



Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers

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An overview of major developments affecting the practice of journalism and freedom of expression in the Caribbean over the past year

Wesley Gibbings, President of ACM

GEORGETOWN, Guyana, May 1, 2008 - During the period 2005-2007, Caribbean media practitioners continued to be challenged by more invasive state action, the changing character of the regional media landscape -including the onset of more broadcast houses - the growing importance of new media, new technologies and their implications for the world of media work and a range of social and other circumstances which helped direct greater critical attention to mass media outputs.

For the period 2003-2005, we named our state of the media report “The Looming Storm.” It is however apparent that the storm is already upon us, however unpredictable and tireless its deceptive eye.

The complex nature and inter-connectedness of the challenges are exemplified in our country reports reflecting the past two years. In St Lucia, for example, coverage of the 2006 general election which brought a new government, the ICC Cricket World held in the region early in 2007, the coverage of government business and the fact that five ministers of government had cases before the courts are cited.

In Suriname, a defamation suit brought against a journalist from De West newspaper led to a judicial injunction that a correction of the story appear in all national newspapers – a directive contested by the non-labile media houses as being in contravention of their right to print, or not to print any subject matter.

In St Maarten, a draft regulation proposing the establishment of a Media Council for the Windward Islands - St Maarten, Saba and Statia – was being debated in the context of a broader media law which imposes a new, more rigid regime of official censorship.

Different countries, different circumstances, but almost everywhere concern that factors internal to the workings of the media and various external elements including, but not exclusively the state, pose threats to the practice of free and independent journalism.

As an example of internally-generated challenges, our report from St Kitts and Nevis describe the national media as having a propensity to operate in “tribal mode, openly showing support for one or the other political parties.”

The report continues: “The pressures on the media are linked to years of state controlled information flows and the fact that the country is small and people



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have little room to re-invent themselves. Most people have relationships dating back to when they were children. They may even attend the same church, be related, by father or mother, and have feuds are longstanding.”

In Haiti, our report points to the significant interventions of big business, powerful interest groups and even armed gangs. These opponents of the free press, the report says, “find allies within the newsrooms to impose ... censorship.”

Eight journalists have been murdered in eight years in Haiti and our current Assistant General-Secretary, Guy Delva, has more than once had to flee his country in the face of threats against himself and his family.

In the Caribbean, it would be a mistake to believe we are facing the single bullet of official action. The ballistic profiles are of several varieties and emerge from all directions, including from within.

The free movement of media workers in the region, under the umbrella of the Caricom Single Market and Economy is not only being stymied by lethargic official progress, but in some instances by xenophobic responses from within the media industry itself. Only recently, we felt compelled to write one media enterprise in Trinidad that had turned an entirely blind eye to acts of victimisation and discrimination against a Guyanese journalist by some of her own newsroom colleagues.

In Jamaica, an admirably progressive report on the country’s libel laws has been produced and tabled in parliament. Included in that report is a recommendation that criminal defamation be eliminated from the statute books. I hope the rest of the region is looking closely at this and that we all will follow suit in the near future.

But we need to maintain a watchful eye on how our governments have responded to real and perceived abuses of the press. In 2004, for example, we reminded the government of the Cayman Islands of hemispheric commitments contained in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

This was necessary when the government there withdrew state advertising from the Cayman Net News newspaper.

Says the Declaration: "The exercise of power and the use of public funds by the state, the granting of customs duty privileges, the arbitrary and discriminatory placement of official advertising and government loans; the concession of radio and television broadcast frequencies, among others, with the intent to put pressure on and punish or reward and provide privileges to social communicators



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and communications media because of the opinions they express threaten freedom of expression, and must be explicitly prohibited by law."

In more recent times, we were inclined to cite both the Inter-American Declaration and Article 7 of the Declaration of Chapultepec in our representations to the Government of Guyana.

This followed a decision to withhold advertising from the state in all its manifestations, including state enterprises and agencies, from the Stabroek News. This situation has since been addressed.

More recently, we have witnessed the closure of CNS Channel 6. It is a situation that has brought us, as a press freedom organisation, in painful contact with the notion of observing what the law says, and the degree to which a lawful remedy can be of questionable validity, legitimacy and appropriateness.

