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The "Reconquista" of El Diario-La Prensa?

By Angelo Falcón (February 24, 2014)

One of the facts of modern day globalized life is the constant churning of businesses, especially, it seems, media companies through mergers, takeovers, bankruptcies and the like. With the purchase of 90 percent ownership of El Diario-La Prensa and its parent company, impreMedia, back in 2012 by the Argentine newspaper, La Nacion, the nature and future of this 100 year old Latino community institution in New York has become open to question. That year, in light of this corporate takeover, I penned an essay, which became somewhat controversial by asking, "[The End of El Diario-La Prensa?](#)"



In that essay, I lamented the increasing disconnection over the years of El Diario-La Prensa from the community it serves, the more than 2 million Latinos of New York City. I wondered whether its takeover by a foreign company from Argentina, which was ideologically conservative, might make its growing irrelevance and small and declining circulation worse. Would the new owners, as have past ones done, reach out to the increasingly diverse and predominantly Puerto Rican and Dominican Latino community to engage in discussions of the future direction of the

publication and share their plans for its remake?

The late Dolores Prida, a longtime colleague and then a columnist for El Diario, [responded in her column](#) in the paper that:

Technically, S. A. La Nación, based in Buenos Aires, is a company as foreign as any other based in London or Madrid or Timbuktu, but that does not keep it from doing a good job that can succeed and positively serve the Latino community. The problem would be if they just see us as a "market" with huge purchasing power and not as a growing community needing tools of political empowerment in this country.

Dolores, as always, was optimistic about the future of El Diario and, although tragically she did not live to see it, looked forward to celebrating the paper's centennial celebrations of last year.

Now that two years have passed since my essay, it seemed time to ask again, What is the current situation of El Diario? Most obviously, although it has experienced a significant decline as have most newspapers today, it hasn't yet closed down, perhaps indicating that my short-term predictive talents are apparently limited. But, has it been transformed into the forward-looking publication that Dolores envisioned under the new owners?

It should be noted that while the focus here is specifically on El Diario-La Prensa, impreMedia, of which it is a part, is a multimedia company that also publishes daily and weekly newspapers throughout the country, including La Opinión in Los Angeles, La Raza in Chicago, El Mensajero in San Francisco, La Prensa in Orlando, Hoy Nueva York, and Rumbo in Houston. According to the transaction announced on March 12, 2012, ImpreMedia, LLC operates as a subsidiary of US Hispanic Media Inc., which is in turn a subsidiary of Argentina's S.A. La Nación. Besides publishing the newspaper "La Nación" in Argentina, S.A. La Nación also publishes magazines, and manages news and information websites. La Nación was founded in 1870 and is based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. What happens in El Diario-La Prensa may, therefore, reflect what is happening to this larger national chain of Spanish-language news sites, yet another example of the powerful forces of a troublesome media consolidation occurring nationally and internationally.

Troubling Developments

It appears that a number of developments do not bode well for the future of El Diario, or at least for the return of the spirit of El Diario of old, as well as for impreMedia as a whole. Based on information coming out of the paper by staffers and other people in the know, here are just a few examples:

The Takeover by Arrogant Foreign Elite

Owners and Managers. Over time, the Argentinean owners of El Diario have started to bring in their fellow countrymen, along with Spaniards, to take over the paper's daily operations. This is not in itself necessarily a problem, except that these are for the most part individuals with little or no knowledge of New York's diverse Latino community and those in other parts of the country. Led by Spaniard Juan Varela as VP News and Editorial/ Content Director, he is recently joined by Argentinean Claudio Remeseira as Multimedia Local Editor. With the economies in Spain and Argentina currently in turmoil (the unemployment rate in Spain is 26 percent), these ex-pats seem to be aggressively creating new titles and openings for their own in El Diario. Like the 1956 movie, "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers," longtime El Diario staff are slowly being replaced by alien pods in what some have loosely characterized as a kind of "Reconquista."



