



Media Encounter Report

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Introduction

The Media Encounter was held on November 17-18, 2005 at Demerara Mutual Life Commercial Building, Robb Street, Georgetown.

At the meeting of the Multi-Stakeholders Forum (MSF) on September 28, 2005 the question was asked whether the media should be involved as a stakeholder. It was noted that the media has a dual role to play in the process- as a member of society and as the medium feeding information to the public at large.

Following the meeting of the MSF the Media Encounter was conceptualized and a planning committee was composed. That committee comprised the PRO – ERC Beverley Alert; two representatives from the State media (Mr. Rashid Osman of Chronicle and Mrs. Nadia De Abru of GINA) who were identified by the Head of the Government Information Agency (GINA) Mr. Robert Persaud; two representatives of the privately owned media (Mr. Enrico Woolford representing the electronic media and Ms. Miranda LaRose representing print media) on advice from the acting President of the Guyana Press Association (GPA) Ms. Julia Johnson; and one representative of international correspondents working in Guyana Mr. Dennis Chabrol.

The focus for discussion and dates and times for sessions were agreed at a meeting of the planning committee held on October 5, 2005 in the Boardroom of the ERC.

The theme for the Encounter was “The Media - A catalyst for conflict transformation”

All known media agencies and a number of Talk-Show Hosts, Public Commentators and Columnists were invited to participate (appendix i). The Encounter was divided in to three sessions. The first brought together policy makers of media houses; Owners, Managers and Editors on Thursday, November 17, 2005 from 08:30 – 11:30 hours. The second; Talk-Show Hosts, Public Commentators, Columnists on Thursday, November 17, 2005 from 13:00 – 15:00 hours; and the third, Reporters and camerapersons on Friday, November 18, 2005 from 08:30 – 13:00 hours.

Participants for the third session came from State owned and privately owned media houses and international correspondents. There were senior television and radio reporters, video editors and camerapersons.

Discussions for this session centered on

- The ethnic dilemma and the role of the media
- Social ills and ethnic discrimination
- Encoded language and images that promote/diffuse ethnic tension
- Helping negotiators maintain their credibility.

It was the view that bringing together the categories listed under one session would defeat the purpose of the Encounter. The difference in views would have been argued and rather than recording the concerns of each category the Encounter would have been sabotaged by the more vocal or senior of operatives.

The Encounter sought to identify from the perspective of the media, their role in conflict transformation and conditions impacting coverage of conflict including laws, practices, social trends. It also sought to obtain commitment from the media to work towards the promotion of ethnic harmony and security.

At the level of the ERC it was agreed that there should be a formal opening of the Encounter at which Prime Minister Samuel Hinds, Member of the PNCR Central Executive Mr. Lance Carberry and Chairman of the ERC Bishop Juan Edghill will address participants. The media was invited to cover the opening.

It was also agreed that a facilitator should be identified and asked to make a presentation to guide the working session. Attorney-at-Law Mr. Teni Housty was the facilitator contracted.

Observations

Session One: 09:30 – 11:30 hours, Thursday, November 17, 2005

(Owners, Managers, Editors)

In the working session the discussion was guided by Mr. Housty as he addressed the theme of the Encounter.

In his presentation Housty pointed to Laws governing freedom of expression, the responsibility that comes with such freedom and media policy on the promulgation of hate speech.

His presentation posited that the Constitution did not define hate speech and questioned what can qualify as hate speech and 'excitement to hostility or ill will'.

Housty led that with no guidance from the Constitution the effect on the media becomes very important and the media would have to look at how the state would go about putting laws in place that deal with notions to 'excite hostility or ill will'.

Participants observed that with no systematic effort to enforce the law the discussion is theoretical and the issue would only be on the discussion table and go nowhere until it is tested, whether in the courts or newspapers.

It was observed that with not a single person being charged and placed before the Court, there will be no application of the Law and thus it will never get to the stage where there can actually be a coining of a definition of the limits of 'excite hostility or ill will'. It therefore remains a question of how do you define hate speech or 'excite hostility or ill will'.

As the Facilitator examined the punishments provided in the Law, participants posited that because of the vagueness of the definition in the Law, the weight of the consequences should be balanced against the weight of the speech being made.

The discussion also examined the promulgation of hate speech and the use of a 'Disclaimer' by the electronic media and whether the media house, the person

making the hate speech or the journalist who in the conduct of his profession is liable.

Participants observed that sometimes the excitement to hostility or ill will cannot be confined to a single speech or expression but as was the case in Rwanda, the conditions that led to violence were established over a period.

The discussions turned to 'self-regulation' and agencies policy and guidelines.

It was noted that there has been a complete breakdown of any attempt by the media to self regulate and that is because the media is also affected by the ethnic-political divide and that needs to be overcome.

It was noted that some media houses have their own set of guidelines by which they operate but not all.

The discussion also examined whether ethnicity should be described when reporting and reference was made to a local report where 'Rastafarian' was used to describe an individual. Participants observed that this can cause harm to a group.

