

# Caribbean journalism's media economy: Advancing democracy and the common good?

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## Abstract

Since the turn of the 21st century, the Caribbean news industry has experienced an economic phase of growth, a trend that contradicts the experience in the United States and Europe, and rapid changes brought on by technological innovations. However, Caribbean journalism is constrained by political, economic, and social forces that limit its effectiveness in upholding the ideals of democracy. This article examines journalism and the news industry in the English-speaking Caribbean. The analysis focuses mainly on the newspaper industry but also includes broadcast media. Media economic theories are used to explain the key forces that are influencing the growth of Caribbean media and the impact on the practice and profession of journalism in the region.

## Keywords

Journalism, Caribbean journalism, mass communication, Caribbean media economy, journalism and democracy, journalism and common good

Caribbean journalism is a paradox: rapid technological and market-led reforms amidst growing, competitive markets. At the time of this study, countries in the English-speaking Caribbean had increased their number of media outlets, their advertising revenues, and circulation numbers in the midst of a global declination in the news industry. It seems perplexing these economic trends come at a time when journalists in western countries such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom are grappling with the question of journalism's future.

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Although these market triumphs seem admirable, media's commercial profits raise questions about the role of journalism in these democratic societies, specifically, how well does commercially profitable journalism protect and advance the common good? The ethic of the common good centers on the ideas of social and political life of early philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and later ideas of the state-of-nature and social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Rawls, and Rosseau, whose general concerns were equality and liberty for everyone—the basic tenets of moral justification for democratic governance. Later, other philosophers such as Habermas (1989) discussed these ideals in a philosophy of the public sphere—where rational critical debate is enshrined in strong public opinion to check the domination of political elites. In current debate media scholars advocate journalism's social obligations or responsibilities to provide accurate, balanced, relevant, and comprehensive accounts of the news in market-driven economies (see Christians et al. 2009; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007).

Western concerns for journalism's responsibilities in democratic societies have centered on the notion that the commercialization of journalism has diluted its role as an effective monitor of power. Many scholars (Bagdikian, 1983, 2004; MacManus, 1995; McCheesney and Nichols, 2010) have raised concerns about the commercialization of the news industry, concentration of ownership, and the decline, even collapse, of journalism as a public service. These concerns are not new as they date to the early days of yellow journalism. Contemporary concerns for the commercialization of the news industry focus on the limitations of the role of news as a source of information about issues of public importance (Habermas, 1961/1984) and the agenda-setting-policy-influence function of media in a democratic society (McNair, 2011). According to Bač ytiéné (2006), the shift to the dictates of the market is apparent in every facet of the media: hybrid discourses, mixed genres of journalism, and advertising, proliferate in magazines, broadcast, and internet media. In addition, some media scholars (see Gitlin, 2003; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McCheesney, 2002) believe many media firms in the United States and Europe are competing with the same content: in broadcasting, increased competition results in program duplication, while in other fields it results in a decline of content diversity and quality. The confluence of these trends is the homogenization of mass media news content, which, according to Herman and Chomsky, (1988), Gitlin (2003), and Bagdikian (1983, 2004), leads to an impoverished democracy. Have these trends emerged in the English-speaking Caribbean and do they raise concerns for the common good as espoused in democratic ideals? Is the competitive news industry in the Caribbean putting profit ahead of serving the public with good information? In the midst of economic prosperity are Caribbean media providing the kinds of public information that advance democracy and the common good? Will the Caribbean news industry continue this pattern of economic growth?

Concerns for news media's agenda-setting-policy-influence function not only stem from the commercialization of news but also from the influence of political systems on press freedom (Oates, 2009). Political systems create and enforce laws and policies to regulate the mass media. In some countries these regulations advance press freedom and democracy and hinder them in others through censorship, media laws, such as libel and defamation, and sometimes through coercive and forceful means. In these Caribbean microstates, do media regulations facilitate democratic ideals of a responsible press in these market-driven societies?

This article examines journalism and the news industry in the English-speaking Caribbean to answer these questions. The analysis focuses mainly on the newspaper industry but also includes broadcast media. The study is based on interviews with Caribbean journalists, editors, publishers, producers, managers, and media owners in five English-speaking countries in the Caribbean. The interviews were supplemented with secondary data. Theories of media economy provide a holistic framework for understanding how media industries function across different levels of society (Albarran, 2010; Bagdikian, 1983/2004; Picard, 1989). Albarran (2010) defines media economy as the study of how media firms and industries function across different levels of activity (global, regional, national, and individual) in tandem with other forces (regulation, technology, and social aspects) through the use of theories, concepts, and principles drawn from macroeconomic and microeconomic perspectives (p. 3). Media economic theories help to explain the key forces that are influencing the growth of Caribbean media and the impact on the practice and profession of journalism in the region.

## Method

A series of interviews were conducted in five countries in the English-speaking Caribbean—Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago—from 2005 to 2012. These countries were selected based on geographic dispersion and accessibility to the author. The English-speaking Caribbean, and the entire geopolitical space called the Caribbean, encompasses a lot of diversity. Some Caribbean countries are islands and others are parts of a continent. Some have populations of less than 100,000 and others have more than a million inhabitants. Some are multilingual and others are monolingual. This study focuses on Belize, one of the northern most Caribbean countries, in Central America, the archipelago of the Bahamas, the island nations of Jamaica and Barbados, and the southernmost Caribbean country, the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago. These countries have many differences and similarities in their composition. Trinidad and Tobago, although English is the official language, is regarded as a multilingual country. It has two major ethnic groups—Africans and Indians—that compose the majority of the population. Belize has a large mestizo population and other ethnicities—African, Maya, Garifuna, and Caucasian. This multilingual country shares a border with Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico and recent migration trends have significantly increased its Hispanic population. Bahamas, Barbados, and Jamaica, mainly monolingual countries, have majority African populations but also have other ethnicities—Asians, Indians, Caucasians, Arabs, Hispanics, and others. The five countries present a geographic representation of the physical dispersion of the English-speaking countries in the region (north, east, west, and south). These countries were also the most accessible ones to the author based on funding and previous knowledge of industry professionals in these countries.

