worlds. Each was proud of its brand of journalism. TMH culture was, says Fiedler, typical of US papers: “American newspapers value being the neutral observer and the unaligned observer, free to be critical of all power.” While the newsroom reflected the Miami community by being one of the most racially and ethnically diverse in the country, it was, says Fiedler, an “Anglo-dominant newsroom.” Nonetheless, a significant number of Cuban-Americans worked there. Most of them had been born in Cuba, but raised and educated in the US. They thought of themselves by and large as journalists first, Cuban-Americans second.

The *Nuevo Herald* culture was livelier than the *Miami Herald*'s. “The headlines are very passionate. And sometimes the use of photography,” exclaims Castelló.<sup>12</sup> The paper covered sports

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<sup>11</sup> Lizette Alvarez, “A Look at Cuba’s Exiles from Both Sides of a Great Divide,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Castelló mentions one incident which embarrassed *El Nuevo Herald*. On June 25, 2006, it published a montage of two archived photos—a 1998 photo of two Cuban prostitutes hailing a tourist; and a 1994 picture of Cuban police. The montage made it appear that the police were ignoring the prostitutes. The paper explained that the photos were meant to run side-by-side, but that in the printing process they ran together. It apologized for its failure to properly

with a passion, as well as culture and politics. Just over half the reporters were Cuban-American; most had come to the US as adults and considered themselves in exile.

*Superior.* There was also a sense that *Miami Herald* staff considered themselves superior to those at *El Nuevo Herald*. “There’s no question about it, the *Miami Herald* always looked down at *El Nuevo Herald*,” confirms Ibargüen. “I used that to great advantage when I would tell [*El Nuevo Herald* reporters]: ‘We’ve got to get this story before the Americans get it.’” That rankled with ENH reporters, many of whom were full professors in Cuba and who considered themselves far more cosmopolitan than the average TMH reporter. The two papers shared common editorial values, however. As Ibargüen puts it: “I think we all subscribed to full, accurate, contextual search for truth. But your truth and my search are different.”

*Estranged.* But mostly in 2006, the two newsrooms had very little to do with one another except on occasion to run each other’s stories. While it had been common during the Ibargüen period for members of each editorial staff to sit in on the news meetings of the other, that had stopped. Fiedler says he and Castelló spoke on a regular basis only on business matters, during a regular Wednesday morning meeting of the executive committee with the publisher. Jesús Díaz formerly general manager for the Miami Herald Company, had become publisher in June 2005. “I never spoke to [Castelló] about stories that we were going to do,” says Fiedler. Clark Hoyt, who knew both papers well, says:

The two papers, they didn’t attend each others’ news meetings. They didn’t necessarily know what each other was reporting, even though they’re in the same building and nominally cousins or brother or sisters or whatever. There was a sense in *El Nuevo Herald* that the *Miami Herald* looked down on their journalism and didn’t respect it.

### **Corral’s series**

Reporter Oscar Corral had joined the *Miami Herald* in 2001, covering the city of Miami and then a presidential primary campaign. In 2004, he was assigned to Cuban-American politics. American-born of Cuban parents, Corral welcomed the beat. One of his first story ideas was to examine the multiple streams of federal monies dedicated to promoting democracy in Cuba. The three major government agencies involved were USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the US Office of Cuba Broadcasting. As a first step, in late 2004 he sent a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to USAID, seeking documentation for all its Cuba programs back to 1999.

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identify the photo as a montage. See: Laura Wides-Munoz, “Newspaper Admits Photos Altered,” *Associated Press*, July 29, 2006.

*USAID records.* The first packets of information did not arrive for nine months, and it took nearly two years to get everything, but by late spring 2006 Corral had what he'd requested. He proposed to his editors, Assistant City Editor Myriam Marquez and Metro Editor Manny Garcia, a big piece on public funding for democracy in Cuba: how much money was involved, who received it, how much ever reached opposition groups in Cuba? They agreed that a 4-5 part series could make a major contribution to public understanding of this use of taxpayer dollars. The series, he thought, would run on consecutive days.

As Corral dug into the records, however, it became clear that USAID was a secondary player. It gave some \$20 million a year total to various Cuba programs. But the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) channeled some \$37 million a year to Radio/TV Martí—a Miami-based broadcaster beaming news into Cuba. BBG was an independent Washington, DC, agency responsible for civilian US government and government-sponsored international broadcasting such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Radio/TV Martí. The Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which oversaw Radio/TV Martí, was part of the BBG administrative and marketing arm.

Corral decided to follow the money. In June 2006, he started a series of interviews with management at both Radio/TV Martí and at the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. What they told him about their operations provided interesting background. But as he delved deeper, Corral had specific questions he preferred not to put directly to the managers until he had done as much independent research as possible. Where was the \$37 million going, he wondered? Who exactly was getting paid? For what? How much?

*BBG records.* So on Aug. 15, 2006, Corral put in a second public records request, this time to the BBG. As he puts it:

I didn't want to trigger any unnecessary alerts in Miami. [The Office of Cuba Broadcasting in Miami] was run by a political appointee who was very close to the Republican legislators who appointed him, and I just, I thought it would probably be smarter to go through Washington at that point instead of going directly through Miami.<sup>13</sup>

He asked for documents, especially vendor reports, on funding to the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. This time the records arrived quickly, some 1,200 pages of names and numbers—what specific individuals had been paid for specific services. As Corral started to sift through the voluminous records, he paid special attention to those who were compensated for appearing on various broadcasts on television and radio. What he saw disturbed him: names he recognized of other Miami-based reporters who had appeared on either Radio or TV Martí, and had been paid

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<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with Oscar Corral on May 21, 2009, in Miami. All further quotes from Corral, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

for their time. He knew several of them: “I saw names popping up in these 1,200 pages of people that I know, people that work in my building.”

Some of the reporters listed worked at *El Nuevo Herald*. Many of them reported in Miami on Cuba and Cuban-American affairs. Corral was not sure what to make of it. As he recalls, “I know that I’m a reporter and if I’m taking money from a government agency, especially one that I’m covering, I better be prepared to have an explanation for that.” Some of the reporters seemed to have earned thousands of dollars from the government-funded station. While he had no proof there was wrongdoing, Corral took his discovery to Editors Garcia and Marquez, both of whom encouraged him to keep pursuing it.<sup>14</sup> They also assigned him a couple of other reporters to help work through the records.

As they did so, Corral felt increasing discomfort. “Putting totals on these people that I was familiar with was kind of uncomfortable,” he recalls. He mentioned his reservations to his wife, a former *Miami Herald* reporter, who told him, “You don’t have to do this.” But he decided he did. “I knew there would be consequences, and I knew that it would be tough,” he says. But he was frustrated by the way he felt the South Florida media “just kind of fell in line with everything the federal government did.” Moreover, he discerned a conflict of interest in the fact that “the people who were supposed to be informing [the Cuban exile community] about Cuban exile politics are benefiting from the US policy towards Cuba.”

