

Let's Not Confuse U.S. Propaganda With Journalism

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Last week, two reporters and a freelancer were fired from El Nuevo Herald after The Miami Herald's Oscar Corral reported they were paid for appearances on Radio and TV Martí.

The dismissals have invigorated the opinion industry and subjected the people of this town to higher than usual doses of hypocrisy.

The most amusing response comes, as usual, from Cuba, where the official press has been gloating about proof that the "Miami Mafia" and its journalists are bought and paid for by the U.S. government. It would be a compelling argument, except for the fact that in Cuba, government hacks are the rule, not the exception. Of the small group of Cuban journalists who don't draw a government salary, many are, sadly, polishing their prose in jail.

The El Nuevo three were fired for entering into the sort of arrangement that defines journalism in a totalitarian state. Which brings us to more hypocrites: all the exile patriots who attack Corral for reporting the truth while simultaneously defending El Nuevo Herald's journalists for taking money from propagandists.

Some of the postings on Corral's blog are scary. "You will pay dearly for what you have done," says one. "We are starting a campaign to have Oscar fired at The Herald," says another. That's the kind of attitude that makes one hopeful about the future of a free press in Cuba.

Radio and TV Martí are tools of the United States, conceived with a singular aim: to undermine the Cuban government. They cannot broadcast here because of U.S. anti-propaganda laws.

This is not PBS or NPR; this is programming designed to influence opinion in ways deemed unacceptable for domestic consumption. Propaganda is propaganda, even when a large portion of the population regards its mission as noble. It is not journalism.

"I fully support what Radio Martí is doing," Miami Herald Publisher Jesús Díaz Jr. told me Tuesday. "The issue is, don't do it with independent U.S. journalists. Leave them alone."

I've never accepted money from Radio Martí. But years after I left journalism, I contributed an essay to a journal put out by the State Department. I've regretted it ever since. Not because it was unethical, but because I believe writers - even fiction writers - must remain independent of governments.

It's a conviction born of my family's own struggles in Cuba and strengthened in recent years by the Bush administration's attempts to manipulate and distort information.

El Nuevo Herald's journalists are guilty of not following common sense. Their firings may have been justified. But were they fair?

There's evidence that these were long-standing practices at El Nuevo Herald, a place that sometimes seems to operate under rules of its own with a skeleton staff of committed but underpaid journalists. Earlier this summer, editors published a doctored photograph.

Díaz says he accepted the editor's explanation that it had been an honest mistake. As for staffing levels, he pointed out that every newspaper would like more resources. ``At the same time, I'm also a believer that you can always make improvements with the team you currently have."

Far from being a secret, freelancer Olga Connor's arrangement with Radio Martí already had been reported in both papers as far back as 2002. Díaz, who was not publisher then, says he hadn't been aware of the article or the arrangement. Connor's bosses, however, presumably took no issue with it.

Connor (who once said nice things about my books in one of her columns) can be forgiven for being confused. The rest of us do well to remember that the ``battle of ideas" is best left to demagogues and dictators. Journalists, in a free society, are paid to watch the government, not to be its hired servants.

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