Juan Varela

The Demotion of the Longtime Bronx-born Puerto Rican Publisher, Rossana Rosado.

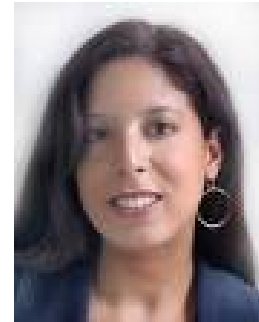
The first major indication of this shift was the demotion of El Diario's longtime Publisher, Rossana Rosado, to the status of "Publisher Emeritus" that occurred back in November 2013, just one week following the big celebration of the paper's centennial in Grand Central Station. Rosado, who many insiders feel was basically forced out from her position after 18 years with the paper, reportedly had to settle for a severance package to be slowly paid out over two or three years by remaining on El Diario's payroll. This is what explains the creation of her current odd title of "Publisher Emeritus."



Rossana Rosado

The Neutering of the Brooklyn-born Executive Editor, Erica Gonzalez.

The paper's Executive Editor, another Puerto Rican woman, is now staffbeing constantly overridden by the new Argentine-Spanish conquerors. Once the paper's very popular Op-Ed Editor, Erica Gonzalez was handpicked by then Publisher Rosado, who moved on last year and left her twisting in the wind with the new management. Increasingly frequent fights between her and her overseers have been witnessed in the newsroom. Many insiders feel that her days are numbered at El Diario.



Erica Gonzalez

The Marginalization of Existing Caribbean and Other Latino Staff.

There is also a significant reshuffling of the paper's newsroom and business, which is reportedly being handled disrespectfully by the new managers. One example is the apparent replacement of the beat of the paper's experienced and well-regarded political reporter, Marlene Peralta, who is Dominican and yet another woman (see the pattern?) by a Spaniard (see the pattern?), Juan Matossian, who,



Marlene Peralta

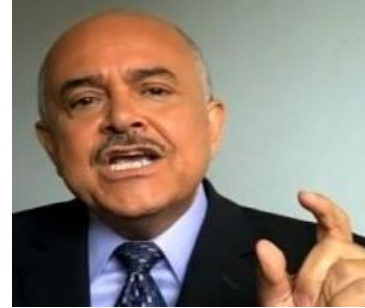
based on his reporting, obviously has very little knowledge of New York and the city's Latino politics. There is also the case of the 15-year veteran Puerto Rican assignment editor, Heriberto González, whose news assignments, I hear, are being constantly and arbitrarily overwritten by newcomer Remeseira.

The Suspension of Columnist Gerson

Borrero. Then there is the special case of the paper's longtime cantankerous columnist and former editor-in-chief, Gerson Borrero. The outspoken journalist, who doubles as a political commentator for Time Warner Cable NY1

News/Noticias, apparently irked the paper's new management by breaking a story on the investigation of the Puerto Rican parade in the New York Post after first bringing it to El Diario and being told they had struck a deal with the Attorney

General and were holding off on the story until allowed to publish it. His popular weekly column, Bajo Fuego, was suspended with little explanation, leading some to believe that he was being censored and, like Erica Gonzalez, a fellow Puerto Rican (see the pattern?), his days at the paper may be numbered as well. When approached about this, the usually verbose journalist has remained uncharacteristically silent about it.



Gerson Borrero

Irrelevant and Poor Local Content. The negative effects of these developments has been most obvious in the poor and inconsistent coverage of the local Latino community. Increasingly, local Latino community leaders and activists reflect on how little they rely on El Diario for news or views about their own community and how much influence the publication has lost. Most recently, it was noted by many how news of a major protest of the first meeting of the reconstituted Board of Directors of the highly controversial National Puerto Rican Day Parade only made it to the bottom of page four of the paper, despite the importance of this issue to the close to 800,000 Puerto Ricans in the city and the other Latinos whose parades are also affected..