Nobody asked questions. Why is this policy like this? Why is this money going here? Why are these people benefiting? [After all this funding,] why isn’t Cuba more democratic? What’s going on here?

### **Timing? Competition?**

Meanwhile, Corral learned from two independent sources—and had it confirmed by Office of Cuba Broadcasting Director Pedro Roig—that the *Chicago Tribune* had requested the identical records from BBG. Corral did not know why the *Tribune* wanted them, but the fact of the request was worrying: the Tribune Company also owned the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel*, the *Miami Herald*’s closest competitor. Corral had imagined that the Radio/TV Martí piece would run second or third in the series he planned. But when he told his editors about the *Chicago Tribune* request, they asked him instead—because of the threat that the *Tribune* might have the same story—to make it the first article. “I can’t just kick this under the rug. I know that there are another set of independent journalistic guys looking at this. So I can’t just pretend it’s not there,” Corral recalls thinking.

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<sup>14</sup> Manny Garcia failed to respond to repeated efforts to interview him for this case study.



Corral consulted daily with Assistant City Editor Marquez, and regularly with Metro Editor Garcia. Garcia pressed him to determine how serious a problem this was. Did these payments constitute a conflict of interest? Were they unusual? Corral called some 12-14 journalism ethics specialists and, he says, "they all agreed that this was a serious ethical breach." Had the journalists publicly disclosed their Radio/TV Martí work, that could have lessened the offense. But "we didn't find any instances of disclosure from any of the journalists," says Corral. Two of the experts, in fact, compared these payments to those (made public in 2005) which the Bush Administration had paid TV personality Armstrong Williams to promote the No Child Left Behind education law. Those payments had caused widespread public anger at government manipulation, even bribery, of the media.

By early September 2006, the story was coming together. Among the 10 or so journalists whose names appeared repeatedly in the BBG lists were three at *El Nuevo Herald*. One was Pablo Alfonso, a columnist on Cuban affairs who had spent eight years in Cuban prison for publishing an underground newsletter. The records showed that Alfonso had earned \$175,000 over five years for appearances on Radio and TV Martí. The second was Wilfredo Cancio Isla, who commented on Cuban political, social and economic affairs for Martí, and had received \$15,000 since 2001. Third was Olga Connor, a freelancer who covered cultural affairs, especially music. She had been paid \$71,000. There were other *Nuevo Herald* names as well, individuals who had received less money for more sporadic work, but Corral had not had time to investigate all of them. Reporters earned from \$75-\$100 per appearance.

*Higher levels.* In late August or early September, Garcia and Marquez took the story to *Miami Herald* Editor Tom Fiedler to let him know that it was in the works. They also told him about the *Chicago Tribune* records request. Fiedler says he was not normally involved in a story as it developed. He did attend the afternoon Page One meeting most days to stay abreast of what would appear in the paper the following day. "My standing order was I don't want to be surprised," says Fiedler, both for his own sake, and so he could alert the publisher to anything atypical. "It wouldn't be unusual that I wouldn't learn of a story until it was very close to publication."

Fiedler realized that the Radio/TV Martí story would be controversial as soon as he heard of it. But he was not aware *El Nuevo* staff were involved until close to publication. That only made it worse. Fiedler briefly considered whether it would be worth running the story:

I knew once this is out there, you can't put Pandora back in the box. I knew that we either do the story, or we don't. And if we do the story, it's going to be the start of the [beat up on] Tom wars.

But he knew the story could not be held. Not least of his worries was that the *Tribune* would publish first, making it look as though the *Miami Herald* was covering for its own. To prevent leaks, Fiedler asked Corral not to contact any of the implicated journalists at *El Nuevo*

*Herald* until the *Miami Herald* could make a formal approach. Fiedler says he insisted that “every one of the people involved had to be contacted. They had to have an opportunity to know we weren’t going to surprise them by putting something in the paper that they hadn’t had a chance to comment on. That was just kind of a standing order.” They did not, however, have to be contacted too far in advance. “I thought that Fiedler made the right call,” says Corral. “They were no longer kind of colleagues, they were part of a story I was working on, an investigative story.”

### **Notification—September 7**

Worried about the potential competition from the *Chicago Tribune*, editors were ready to run the story as soon as Corral judged it ready. Corral hoped he had the makings of a front-page story. On Wednesday, September 6, his editors agreed that he did. At the 4 p.m. editorial meeting, the story was given a slot on Page One for Friday, September 8, 2006.

On Thursday, September 7, Corral had a busy day. In the morning, he and Editor Marquez visited Radio/TV Martí for what Corral calls a “hostile interview” with senior executives—a contrast to their meetings in June and July. He recalls that “they knew we were talking about journalists. They knew that we were doing an investigative piece. Their tone had hardened.” In the early afternoon, Corral called a couple of the reporters named in the story, such as Helen Aguirre Ferré, then-opinion editor of *Diario Las Americas*. She told him: “I don’t see a conflict of interest.”<sup>15</sup> They talked for some 10 minutes, recalls Ferré, who argued that the charges in the story were not fair.<sup>16</sup> Reporters at other publications, she pointed out, could not be held to *Miami Herald* ethics guidelines.<sup>17</sup>

There were too many calls for Corral to make them all, so the editors drafted others on the *Miami Herald* staff to notify the remaining reporters. When they reached the named reporters, the team described the forthcoming article and asked for comment. They failed to reach several of those identified, including syndicated columnist Carlos Alberto Montaner and ENH freelancer Connor. When TMH reporters finally contacted the other two *Nuevo Herald* reporters, Cancio and Alfonso refused comment.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, Metro Editor Garcia and Assistant City Editor Marquez took responsibility for approaching the *Nuevo Herald* newsroom. At 2:30 p.m., Garcia and Marquez went to see *El Nuevo Herald* Editor Castelló. They asked Corral to join them.

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<sup>15</sup> Oscar Corral, “10 Miami Journalists Take U.S. Pay,” *Miami Herald*, September 8, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview with Helen Aguirre Ferré on May 20, 2009, in Miami. All further quotes from Ferré, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>17</sup> As it happened, the *Miami Herald* had written ethics guidelines; *El Nuevo Herald* did not. But reporters at both publications were expected to practice ethical behavior.

<sup>18</sup> The reporters could not find Connor although she was in the building, learning that her contract was terminated. They reporters managed to locate and question Cancio and Alfonso only after the two had been fired. See below.

*Corral's account.* Corral brought with him a carton of the materials his FOIA request had yielded. When he walked into the newsroom, by chance he caught the eye of reporter Cancio. "I just kind of shrugged," remembers Corral. "At that point, I was there to meet with his boss. That was one of the toughest points of my entire career... He was definitely a colleague, and a guy that I respected."

