

Telecommunications Convergence: Implications for the Role of Traditional
Media to Serve the Public Interest in the Caribbean

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

The focus that this World Press Freedom observance has placed on democracy as a zone of engagement for the communications media in the Caribbean emphasizes the correlation between media as social institution and as corporate entities, and the public interest. This relationship can be as much between the media and the people as it can be one whereby the media function to promote public interest in relation to other social institutions. Because technological considerations will have an impact on either of these relationships we can appreciate the imperative for us to enter into the discourse on whether information and communication technologies (ICT's), represent a threat or an opportunity for the media to exercise their role and in so doing promote democracy in the Caribbean. The challenges that these technologies bring for the media will manifest in various ways:

- in the impact on economic viability of media organisations;
- in whether the technologies will enhance or impede the creation and distribution of content that would be in the public interest; and,
- in the extent to which citizen participation is facilitated by ICT applications in the media.

The sub-theme that my presentation carries identifies telecommunications convergence as a part of this wider context and hence is requiring us to consider its implications for how “traditional media” have served the public interest.

Of course, convergence is as much an aspect of the regional as it is of the global context of the communications services industry and its implications for Caribbean media also derive from global considerations. In this regard, we can make reference to multilateral understandings reached over recent years. There was the Colombo Declaration 2006 from the UNESCO World press freedom day Conference which reaffirmed “... [the] finding that independent and pluralistic media are fundamental elements of good governance, [and] human rights-based development ...”.

We can recall also the World Summit on the Information Society that in both its conferences in Geneva (2003) and Tunis (2005) affirmed the mandate to develop independent and pluralistic media as “core components” of democracy. Promotion of the “free flow of ideas by word and image”, a mandate adopted over the years by UNESCO and members states, is related to this democracy. This mandate was to advance freedom of expression and freedom of the press [read media] as a basic human right. This “basic human right”, I am suggesting, assumes the “public interest”.

Such is the background against which we should explore the implications that convergence has for the ability of the “traditional media” to serve the public interest.

Of what do we speak when we refer to the “traditional media”? “Traditional” can of course be a moving target as its interpretation will depend on the given historical marker. For purposes of our discussion we could take traditional media to mean pre-internet media for mass communication: free to air radio and television and subscription radio and television services, including pay per view. These would be among services that are now being described as “linear” services in the electronic media services sector, i.e. where providers ‘push’ content. And, there is also the print media, particularly newspapers.

The convergence about which we speak is at its core the outcome of technological developments that permit all communications services and content to be generated and delivered from one ICT platform. This has meant growing convergence between the traditional broadcasting and telecommunications altering how information can be accessed in terms of time and space as well as the immediacy and speed with which access is possible. From technological convergence other aspects of this concept are derived. The multiple dimensions of convergence include carrier convergence, which has blurred the traditional distinctions between telecommunications and broadcasting and between content and carriage. Services are delivered by infrastructures in common, creating implications for investment, service delivery, market structures, business models, policy, legislation and regulation.

The new configuration of technologies has brought communications services into a new ball game. Pre-existing internet protocols and digital technology were together applied to create a global information and

communications network presenting traditional media with global audiences and the opportunity to become multi-service providers. Infrastructures could provide greater capacities with expansion of access to broadband to carry multimedia content. Third generation networks and digital television; device portability and mass storage of content are now well developed features of the technological environment.

As new applications come on stream the technologies are in some ways taking (back?) audiences as media use/consumption has become individualized and consumers take greater control of what they access and when. This is about the emergence and impact of “non-linear” services, where consumers ‘pull’ content. Reverse processes in some areas are therefore now evident in these movements from the mass to the individual.

“Non-linear” services and devices such as personal video recorders that allow television viewers to subvert traditional advertising assumptions of the captive audience are reconfiguring traditional media and advertising markets. Some providers in the more mature communications services markets e.g. in North America are already responding to/preparing for this phase, and particularly competition from video on demand and download services, by further adjusting business models to offer both linear and non-linear services and the attendant consumer electronics to households that they serve.

The continuously increasing capacity of personal computers promises a device that will store greater amounts of audiovisual materials and the Video Signal Converters allow consumers to view video from the television on the computer (PC/TV connectivity). There are also those devices that will allow users to send streaming video from their PC to their televisions, which may have broadband connectivity.

New policies and regulatory arrangements as a consequence of convergence now provide the legal basis to make multi-service providers of both traditional telecommunications operators and traditional media (content) operators as technology-centric licensing is progressively replaced by technology neutral-licensing.

How much of the developments from convergence in ICT's is evident and present challenges to Caribbean media organizations? Challenge, of course, should assume exertion and not necessarily a negative impact.

The traditional media as we have defined them, particularly over the air television, more or less found their feet in transitioning to the new technological paradigm in the earlier phases of convergence. The internet provided a new frontier with global audiences and a global market for advertising. Today most if not all major newspapers in the Caribbean can be read online; they record millions of hits daily have been able to add another essentially lucrative income stream from web advertising. This morphing of print media into electronic, internet-based media was probably the most dramatic expression of the impact of convergence on the traditional media in the mid to late 1990's. Radio and television stations can also be accessed on the internet.

