

## **Keeping them honest!**

Media play a specific and vital role as champions of 'the mob' - champions of the masses, voice of the voiceless, making the comfortable uncomfortable and giving hope to the hopeless. Journalism's objective is to balance the scale in this system of 'government by the whole population' or 'all the eligible members of a state'. A journalist's role is to stand in the gap in this dispensation called a 'democratic society'.

In our democracy, our Constitution guarantees that every person in Jamaica is entitled to the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, the freedom of conscience, of expression and of peaceful assembly and association; and respect for his or her private home and family life. This is not dissimilar to other democracies.

Historically, democracy has relied heavily upon the exchange of ideas relayed through the widespread distribution of information through media platforms. This reliance has not changed since, and there is no indication that it will anytime soon.

Buttressed with technology... printing presses, radio and television transmitters, computers and other digital technologies, media give individuals the capacity for reach and noise ... large audiences. Media superimpose that technology on the individual right to freedom of expression.

There is a convergence of interests between the press and the communities in which they operate and serve. (Of course we are not ignoring the commercial interests as well)

The community gives the press certain privileges and access on the expectation that if these rights fall under stress, the press will use its capacity for reach and noise to challenge those who would abridge the rights.

Of course, there are new issues with the advent of digital technology that have lowered the entry barriers to serious broadcast and publication. With a computer and broadband anyone can reach mass audiences, even if it is no longer a single mass... but fragmented. This is an issue for discussion.

Without the press championing the cause of the people as a whole, those who determine policy - who make decisions for the society; who implement the decisions and interpret the laws - would most likely be prone to favour the most influential sectional interests, which

wield enormous influence and power. This would automatically rob many, who are without influence, of their basic Constitutional rights.

Media, by bawling out injustices and showcasing the plights of the disadvantaged, ensure that the corrupt is handicapped.

In his book 'Why Democracies Need An Unlovable Press', Michael Schudson argues that the news play a vital role in informing the public. The second function he identifies is that of keeping government officials accountable. The third key role is analysis, where journalists help to break down major events into something understandable – a role that is increasingly diminished, but one that still calls out to a public that might not know about the subject, but could otherwise gain from that knowledge. Schudson calls the fourth key role "social empathy," - it is the method of using individuals to create collective yearnings among decision-makers (principally, possible voters) for change.

WE SAW THAT IN LIVE AND LIVING COLOUR WHEN THE JAMAICAN STATE CAME UNDER ATTACK LAST YEAR, AND WE SEE IT AGAIN WHEN YOUNG KAHJEEL MAIS WAS GUNNED DOWN IN A TAXI CAB RECENTLY.

Journalism is also a public forum, and Schudson promotes the Web as increasingly important in fulfilling this role. Journalism inspires people to mobilize. The recent TVJ story of that young cricket analyst, physically challenged though he was, he just needed help to go to school, is an excellent example of this at work.

A journalist-as-advocate model might well work in some environments. WE LOST OUR MOST PROLIFIC ADVOCATE, EARLIER, OUR JOHN MAXWELL, may his soul rest in peace.

Democracies may need an unlovable press, but they also need a press the people can trust.

Major news organizations worldwide, including in the Jamaica and other parts of the region, have codes of ethics and behavior that prohibit invasion of privacy as it relates to the home and telephone conversations of private citizens. These institutions expect their employees to obey the law. The Times' guidelines on journalistic ethics say staff members "must obey the law in the gathering of news. They may not break into buildings, homes, apartments or offices.

In Jamaica, the issues of libel, the Official Secrets Act and innate corruption, provide journalists with a barrage of challenges that can be quite daunting to as they weave through the muck to ferret out truth.

But what happens when the news is information-poor, sensationalistic, or, too resource-poor, to provide the kind of coverage to enable democracy to thrive? Are we willing then to accept that we contribute to the rise in corruption and the devastation of society by failing to be rigorous in our work?

Can we hold anyone to account, when we fail to properly investigate and/or provide critical information to enable our people to make crucial choices in serious times?

Can the messenger be held up to the same scrutiny as the message? When we indulge in Payola, phone hacking and other unscrupulous activities, should we be taken seriously when we stand up to declare our credibility and integrity?

Trust us! Trust us to do what?

"Our reputation is more important than the last hundred million dollars." Says media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

"I'm a catalyst for change," he says, "you can't be an outsider and be successful over 30 years without leaving a certain amount of scar tissue around the place."

How much damage or 'scar tissue' can credibility take?

Guardian journalist Nick Davies spent many years investigating phone hacking claims in the UK in the face of police indifference and ridicule from rivals.

"It's a great story about the abuse of power," Davies told The Associated Press. "That's what all journalists want to expose, isn't it? The abuse of power."

Although interest faded in the story after his first report in 2007, Davies stayed on the trail.

Davies has also clashed with Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, whom he persuaded to work with The Guardian in releasing Wikileaks material.

The two men fell out after Davies reported that Swedish police were investigating allegations that Assange sexually assaulted two women. Some of Assange's supporters criticized The Guardian for running the story against such a key source, but Davies says that's how journalists become corrupt - by staying away from stories about people they are close to.

It has also been argued that by providing information and maintaining a non-partisan investigative function, media may inadvertently have a de-mobilizing effect on a

population. We provide people with information, but do not advise them on what to do with it. In a world where information overload is a real possibility, is it the role of media to sort through the flood of knowledge and hold up actionable points? That is still open for debate.

In 1991, an informal network of journalists and media professionals, under the banner 'the International Communication Forum' decided to work together to restore public confidence in their profession. Each of them made a personal commitment to apply a high standard of professionalism dedicated to the service of the public. This was followed by activities to promote these values to their colleagues in their own situations and across the world, which led to fifteen conferences in Europe, North America, the Caribbean, Asia and Australia. Particular attention was given to the situation in the new democracies, and outreaches were made to the Developing world.

During a World Media Assembly held in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, from 28 September to 2 October 2000, initiated by the ICF with the support of the World Association of Newspapers and the International Federation of Journalists, 'The Sarajevo Commitment' was issued. It was not an Assembly Resolution, but a personal undertaking on the part of the participants intended for the association of colleagues world wide.

A section of that commitment reads:

We accept that we in the media, whilst talent and technology enabled us to reach the lives of almost every last person in the world, were not able to create the climate in which problems were solved, conflicting groups and interests reconciled, and peace and justice established.

The practitioners committed to the public :

We shall inform you to the best of our ability, with clarity and honesty, with independence of mind, of what is truly happening in the world at the level of the individual, the family, the community, the nation and the region. We shall present the facts and explain the facts, and some of us will aim with modesty to interpret them. As we succeed in doing this, we believe that you, the people, will be enabled to make the right decisions, to elect and appoint the best leaders and to build a fair, just and compassionate society.

We seek a world in which everyone cares enough and everyone shares enough so that everyone will have enough; a world in which the work and wealth of the world are available to all at the exploitation of none.

... We undertake to apply and demonstrate in our own lives the values that we hope for, and often demand, in others. We shall confront hypocrisy, oppression, exploitation and evil,

firstly by our own clarity and straightness and then through the means by which we reach our audiences. We are unlikely to be perfect, but we shall aim to be truthful and free of guile, selfish ambition, perverted behavior and deception.

That remains the commitment of journalism to a nation, especially a democracy where freedom of speech, freedom of choice are rights, enshrined in constitutions.