Castelló told the three from TMH that he knew nothing about his staff working for Radio Martí, and "speculated that maybe they had gotten approval from some previous editor or some previous publisher," says Corral. At that juncture, Corral presumed that the reporters his story named would be reprimanded, or suspended while they took an ethics or other course. But at 5:30 p.m., Corral spoke with Publisher Díaz to find out what action the paper planned to take so he could include it in the story. To Corral's surprise, Díaz reported that he had fired the *Nuevo Herald* writers. "Myriam [Marquez] came over to my desk and she hugged me," says Corral.

I did not think they would be fired in that manner, especially not without some sort of more extensive review. And the [Miami] *Herald* knew that there were other people in our building that showed up on that list, but I hadn't had the time to process all the names... So I was shocked.

*Fiedler's account.* Early on September 7, TMH Editor Fiedler contacted Díaz to let him know that a story about Radio Martí would appear the next day, and that the story named three *El Nuevo Herald* writers. As Fiedler described it to Díaz, the story was about how the Broadcasting Board was "using Spanish-speaking, Spanish media journalists in Miami to carry out what would be US policy toward Cuba... The larger story was that there are journalists who are on the payroll of the US government." Fiedler firmly believes that, even had they received no compensation, the journalists' actions contravened generally accepted reporting ethics guidelines. "You are in effect giving a contribution in kind, your time and your expertise, to carry out the mission of the US government, a propaganda mission. Whether you agree with it or not, that's what you are doing," notes Fiedler.

That three of the named journalists worked for *El Nuevo Herald* made for a difficult situation internally. But Fiedler observes that "we couldn't not include those three if we were going to write the larger story, and then name eight others." Fiedler told Díaz that "we intend to treat them as we are treating all the others." Recalls Fiedler:

I told the publisher what we were doing, and what the justification was. His response as I expected was, 'This is a legitimate story, and let the chips fall where they may,' and that was it. He didn't attempt to intervene in any way... It would have been inappropriate for him to tell me not to publish a story that was ready for publication.

Later that day, Fiedler learned that Díaz had taken the initiative to ask Castelló to fire the reporters—before Corral and his team had a chance to seek their comments on the story. “In some ways,” says Fiedler, “it was I thought a breach of faith [by] the publisher, but I could understand the situation I think he felt he was in. How could he take that knowledge and not act on it?” Unfortunately, says Fiedler, “our ability to tell them what we were doing was thwarted by the action that happened. The result was the story that ran, to my great dismay, didn’t include comment from them because we hadn’t gotten ahold of them.”

*Castelló’s account.* As Castelló remembers September 7, he returned from lunch at 2:30 p.m. to find Editors Garcia and Marquez in his waiting room. He invited them into his office, but they waited for Corral to arrive, then asked to speak with Castelló “privately, in your office. Then I felt something strange, something weird,” recalls Castelló.<sup>19</sup> The *Nuevo Herald* editor prided himself on an open-door policy, and was angry when the visitors closed the door to his office. At the same time, he says, Corral “turned on a tape recorder, and they go, ‘we have to tell you something: that we are working on a story and we want your reaction.’”

Castelló protested first at the closed doors, then at the tape recorder. “Hey guys, are you crazy? You cannot talk to me that way... What’s happening here?” he asked. When he understood what they wanted, he asked them to leave. “I will talk to the publisher... but the way that you are conducting this investigation is not the proper way. And you are being disrespectful to me,” he added. He insisted that he had not known the *Nuevo Herald* reporters were being paid for their work at Radio Martí.

Castelló tried immediately to call Publisher Díaz, who was out of town, but could not reach him for two hours. When the two finally spoke, Díaz confirmed that he knew about the *Miami Herald* story, which further dismayed Castelló. “It was unbelievable that the publisher didn’t inform me,” he says. Díaz suggested a conference call with Elissa Vanaver, vice president for human resources, and Robert Beatty, the company lawyer.

The conference call convened about 5 p.m., and Díaz announced that he intended to fire the three *Nuevo Herald* reporters named in the story.<sup>20</sup> Castelló protested: “Jesús, we have to investigate this first... We should separate them [put on leave], interview them, investigate them, and not publish this story today.” Beatty agreed. Díaz, however, countered that the *Miami Herald* could not delay publication. “No one could change his mind. ‘No, they are out. And the story runs today,’” recalls Castelló. Under protest, Castelló agreed to fire the reporters.

*DeFede redux?* Once in the hallway, Castelló—who considered Díaz a friend—called him back on his cellphone. Castelló worried that Díaz was making a mistake, as Castelló felt he had in

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<sup>19</sup> Author’s interview with Humberto Castelló on April 13, 2009, in Miami. All further quotes from Castelló, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

<sup>20</sup> Jesús Díaz failed to respond to repeated efforts to interview him for this case study.

endorsing the dismissal of a *Miami Herald* columnist a year earlier. In that incident, on July 27, 2005, former County Commissioner Arthur Teele had walked into the lobby of the *Miami Herald*, dropped off a stack of papers, pulled out a gun and shot himself. After the suicide, columnist Jim DeFede came forward with the tape recording of a conversation he had had with Teele only hours before. He thought it could be helpful to investigators. But taping without the subject's permission, which DeFede had done, was against *Herald* policy as well as Florida law. Díaz had become publisher only 11 days earlier, on July 16. Fiedler conferred with Díaz and, the next day, fired DeFede. Many in the newsroom disagreed heatedly with the decision; some 200 current and former staff in vain signed a petition to reinstate him.

But when Castelló reached him, Díaz was adamant, saying "if the story's being published, we cannot have those guys in-house," recalls Castelló. So towards 6 p.m. Castelló, with HR Vice President Vanaver present, in turn told Alfonso and Cancio they were fired. Connor was informed that her freelance arrangement with the paper was terminated. The reporters insisted that they had permission from the previous editor, Castañeda. That made no difference to the decision.

During a second conference call that evening with Díaz, Beatty and Vanaver, Castelló made one last plea, to no avail. Castelló could not understand why, if the reporters had permission, they should be fired. Nor did he object to their work for Radio/TV Martí. "Probably if they had asked me for permission, I would have said yes," comments Castelló.

Why? Because we didn't see that as a way to create propaganda, number one. And not one of them was doing propaganda... If there is a [US government] policy that you have to be paid for [appearances], that is not a problem.

Castelló was particularly disturbed that TMH editors had given his reporters virtually no advance notice about the story. If the editors, he says, "think that its sister publication is involved in or practicing something that they consider is not the best, why don't they tell us? Why not talk to the editor? Why not talk to the publisher? We consider that is not proper conduct. Behind that, there is always witch hunting and racism."