Reference was also made to the USA agencies which have used 'Muslim' to describe individuals and the harm this has done to a people.

It was noted that with the establishment of the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) persons may now realise that there is a body looking in to complaints of ethnic discrimination. However an observation was made, based on the perception of the number of complaints being made to the ERC, that nobody is taking it seriously or persons do not believe they will get justice.

Observations

Session Two: 13:00 – 15:00 hours – Thursday, November 18, 2005

(Talk-Show Hosts, Columnists, Public Commentators)

The absence of any representative from the State media was noted.

Participants at this session were of the view that a lot of the ethnic problems could be resolved if the two main political parties would sit and discuss their differences.

Early in the session participants expressed dissatisfaction with the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Broadcasting. It was said that the ACB was not properly constituted and that there was political interference in the naming of the representative from the private business sector who would sit on the Committee. As such persons were not confident that the ACB would do what was expected of it. In addition one nominee was withdrawn and another is otherwise employed, making, in effect, the ACB non-functional.

Participants observed that “the Government’s control of the State media is not working in the best interest of promoting equitable distribution of the resource. This is in the sense that the Party’s (Government) control excludes the representatives of a significant section of the population from using resources that actually belong to all the people, from communicating with their constituents”.

The Government’s control gives an unfair advantage to the Party in Government and this can cause discontent. Participants pointed to Government’s sponsorship of international cricket and the Government advertisements that usually follow each over. They questioned why not air advertisements of other political parties if the resources belong to the State?

Reference was made of the 1982 Court case in Trinidad and Tobago where the ruling determined ‘State Media’ to mean owned by the State and that air time subsequently granted to political parties would be based on their representation in the Parliament.

Participants also drew attention to the Government's control of television broadcast in Linden and Bartica. In Linden only the Government controlled NCN Linden television station operates. It was also stated that State media was being allowed to expand its broadcast capacity while other stations were being prevented from doing so.

Participants shared the view that the use of the State media must be dealt with, but this must not be in isolation but rather in addressing "fundamental issues" – the rule of law.

It was said that operatives and media houses are victimized when trying to bring equity in the dissemination of information by giving time to the Opposition.

Participants called for the general programming of television stations to be looked at in relation to the air time dedicated to Indian programmes.

Observations

Session Three: 08:30 – 13:00 hours - Friday, November 18, 2005

(Reporters, Camerapersons)

- Ethnic dilemma

Participants agreed that there exists an ethnic dilemma in Guyana.

The view was expressed that there exists political polarity between the two major race groups as caused by the two major political parties and this leads to media censorship by whichever Party is in power. As a result the public depending on which medium they are exposed to get a different set of information.

Participants were concerned that their professionalism was being compromised by such a system. It was their view that media houses, depending on their owners took either a pro Government/ anti opposition or pro Opposition/ anti Government slant.

It was also thought that the problem is more prevalent in the electronic media, mostly television and not so much radio because of Government's monopoly on Radio.

The view was shared that the migration of trained, experienced media operatives is part of the problem. Senior operatives who would more likely stand up to protect their profession and professionalism are leaving and the younger replacements are not experienced enough to make this stand.

On the issue of training, it was observed by participants that though training is provided sporadically, nothing changes. Political interference in editorial content continues to dictate what is reported.

It was posited that editorial decisions which are guided by political influences, distort the story giving it a 'foreign' angle. When this happens it puts the reporter at risk. It could make the reporter seem un-trustworthy.

Participants also pointed to Politicians' very vocal criticisms of media outfits and noted that a political attack on a media house is an attack on journalist and all

employees of that outfit. Such attacks it was noted could influence person, physical attacks on the journalists and employees of that outfit.

Political interference was also cited as influencing business co-operation in television productions. Participants observed that businesses are often times not willing to co-operate with producers out a fear of being perceived as supportive of a certain political party, depending on which agency the producer represents.

There is concern that the political directorate has become so ingrained that reporters are engaged in self censorship. Reporters now question their own professionalism.

Participants observed that the Private Media is also subject to political pressure. It was mentioned that the privately owned media makes a special effort to give voice to the Opposition as a sort of balance to the coverage the party in Government receives due to its control of the State owned media houses. The participants however, denied that by making this special effort, their professionalism is compromised.

The view was expressed that air time on state owned television or radio should be proportional to the Party's representation in the National Assembly, this would help to create balance in the information reaching the public.

- Social ills and ethnic discrimination

On this topic participants observed that where Government's support or neglect is directed to reduce social ills, the predominant ethnicity of the community does not have to be mentioned. However, it adds to the ethnic divide when support is perceived to be for one ethnic group

It was observed that the current situation lends itself to suggest that support to reduce social ills is directed to the ethnic group that supports the Party in power.

State media operatives noted that if given the opportunity to act professionally, they would not mention the ethnic composition of the community but as State Media operatives they are obliged to mention the ethnic composition of the area or community receiving the benefit.