Whenever new owners take over, there inevitably are changes in personnel and direction, so none of the changes described above are in themselves unusual. The word is that in January, impreMedia had a major reorganization, laying off some 25 staffers that included replacing the managing editors of



their weekly newspapers El Mesajero in San Francisco, La Prensa in Orlando and Rumbo in Texas. The purpose of these changes, according to management, was to strengthen local content and minimize duplication between the weeklies. All of this is the handiwork of Juan Varela, who has come to be known among impreMedia staff as "El Verdugo" (The Executioner), kind of like the character George Cooney played in the movie, "Up in the Air," whose job was traveling around the country firing people.

Takeover By Narrow Set of Nationalities

However, what is unusual is the apparent takeover by a narrow set of nationalities, most with little or no real knowledge of the experience of Latinos in New York and the United States. The fact that the overwhelming majority of Latinos in this city are Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, Colombian and Ecuadoran appears irrelevant to the new owners and managers of El Diario, which is troubling.

But most disturbing is the apparent lack of outreach to these communities by the new owners and managers. Even when El Diario was bought some time ago by a Canadian owner, there was at least an effort by these non-Latinos to engage the Latino community in a dialogue about their plans for the paper, even establishing a community advisory board. What the current owners are projecting is a offensive and patronizing arrogance.

As the Latino population in New York City becomes increasingly diverse, making it perhaps the most diverse in the country, developing relationships between and understanding the sensitivities of the different Latino national origin groups takes on more and more importance. This is a process further complicated by issues of social class, generation, race and gender. In the late 1960s, for example, the New York's local Puerto Rican community had to challenge Puerto Rico's political elites from interfering so much in the politics and policy issues facing city's Puerto Rican population. And in the 1960s, there was the negative reaction in Puerto Rico to the newly-arrived Cuban exiles who seemed to be monopolizing the island's news media industry at the time.

Among Latinos in the US, Argentineans and Spaniards are atypical in many ways. In New York City, it is important to note that, combined, there are only 32,962 Argentineans and Spaniards, making up only 1.4 percent of the city's 2.4 million Latino population. Furthermore, nationally, Spaniards, besides being most definitely European, have, according to the Census, median personal earnings of \$29,300 and Argentinians of \$30,000, compared to \$20,000 for all Hispanics and \$29,000 for the total US population. In terms of educational attainment, 32 percent of Spaniards and 40 percent of Argentineans have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 13 percent of all Hispanics and 29 percent of the US population.

This social class dimension is important to note as we discuss interactions and differences between Latino nationality groups within the United States and their respective priorities. How, one can ask, do these relatively rarified Latino subgroups and their foreign-born elites play such a disproportionate role in, in this case, the Spanish-language newspaper industry, and do so in such patronizing and disrespectful ways?

The Future of El Diario-La Prensa?

In light of all of these developments, what can we say about the future of El Diario-La Prensa? This past year, El Diario-La Prensa celebrated its centennial with a large number of public events throughout the city, but despite this, the new owners and managers missed the opportunity to establish a useful dialogue with the city's Latino communities about the role that the paper should be playing. This lack of interaction and outreach, as well as the heavy handedness in their dealings with longstanding staffers, reveals a certain arrogance that is patronizing and disrespectful.

Ultimately, it would seem to me that it makes good business sense for the new owners and managers to do a better job of reaching out to the communities they plan to serve. If their plan is to make El Diario and the other impreMedia properties attract a much more upscale and "Euro-Latin American" readership, or to better serve what are largely poor and working class Latino communities, then they should make that clear. The way in which the new owners and managers have been conducting themselves may very well hasten

the end of El Diario-La Prensa and other impreMedia publications. It could be that I was right after all. But only time, as usual, will tell.

***Angelo Falcón** is President of the National Institute for Latino Policy (NiLP). He is co-editor of the forthcoming 2nd edition of the book. "Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition." He can be reached at afalcon@latinopolicy.org.*