*Cancio's account.* Wilfredo Cancio knew nothing about the charges against him until the day he was fired. He saw Corral and the *Miami Herald* editors enter Castelló's office and close the door. "This was not usual," he comments.<sup>21</sup> At about 4 p.m., HR VP Vanaver summoned Cancio to her office. Castelló was there as well. Vanaver told Cancio that he had been terminated. "I was very furious with this meeting. But I'm trying to be a decent person. And I was also surprised, of course," says Cancio. Castelló was, recalls Cancio, "very emotional... He told me at that time 'you are the best reporter that I work with in years, and you are a very dedicated person.' He cried."

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<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Wilfredo Cancio Isla on May 21, 2009, in Miami. All further quotes from Cancio, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Since December 1998, Cancio had been a full-time staff member at ENH, where he reported on Cuban exile affairs and politics. He had defected to the US in 1994 while in the country on a MacArthur Foundation fellowship from Havana University, where he worked for 12 years as a professor of communications. As Cancio explained to Castelló, he had first worked for Radio Martí in 2000 as part of a discussion panel. In 2001, the broadcaster engaged Cancio for 20 minutes a week to discuss films on a new program, *Commentarios*. Cancio went to then-ENH Editor Castañeda for approval, which was granted. “I didn’t receive official written authorization,” says Cancio, “but I assumed that it was absolutely legal” because a number of journalists at *Nuevo Herald* had worked at Radio/TV Martí since the station’s founding in 1985. “The collaboration didn’t change my thoughts,” says Cancio. “What I thought about Cuba didn’t change because I did some work at Radio Martí.”

While Cancio was clearing out his desk to leave, *Miami Herald* reporter Alfonso Chardy walked up looking for a reaction to Corral’s story. “No comment,” Cancio responded. Castelló announced the dismissals to the *Nuevo Herald* newsroom at about 7 p.m. “Nobody wanted to believe that,” says Cancio. “Some people were very upset with this at that time.” Over the next several weeks, Cancio continued to make no public statement, although he did talk to Castelló from time to time about the evolving situation.

### Story goes to press

Corral continued to write and revise his story until 6 p.m. on Thursday, September 7. It was what Corral terms a “nosebleed story, which is when you’re working on a story and you have six people behind you. So if you lift your head, they all get their noses busted.” At 6, the story moved out of his hands and went to a series of editors: Garcia, Managing Editor David Wilson, and Fiedler. “In fact, in my eight years at the Herald I had never seen an editor so involved in a story,” Corral says of Fiedler. When Corral next saw the copy, it was around 10 p.m.. “I was surprised they had cut it so much,” he says. “It became a space issue... It was also written in a different way when I turned it in... more nuanced.”

The story had been cut by 10 column inches. Among the items removed were the names of the ethics experts Corral quoted. Also gone was reference to a 2002 *Miami Herald* story that mentioned Olga Connor worked for Radio Martí.<sup>22</sup> Fiedler explains that “it wasn’t news earlier [in 2002, because] we hadn’t paid much attention to it back then. But when we realized the magnitude of what had happened... that just really put it up at a different level.” The fact that Alfonso had earned \$175,000 drew special attention.

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<sup>22</sup> Editors did not learn until later that a second story in *Nuevo Herald*, in September 2002, made it clear that Alfonso was a Radio/TV Martí regular.

Fiedler acknowledges that there was discussion about whether it was right to lump together Alfonso with people who had earned far less. But editors decided to treat all the reporters as a single group. "Once you start saying OK, do we draw a line and say if you got this much, then we'll put you in, but if you got only that much, we'll leave you out. That's a slippery slope," says Fiedler.

When you start trying to slice and dice about how much does it cost to influence someone, everybody's price tag may be different. So in general, journalists will tell you, you don't take a nickel... If somebody writes you a check, and it comes from the US government, you don't do it. You just say no.

Meanwhile, Managing Editor Liza Gross brought Corral for his review a secondary story featuring the comments collected by the team that afternoon from each of the reporters named in the story. A headshot of each accompanied the sidebar. "She asked me, are these the people?," recalls Corral. As Corral remembers the editorial process:

There was confusion. There was debate. There was disagreement. But in the end we published something that was accurate, and that I do verify... You had a series of very smart, very committed journalists all trying to strike the right tone with a very controversial story.

*Page One.* At the 4 p.m. afternoon editorial meeting, the story retained its proposed position on Page One. The decision to run it in such a visible location, says Fiedler, was his:

If we had played that story somewhere other than prominently on Page One, we would have had critics who would say we were trying to cover it up... I figured if we're going to do this, if it involved *El Nuevo Herald*, we can't win on this. We're going to be hit no matter what we do, so we might as well at least take away the argument that we tried to soft pedal it.

Fiedler also argues that, while the possible competition from the *Chicago Tribune* accelerated the reporting somewhat, "I think we felt that the story we had was solid." He regrets that the story included no comment from the *Nuevo Herald* reporters. But he is confident that nothing they could have said would have disproven the story or stopped its publication. "We knew to the dollar the money that they had collected.... Whether they had permission or not didn't make it right ethically, and that's what we were really writing about: that this is US government policy to, in effect, compromise journalists," he says.

*The story.* The first edition copy was ready to go by about 10 p.m. The final deadline could slide as late as 12:50 a.m., but on this night the paper closed about 10:30 p.m. The [story](#) was on Page One. The headline read: "10 Miami Journalists Take U.S. Pay." The lede said:

At least 10 South Florida journalists, including three from *El Nuevo Herald*, received regular payments from the U.S. government for programs on Radio Martí and TV Martí, two broadcasters aimed at undermining the communist government of Fidel Castro. The payments totaled thousands of dollars over several years.

In the third paragraph, Corral wrote: “Alfonso and Cancio were dismissed after The Miami Herald questioned editors at El Nuevo Herald about the payments. Connor’s freelance relationship with the newspaper also was severed.” The story cited no comment from two of the three, and said reporters had been unable to locate Connor (she had been in the HR office, getting her dismissal). Díaz, however, was on the record, saying:

Even the appearance that your objectivity or integrity might have been impaired is something we can’t condone, not in our business. I personally don’t believe that integrity and objectivity can be assured if any of our reporters receive monetary compensation from any entity that he or she may cover or have covered, but particularly if it’s a government agency.

The article also quoted Castelló: “I lament very much that I had not been informed before by them” about the payments. Ivan Roman, executive director of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, deplored the journalists’ conflict of interest in accepting money for reports to Cuba while reporting on Cuba to the US: “It’s definitely a line that journalists shouldn’t be crossing.” A sidebar on Page Two included headshots of 10 of the 11 named journalists, as well as comments from those who had spoken on the record.

### **Widespread reaction**

Fiedler says he had no illusions about the effect the story would have on Miami’s Cuban community. “I expected it to be messy, really messy. And I wasn’t disappointed... I knew it would be divisive in the community.”

