

# Problems dog broadcaster

## The most recent analysis of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting found some programs have let bias creep in.

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Almost four years ago, an Inspector General's audit ripped TV and Radio Martí bosses for improper hiring practices. The director resigned under a barrage of criticism for cronyism and patronage. Programming needed an overhaul to curtail bias, a separate study concluded.

Miami's powerful Cuban-American congressional leaders looked to local lawyer Pedro Roig to turn the operation around.

Today, many of the problems that have dogged the Martí broadcasters for two decades remain. A miniscule number of people in Cuba hear or see the broadcasts. The Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which oversees the Martí operation, is once again beset by scandal -- a top executive was indicted last month on a kickback-for-contracts scheme.

Roig -- who turned in the executive to investigators -- says his goal has been to improve and diversify programming by contracting the best talent available.

"What interests us is professional content. All these people I see here are magnificent professionals, and it gives me great pride to know that we can have people of this caliber in Radio and TV Martí," Roig said. "It's a magnificent rainbow."

Roig, 66, set out to clean up a government-financed media operation plagued with low morale, allegations of cronyism -- but still highly paid. OCB salaries are higher than those at other U.S. government-financed media.

One of Roig's first hires: his wife's nephew, Alberto Mascaro, as chief of staff. His salary: more than \$100,000 a year. Mascaro had no media management experience.

"I was an international business manager for a Fortune 500 industrial parts and supply company," he told The Miami Herald.

This year, Roig tapped Luis Zuñiga, a former political prisoner and the executive director of the Cuban Liberty Council (CLC), to run "special projects." Yearly salary: \$100,000. Zuñiga had no media management experience.

Zuñiga said he is qualified because he has a bachelor's degree in business from Florida International University. He also helped the Cuban American National Foundation launch a radio show to Cuba -- before he and a group of hard-liners split because they felt CANF had gone soft on Fidel Castro.

Roig said several "very qualified" people applied for Zuñiga's position, which he said posted publicly.

CLC Treasurer Feliciano Foyo said Roig recruited Zuñiga: "We found out from Roig, who told us he was interested in Luis and wanted us to agree with an offer he had for him."

A Bay of Pigs veteran and historian, Roig concedes he lacked media management experience when got the OCB job in 2003.

Roig sought help from Herbert Levin, a veteran radio executive who already had a \$5,000, no-bid contract with OCB to help Radio Martí boost its signal to Cuba. Levin got that contract three months after the U.S. Senate confirmed Joaquin Blaya, his former business partner at Radio Unica, to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which oversees OCB.

Salvador Lew, OCB's former director, said Blaya did not sway his decision to give Levin the original contract. Blaya said he did not get involved. Levin's company won subsequent contracts by competitive bid.

With Roig at the helm, Levin partnered with Jorge De Cárdenas, a popular advertising executive convicted on obstruction of justice charges in the late 1990s in a Miami corruption case. De Cárdenas said he and Roig are longtime friends who have run political campaigns together, but that their friendship did not help him or Levin get OCB work.

Roig said he did not tell Levin to hire De Cárdenas, who has acted as a media liaison to Roig and interviews new arrivals from Cuba to help shape programming.

"I paid my dues to society, and I have a right to make a living," De Cárdenas said. Roig said De Cárdenas does not need security clearance to enter Martí headquarters -- as required for employees and contractors -- because he goes there as a visitor.

Spanish Radio Productions Inc., owned by Levin, has received more than \$210,000 since 2003 to overhaul programming.

Despite having dozens of U.S.-paid journalists on staff, OCB has spent about \$1 million since 2001 to contract at least 49 other news gatherers who also work or freelance at major media outlets in Miami. Several have reported on TV and Radio Martí for their local news organizations.

Joe Garcia -- a former CANF director and now vice president of the New Democratic Network, which helps Democrats recruit Hispanic voters -- said paying local journalists gives the appearance that OCB is trying to buy off criticism.

Roig and his predecessor, Lew, say they hire local journalists to improve programming: "No one is asked, and it has never been a point of discussion with anyone to defend or protect a certain policy viewpoint," said Roig, adding that contract journalists are hired without bidding, based on their talents.

Lew jokingly said OCB policy had resulted in contracts going to "half the Miami phone book."

OCB's contracts, hiring practices and salary scale have come under fire for two decades. In 1985, in a funding debate on the floor of the U.S. House, critics of Radio Martí called it a "gold-plated operation" for its lavish salaries.

Roig says he has moved to bring contractor salaries in line with federal requirements, reducing payments for half-hour shows to between \$75 and \$125 per show. During Lew's tenure, some contractors earned as much as \$400 an hour.

Bias in some programming persists, though objectivity overall continues to improve, according to two recent evaluations by the International Broadcasting Bureau's Office of Performance Review.

Program quality reports done this summer for TV Martí and for Radio Martí found many news and entertainment shows met U.S. guidelines for balance and fairness, but bias and vulgarity crept into some

shows, and selection of guests or contract hosts seemed out of place for topics covered in other shows. Quality reports come out every year or two.

The analysis found one show in particular, *La Oficina del Jefe*, which spoofs a decrepit Fidel Castro, to be funny but sometimes "vulgar" and to inordinately poke fun at the Afro-Cuban religion of *Santería*. It also found bias among a few news shows hosted by contractors.

A presidential advisory board was created to guide Martí policy and provide oversight. Yet it has not met in the six years of Bush's presidency, BBG officials say, for lack of a quorum.

The nine-member board is supposed to act as a check and balance for Martí, but several members say they haven't been called to meet.

Asked why the board hasn't met, White House spokesman Blair Jones said in an e-mail: "The president has concentrated primarily on putting key personnel in place on the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting and remains focused on empowering Radio and TV Martí so they are able to broadcast a message of freedom and democracy to the Cuban people."

The U.S. government has a long tradition of using broadcasting to promote democracy, most notably in Eastern Europe during the Cold War with Radio Free Europe. The OCB and the Washington-based Voice of America operate as part of the U.S. government, and not as an independent nonprofit.

"Radio and TV Martí are more under the influence of the exile community than Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were from European emigrés," said Ross Johnson, who ran Radio Free Europe from 1988 to 1991. "Radio Free Europe fought those battles in the 1950s and established their distance from the emigrés."

The exile community consolidated its control over the Martí operation when Congress and the Clinton administration, in the run-up to the 1996 election and under pressure from CANF founder Jorge Mas Canosa and other exiles, agreed to move the stations from Washington to Miami.

The OCB building in Miami-Dade is named after Mas Canosa.

"It can be negative if it affects the objectivity of the reporting and keeping your distance from the story," Johnson said of exile influence.

"It can also affect objectivity if the emigré community affects who gets hired and promoted."

Roig said politics doesn't influence OCB. "No one has broken the firewall. We are totally independent."