2 Accused of Computer Crimes in TV Rivalry

TAMPA, Fla., May 10 — Two former employees of a Tampa television station were charged today with stealing information by tapping into the computer of a competing station in what an investigator called "an unusual case of media espionage."

The two former news executives of WTSP-TV, Tampa's Channel 10, were arrested and charged with computer crimes after a rival station, Channel 13, reported that its computer had been illegally entered.

Those charged were were Michael I. Shapiro, the 33-year-old former assistant news director at Channel 10, and Terry L. Cole, 33, the former news director. Mr. Shapiro was arrested Feb. 7 and Mr. Cole was arrested April 11, but formal charges were not filed by the state until , officials said. Both were dismissed by Channel 10. Familiarity With System

Each man was charged with 15 counts under Florida's computer crime statute and one count of conspiracy. If convicted on all counts they could each face up to 76 years in prison, and a $76,000 fine, according to W. Christian Hoyer, chief assistant state attorney in Hillsborough County, who is prosecuting the case. Mr. Shapiro, a computer enthusiast, was intimately familiar with the computer system at Channel 13 because he had worked there until he was hired away by Channel 10 in October, said to Richard Pyles, a supervisor at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, which investigated the case.

The break-ins began in December but were not detected until Jan. 12 when Jim Hooper, Channel 13's morning news producer, noticed that files listing story projects were missing, said officials at Channel 13. Computer experts deduced that an intruder had rifled the system, Mr. Pyles said.

The police seized a home computer, a Channel 13 computer-user manual and other materials from Mr. Shapiro's apartment in St. Petersburg, Mr. Pyles said. Telephone records indicated that his telephone had been used to enter the Channel 13 computer. The computer at Channel 10 had also been used to gain entry to Channel 13's system, Mr. Pyles said. Computer crime is not unusual, but "this was unusual because it was involving the media - like media espionage," Mr. Pyles said.

Lawyers for Mr. Shapiro and Mr. Cole declined to comment on the charges.

"Shapiro used the computer at Channel 10 to access Channel 13's news computer, and looked at the information it had on it," said Mr. Hoyer. "Everything dealing with the news operation was on it."

Mr. Hoyer declined to comment on a motive in the case, but he repeated a comment he made to The Columbia Journalism Review in answer to a hypothetical question, noting that television news is very competitive and adding, "It seems to me it would be rather comforting to know that you're not getting beat." Some break-ins appeared to have been made shortly before newscasts, which might indicate that someone at Channel 10 sought a competitive advantage. Slip in Viewer Ratings

Until recently Channel 13 consistently ranked No. 1 in the Tampa television news market, but its ratings have slipped lately, permitting gains at competing stations, Channel 10 and Channel 8.

Channel 13 has taken new precautions to insure that its computer is secure, said Bob Franklin, the station's news director.

The matter has presented Channel 13 with a journalistic challenge, since it is reporting on a story about itself. "I've removed myself from the editorial loop on this story," Mr. Franklin said. "I was both a victim and a journalist."

He said that he felt it would be unethical for him to participate in the reporting on the matter and that the station's assignments editor, Daniel Webster, was supervising the reports.

Meanwhile, Channel 10 also has had trouble reporting the case, its employees said. The management has repeatedly said it did not know about or condone any illegal acts. And after dismissing Mr. Shapiro and Mr. Cole, the station hired a new director of news, Mel Martin, who is trying to restore credibility and to improve morale.