The idea that there could be some kind of a neutral reporter of events does not exist in the exile community. Even those in the community who might have thought that there was a problem with having a journalist take money from a US government agency, if the purpose was ultimately against Castro, then that was OK.

Fiedler says he knew the next morning that “whatever else I had intended to do that following day or a couple of days after, I knew was going to be totally overrun by the reaction to this story. Gnawing at me too, was that if you make the smallest error in a story like that, you’ve got to go back and lay yourself bare.” At the same time, Fiedler says he “never entertained the



thought that I was going to back down or reverse course on this. I also didn't go into this deliberately trying to make the fight bigger. I just thought this is a story we believe is valid."

*Protests.* Carlos Alberto Montaner was a syndicated columnist based in Madrid; the *Miami Herald* ran his columns. He swiftly protested Corral's article. On September 9, he issued a statement from Madrid that called the charges "unfair, ludicrous, offensive and false." The columnist objected that "I don't live in Miami, and I don't work at the *Miami Herald* or *El Nuevo Herald*, nor am I subject to their regulations." He explained that once a week he did a 20-minute commentary for Radio Martí which repeated material from his column; for that, he was paid an "official and *obligatory*," according to Broadcasting Board of Governors rules, \$100. He added:

Contributing to breaking the boycott on information that exists in Cuba, far from being a conflict of interest, is the duty and responsibility of any Cuban journalist who truly loves liberty... More than a conflict of interest, it is a coincidence of interests. Radio-TV Martí wants Cubans to be freely informed. So do I. Where's the problem?<sup>23</sup>

A vocal part of the Cuban-American community was outraged. Some 1,200 canceled their subscriptions to the *Miami Herald*, as well as *El Nuevo Herald*. As the extent of the anger became clear, Fiedler says he tried to "maintain consistency from that point on."

Let's make sure once we open this line, that we continue to follow it wherever it goes. That we listen to criticism and respond appropriately, and that we're just going to take this where it goes and we're going to try to be as sure-footed in doing that as we possibly can.

Within three days, the *Miami Herald* moved Corral and his family out of their house and into an apartment after he received threats. "The attacks on Oscar on Spanish-language radio as a result of this were becoming increasingly vicious," recalls Fiedler. The incident caused tension and sparked heated arguments between Corral and his Cuban-born father. Fiedler recalls worrying "that the controversy doesn't so envelop Oscar particularly, that either his ability to report the story, or his willingness to report the story, that the personal burden he would have to bear wouldn't become too much for him."

*Poison.* The controversy "poisoned the atmosphere between our newsroom and the *El Nuevo Herald* newsroom, I think, instantly," remembers Fiedler. Rumors circulated that Fiedler had fired the journalists, even though he protested that Castelló had fired them. "I had nothing to do with their firing. I had nothing to do with the internal operations of the newsroom at *El Nuevo Herald*. But that didn't go over," he recalls.

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<sup>23</sup> See: <http://www.carlosalbertomontaner.com/692.htm>. As a note, a Broadcasting Board of Governors spokesperson on January 7, 2010 confirmed that while most Radio Martí contributors in 2006 accepted nominal payment for appearances, a fee could be declined. Such fees, though not universal, were common practice at other BBG news outlets as well.

Some—both in the Cuban community and at ENH—accused Corral of having leaked the story in advance to the Cuban government because a government-run news outlet, *Mesa Redonda*, on August 30 speculated that a story about US journalists taking government money might be coming soon. A quote from Castro about payments to a Miami-based journalist published in the July 23 issue of an Argentine newspaper reinforced the perception that Cuba got the story first.<sup>24</sup> Others said the Cuban government’s source was a left-wing Cuban émigré, Max Lesnik, who was director of Radio Miami and a blogger. They alleged Lesnik had steered Corral to pursue the story.

Corral dismisses as “the biggest smoke screen” the charge that he leaked the story to Cuba. “At that point, I had made so many records requests, and had talked to so many people on the periphery, that maybe it leaked... Was I in touch with the Cuban government? That’s ludicrous,” he protests. As for the notion that he had been manipulated by Lesnik, Corral says he had “talked to him maybe a couple of times in my entire career. He was not a friend.” At ENH, that was not believed. Says Castelló: “[Lesnik] is pro-Castro. And he is a very close friend or mentor of Oscar Corral.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***Nuevo Herald* campaign**

On September 9, *El Nuevo Herald* started a campaign to reverse the decision to fire the three journalists. “We did the battle in a very professional way,” asserts Castelló. He held daily staff meetings to discuss the firings. The paper solicited views from the community, and ran an article after article on its opinion and news pages.

And VOA? ENH reporters also set out to discover whether parallels existed to the Radio Martí situation. On September 14, ENH published a report on Washington journalists who had done work for Voice of America—and been paid for it. Hugh Sidey of *Time*, Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*, Tom DeFrank of the *New York Daily News* and David Lightman from the *Hartford Courant* had all been paid from \$100 to \$150 per appearance on VOA’s “Issues in the News” program. The ENH story posed the implicit question: was there some definable difference between Radio/TV Martí and VOA, both funded with taxpayer dollars? If not, why pick exclusively on Radio Martí contributors?<sup>26</sup> Broadcasting Board of Governors spokesman Larry Hart said:

For decades, for many, many years, some of the most respected journalists in the country have received payments for participating in Voice of America programs. The [*Miami Herald*] article makes it seem like this is

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<sup>24</sup> *Perfil*, July 23, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> That Castelló positively affirmed as late as 2009 what Corral calls “a flat-out lie” is further evidence of how deep lay the divide on this story.

<sup>26</sup> The *Miami Herald* never reported the VOA payments story, although Corral did put in a FOIA request for VOA’s payment records, and thousands of pages arrived. His editors decided it would be too expensive to pursue.

something that only Radio or TV Martí has done, and like they are having to pay the reporters to say certain things or to have certain points of view.<sup>27</sup>

The article sparked divided views on how and whether Martí's product differed from that of Voice of America. A writer in the *Columbia Journalism Review* observed on September 20 that Martí programs were "funded by the federal government to broadcast explicitly political propaganda."<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Executive Director Frank Calzon of the Center for a Free Cuba wrote September 19 in the *Miami Herald* that "Radio and TV Martí deliver uncensored news to people who could otherwise have little or no access to information. Radio Martí is required to follow the same standards as Voice of America." He continued:

If it has become professionally unethical in this country to oppose tyranny and to support freedom, then the First Amendment has been stood on its head. It is simply false to suggest that 'real' journalists turn into propaganda hacks if they write or broadcast for government-funded stations.