Forty-four face-to-face semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Caribbean news media journalists, editors, producers, talk show hosts, news media owners, and media scholars. There were 31 men and 13 women interviewed from a variety of newsrooms across the five countries—radio, television, and newspapers. The participants ranged in age, industry experience, and seniority. The average age was 45 years and the years of experience ranged from 2 years to 40 years, with the average years

of experience in the industry of 23.5 years. The interviewees were selected based on my previous knowledge, accessibility, and availability. The majority of the interviewees were senior members of the media. This bias came about because of issues of availability. There were 20 interviewees between the ages of 20 and 30 with experience ranging from 2 to 6 years, and 24 interviewees between the ages of 32 and 70 years with 10–50 years of experience. Belize was the first country where the interviews were conducted in 2005 and therefore the information may be a bit dated but is still relevant for a description of the news industry and emerging trends in a region with very little published information.

Initially, a list of potential interviewees was created based on previous knowledge of media practitioners in these five countries and names were added to this list through referrals from interviewees on the original list. This link-tracing methodology (Spren, 1992) took advantage of the social networks that exist among Caribbean journalists to expand potential contacts (Thomson, 1997). The interviewees were contacted and informed at the time of initial contact of the topics to be covered in the interview. The topics included, but were not limited to, discussions on career trajectory, industry practices, challenges in day-to-day work routine, definitions of journalism, and its purpose, future projections for journalism, and impact of new technology on the industry.

The interviews were supplemented with newspaper articles, annual reports from media organizations, online sources, and archival documents. In 2012, a survey was sent to editors, publishers, and owners of the media organizations to obtain data on advertising revenues but none of them responded, even after repeated contacts. The interviews were transcribed and close reading of the transcripts provided key themes. The following thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns in Caribbean journalism. The findings and conclusions cannot be applied to all Caribbean countries as the study focused only on five English-speaking countries. However, the findings do provide rich data on the conceptions, trends, challenges, and future of journalism and the news industry in the English-speaking Caribbean from the perspective of the participants. Four major themes emerged: economic prosperity and emerging media empires; factors influencing economic trends; the impact of commercialization on journalism and democracy; and media regulations in the Caribbean. These themes are discussed in the following sections.

### *Economic prosperity and emerging media empires*

Media has become big business in the Caribbean. At the time of this study, media in the English-speaking Caribbean were experiencing a period of growing profits and empires. This growth began with an explosion of new media channels, particularly in broadcasting, from the late-1980s to present, which were ushered in through deregulation and liberalization policies that opened these former state-controlled markets. These policies led to the privatization of many state-owned institutions, including state broadcasting, and increased the number of media organizations, particularly broadcasting, within these markets (Storr, 2011). Many Caribbean media markets went from one state radio and television broadcaster to as many as 60 private radio and television stations. These increases created highly competitive media markets.

Historically, newspaper ownership in the region has been mainly private. At the time of this study, the newspaper industry was experiencing a period of growth. In this regard, the English-speaking Caribbean is following the trends of India, China, Latin America, and parts of Africa where newspapers are also successful (Franklin, 2009). But many of the editors and publishers interviewed believe this growth will last only another 5–10 years before these countries follow the pattern of the United States and Western Europe.

In addition to this economic growth in the news industry, throughout the region Caribbean journalism is experiencing a period of rapid changes led by technological innovation and economic reform. But, in the midst of these changes, journalism as business is prospering as advertising revenue and the overall circulation of tabloids, broadsheets, and specialized magazines multiply and the number of news channels (free dailies, broadcasting time, and online news portals) increase in these countries over the last decade.

The *Trinidad Express* editor explained this growth, Trinidad, and by extension the Caribbean, this part of the world is somehow caught in a wave, where we're just an incredible paradox, newspapers continue to grow. The *Express*, our paper, has put out a 240-page paper on a Wednesday—240 pages paper is bigger than the *Sunday Times* [*New York Times*]. How is that possible to be happening? We are inundated with ads, we are actually refusing ads.

But, this period of growth, most notable in the 2000s, was interrupted by the onset of the global economic recession and was most notable in the newspaper industry. From 2007 to 2008, the newspapers in Jamaica, Bahamas, and Barbados experienced a decline in advertising profits. In a 2009 annual report, the *Jamaica Gleaner*, the largest newspaper in Jamaica, reported its worst financial loss in the company's 175 years history, noting "a dramatic loss of JMD [*Jamaican dollars*] \$444.69 mm for 2008, coming from a profit of JMD \$98.2 mm in 2007." Among the factors that contributed to the decline in revenues in 2008 was a decline in advertising revenues. Advertising which contributes 53% of total revenue, incurred a 7.3% decline due to shrinking advertising budgets. However, despite the loss in advertising revenue, circulation, which accounts for 20% of the revenues, had increased by 13.8%. Caribbean media scholar, Dunn (2008) reported that overall newspaper readership had grown in Jamaica from 1.4 million in 2007 to 1.6 million in 2008. The Gleaner Company Ltd, owner of the *Jamaica Gleaner*, expected significant future growth through online media usage. In 2010, the Gleaner Company annual report noted that the company had increased its profits by over \$270 million compared with 2009 as it regained advertising revenue. The 2010 report also noted a significant growth in the company's online media products.

