



Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers

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Report on the State of Caribbean Media 2006 to the Austin Forum, Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas - Austin, Texas - June 19-20, 2006

Presented by
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The Report on the State of Caribbean Media prepared by regional journalists for the Third Biennial General Meeting of the Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers (ACM) in November 2005 was entitled “The Looming Storm”.

Suffice it to say, even among journalists there was some doubt that such a summation accurately represented the reality of Caribbean media in 2005 and there was a view that too much was being made of relatively harmless incursions into the realm of media freedom.

One Caribbean publisher had earlier proclaimed my own preference for hyperbole and declared in a dispatch to the Inter American Press Association that freedom of the press was “alive and well” in his home territory.

Today, there are two persons facing possible prison sentences on charges of criminal libel in Grenada, a newspaper on the verge of closure on account of legal costs and damages awarded by a court in a libel suit while the Minister of Information continues to retain full and exclusive control over the granting of broadcast licenses in that country.

The most recent IAPA mid-year report on the free press in the Caribbean does not include a single line on any of these and other matters. Hopefully, the forthcoming 62nd General Assembly of this organisation will attempt to accurately portray the Caribbean reality as more than an idyllic side-show.

In Guyana, two Caribbean journalists – Trinidadian Lennox Grant and Jamaican Wyvolen Gager - have been appointed to oversee compliance with a media code drafted by the country’s media houses ahead of controversially delayed general elections. The code betrays underlying issues of real and perceived media bias linked to race, religion and political partisanship.

Guyanese media houses have also recently been criticised by the main opposition Peoples National Congress Reform (PNCR) for airing and quoting unauthorised recordings that purportedly contain the voice of Police Commissioner, Winston Felix.



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The PNCR's condemnation has brought into sharp focus the right of the public to know and what journalists interpret to be the public interest.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there was opposition last year to a proposed broadcasting code that would have accompanied a new licensing regime for all radio and television stations in the country.

The campaign against the code was initiated by the ACM and later supported by the Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago, the broadcasting industry and other civic interests. Journalists however remained divided on the issue and some have now reportedly emerged as so far quiet participants in the re-drafting of the code.

We do not now fear the worst because of a stated intention to eventually secure the active participation of broadcasters in the process, but the ACM is calling for vigilance to ensure conditions conducive to self-censorship and prior restraint do not emerge as by-products of the exercise. This is particularly so since the code is necessary only insofar as it is meant to establish limits on media practices in excess of the prevailing legal and regulatory environment.

The continued expansion of broadcast media has also unveiled glaring shortages in the availability of the required human resources and there has been a corresponding decline in professional standards in the Trinidad and Tobago media.

In Suriname, George Findlay, publisher of De West newspaper faces imprisonment on a charge of insulting members of the country's Currency Board and heavy fines for not publishing a retraction of a story in a competing newspaper. The retraction was published in De West. At first, Findlay refused to place the ad, but when he attempted, the newspaper he was ordered to place it in refused to carry it. The penalty for not complying with the court order was fixed at US\$1,800 every day the ad was not published in De Ware Tijd. A court ruling on this matter is expected very soon.

These are simply snapshots of some flashpoints in the Caribbean region at this time. We can spend a lot of time also examining progress with access to information laws in the Caribbean – both their development and application and we can look at the extent to which the changing telecommunications landscape is serving to create, through official regulation of the sector, new entry points for the endangering of free expression. Hand in hand with this phenomenon is the attention being paid to the use and management of Information and Communication Technology and issues of governance that have emerged.

One of the more vexing of issues of transnational Caribbean concern though is the slow pace at which the process of facilitating the free movement of media



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workers between Caribbean Community states is being conducted. I had reported to this meeting a year ago our success in getting governments of the region to actively engage a treaty arrangement between the 15 members of CARICOM that allows for the unhindered right of Caribbean journalists to live and work in the CARICOM country of their choice without the requirement of a work permit.

Such a right is enshrined in the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas signed in 2001. So far, it has been possible for media workers to secure Skilled Nationals Certificates in several CARICOM countries – a process meant to facilitate access to this right. However, in several territories, immigration and other officials have refused to act within the spirit of the provision and certainly within the letter of the agreement.

There is one case we are monitoring right now where a broadcaster is being required to secure a third certificate, having already secured one from his home country and his previous country of employment.

There is also some concern that the process of acquiring a skills certificate may well constitute an act of official licensing. Indeed, in the current issue being closely followed in one state, the processes closely resemble classical procedures for the licensing of a journalist.

Is this all ACM alarm? Or are the clouds massing for the looming storm?

Whatever it is, journalists and media houses would do well to prepare. And, how do we prepare?

In the ACM we have identified a strategy that includes a mix of organisational strengthening, professional development and public awareness. In every single respect we are lagging behind, but yet we are making some strides.

The work of affiliated national organisations, including the fledgling efforts of new ones, promises much, so too our relations with external agencies and organisations.

Through our association with the Austin Forum, we have benefited from two online courses directly and, another indirectly, hosted by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. The last activity which came to an end in March was a highly successful course on Feature Writing. This time around we were able to address the issue of dropouts and the feedback from participants was exceptionally strong.

I hope, before the end of the year, I can crave the indulgence of the Center to initiate the hosting of a long-awaited course on Investigative Journalism.



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Again, through our association with the Austin Forum, we were able to host a workshop on Covering Freedom of Expression in collaboration with the International Center for Journalists and sponsored by the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation in October last year.

We have also maintained contact with the International News Safety Institute and the Rory Peck Trust whose magnanimous response to the crisis in Grenada will never be forgotten.

A presence at the Global Forum for Media Development in Jordan last October served to both register discrete Caribbean conditions and needs and to reinforce the existence of the sub-region as a distinct component of the Latin American and Caribbean landscape. Latin America and the Caribbean after all are family, but we are not the same person.

But, even as family, we need to pay more attention to each other's achievements, challenges and needs. There are no fundamental differences between your 'desacato' legislation and our application of defamation laws. The culture of official secrecy is the same and we both have people who are prepared to kill you for what you write or say.

There is therefore no reason why the still unresolved murder of television talk show host Ronald Waddell in Guyana in January should not be condemned as much in Buenos Aires as it was in Kingston, Jamaica. Likewise, the death of Jaime Arturo Olvera Bravo in Mexico is as much our loss in Port of Spain as it is in La Piedad and Mexico City.

The Austin Forum is the platform for the sharing of our thoughts and our common grief. The ACM is committed to this process and pledge our continued support, whatever its future configuration.

I have the approval of my Executive Board to extend an open invitation to you as hosts for any future activity we may decide upon under the umbrella of the Austin Forum, especially since it appears we would not be bringing the World Cup to the Caribbean this time around.

If the last phase of the Uruguay Round of global trade negotiations could have been hosted in countries such as Canada and Japan and the final agreement signed in Morocco, there is no reason why an Austin Forum cannot be hosted at Montego Bay in Jamaica.

I thank you for this opportunity to again contribute to the deliberations of this important event and praise the staff at the Knight Center for the typically excellent arrangements made for me in this lovely city.