*Open letter.* On September 17, a group of journalists, academics, artists and others—most, but far from all, Hispanic—calling themselves Support for the Journalists of *Nuevo Herald*, posted online an [open letter](#) to McClatchy management. They solicited additional signatures from other journalists around the world.<sup>29</sup> The letter asked McClatchy to reconsider the firing of Alfonso, Cancio and Connor. Calling Corral's article "yellow journalism," it said the article "creates the false impression that the professional work of these colleagues was a clandestine political operation." It drew the equation with VOA contributors, and continued:

Their collaboration with Radio and TV Martí was a continuation of their professional duties and wasn't subordinate to government agendas... None of the professionals mentioned had kept secret his or her participation on Radio and TV Martí, which had been consulted with their supervisors.

But others at Latino publications applauded the firings. "We've fired people here for less than that," said Editor Pedro Rojas of the Spanish-language *La Opinión* in Los Angeles.<sup>30</sup> "My main concern is that people will see this (conflict of interest) as a trend in ethnic media, and draw the conclusion that all ethnic media does this. This is an exception to the rule."

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<sup>27</sup> Gerardo Reyes and Joaquim Utset, "Los pagos a periodistas son una práctica común," *El Nuevo Herald*, September 14, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Paul McCleary, "When All Things Are Not Equal," *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 20, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Eventually, there were nearly 500 signatures.

<sup>30</sup> Elena Shore, "Double Standard for Hispanic Media?" *New American Media*, September 27, 2006. See: [http://news.newamericanmedia.org/news/view\\_article](http://news.newamericanmedia.org/news/view_article) etc.

On September 21, Montaner returned to the fray with an op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal*, which expressed his view that a “clash of civilizations” had pitted *Miami Herald* journalists against those at *Nuevo Herald*. He wrote:

For the ‘Anglo’ journalists, their Cuban colleagues had conflicts. In contrast, the journalists at ENH felt their corporate brothers had ambushed them. To Miami’s Cuban-Americans, this was a display of double-standards.

He pointed to the VOA parallel, and noted that “[p]rofessors at public universities get paid by the government; yet they don’t submit to their paymaster for that reason.” Montaner demanded a public apology from McClatchy.

### **McClatchy meets Miami**

The first the McClatchy Company—which had acquired the Miami Herald Media Company only three months earlier—knew of the firestorm at its premier property was after TMH published Corral’s article. McClatchy had owned newspapers as far back as 1857, when James McClatchy helped found the *Sacramento Bee* in California. The company went public in 1988 and expanded steadily, buying properties in the Carolinas and Minnesota. It prided itself on being a public service journalism company. On June 27, 2006, McClatchy acquired the respected Knight-Ridder newspaper chain.<sup>31</sup>

Even with the acquisition, the senior executive team remained small: only eight people. Reporting directly to CEO Gary Pruitt were two vice presidents of operations, a chief financial officer, a general counsel, a vice president for interactive, a vice president for human resources (HR), and a vice president for news. On June 28, McClatchy executives started visits to their new papers with a trip to the *Miami Herald* and *El Nuevo Herald*. In a conference room, CEO Pruitt and Vice President-News Howard Weaver addressed the staffs of both papers. *Nuevo Herald* editor Castelló remembers the day:

In that meeting, they said ‘McClatchy Company policy is this: you have to manage your institution as if you were the owners. You should do what you consider is correct and good for *your* company.’ Then I said to myself, I will do what I think is good for my company, in my newsroom.

*Howard Weaver*. In 2006, McClatchy’s vice president for news was a veteran journalist. Weaver had led his hometown paper, the Anchorage *Daily News*, to two Pulitzers, one in 1976 (when he was 25) and the second in 1989, when he was editor. The *News* was a McClatchy paper,

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<sup>31</sup> The Knight Ridder purchase made McClatchy briefly the second largest newspaper publisher in the US, but it quickly sold 12 of the 32 daily newspapers.

and the corporation tapped Weaver as a new media expert in 1995. He subsequently became editorial page editor for the *Bee*, and in 2001 returned to headquarters as vice president-news. Editors at McClatchy papers did not report to him, but they did talk to him. Weaver characterizes his job as “part quality control and part evangelism.”<sup>32</sup>

Your job is to explain the corporation to the editors, and explain the editors to the corporation... I became the champion of journalistic values in the company.

He did not expect to hear from individual newspapers about stories they covered. “Once in a while I would hear from editors in advance just to say, ‘I want to give you a heads-up that we’re doing this thing and it’s going to be controversial.’ But usually not even that... They didn’t ask permission. We didn’t clear things.” Weaver recalls that when McClatchy acquired the Miami Herald Media Company, it knew little about the two newsrooms. “We have a traditional policy of lots of local autonomy at our papers, so we didn’t anticipate a great deal of needing to know the intricacies of balance between the two newsrooms, or the two communities, or anything like that,” he notes. Weaver himself had never been to Miami until he visited with Pruitt.

Weaver called ENH Editor Castelló on the Monday morning after the Corral story ran. Weaver called because “there were immediate repercussions in the sense of community concern, grousing within the building, hurt feelings.” Unfortunately, Castelló could not take the call because his mother had had a heart attack, and he was with her in the hospital. A couple of days later, Weaver emailed Castelló with good wishes for his mother, and asked him to return the phone call only when he was able. “A very candid, and very good person,” Castelló terms Weaver.

Weaver also contacted Fiedler: “I was trying to talk to them as quickly as I could... [to say] ‘I want to find out about this. This is blowing up. What’s happening?’” While he had experienced no exact parallel situation, Weaver was an old hand at stories that caused advertisers or readers to cancel. “I understand that when there’s a big community blowup over something, you need to get your ducks in a row,” he says, to determine “was it journalistically sound?”

That’s what I started out to do, to get my arms around the thing so I could presumably defend the editorial integrity in the process: Yes, it was a legitimate story. Yes, we got the facts right.

After his inquiries, Weaver was satisfied with the journalism. “Do I think it was a newsworthy story?” he says. “Yes. Do I think the fact that it was their sister publication should have stopped them? No, I don’t.” While he might have handled parts of the publication process differently, he adds, “I’m not in the second-guessing business, because I’ve been an editor and I know how many decisions you make quickly, and these are all good people as near as I can tell.

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<sup>32</sup> Author’s interview with Howard Weaver. April 27, 2009, in New York City. All further quotes from Weaver, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Certainly Tom [Fiedler] and Humberto [Castelló] whom I know best out of this group are both fine people.”

For his part, Weaver expected the distress to subside: “When I heard about this for the first time, I presumed that the kind of factual and procedural things would work out... I thought we had some time.” He adds that “it was not an unusual situation for somebody to be pissed off at a story that appeared in one of our papers. That happened all the time. This time, it just happened to be people that worked for us.” After 40 years in the journalism business, Weaver thought he knew the process.

I’d been through a lot of firestorms. Created a few of them, and been through some others as a leader. So I felt confident that we would be able to get in there, sort out what the right and wrong was in the journalism to make a decision about whether it was fair, and what the next steps were.

