

# Keep media independent of the government

Opinion  
The Miami Herald  
By Sam Terilli  
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The tempest over the journalists paid by TV and Radio Martí has been brewing for at least week, but the time has come to take a deep breath and smell, if you will, the coffee -- American or *cubano*, take your choice.

Let's start by defining what this controversy does or does not involve.

- **First**, it is not about journalists opposing the Castro regime in Cuba or supporting the cause of a free Cuba. Journalists are entitled to their own opinions. No one is applying a litmus test.
- **Second**, The Miami Herald Media Company terminated its relationships with a number of journalists paid by the agencies, and journalism experts have offered their criticism of the journalists. But neither The Miami Herald nor the experts have offered one word of support for Fidel Castro. This is not about Castro, at least not in that sense.
- **Third**, this controversy is really about the relationship between government and an independent press. In that sense it is a little about Castro because the Cuban press is so clearly not independent of the Cuban government, but hold that thought for now.

Americans expect their news media, including The Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald, with all of the flaws that come with being institutions run by mere humans, to be as independent of government as possible. Yes, we are all dependent on government to, for example, protect the public welfare, defend the republic from invasions, pave the streets and provide some social services. We are all citizens or residents of a country and, thus, not truly independent of our country or national interests.

## An informed judgment

As I remind my college media-ethics students, journalists do not parachute into a community from Mars. They live here. Many have children in our schools. They have many of the same concerns as everyone else. And, many have strong political beliefs. Many in Miami want a free Cuba. That's all great. That is America at its finest. We should support freedom and the rule of law for all.

This does not mean that all journalism is hopelessly slanted. In a mechanical sense there is no pure objectivity, but there is the next best thing and that is the acknowledgement and disclosure of one's biases, affiliations or connections that might be relevant to a reasonable reader.

If a journalist is working for -- paid or not -- any person or organization that might be even remotely relevant to the news media's mission, then when in doubt (and one should often be in doubt) the best course is to disclose to the editors or management. Only then can an informed judgment be made in terms of who is doing the reporting, opinion writing, editing or other work

of the news media. If the editor or management fails to make the right decision, then they will have to suffer the consequences with readers.

The reason is simple. The public in this country understands that the news media may be opinionated or flawed, but it wants the members of the media to be what they appear to be -- independent, owned by a major corporation or, perhaps, an arm of government. The latter, of course, might be called a government propaganda tool -- perhaps accurate and fair, or perhaps not -- but at least we would know the source so as to make our own judgments.

When journalists deny the public this information, they deny the public the freedom to choose and decide.

When journalists accept payments from a government agency or even just work for a government agency, they run the risk of being viewed as agents of government. Their reporting and writing may be very fine, objective and honest, but the problem is one of appearance and judgment.

No two cases are alike. Employee or staff journalists might be different from freelance columnists. People being paid a lot might be viewed in a light different from those paid little or doing it for free. Hacks simply parroting the government line are certainly different from and worse than an independent person simply selling some of his or her time to an agency, but not changing his or her opinion or the facts. Yet in each case the underlying questions of trust, disclosure and appearance are basically the same.

### **Agencies ought to know better**

Too many good and honest people have been caught up in this little mess, and that is very unfortunate. Some perhaps belong in the mess, some perhaps not. Either way, a fair degree of the responsibility for this lies at the doorstep of the government agencies involved.

These agencies ought to know better than to do anything that compromises the independence or appearance of independence of the American news media. If Radio or TV Martí felt compelled by law to make such payments, those agencies need either new lawyers or a new law. Our government should do nothing that makes our news media appear to be an arm of the government.

Sadly, these bone-headed actions by our government only benefit those who would harm this country, someone like, say, Castro himself, who has for years been claiming the American media are just a tool of the U.S. government. We ought not give a tyrant such an easy and ironic shot to take against us, especially when we know his media are neither free nor independent.

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