Some broadcasters moved to include cable services under their brand and others have globalised the market for their programming by exporting into the regional market and into North America, particularly targeting the Caribbean Diaspora communities. Communications groups/conglomerates in the broadcasting and print media, (some with multi-national coverage) based notable in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad & Tobago were consolidated in this period. Although organizations had to retool, restructure business models and

make substantial new investments, the internet and the emergent technological environment presented more of an opportunity than a threat to the traditional media businesses.

More recently audience shifts, possibly in the reverse process mentioned above, were noted in the recent Jamaica All Media Survey. Based on the survey, as one radio broadcaster said, 400,000 listeners, a majority it seems in the under 24 age group, have “disappeared” from the radio broadcasting radar. Radio audiences seem to be migrating and the question is: where to? One can only speculate: to hand held devices such as i-Pods as well as to the visual media. Maybe next years survey will assist with the explanation.

The good news is that Caribbean media already have online content that can be accessed through internet ready consumer electronics – as mobile telephones or through PC/TV convergence. Depending on how one looks on the matter the good/bad news is that traditional media must make another transition to providing more “pull” content to reach audiences seeking more personalized/individualized services.

These processes are taking place at a slower rate in the Caribbean but the rate is likely to increase as internet penetration increases. (up from 2.3% in 2000 to 39% in 2006, according to the Economic and Social Survey ESSJ of Jamaica). Still, the threat of infrastructure obsolescence and severe audience fragmentation may not be as imminent. There remains scope for traditional media organizations to maximize existing infrastructure and the internet market to target and to reach audiences to their economic advantage and to sustain the businesses.

The challenges for the traditional media are varied with implications and indicators that are different for radio and for the visual media. Ultimately, the technological developments emergent from convergence have diminished the power of these media over information dissemination and the ability people have to choose their sources of information. These developments provide, however, greater scope for bringing Caribbean content to global audiences and for accruing economic benefit from the global market for Caribbean audiovisual products and services.

The new environment is requiring renewed understanding of the audio-visual services market; development of the attendant skills that the new environment demands; and readiness to operate in a multiple market regulatory framework instead of the traditional single service regulatory arrangements.

Where do convergence and information and communication technologies leave us in fulfilling the UNESCO mandate to promote “the free flow of ideas by word and image as a basic human right: a mandate which assumes independent and pluralistic media that serve democracy and so serve the public interest?

Does public interest means restricting private interest? The answer seems to be clear in the case where land is required to widen a road that is dangerous because of its narrowness. Not so necessarily, however, when it a matter of broadcast content or whether attempts should be made to regulate the internet.

Or is the public interest to be determined on a case-by-case assessment rather than prescriptive definition? Still, another important consideration is whether the public defines its own interest: is the public interest the same as what the public is interested in? Do media organizations and governments or regulators define the public interest similarly? These are issues of in content regulation

that are now engaging the Broadcasting Commission in Jamaica. Add to this the nuance that consensus or general agreement does not always represent the public interest. It is therefore sometimes difficult to agree on what the public interest is and by whom it is to be determined.

We could agree though, that the "public interest" represents what serves society as a whole and that it is to be determined based on a balanced approach focussed on the longer term. At times, it may be directed towards the needs of special groups, however, because, ultimately, the society as a whole benefits.

In this sense the media should serve the public interest in two ways, both from a utilitarian perspective. They should operate **IN** the public interest: that is to say that there should be nothing in what they undertake - whether in output or in meeting commercial imperatives generally - that detracts from what is understood as the public interest. They must also **operationalise** the concept of the public interest by in a way acting as accountability agents on behalf of the public - by investigation and exposure of those acts/decisions by any sector that detract from or undermine the public interest.

It is noted that public value from the media, being a non-material value, is difficult to define compared to, say, the market value of a service. This is why regulators, public policy makers, media organisations, and media professionals must set standards and establish public interest tests to assist in clarifying how the media can best serve the public interest in the current technological environment.

What then could be public value from the media as they serve the public interest? In a speech two weeks ago in April, Assistant Secretary General in the Organization of American States (OAS), Mr. Albert R. Ramdin noted that while

democracy had been strengthened in the region, “it has not satisfactorily translated into economic and social progress for all in society.” The public interest in our countries should therefore mean the achievement of economic and social progress.

Democracy and the public interest in the Caribbean as a region and as individual countries are integrally linked to democracy globally. And, the achievement of progress will have to be pursued in this global context. For this there will need to be “specific flexibilities for small and vulnerable economies” This was the view of Pascal Lamy, Director General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) who was visiting the Caribbean for the first time just about when Ramdin spoke. These flexibilities would need to take into account democracy and the rule of law, respect for human rights, free and fair trade, poverty alleviation, environmentally responsible development policies, and other issues relating to health care and education to which Ramdin referred.

Even with the challenges they pose, convergence and ICT applications currently offer traditional media an opportunity to promote and to serve the public interest. The point has been made that information and communication technologies can assist journalists in becoming advocates of the public interest, by adding depth to their coverage and enabling them to incorporate more voices into their reporting. Exercising this role will contribute to empowering public participation in national decision-making (democracy?)

The potential of the media to use the technologies to generate value as return on investment is substantial. So too is their potential to create social, economic, cultural and political value in respective Caribbean countries. With visionary leadership, the traditional media by maximizing ICT’s can serve the

public interest by contributing to the security, economic advancement, social and cultural and political development in the region.

Thank you.

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