Other newspaper companies in the region also reported similar trends of declining advertising revenues for the years 2007–2009, but by 2010 they had also regained advertising revenues and increased circulation by implementing new strategies—mergers and acquisitions, the hiring of accountants, collaborative partnerships, and global markets. Some of the news media organizations created joint operational agreements to share rising costs. In July 2007, in the Bahamas, the *Nassau Guardian* and the *Nassau Tribune*, the two largest daily newspapers, and the *Freeport News*, a subsidiary of the *Nassau Guardian*, signed a joint operating agreement to share rising operational costs. According to some media economists (Busterna and Picard, 1993; Picard, 2007) joint operating agreements are entered into to save a newspaper business from failure. The 'joint

operating agreement' (JOA) strategy (Busterna and Picard, 1993) was applied to many news organizations in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. However, since the 1990s, many US newspapers ceased their JOAs as they were economically no longer viable or one or both parties were no longer willing or required to continue joint operations—contract expiration dates or financial losses that trigger escape clauses (Picard, 2007). The *Nassau Guardian* and the *Nassau Tribune* dissolved their joint operation agreement in 2009 for similar reasons.

During the joint agreement these newspapers increased circulation. After the dissolution of the JOA the *Nassau Tribune* continued to report increases in its circulation, while the *Nassau Guardian* held stable circulation numbers. Since 2009, these newspapers reported increases in circulation (see Table 1) and advertising revenues. Although advertising revenues are better indicators of success, advertising data were not available from these private firms and this study relies on available annual reports and circulation revenue. The *Nassau Tribune's* daily circulation increased from 12,000 in 2002 to 21,000 in 2012 and the *Nassau Guardian* increased from 14,100 in 2002 to 17,000 in 2012 (Benjamin and LeGrand, 2012). In 2011, both newspapers added supplementary sections with increased advertising content and the *Nassau Tribune* also created a new weekly tabloid paper, the *Big T*. The media formula, wider circulation attracts more advertisers (Pew Research Center), was applied to indicate the growth in newspaper revenues, as no annual report data were accessible for the Bahamas media companies. Using the formula, daily circulation number multiplied by the cost of the newspaper (Pew Research Center), the estimated annual circulation revenue for the *Nassau Tribune* increased from \$825,000 (Bahamian dollar) in 2007 to \$1,575,000 in 2012; the *Nassau Guardian's* was \$450,000 in 2007 and increased to \$1,275,000 by 2012. The Tribune Group Incorporated, owners of the *Nassau Tribune*, is the largest media conglomerate in the Bahamas. It owns five radio stations, an online media news aggregate service, and two newspapers, a broadsheet, and a tabloid. The second largest media conglomerate is the *Nassau Guardian Group Ltd*, owners of the *Nassau Guardian*, owns two newspapers, two radio stations, and a television station. Colina Holdings Limited, parent company of Colina Insurance, owns 60% of the *Nassau Guardian Group* and reports "continual profits" in its annual reports for its holdings since it bought the newspaper in 2002. There were no additional details on revenue dispersion. The Tribune Group Limited, a family-owned company, has no public record of its revenues.

Barbados has two national daily newspapers, the *Barbados Nation* and *Barbados Advocate*. The *Nation* newspaper company merged in 2005 with Trinidad and Tobago media giant, Caribbean Communications Network (CCN), to form the largest media conglomerate in the English-speaking Caribbean, One Caribbean Media. Since the merger the *Nation* newspaper has increased its advertising revenues and circulation. In 2002, the *Nation* had a circulation of 32,000, in 2012 the circulation had increased to 35,000 (One Caribbean Media). Its circulation revenue was estimated at \$320,000 (Barbados dollar) in 2002 and \$350,000 in 2012. The *Nation*, now a subsidiary of One Caribbean, is the largest media conglomerate in Barbados. The Nation Corporation owns the radio stations of StarCom Network (seven radio stations—four in Barbados, one in Trinidad, and two radio stations and a television station in Grenada), an Internet service company, Nation Logic, and a real estate holding company (One Caribbean Media). Its rival, the *Barbados*

**Table 1.** Caribbean daily newspaper circulation 2002–2012.

	Bahamas (Daily circ.)	Barbados (Daily circ.)	Belize (Bi-weekly and annual circ.)	Jamaica (Annual cir.)	Trinidad and Tobago (Daily cir.)
	Tribune	Nation	Amandala	Jamaica Gleaner	Trinidad Express
2002	12,000	32,000	N/A	259,000	51,000
2012	15,000–21,000	35,000	45,000	509,000	75,000
	Guardian	Advocate	Reporter	Jamaica Observer	Guardian
2002	14,100	15,000	65,000	N/A	46,760
2012	13,000–15,000	22,000	N/A	115,000	67,000
	Bahama Journal			Herald (weekly publication)	News Day
2002	N/A			N/A	N/A
2012	4000			20,000	40,000
	The Punch			The Star (weekly tabloid)	Tobago News
2002	N/A			N/A	N/A
2012	20,000 (bi-weekly tabloid)			884,000	
	Freeport News				
2002	3000				
2012	4000				

Source: The figures were compiled from various online reports—annual reports, special commission reports, and country profiles of media systems. The figures represent daily, weekly and annual circulation numbers.