He did not anticipate that a second firestorm would erupt within a week.

## Hiassen Episode

On September 15, 2006, celebrated columnist Carl Hiassen submitted his weekly column to the *Miami Herald*. It was a send-up of the entire ENH/Radio Martí incident. Hiassen quipped: “Now we find out that the U.S. government-run stations are actually running a charity for needy journalists, at least 10 of whom have been paid to appear on their programs.”<sup>33</sup> He bemoaned the fact that he had never earned a cent, despite lifelong opposition to Cuban leader Castro. When Publisher Díaz read the copy, he grew alarmed. The column, he felt, was inflammatory. To run it would only exacerbate the community tensions unleashed by the firing of the *Nuevo Herald* reporters a week earlier. He ordered that the column not be published.

“Usually the thought of a publisher threatening to spike a column because it might be incendiary is unheard of,” says Corral. “Jesús Díaz must have been under tremendous pressure.” At the same time, he comments that “many of the people who were outraged never read the [September 8] story... That’s what Jesús Díaz was up against. Basically, the Spanish-language media declared war on the *Herald* for a good two or three months.” TMH Editor Fiedler concurs that the Hiassen column has to be considered in context: “It was because the hostility between the Cuban community and the *Miami Herald* was reaching such a crescendo. When Carl weighed in and was kind of going to make light of the whole thing... the publisher tried to stop it, tried to spike the column.” But Hiassen had his own views. Told the column would not run, he threatened to resign.

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<sup>33</sup> Carl Hiassen, “Finally, Someone Appreciates Journalists’ Work,” *Miami Herald*, September 17, 2006.

That was where matters stood on September 16, when Weaver got wind of it. He decided to call Hiassen's boss, the editorial page editor, to ask for an overview of the situation. The editor explained that "the publisher has seen it and doesn't want to run it, and he thinks it would inflame the situation, and that it doesn't break any new ground. You know, there were several plausible reasons," recalls Weaver. Weaver had considerable sympathy for that viewpoint. "It's not inconsequential to think of what was going on in the community at this point," he recalls. "There had been a significant, and overwhelmingly negative, reaction to this. Thousands of people cancelled [subscriptions]. The talk radio [criticism] was constant."

But Weaver went one step further and asked the editor what he thought should happen. The editor said he thought it should run. Weaver called his colleague Frank Whittaker, vice president of operations (to whom all publishers reported), as well as CEO Pruitt, to say "this looks like a bad situation to me." Based on Weaver's assessment, Whittaker made a decision: he phoned Díaz to say the column should run in its usual slot on Sunday, September 17.<sup>34</sup> Weaver explains:

That gave us a chance to say very early on, at McClatchy we really like the editors to make the journalistic decisions, not the publishers... Frankly, we like strong voices in our papers. They obviously don't want to be irresponsible, to pour gasoline on a fire. But you're allowed to say that's a big fucking fire.

*Executive committee.* Following the Hiassen incident, Publisher Díaz on Wednesday, September 20 called a meeting of the company's executive committee to discuss the snowballing controversy.<sup>35</sup> At the meeting were Díaz, ENH Editor Castelló, TMH Editor Fiedler, and five *Miami Herald* managing editors. One of the managing editors, recalls Castelló, made the argument that the September 8 story had been a "witch hunt." But the others defended the story. "They were trying to justify why they published the story, why they didn't talk to me," recalls Castelló. "They tried to justify everything that has no justification." The discussion was "very hot," says Castelló, and did not calm tempers.

### **The view from Sacramento**

To the dismay of Vice President Weaver and other McClatchy executives, the situation in Miami was not settling. Weaver got a personal taste of its ramifications when he was obliged to deny to a *New York Times* reporter a rumor that McClatchy had authorized the September 8 story

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<sup>34</sup> Some press accounts reported that Díaz offered his resignation following this episode, and that it was accepted but delayed until the Miami Herald Media Co. could announce a successor. Those interviewed for this case neither confirmed nor denied that account. See: Douglas Hanks, "A column, a quarrel—and change at the top," *Miami Herald*, October 4, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> This date may be off by a day, but the meeting was that week.

as part of a secret deal with Castro to open a Havana bureau. "It gave [me] an insight into how the community operated down there," he recalls.

When Jesús would say, 'You've got to recognize that handling this kind of controversy in this kind of community is tough and difficult and nuanced,' I believed that.

Clearly there was an important human resources dimension to the continued anger: three people had lost their jobs. But that was not Weaver's area of responsibility. He was more concerned about the editorial judgment which had gone into the September 8 story, not to mention the handling of the Hiassen column. Had there been bias, unconscious or otherwise, in the reporting of the September 8 story? How could one judge this case on its merits?

Weaver appreciated the descriptions Díaz and Fiedler had given him of the deliberations in the *Miami Herald* newsroom before the September 8 story was published. "We were trying to find out what happened, who makes these kinds of decisions, why didn't you talk to them earlier?" recalls Weaver. The executive team had explained that "the two newsrooms don't talk, they don't trust each other, and you couldn't be sure they wouldn't have run it first." Weaver's next step was to seek a better understanding of the *Nuevo Herald* position. On Saturday, September 23, Weaver called Castelló at home. Castelló remembers the day because his wife had an interview to become a US citizen. Weaver asked Castelló to tell the story from his point of view.

"I told him everything. I remember that I broke into tears because, you know, I was that tense," says Castelló. "And he was very kind. He told me... I appreciate that you acted with dignity." Weaver asked permission to share what Castelló had told him with McClatchy top management, as well as its legal counsel. He asked Castelló to keep the conversation confidential, and promised to get back to him as soon as possible.

The problem, as Weaver saw it, was cultural but also ethical. He had expected the two newspapers to look and read differently. "You've got a Latin American newspaper, it's probably going to have more soccer in it than the Anglo papers. It seems, just from an outsider's vantage point, to have more cleavage," he says.

All of that is, I think, appropriate and interesting and great. But you can have, I believe, independent cultures and perspectives without having a different set of ethical values and baseline journalistic touchstones. That's the part we wanted to be sure the papers shared.

What had finally begun to sink in was the depth of animosity between the two publications. "I had no idea the level of animosity, mistrust and active ill will was anywhere near as strong as it was. I mean, I had no idea really that there was any, at first," he says. When others started telling him that "these newsrooms are at war, that was shocking and very, very discouraging."



Because it suggested to me that we don't have a little knitting-up to do here. We have to really reweave this fabric, because... they were really dramatically at odds in an unacceptable way. For them to be competitive, that's fine... [But] I didn't anticipate... the degree to which these two newsrooms were in this genuinely dysfunctional condition of antagonism toward one another. There were unacceptable levels of distrust and antagonism between the two newsrooms... It was toxic in this situation.

