



Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers

Unit 1, Upper Level, Elan Place, 137 Eastern Main Rd,
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NEW YEAR'S STATEMENT – ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN MEDIAWORKERS (ACM) PRESIDENT, WESLEY GIBBINGS

December 31 – Let me extend best wishes for a productive, safe and enjoyable 2008.

This network of journalists and media workers became six years old in November. Evidence that we fill a real void in the sphere of Caribbean media has come not only via the regional and international recognition we have achieved, but also through the sense of community we have been able to build.

For example, when we met in Trinidad, under the leadership of Dale Enoch, for our various meetings on December 4-6, there was a level of camaraderie and friendship our institutional partners in that exercise found inspiring and exemplary.

The thing is, we are in fact building a community of professionals along lines that defy the undoubted requirement to formalise and to install firmer organisational structures.

Though the latter imperative becomes the focus of our attention over the next two years, we would do well to continue deepening and widening the process of developing this community across borders.

Today, colleagues from Trinidad and Tobago, St Lucia, Haiti, Suriname, Jamaica, Grenada and Antigua & Barbuda sit on our executive committee – a design, unlike suggestions to the contrary, not contrived by any notion of territorial equity.

We have also done our work largely on our own with some help from friends who have demanded nothing more than the fact that we stay together.

Our engagement has not been time-bound by contract or project funding and there has been no single, exclusive financial benefactor. This means we have remained independent and free.

Our executive members have all contributed voluntarily to the work of the organisation – even though so many of us are freelancers with no fixed source of income.



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Bert Wilkinson, Peter Richards, Deby Nash, Jerry George (SVG) and Michael Bascombe come to mind as they have all contributed selflessly to the cause as freelance journalists serving on our executive committee.

Bert, for example, had served on every single executive committee between 2001 and 2007, when he decided not to seek re-election at our last Biennial Assembly. His work in leading a one-person mission to Haiti in 2002 was a high-point of our early activities and is favourably remembered by colleagues there. His experience and skill as a journalist were also assets he brought to the process. Thank you, Bert.

We have aligned ourselves with the Rory Peck Foundation, based in the United Kingdom, which looks exclusively at welfare and safety issues associated with the work of freelance journalists. In 2004, for the first time ever, the ACM was able to convince the Foundation that natural disasters should be considered a source of professional distress for freelance journalists and the Foundation offered assistance in the case of Grenadian journalists affected by Hurricane Ivan.

The point was reinforced in Jordan when I attended the first Global Forum for Media Development in October 2005 and, together with Jean Claude Louis of Haiti, urged participants to consider that vulnerability to natural disaster is as urgent a matter for the small-island and low-lying coastal regions of the Caribbean as are the threats of political and criminal violence that specifically target media enterprises and journalists.

For example, the effects of the 2004 hurricane season severely disabled mass media operations in Haiti and Grenada and dislocated journalists and other media workers. Media-specific international aid resources should therefore extend beyond the current inclination to focus only on violence against media workers.

The coming year will see an ACM that is much more focused on matters of internal organisation and consolidation. We plan to become legally incorporated, establish a small secretariat in Trinidad, re-design and configure our web presence, regularise the processes for the acquisition of regional media passes, apply for formal membership of the International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX), which monitors free expression issues globally, and re-visit our constitution and code of ethics.

Several projects are also currently in the making. They include two online courses on Digital Media and Investigative Journalism. The Digital Media course should, in collaboration with the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, be ready for offer by March. The long-awaited Investigative Journalism course



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should commence by July/August, we hope. These follow two highly successful exercises in 2005 and 2006 and a third, limited offering in 2005 in Spanish.

We are also compiling our State of the Caribbean Media Report II (2005-2007) and are currently awaiting submissions from Barbados and Jamaica. It is hoped that a draft will be prepared for submission at a workshop on Media and Governance hosted by the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington DC on January 15, 2008.

Our Mentoring Programme for Young Caribbean Journalists is being developed and is being put up for project funding and should be launched early in the new year. Prospective mentors have been notified and we will soon begin pre-screening for a cadre of protégés for a pilot of this important project.

We are also developing a project to produce an Elections Handbook for Caribbean Journalists. The idea has already received favourable feedback from prospective benefactors and a team is being assembled to manage the research and production processes.

On the invitation of the West Indies Cricket Board (WICB), we recently submitted a prospectus for the staging of a regional media workshop on West Indies cricket designed for journalists who do not cover sport.

This forms part of our overall campaign to maintain contact with a variety of regional institutions and to establish our bona fides as a representative regional organisation. Such recognition is already extended by the CARICOM Secretariat and regional and international organisations active in the Caribbean. Some of these include: OAS, PAHO, ILO, UNESCO, UNIC, UNDP, IICA, CARDI, CTO and CEHI.

Similar initiatives are now envisaged for the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) and CONCACAF.

In the meantime, we do not plan to take our eyes off the challenge of threats to freedom of the press.

We note with concern recent regulatory developments in Antigua and Barbuda - to be replicated, we understand, throughout the OECS - which have the potential to impose new levels of censorship in the broadcast media. The challenge of Trinidad and Tobago's proposed broadcasting code is not dissimilar.

In Guyana, the continuing state advertising boycott of the Stabroek News is being viewed in the context of official action to stifle dissent and to punish recalcitrant media. Its impact on the practice of journalism in Guyana is yet to be fully examined, but the prospect of substantial reductions in advertising revenue



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will no doubt have the potential to steer media coverage along more conservative editorial lines.

In Jamaica, we need to keep an eye on proposed revisions to defamation legislation being considered by a multi-sectoral team which includes the Press Association of Jamaica (PAJ). This is a move in the right direction but one that needs to be delicately negotiated to ensure that ad hoc reform of one branch of media law is not accepted as absolute acceptance of all other regulatory conditions affecting media. In the process, as well, we would expect that the Government of Jamaica also use the opportunity to remove criminal defamation from its statute books. This would set a highly positive precedent throughout the Caribbean and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Throughout the region, we also look forward to more consistent application of the freedom of movement provision of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas which specifically grants such rights to media workers. The expulsion of Vernon Khelawan and Lennox Linton from Antigua and Barbuda earlier in 2007 provided evidence of a lack of commitment to the principles under which such a provision was embraced both by international treaty and domestic legislation.

CARICOM Skilled National Certificates as they relate to media workers are not being consistently recognised in the region. There are now media workers with skills certificates from more than one country. Certainly, this was not the original intention. To insist that media workers apply for certificates from their adopted countries, IN ADDITION TO certificates granted by their home countries is absolutely inconsistent with the original design of the free movement provisions of the Treaty.

I am amazed that more journalists have not taken this up as a valid story. It is a travesty and amounts to official sleight of hand to re-introduce the notion of a work permit. CARICOM countries need to decide whether they want this or not. The ACM did not participate as a member of the Advisory Council to the Prime Ministerial Sub-Committee on the CSME with this in mind and the current procedure does NOT have our blessings.

In collaboration with the International News Safety Institute (INSI), the ACM will work with SOS Journalistes-Haiti on the hosting of a workshop on journalistic safety early in 2008.

I also want to pay special tribute to our Assistant General Secretary, Guy Delva, whose work as head of the Independent Commission for Supporting Investigations into Murders of Journalists (CIAPEAJ) is already producing favourable results in Haiti.



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Our work is cut out for us in 2008. Thank you for your support. Thank you, Dale, for an ACM that remains strong and united.

Wesley Gibbings

President