*Advocate* newspaper, has also become a media conglomerate acquiring the Sun Printing and Publishing Ltd in Antigua, the parent company of the *Antigua Sun* newspaper, in 2010, the *Grenada Advocate* newspaper in Grenada and owns radio stations in Barbados, Grenada, and Antigua. The *Barbados Advocate*'s circulation increased from 15,000 in 2002 to 22,000 in 2012. Circulation revenue was estimated at \$150,000 in 2002 and \$220,000 in 2012 (BarbadosAdvocate.com).

Trinidad and Tobago's media market is dominated by CCN, which owns the *Trinidad Express* newspaper, TV 6, and four radio stations. As noted, in 2005, CCN merged with the largest newspaper company in Barbados, the Nation Group, to form 1 owns newspapers, television and radio stations, and publishing companies in seven Caribbean countries—Antigua, Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago. One Caribbean Media's second quarter report for 2012 indicated a slight decline in profits for the company but reveal that its newspapers the *Trinidad Express* and the *Barbados Nation* "continue to grow and extend their audiences." One Caribbean Media's third quarter report for 2012 showed net profit increase for the company by 7%. The third quarter report also noted that the company's newspapers, television and radio stations "continue to grow and extend their audiences" (One Caribbean Media). One Caribbean Media also acquired four new radio stations in the third quarter of 2012, three in Trinidad and Tobago and one in St. Lucia.

According to the editor of the *Trinidad Express*, Trinidad and Tobago has one of the highest per capita consumption of newsprint in the Caribbean. The country's four major newspapers—*Trinidad Express*, *Trinidad Guardian*, *Newsday*, and *Tobago Evening News*—had a daily circulation of 240,000 in 2002 and by 2012 this had grown to more than 300,000. The most popular newspapers are the *Trinidad Guardian* and the *Trinidad Express*. The *Express* has 40% of the readership and the *Guardian* follows closely with 37%. In 2002, the *Trinidad Express* had a daily circulation of 51,000; the *Trinidad Guardian* had 46,760, *Newsday* 25,000, and *Trinidad Evening News* 33,770. In 2012, the *Trinidad Express* daily circulation had grown to 75,000 (One Caribbean Media). The *Trinidad Guardian*, its major competitor, had an estimated daily circulation of 67,000 in 2012.

Of the five countries in this study, Jamaica media organizations have the most detailed public records of their revenues. *Jamaica Gleaner* and *Jamaica Observer* dominate Jamaica's newspaper landscape. In 2002, *Jamaica Gleaner* had a circulation of 259,000 and by 2009 its circulation was 432,000. The readership grew in 2010 to 509,000, an 18% increase. Its rival, the *Jamaica Observer* had an estimated circulation of 115,000 in 2010. The *Sunday Gleaner*, a weekly edition published by the Gleaner Company, had a readership of 671,000 in 2008. This dropped to 640,000 in 2009 but increased again to 745,000 in 2010, a 16% increase. The Gleaner Company tabloid publication, the *Star*, also had a high readership—653,000 in 2009 and 884,000 in 2010, a 35% increase. In 2011, the Gleaner Company continued to make profits but reported flat revenues with \$431 million profit in 2010. The Gleaner Company's 2011 profit was \$118 million, a drop from 2010 but the newspaper, *Jamaica Gleaner*, increased its revenue by 1.5%. At the time of this writing, the company's 2012 annual report had not been published but its quarterly reports, available to September, noted continued growth of 1% in its media services (Gleaner Company 2008–2012 annual reports).

The Gleaner Company Limited is the largest media conglomerate in Jamaica with assets of \$3.6 billion (JMD) as of December 2011. The Gleaner Company operates media

services in Jamaica, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States which include newspapers—the daily *Gleaner*, the *Sunday Gleaner*, and the *Star*—both online and print operations, two radio stations in Jamaica and book and magazine publications. The Gleaner Company, like many of the larger media companies in this study—the Tribune Company, The Nassau Guardian Group, One Caribbean Media—has employed a globalized strategy that focuses mainly on the diaspora. The second largest media conglomerate in Jamaica is Radio Jamaica Communications Group (RJR) with assets as of 2011 of \$1.2 billion. RJR owns Television Jamaica, Reggae Entertainment Television, TVJ sports Network, and Jamaica News Network, and radio stations RJR 94 FM, FAME 95 FM, and HITZ 92 FM and also owns shares in One Caribbean Media (rjr2011 annual report). *Jamaica Observer* comes in third.

Belize has a slightly different story. There is no daily newspaper in Belize. In 2002, the *Amandala*, a bi-weekly newspaper, had the largest circulation of about 45,000. In 2012, its circulation remained the same and its estimated circulation revenues were \$90,000 (Belize dollar). The *Amandala* also owns one radio station, Krem. The *Reporter*, the second largest weekly had a circulation of 6500 in 2012. There are 13 additional newspapers that offer print and/or online versions and are published weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly. These include the *Ambergris Today* (which is now offered only online), *Belize Times* (a political newspaper of the ruling Peoples United Party), and the *Guardian* (the opposition party's newspaper). The largest Belizean island, San Pedro, has a daily newspaper, the *San Pedro Daily* and a weekly newspaper, the *San Pedro Sun*. Circulation figures were not available for these newspapers but online sources estimate their range from 5000 to 20,000. In 2006, a new newspaper, *Independent Reformer*, was started first as a printed publication and then as an online newspaper as of 2011.

The largest private media company is RSV Media Center, which owns the largest private radio station, Love FM, three smaller radio stations, and Love Belize Television. The second largest media corporation is Kremandala Ltd, which has major shares in the press, radio and television, and includes The *Amandala*, Belize's largest independent newspaper and Krem FM radio and Krem television station.

