

10 Miami Journalists Take U.S. Pay

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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.

Those who were paid the most were veteran reporters and a freelance contributor for El Nuevo Herald, the Spanish-language newspaper published by the corporate parent of The Miami Herald. Pablo Alfonso, who reports on Cuba and writes an opinion column, was paid almost \$175,000 since 2001 to host shows on Radio Martí and TV Martí. El Nuevo Herald freelance reporter Olga Connor, who writes about Cuban culture, received about \$71,000, and staff reporter Wilfredo Cancio Isla, who covers the Cuban exile community and politics, was paid almost \$15,000 in the last five years.

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.

Alfonso and Cancio declined to comment. Connor was unavailable for comment.

Jesús Díaz Jr., president of the Miami Herald Media Co. and publisher of both newspapers, expressed disappointment, saying the payments violated a "sacred trust" between journalists and the public.

"Even the appearance that your objectivity or integrity might have been impaired is something we can't condone, not in our business," Díaz said. "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."

Other journalists receiving payments from the U.S. Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which runs Radio and TV Martí, included: Diario Las Americas opinion page editor Helen Aguirre Ferre and reporter/columnist Ariel Remos; Channel 41 news director Miguel Cossio; and syndicated columnist Carlos Alberto Montaner, whose opinions appear in the pages of El Nuevo Herald and The Miami Herald.

GOVERNMENT PROJECT

Radio and TV Martí are U.S. government programs created to promote democracy and freedom in Cuba. Their programming cannot be broadcast within the United States because of anti-propaganda laws. Radio and TV Martí have received \$37 million this year.

The payments to journalists were discovered in documents recently obtained by The Miami Herald as a result of a federal Freedom of Information Request filed on Aug. 15.

OWN RESPONSIBILITY

Pedro Roig, the director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting since 2003, said he has sought to improve the quality of news by, among other things, hiring more Cuban exile journalists as contractors. He said it's each journalist's responsibility to adhere to their own ethics and rules.

"We consider them to be good journalists, and people who were formed inside that system who got out [of Cuba] and adapted and made good," Roig said. "In reality, I feel very satisfied."

Journalism ethics experts called the payments a fundamental conflict of interest. Such violations undermine the credibility of reporters to objectively cover key issues affecting U.S. policy toward Cuba, they said.

Iván Román, executive director of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, said the payments from TV and Radio Martí posed a clear conflict of interest.

"It's definitely a line that journalists shouldn't be crossing," said Román, a former El Nuevo Herald journalist. "It's clear the medium has a particular agenda. If they cover Cuban issues, it could be seen as a conflict."

El Nuevo Herald Executive Editor Humberto Castelló said he hadn't been aware that the three writers were being paid by the federal government.

"I lament very much that I had not been informed before by them," Castelló said. "We discussed the situation with them and they were both dismissed immediately."

POPULAR FIGURES

The journalists involved are among the most popular in South Florida, and many were reporting on issues involving Radio or TV Martí for their news organizations.

Channel 41 reporter Juan Manuel Cao, who received \$11,400 this year from TV Martí, made news in July when he confronted Castro during an appearance in Argentina by pressing the Cuban leader to explain why his government had not allowed a well-known doctor and dissident, Hilda Molina, to leave the island to visit her son in Argentina.

During the exchange, Castro openly questioned Cao if anyone was paying him to ask that question. The Cuban government has long contended that some South Florida Spanish-language journalists were on the federal payroll.

"There is nothing suspect in this," Cao said. "I would do it for free. But the regulations don't allow it. I charge symbolically, below market prices."

DEFENDS ROLE

Ferre, the opinion page editor for Diario las Americas, was paid \$4,325 from 2001 to 2005. She said the payments did not compromise her journalistic integrity. She was paid to be a guest on TV Martí shows and said her point of view was never suppressed.

"Guests are being paid for their time that they have to take in order to be able to accommodate the program," she said.

Ethicists say that it's common for journalists to be compensated by other media outlets but not by the government, built on principles that espouse an independent press.

"This is such an obvious textbook case," said University of Florida journalism professor Jon Roosenraad. "This is exactly like a business reporter during the day going out and moonlighting as a PR [public relations] person for a local company at night and then going back to the paper the next day and writing about 'his' company."

Total payouts since 2001 range from \$1,550 to Radio Mambi commentator Ninoska Perez-Castellón to \$174,753 for El Nuevo Herald's Alfonso, the government payment records show. The payments — which range from \$75 to \$100 per appearance — are to host or appear on the government-produced shows.

The Miami Herald's review of dozens of articles by the El Nuevo Herald journalists — including several about TV Martí or Radio Martí — found no instance in which the reporters or columnists disclosed that they had received payment.

Two ethics experts compared it to the case of Armstrong Williams in 2005, when it was revealed that the Bush administration had paid the prominent pundit to promote its education policy, No Child Left Behind, on his nationally syndicated television show.

Herald staff writers Jasmine Kripalani, Luisa Yanez, Casey Woods and Alfonso Chardy contributed to this report.

THE JOURNALISTS' RESPONSE

Pablo Alfonso: "I don't have any comment. I believe that's better for the newspaper and for me."

Olga Connor: Could not be reached.

Wilfredo Cancio Isla: Declined to comment. Said his wife, Ivette Leyva: "This is an overreaction by McClatchy [The Miami Herald's parent company]."

Miguel Cossio: "I am a sometimes panelist, that's all. They will call me up and ask me to take part in a discussion on a topic, let's say the Mexican elections or the war in Iraq. That is the extent of my involvement."

Carlos Alberto Montaner: Could not be reached.

Juan Manuel Cao: "I feel proud to help break the censorship in Cuba."

Ariel Remos: "I liked being on those panels because we could say what we wanted. For example, we didn't have to call Fidel Castro the president of Cuba. I could call him what he is, a dictator."

Omar Claro: "I will not say whether I do or do not accept money. You publish whatever you want."

Helen Aguirre Ferre: "I don't see a conflict of interest."

Paul Crespo: "I am pro freedom and democracy everywhere, from Cuba to Afghanistan to Yugoslavia."

Ninoska Perez-Castellón: "The purpose of these human-interest programs is to show people in Cuba what life is like in a democracy."

Illustration: Photo: Pablo Alfonso (a), Olga Connor (a), Wilfredo Cancio Isla (a), Miguel Cossio (a), Carlos Alberto Montaner (a), Juan Manuel Cao (a), Ariel Remos (a), Omar Claro (a), Helen Aguirre Ferre (a), Paul Crespo (a), Ninoska Perez-Castellón (a)

graphic: Partial list of payments made by radio Marti (see microfilm)

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