Last month, in Bermuda - an Associate Member of Caricom but not covered by our mandate as an organisation – the government there announced a cutback in state advertising in the print media and terminated its subscriptions of newspapers meant for government offices and departments.

The Royal Gazette, the island's only daily newspaper, has protested these acts claiming they were in response to the media house's independent editorial line. Our position is that the withdrawal of state advertising has been widely recognised by governments all over the world as a method of punishing media houses for behaviour viewed as being recalcitrant or not in keeping with their political agendas.

At the level of professional development, our national reports all refer to stark deficiencies. In most instances, the responses to a question on the most urgent needs of media professionals in the Caribbean point to the need for more and better quality training.

Our report from Suriname states: "People think that the media are independent and free, but sloppy and unprofessional. The many complaints which reach SVJ are talking about such issues. The complaints are about not verifying facts, not objective reporting, no preparation before interviews, no investigation, careless reporting and manipulated photographs."

In Grenada, there is the view that poor quality journalism is contributing to threats to press freedom. This is made worse by the fact that, according to our report on Grenada, "some managers are challenged by the political directorate and show weakness."



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Our report on Dominica says “respect for the media is often based on political affiliation and the nature of current issues. Among the intelligentsia respect is fairly low, with a perception of a lack of professionalism, limited education/training and analytical skill. The complaint is common that reporting goes no further than he said/she said.”

This kind of feedback from representative organisations and media professionals over the past six years has informed our response as a supporter of higher journalistic standards. In the last two years, we have hosted and co-hosted issue-specific training workshops on health reporting, human rights, food production, climate change and basic journalistic training for young Caribbean journalists. In 2007, we conducted training for almost 70 young journalists in Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda and Dominica and established a network of young Caribbean journalists.

In less than three weeks, we launch our Journalism Mentoring Programme which will bring ten of our brightest and best young journalists in contact with ten of our outstanding regional journalists for a period of 12 months. Mentors and protégés will cross national borders in an unprecedented programme of professional development in the field of Caribbean journalism. Assistance from UNESCO has made the first phase of this programme possible.

Less than a month ago, 20 Caribbean journalists also benefited from an Online Journalism course organized by the ACM and conducted by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. The course is now being translated for use by Spanish and Portuguese members of the profession in Latin America.

It was the third programme of its kind in three years. Last year, Caribbean journalists benefited from an online course on Feature Writing for Newspapers, also organized by the ACM and conducted by the Knight Center at minimal cost to participants.

It is true that we have to attend to the press freedom issues, but we have never ignored the important developmental needs of the profession. Because of the ACM, for instance, the Caribbean is represented in the Global Forum for Media Development – a massive undertaking by international media aid agencies to improve the quality of mass media outputs globally.

Our State of the Caribbean Media Report, the first of which was published in 2005, is also our attempt to address the fact that previous reports on the state of Caribbean media have all come from outside of the region. We have done so almost entirely without financial or other assistance from anyone. In fact, The Looming Storm was produced entirely on a voluntary basis with not a cent from any corporate or international development entity. No one's agenda but our own was involved.



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You may also be aware that the Caribbean Reporters' Handbook on Climate Change, produced by the Caricom Climate Change Centre and the ACM, was the first of its kind anywhere in the world. In a few weeks' time, we begin work on an Elections Handbook for Caribbean Journalists with help from UNESCO and other regional and international partners. Already, our international media development and press freedom partners have shown an interest in this very important project.

The current wave of political change in the Caribbean has highlighted the advisability of improving our performance in the area of political and electoral coverage. In Guyana, last year, the Independent Refereeing Panel - constituted to monitor adherence to a voluntary code of media conduct during the elections process here - played an important role in developing a blueprint for similar action throughout the Caribbean and further afield.

There is reason to believe the model spawned here can serve as an adequate starting point for similar exercises elsewhere. Our Elections Handbook will include a case study involving the performance of the media in Guyana in 2007.

We are also going to examine electoral laws in the region especially as they relate to the work of the media.

The idea in all this is to get everyone on board with the idea of positive change while ensuring that our freedoms are preserved.