The current wave of mergers and acquisitions is creating regional conglomerates that are controlling major portions of the Caribbean media market. In the English-speaking Caribbean, there are no media anti-trust laws and this trend of conglomeration raises concerns for fair competition and good public information (Dunn, 2009). The creation of media oligopolies has been criticized significantly in the literature by American media scholars (Bagdikian, 1983/2004; McChesney, 1999; Schiller, 1992) concerned about the impact of concentrated ownership of media on the purpose of journalism as a public good. McChesney (1999) and Bagdikian (1983/2004) have criticized policy makers for the lack of anti-trust laws to control the mergers and acquisitions of multinational and transnational media corporations such as AOL and Time Warner, Time Warner and EMI, and Tribune and Times Mirror. The fear is a few media oligopolies will control the content of global, regional, and national information and thereby impact editorial independence and content diversity. In these smaller markets of the Caribbean, this concern, Dunn (2009) believes, is urgent. Having broken the state history of controlled media with the disintegration of state control broadcasting over the last 10 years (Storr, 2011), the emergence of the private control of information in the region may be even more daunting

for regional democracy. To ensure the independence of the media, particularly news media, Dunn (2009) believes Caribbean policy makers should implement anti-trust laws to ensure fair competition, diverse content, and editorial independence.

### *Factors influencing media growth in the Caribbean*

What accounts for the different economic performance of the news media industry, particularly newspapers, in the English-speaking Caribbean? Interviewees identified several factors. Perhaps the most significant factor has been the small markets, size matters. Over the last decade, international research shows that small market newspapers are faring better than large newspaper markets. The recent 2012 research findings of US research and consulting firm, Borrell Associates and World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, confirmed this trend. The largest newspaper in the Caribbean, in terms of circulation size, *Jamaica Gleaner*, had the most significant loss for the year 2008, but since then, it has presented financial reports that indicate growth and increased revenues.

New economic strategies have also been employed. The editor of the *Nassau Tribune* explained that beyond the hiring of a plethora of accountants, some media organizations have created new partnerships and have expanded their markets globally to include the Caribbean diaspora. The *Nassau Tribune* and the *Nassau Guardian*, newspapers of the Bahamas, experienced growth after their joint operations agreement and shifted their focus to a mixed marketing environment using a combination of online and offline advertising to expand growth. In Barbados, both national dailies, the *Nation* and the *Advocate*, increased circulation and revenues after mergers and acquisitions created media conglomerates. The same trend has emerged in Bahamas, Belize, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago where mergers and acquisitions have also created new media empires. The editors and media owners also noted that they have extended their markets beyond their borders with both online and offline media services that are marketed to their diasporas.

Two other contributing factors to this period of prosperity, which are related to cultural aspects of the region, are oral traditions and interpersonal selling. Caribbean societies have very strong oral cultures (see Brathwaite, 1974; Patterson, 1971). These cultures still rely on interpersonal storytelling to disseminate information. This aspect of the culture plays a significant role in the newspaper industry as those who do not purchase newspapers rely on those who do to tell them the day's events or pass on important information. This oral tradition is coupled with the culture of selling newspapers. In many of these countries, newspapers are sold on street corners by street vendors, at neighborhood convenience stores or other public venues. In these spaces, there is high interpersonal interaction and a lot of storytelling in the act of selling newspapers. Marketing scholars, Guenzi and Pelloni (2004) believe interpersonal relationship plays a significant role in customer satisfaction and loyalty. In the Caribbean, interpersonal interaction plays a key role in maintaining the important status of newspapers in the region. Many of the editors in this study indicated that because of these cultural indicators, they expect newspaper readership to remain significant over the next 5–10 years but also expect some changes with increased access to digital technologies.

Another factor affecting the continued success of newspapers readership is demography. The Caribbean population has a high percentage of older people. However, much is still unknown about the demographic makeup of this group as data on the elderly are still scarce throughout the region. But, as noted by an Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean 2004 report, the region has, outside of Europe and North America, the highest percentage of elderly in its population. A 2006 UN report noted that by 2010 more than 10% of the Caribbean population would be over 60 except in Belize, Dominican Republic, Guyana, and Haiti. The ECLAC 2004 report noted that the Caribbean will experience absolute and relative increases in the elderly population over the next 50 years and that the elderly population, which constituted 4.5% in 1950, will increase to 18% in 2050. According to several editors and publishers in this study, this group of consumers still has a high newspaper preference. The younger generation has shifted to the digital online environment for their information and entertainment. The editor of the Barbados newspaper the *Nation* noted that when the older generation dies out, the region would experience a significant drop in newspaper readership. But, this may not happen any time soon, as the older generation is the fastest growing population in the region (Rawlins, 2010). Buoyed by increased readership over the last 4 years (2008–2012), the Caribbean newspapers in this study have experienced increase circulation numbers and growing revenues.

Technological factors that are impacting these changes involve the advances in digital technologies. At the time of this study, the relatively low internet connectivity was also impacting the growth of Caribbean newspapers. According to Dunn (2009) and the editor of the *Trinidad Express*, the region has 100% wireless phone usage. In 2012, Internet penetration was highest in Barbados, 71.7%, moderate in the Bahamas, 45.3%, Jamaica, 55.1%, and Trinidad and Tobago, 55.2%, and low in Belize, 19.1% (InternetWorldStats). In 2009, the *Trinidad Express* editor noted only 1 in 10 had access to online technology in Trinidad. Internet penetration is increasing in the region but still remains much lower than the United States and Western Europe.

