

U.S. Paid 10 Journalists for Anti-Castro Reports

By ABBY GOODNOUGH, New York Times
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MIAMI, Sept. 8 — The Bush administration's Office of Cuba Broadcasting paid 10 journalists here to provide commentary on Radio and TV Martí, which transmit to Cuba government broadcasts critical of Fidel Castro, a spokesman for the office said Friday.

The group included three journalists at El Nuevo Herald, the Spanish-language sister newspaper of The Miami Herald, which fired them Thursday after learning of the relationship. Pablo Alfonso, who reports on Cuba for El Nuevo Herald, received the largest payment, almost \$175,000 since 2001.

Other journalists have been found to accept money from the Bush administration, including Armstrong Williams, a commentator and talk-show host who received \$240,000 to promote its education initiatives. But while the Castro regime has long alleged that some Cuban-American reporters in Miami were paid by the government, the revelation on Friday, reported in The Miami Herald, was the first evidence of that.

In addition to Mr. Alfonso, the journalists who received payment include Wilfredo Cancio Isla, who writes for El Nuevo Herald and received about \$15,000 since 2001; Olga Connor, a freelance reporter for the newspaper who received about \$71,000; and Juan Manuel Cao, a reporter for Channel 41 who got \$11,000 this year from TV Martí, according to The Miami Herald, which learned of the payments through a Freedom of Information Request.

When Mr. Cao followed Mr. Castro to Argentina this summer and asked him why Cuba was not letting one of its political dissidents leave, Mr. Castro called him a "mercenary" and asked who was paying him.

Mr. Cao refused to comment Friday except to say on Channel 41 that he believed the Cuban government knew in advance about the article in The Miami Herald. Most of the other journalists could not be reached. Ninoska Perez-Castellón, a commentator on the popular Radio Mambí station here, said she had received a total of \$1,550 from the government to do 10 episodes of a documentary-style show on TV Martí called "Atrévete a Soñar," or "Dare to Dream," and saw nothing wrong with it. Her employer has always known about the arrangement, she added.

"Being Cuban," Ms. Perez-Castellón said, "there's nothing wrong with working on programs that are on a mission to inform the people of Cuba. It's no secret we do that. My face has always been on the shows."

But Al Tompkins, who teaches ethics at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, called it a conflict of interest for journalists to accept payment from any government agency.

“It’s all about credibility and independence,” Mr. Tompkins said. “If you consider yourself a journalist, then it seems to me it’s an obvious conflict of interest to take government dollars.” Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a Republican congressman and one of Miami’s most stridently anti-Castro voices, said he believed editors at El Nuevo Herald and The Miami Herald had known that the three writers for El Nuevo had worked for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. He pointed to articles from both papers in 2002 that describe Mr. Alfonso as a moderator for a program on Radio Martí and Ms. Connor as a paid commentator for the station.

But Robert Beatty, vice president for public affairs at the Miami Herald Media Company, said the editor of El Nuevo, Humberto Castello, learned only on Thursday. The Herald, long owned by Knight Ridder, was acquired in March by the McClatchy Company.

Mr. Beatty said that Jesús Diaz, publisher of The Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald, had decided to fire Mr. Alfonso and Mr. Cancio and to sever ties with Ms. Connor, a freelance journalist who wrote about Cuban culture.

“Journalism’s ethical guidelines are neither subjective nor selectively enforced,” Mr. Beatty said. “Where conduct of this sort is brought to our attention, we act decisively.”

Mr. Cancio said Friday evening that his supervisors had known and approved of his appearances on Radio and TV Martí, during which he said he always expressed his own opinions and not the government’s.

“It is for these reasons that I deny any conflict of interest in my professional behavior,” he said, “and I believe my termination to be an unfair and disproportionate decision made in bad faith.” Pedro Roig, director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, could not be reached for comment. But he told The Miami Herald that hiring Cuban-American journalists was part of a broader mission to improve the stations’ quality.

Joe O’Connell, a spokesman for the government’s International Broadcasting Bureau, which oversees the Office of Cuba Broadcasting as well as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, said the bureau did background checks on journalists who contributed to its programming but had no ethics code for them.

After Mr. Williams admitted in 2005 to accepting money from the Federal Education Department through a public relations company, federal auditors said the Bush administration had violated the law by disseminating “covert propaganda.”

A few months later, The Los Angeles Times reported that the Pentagon had paid millions of dollars to another public relations firm to plant propaganda in the Iraqi news media and pay friendly Iraqi journalists monthly stipends.

Government spending on Radio and TV Martí — \$37 million this year — has long been the subject of criticism because the broadcasts appear to reach only a minute number of Cubans. The Cuban government jams the signals. This year, the Bush administration spent \$10 million on a new plane designed to transmit TV Martí more effectively.