It was also opined that the problem may revolve around the State media. It was the view of participants that should State media be permitted to carry balanced reports, privately operated media houses; referred to as opposition media, would not feel obliged to place emphasis on the Opposition's side.

Participants shared the view that there is a perception in the public that political parties give benefits to their support base and it is the role of the media to highlight these imbalances. It was also their view that where such a perception is substantiated, it could add to the ethnic divide and influence people's behaviour.

- Encoded language and images that promote/ diffuse ethnic tension.

Participants observed that in the Guyana context the subliminal message is often very clear and it all points back to the need for a real public broadcast entity which would inform viewers.

They believe that an informed public would not be influenced by images or messages that promote or could excite ethnic tension.

They voiced the need to move away from 'race-based politics'

- Helping negotiators maintain their credibility

The discussions were led to the example of the signing of the St. Lucia Accord and the subsequent perception in some sections of the public that one of the Political Leaders had let his constituents down.

The participants shared the view that the role of the media in helping negotiators to maintain their credibility would be hampered by the Media Organisations' policy and political control of the organization.

The view was also expressed that for State media operatives to try and do a professional job could cost them their employment.

The discussion turned to representation for media operatives and it was expressed that few State media operatives subscribe to the Guyana Press Association. It is the opinion that these operatives may fear losing their jobs if

they join the Association. It was however pointed out that some have joined and have not lost their jobs.

The feeling is that the Association is mainly for private media operatives.

It was also stated that State media employers have told their employees not to join the Association.

Conclusions

The first session of the Encounter concluded that the Laws governing freedom of expression and hate speech are vague. It was agreed that until these laws are tested there will be no standard from which a definition can be culled or a standard for freedom of expression be measured.

It was expressed that self-regulatory mechanisms do not work. Some comply to the regulations, others do not and this may be because the media itself is affected by the ethnic political divide and that needs to be overcome.

Participants at this session when they examined media policy on ethnic discrimination including the use of encoded language and image looked at the insertion of a disclaimer. While there was general debate as to the appropriateness of such an insertion, there was no conclusion as to who would be liable for damages caused.

During the second session participants concluded that one of the first areas that must be addressed is the use of the State media particularly radio and television. It was felt that the granting of air time based on representation in the National Assembly would be an equitable way to distribute this resource of the State. There was however some concern of how businesses would benefit in such a distribution.

It was the consensus of participants at the Third session that there needs to be a truly "Public Broadcast" entity. This would ensure that information disseminated is not biased towards or against any political party. It would also allow for the training and long-term retention of operatives.

The issue of journalists being allowed to present their stories in a professional manner, without political interference or pressure was sorely stressed. This was the point of view of journalists from the State and privately owned media houses.

Operatives at all sessions concluded that the Encounter was worthy of attendance and provided the opportunity for media owners and employees to once again put their views on record.

It was however stressed that there needs to be some form of action in addressing the views and concerns put forth.

Operatives concluded that a full report of the Encounter should be shared with all political parties, either directly or through the National Assembly.

Evaluation

The number of participants was less than expected given the nature of the exercise and the numbers and scope invited. Those that attended however, fully participated in frank and open discussions

The decision to separate the Encounter into three sessions bringing together different categories of operatives, made for each group being able to voice their concerns without fear of sounding overbearing or naive and also allowed for time to be given to hear the views of each.

Seeking to have the commitment of policy makers for their agencies to work towards the elimination of ethnic discrimination was a noble idea. However, the first instance should have been to examine constraints affecting such commitment.

While it seems that agencies have no objection to making such a commitment, there are considerations such as laws, agency regulations and policy, capacity of agency, capacity of journalist, etc, that need to be addressed.

Appendix I

MEDIA HOUSES

GINA	CHANNEL 19
TARZIE	RCA
GWTV	STVS
RBS	HGPTV
NEWS QUEST	NCN – LINDEN
VISION TV	CHRONICLE
STABROEK NEWS	NEW NATION
MIRROR	THE WITNESS
GUYANA REVIEW	KAIETEUR NEWS
CATHOLIC STANDARD	NCN - RADIO
NCN – TELEVISION	MTV
WRHM	CAPITOL NEWS
VCT	HBTV
PRIME NEWS	CNS
MBC	NTN
DAVE'S TV	LITTLE ROCK

TALK-SHOW HOSTS, COLUMNISTS, PUBLIC COMMENTATORS

Mr. Basil Bradshaw
Mr. Clem David
Mr. Frederick 'Freddie' Kissoon
Mr. Christopher 'Kit' Nascimento
Mr. Adam Harris
Mr. Ian McDonald
Mr. Allan Fenty
Mr. Robert Persaud
Mr. Rasheed Yasin
Mr. C. N. Sharma
Mr. Anthony 'Tony' Vieira
Mr. M. F. Khan
Mr. Quame McKoy
Mr. Christopher Ram
Mr. Grantley Waldron
Mr. Patrick Zephyr
Mr. Ronald Waddell
Mr. Cecil Griffith

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENTS

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