The newspapers in this study have integrated online media into their operations. All of the editors and publishers in this study indicated digital technologies would play a major role in the future of newspapers and journalism. Internet and wireless technologies are changing the practice and profession, allowing Caribbean journalists to research, access, and disseminate information quickly, providing interactive elements in news content, and increasing the competition for readers, viewers, and listeners as more citizens have the ability to publish information on the internet or disseminate it via wireless technology, twitter, facebook, and other social media. These are the strategies that Enli (2008) urged public service broadcasting to adopt to survive and succeed in the digital age. Fortunately, for now, as a Bahamian managing news editor indicated, the credibility for news sources still lies with the professional journalists and traditional media, so the competition from bloggers, although making an impact, is limited, for now.

There are growing trends in the use of digital technology by citizens and the media industry. One of the areas of journalism that is notably being affected is investigative journalism as citizen bloggers and news aggregators publish stories online that traditional journalists are not able to publish. According to a Barbadian journalist, citizen bloggers are filling a void in the Caribbean. Investigative journalism throughout the region is stymied

by access to information laws, and economic and cultural constraints. Like their former colonizer Britain, Caribbean governments are very secretive. Pointing (1989) and McNair (2011) discussed the British tradition of government officials' secretive approach to decision making on public policies; where the public is perceived as the outsider. This inherited colonial tradition is still prevalent in the English-speaking Caribbean. But, online bloggers are contesting this tradition and the archaic media laws with publication of information once deemed too sensitive or controlled by government officials. Government officials are fighting back through defamation lawsuits, 'national security' defense, and secrecy legislation. The region has one of the highest numbers of lawsuits against journalists and media organizations (see discussion below on media regulations).

### *Impact of commercialization on journalism and democracy*

At the time of this study, Caribbean newspapers were experiencing increased profits and circulation. With these increases have come increased concerns for the common good as news organizations in these five countries place more emphasis on making profits. As noted earlier, the global trend for marketplace preference which views news as commodity brings many concerns for the public good and democracy (Bagdikian, 1983/2004; Gitlin, 2003; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Schudson, 2008).

Caribbean media scholars (Dunn, 2009; Pendergrast, 2009) and journalists in this study believe making profits come at a high price. Caribbean journalists believe many media houses are placing profits ahead of good journalism. With competitive media environments, media organizations throughout the region have resorted to some of the same tactics of their global counterparts to increase profits and cut costs (see Balč ytiènè, 2006; Curran and Myung-Jin, 2000; Esser and Pfetsch, 2004; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Humphreys, 1996, for discussion on effects of marketization and commercialism on news industry)—laying off senior reporters for inexperienced junior staff, lowering the standards and quality of journalism, pushing the advertising agenda over the editorial agenda, and the growing bane of the sensational.

One of the owners of One Caribbean Media notes that the change to a market-oriented journalism created a crisis in journalism throughout the region. He believes the crisis came about because the marketplace opened up quickly and the new competitors were unprepared to operate media organizations, particularly radio and television stations. Consequently, he says, this led to the disappearance of standards.

Many of the interviewees believe there is a greater emphasis on sensational, tabloid style journalism, increased mergers, and layoffs. Journalists in Barbados, Belize, and Jamaica discussed the issue of layoffs that came about as a result of mergers or acquisitions. There is no accurate figure for the number of journalists laid off in these countries as much of these data have not been collated and this work relies on the anecdotal stories of practicing journalists. According to a Barbadian newspaper editor, senior members of the editorial team were laid off when the company merged and were replaced by young, inexperienced reporters. This trend led to increased public criticism on the quality of journalism.

Along with the layoffs, the competitive media market also aided the high turnover of journalists. A young Trinidadian journalist described the profession as a "merry-go-round." The high turnover in the profession results from the movement of journalists from

one media house to another, in search of higher wages and better benefits. This movement resulted in issues of continuity and professional development. A journalist in the Bahamas expressed concern over his meteoric rise from cub reporter to senior reporter to editor in the short period of one year. He agreed that the high turnover is partially responsible for the quality of their work and the increased public criticism of that work. But he also believes the fragmented, fast-paced media environment is also to blame.

Unequivocally, Caribbean journalism is in transition. The profession and practice of journalism is going through a period of rapid change brought on by the shift to commercialized markets, the rise of media conglomerates and technological innovations. In 2010, the editor of the *Nation* newspapers in Barbados believed the market model may be good for selling products but not for providing the kind of information citizens need. Her concerns reflect those of Herman and Chomsky (1988), Schiller (1992), Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) who have warned of the influence of the commercialization of journalism on democratic processes. She describes what happened to journalism in Barbados when the business model became the dominant approach to news production:

We were known as the people's paper and we did what we called people's journalism ... [when] the *Nation* [newspaper] became a public entity ... some of the changes begun to be apparent.

... many things started to happen at the same time. First of all, the whole pace of journalism began to change. Not only here in Barbados but elsewhere too. One, the *Advocate* [competitor newspaper] was bought by a businessman, and I want to stress businessman because I have been here at the *Nation* when the paper was run by a newspaper person and now I am here when it's being run by a business person. Because now we're in that same boat as the *Advocate* ... So the *Advocate* was actually taken over by a business man who said quite plainly and frankly he was really not that interested in journalism, he was interested in the business aspect of it ...