At the same time, Weaver had faith in the editors of both papers. Both Fiedler and Castelló assured him that they had a high regard for one another. Fiedler "told me he thought Humberto [Castelló] was a good journalist, that he was an honorable guy, that they got along fine. And vice versa." While Castelló confessed that he felt ambushed by Garcia and Corral, "he said, 'I don't think Tom's [Fiedler's] got any bad motives. I don't think he's out to get us or anything.'"

On the morning of Sunday, October 1, Weaver called Castelló to request his participation in a conference call at 2:30 p.m. that afternoon. Weaver asked Castelló to go to the office of the Miami Herald's lawyer, Beatty. HR VP Vanaver was also there, but not Díaz. "I thought, what is this? There is no publisher?" recalls Castelló. On McClatchy's end of the conversation were Weaver, Vice President and General Counsel Karole Morgan-Prager, and HR Vice President Heather Fagundes.

For about 90 minutes, the McClatchy team interviewed Castelló, mostly on procedural and personnel matters but also on his understanding of the story and how it was reported. The McClatchy team wanted to know "were there standards to hold [the reporters] accountable to? What was the past practice?" recalls Weaver. After the conference call, Castelló called Díaz because "I was worried... I tell him, 'You know, they are manipulating you. They don't like you, Jesús, because you are a Cuban-American.' He resisted believing that... He was very naïve." Díaz had moved to the US as a child, was raised in Georgia, and had married an American. Díaz assured Castelló that he had not attended the conference call because he did not feel well. He expressed continued full confidence in his decision to fire the *Nuevo Herald* reporters.

After listening to Castelló, Weaver says it was clear that "there were lots of folks at *El Nuevo* who don't believe that there was anything wrong with having worked for Radio Martí." Newspapers commonly encouraged their reporters to appear on such media outlets as Fox News or CNN, because it was good publicity for the newspaper. What was different about this? Mulls Weaver:

I don't consider this revealed wisdom from God. I think this is the kind of thing you have to work through and figure out. So I tried to do that in my sphere of influence here on the journalism side... You have to ask now, what were the rules? Were they well understood?

At the same time, the rules which the *Miami Herald* had borne in mind in judging the Miami reporters' actions unethical were widely accepted and followed throughout the industry, not least at McClatchy publications. "If it means anything to be a McClatchy newspaper, it has to be rooted in things like fairness, like accuracy, like ethical behavior. And so we wanted to work through that with them," remarks Weaver.

Weaver felt that in some ways his career up to now had been a preparation for this situation. In the run-up to the first Gulf War, when he was editor of the Anchorage *Daily News*, the paper ran a story on whether or not the trans-Alaska oil pipeline was safe from saboteurs, including a graphic of the most vulnerable parts. "It just caused a conflagration in Anchorage," remembers Weaver. "I got calls from US senators and oil company presidents and the governor... The truth was that nobody that was going to sabotage the pipeline was going to learn anything from our story. The blueprints for the Trans-Alaska pipeline are on file at every federal repository library in the country... But it was definitely an error in judgment to have run that graphic that way." He observes:

I didn't start out knowing what to do in all these situations. I made some bad calls and I agonized over things that it turned out didn't need agonizing. But in some sense that was all by way of paying your dues, so when you come to something like this, you go into it on a fairly steady footing... It was an ethically loaded situation.

### **Visit to Miami**

By the weekend of September 30, after consultations with the McClatchy leadership team, Weaver had decided it was time to go to Miami in person. He and Vice President-Operations Whittaker made reservations to fly out Monday, October 2, and convene the Miami Herald Media Company's executive committee Monday evening. They had much to discuss. Had the situation gone too far? What would too far look like, and what could McClatchy do about it? Who was responsible for what? "What was difficult was the interplay between the various forces at work here," recalls Weaver. "Some journalistic, some individual, some personnel, some legal." Weaver understood that Díaz and Fiedler had both done what they considered right. He also understood that the *Nuevo Herald* journalists had perceived nothing wrong in their behavior, and thought they had permission to freelance for Radio/TV Martí.

If some journalistic sin had been committed in doing the story, then I would have had an altogether different agenda. Or if I'd found that this was really the tip of the iceberg and it turned out everybody on the [*Nuevo*] staff was being paid by somebody else, that would have been different... [But I wanted to know] what's the journalism here? What was the reason for doing it? What was the way in which it was done? Do both

of those match the standards that we want to hold ourselves to for journalism? That's not unique to a multicultural, intramural sort of flare-up like this. But it took on extra intensity because it was intramural, or intra-familial, and because it was multicultural.

It had been hard enough to extract the story of what happened from the participants. Now, says Weaver, "we had to balance contradictory stories... This was unusual. I had not been through anything like it." It was, he recalls, "pretty painful."

All this didn't happen in a low, dispassionate, quiet voice. There were people in this who cared passionately about it, who felt personally aggrieved in various ways, who thought the consequences of one behavior or another on our part was going to be cataclysmic... This was a kind of harmonic convergence, where you had a lot of things comes together: journalistic questions, multicultural questions, community relations questions, authority questions. It brought a lot of tough things together.

The McClatchy executives had a number of options, none ideal. They could decide to reinstate the fired journalists. If that happened, the *Miami Herald* newsroom would be outraged. "I knew that rehiring those journalists would piss off the *Miami Herald* newsroom. They felt like they'd done a very legitimate story about a grievous journalistic sin," remembers Weaver. If, on the other hand, the company upheld their firing, the already low *Nuevo Herald* newsroom morale would stagnate. Plus the community would remain unassuaged. "You wonder, oh God, if we do this, and another 6,000 people cancel their subscriptions... You've got to be willing at some point to take that, but it doesn't mean you don't lose sleep over it," says Weaver.

Or was the publisher at fault? Should Díaz be encouraged to resign? Would his resignation accomplish anything? McClatchy would not want Díaz to be perceived as a sacrificial lamb. "I really don't believe any publisher has ever been thrown overboard for people with the pitchforks and the sputtering torches," jokes Weaver. After all, it was part of Díaz' job to make his own judgment calls; he had broken no laws.

At a more philosophical level, was this an instance of two different styles of journalism, or two different standards of ethics? Had there been a bona fide conflict of interest? If so, what constituted sufficient disclosure? Should journalists always acknowledge if they reported for several news outlets? How often should such disclosures be made? Was broadcasting to Cuba necessarily propaganda? Did a valid distinction exist between the laudable promotion of democracy and truth, versus a blameworthy transmittal of propaganda? What rules should McClatchy propose going forward?

Weaver and Whittaker were well aware that any decision they took would reverberate across all McClatchy newspapers. They would be sending signals on numerous levels: about

journalistic ethics, about management structure, about a publisher's prerogatives. On the flight, Whittaker and Weaver would have to come to an agreement about what to do.