Caribbean journalists interviewed for this study believe the rapid technological changes, concentration of media ownership and commercialism are threatening professional journalism. In the midst of advancing technologies and the dominance of the marketplace, the concern for the public sphere and democracy remains a focal point for journalists in the English-speaking Caribbean. This leaves Caribbean journalism at crossroads. On the one hand, there is the impact that new communication technologies are having on the news industry. Newspapers are creating mixed marketing strategies to stay ahead of digital technologies that are allowing the consumer direct access to information. On the other hand, news organizations are pushing a commercialized product to maximize profits. In essence, this product is a highly sensationalized one. In a crowded market space, publishers, editors, producers, and owners are pushing a product that relies on an entertainment model than on an information model (see Hallin, 1994; Schudson, 1995). Journalists fear in this fast-paced competitive environment accuracy, relevance, and comprehensiveness are being sacrificed.

The emerging pattern throughout the Caribbean is one that views journalism more as a business than a public service. This shift has led journalists, editors, and media owners interviewed for this study to believe that the demands of the marketplace have changed

the emphasis of journalism. Big businesses are either buying news organizations and are operating them like a business or news organizations have become big corporations through mergers and acquisitions, their main goal is to make a profit. Consequently, many Caribbean journalists believe business owners are not interested in journalism as a public good and necessity; news has become big business (see critique of Lippmann, 1922). To sustain their business in the competitive Caribbean media markets news organizations have resorted to the old formula: if it bleeds it leads.

### *Media regulations in the English-speaking Caribbean*

One of the challenges of the region remains access to information. Despite the passage of freedom of information acts (FOIAs) in most of these countries, obtaining information remains a great challenge (Smith, 2012, 2013). Many public organizations, including state entities, in these countries still do not release public information (Gibbings, 2011). Private entities follow a similar pattern of secrecy. Many scholars (Christians et al. 2009; McNair, 2011; Oates, 2009; Siebert et al., 1956) have identified the influence of political systems on media systems through regulations as a major concern for democracy. Caribbean media have minimal regulations. However, Caribbean governments play an active role in the control of media through imposing media laws such as libel and defamation. The political structure is centralized with political power resting in the hands of the prime minister and his/her governing party. As a result this allows the governing party to maintain a high level of control over the media. These systems were inherited from the British whose media environment is also controlled by its political structure. British media scholar Oates (2009) identifies the relationship between the political system in the United Kingdom and the media, particularly broadcast media, as intense. This descriptor also applies to the relationship between the media and politicians in these former British colonies. Some Caribbean editors and journalists have even characterized this relationship as hostile.

Like their former colonizer, the print and broadcast media emerged in these countries with two separate paths to regulation, private and state ownership. Print media, private entities in all the countries except Belize which has a mix of private and political ownership, evolved with restrictive media laws—libel and defamation. These laws remain a bane in the practice of journalism throughout the region and have become more insidious with the opening of these markets. Journalists in this study complain these laws, inherited from the British, restrain them from criticizing elected officials and other public figures. Unlike the United States Bill of Rights, the constitutions of these countries, except Trinidad and Tobago, do not guarantee freedom of the press. Instead the constitutions in four of these countries—Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, and Jamaica—identify freedom of expression. Trinidad and Tobago's constitution specifically identifies the rights of a free press but has done very little to encourage freedom of the press and was downgraded by Freedom House, a non-profit international organization that monitors press freedom, for its abusive treatment of journalists in 2012 ([freedomhouse.org](http://freedomhouse.org)). Journalists throughout the region argue that freedom of expression does not provide the constitutional protection they need to challenge restrictive media laws and thereby limit journalism's role in these democratic societies (Raymond, 2010). Under current libel and defamation laws,

Caribbean journalists, both print and broadcast, have to prove the information they are reporting is both accurate and true. According to Raymond (2010) defamation laws in these countries require minimal proof of defamation and legally start from the position that the information is false, thus politicians and civilians have taken advantage of these laws to bring libel suits against journalists and media organizations who are required to defend their statements as truth.

For broadcast, by the 1950s, the social responsibility ethos of British broadcasting had morphed into state control broadcasting in all of the countries in this study. This created state control information, which favored the governing party. State control broadcasting, associated with propaganda, censorship, and control of information, was dismantled in the region over the last 10 years (Storr, 2011). All of the countries in this study, except Barbados, have restructured their state broadcasting systems into public service broadcasting. New broadcasting commissions and other regulatory bodies were formed to regulate the new liberal media environments that have emerged in these countries. Of the five countries in this study, Jamaica has the most regulated market and Belize has the most restricted market.

Encompassed in the fulfillment of license fee agreements required by these states, both public and private broadcasting are regulated by government rules that require they maintain standards of decency, protect vulnerable groups, advance cultural diversity, present accuracy and fairness in news and current affairs programs, maintain public service obligations, avoid harmful and incendiary material, and protect national security interest. The central goal of the new broadcasting commissions, as quoted from the Jamaica broadcasting commission, is to “monitor and regulate these industries, balancing the interests of consumers, the industries and the creative community in implementing public policy and law” (Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica.org).

Despite the existence of archaic media laws, Jamaica has the least restrictive media environment. In the 1990s, in an effort to encourage openness and transparency in governance and advance human rights throughout the region, Caribbean governments were urged by international agreements to pass freedom of information legislation, and implement it, to close the gap between government and civil society (Durant, 2006). Belize began the process early with the creation of its FOIA in 1994. The act was not implemented until 2000. It was considered too broad in its definition of private and public information and was revised in 2000. Jamaica passed its access to information act in 2002, which became effective in 2004, to allow greater access to public information. According to Jamaican journalists, the passage and enactment of the FOIA was a step in the right direction but it took almost 10 years for politicians and civil servants to implement the requirements of the act. The Bahamas passed its FOIA in 2012 but has not enacted it. Barbados has not passed an FOIA. Trinidad and Tobago passed its FOIA in 2001 but has not implemented it. The implementation, scope, and types of exemptions in these acts (access to information/freedom of information) throughout the English-speaking Caribbean leave some critics (Daruwala et al., 2012; Iyer, 2006; Mendel, 2005) questioning their effectiveness in advancing openness, accountability, and transparency among Caribbean governments.

According to the non-profit organization Reporters Without Borders, in 2012 Jamaica was ranked the highest of all Caribbean countries for its record of free press, number 13

globally. Despite its constitutional reference of a free press, Trinidad and Tobago, as noted, was downgraded 20 positions in 2012 because of its abusive treatment of journalists. In 2012, Freedom House, the non-profit organization that monitors press freedom and democracy, described Trinidad and Tobago's democracy as 'flawed'. Freedom House also described the Bahamas, Barbados, and Belize as having a "moderately" free press.

Despite Reporters Without Borders' favorable ranking of Jamaica and the relatively free press of Bahamas, Barbados, and Belize, as noted above, journalists in the region are still constrained by restrictive libel and defamation laws and non-enforceable FOIAs. In 2012, the International Press Institute held several symposiums throughout the region in an effort to urge Caribbean governments to change restrictive libel and defamation laws. This was a constant refrain by journalists interviewed for this study. Caribbean journalist Gibbings (2011) believes these restrictive laws prohibit journalism from protecting and advancing democracy. He identifies the challenges to press freedom and freedom of expression in Caribbean countries as "a complex mix of direct and insidious phenomena that include overt state hostility towards media organizations, a heritage of restrictive legislative environments, control of media content by commercial and special interest groups, corrosive effects of systemic self-censorship, and general public apathy." In 2013, Gibbings posits the current blend of media regulations and commercial interests do not bode well for the future of democracy in these countries.

## **Conclusion**

Media economists identify four external forces that continue to drive change across media industries—technology, regulation, globalization, and sociocultural developments (Albarran, 2010; Bagdikian, 1983/2004; Picard, 1989). Each of these forces was present in this examination of Caribbean media growth and its impact on journalism in the region. In the United States and Western Europe, journalism sits in a precarious position—an uncertain business future and an endangered vital component of democratic governance. In the English-speaking Caribbean, like other regions of the world—China, India, Latin America, Africa—media organizations, especially newspapers, have found ways to succeed, for now. However, in doing so, news organizations in the Caribbean have converted to a business model that places more emphasis on profit margins than public service. Competitive markets, media conglomerates and new technologies are driving news organizations to respond with defensive marketplace tactics that drive sales and advertising revenues which endanger journalism's vital position in democracies.

In the region, print and broadcast media have more competition from internet and wireless technologies. Thus, journalists are being pushed to be more aggressive to attract audiences and advertisers. To feed a 24/7 news cycle, news organizations publish more sensational stories to get the audience's attention.

Along with an increase in sensational coverage is the growing increase in homogenization of media content. Today, there are more Caribbean media empires. In each of the five countries in this study, there is a dominant media conglomerate in each country: Jamaica Gleaner Ltd and RJR in Jamaica, Tribune News Incorporated in the Bahamas, One Caribbean Media in Barbados and Trinidad, and Love FM in Belize. The emergence of these new media conglomerates is increasing the media's reliance on the same sources

and the same advertisers as they share the same owners and the same markets. Different media organizations often tell the same stories in the same way. The formula is simplistic and sensational coverage, not complicated, in-depth information. Economic homogenization makes it more and more difficult for audiences to evaluate truth and relevance in news stories as more often than not information is distorted, left out or inaccurate. The competition for attention has led to increased coverage of the salacious.

What is at stake in a heavily commercialized Caribbean news market? According to many of the interviewees in this study and scholars of democracy and media's role in democracy, the sacrificial lamb is the common good. What does the increase in sensationalism mean? As in the United States and the United Kingdom, and throughout human history, sex, violence, and scandals sell. The fact that sensationalism has become a priority for news organizations in the region has great implications for democratic governance (see McChesney, 1999). What happens to Caribbean democracy when the sensational trumps the informative and educational role of media? As media scholars (McChesney, 1999; McChesney and Nichols, 2010; Schudson, 2008) note, democracy suffers when citizens get less content that is educational and informative and less content diversity.

There are minimal media regulations in these five countries for the new media environments that have been created post-1990. Jamaica is the country that has made the most progress in re-regulating its market. Concerns about anti-trust are surfacing but the necessary policies have not been created, and probably will not in these micro-markets with the reemergence of monopoly and oligopoly. In addition, media organizations, journalists in particular, are constrained by archaic media laws for libel and defamation and ineffective freedom of information laws. Thus, journalism's role as the watchdog of powerful elites is difficult to achieve. This makes it difficult for journalists to expose political elites' lack of accountability and transparency in the public interest.

Where does this leave journalism and Caribbean democracy? In opposition, for as predicated by Caribbean journalist Gibbings (2011), the current blend of media regulations, and lack thereof, and commercial interests do not bode well for the future of democracy in these countries.

This study is limited to five countries in the English-speaking Caribbean. The span of time provides a framework for updating journalism in the Caribbean but does not include all countries in the region. The economic performance is limited by the analysis of accessible data; advertising revenues were not available and this study relies on other economic indicators, namely circulation revenue and available annual reports. Future studies should focus on advertising revenue and more countries in the region.

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