

Political Financing: Access of Political Parties to the Media³⁶

Douglas W. Payne

I. Introduction

Despite a few disturbing trends over the last few years, the media in the English-speaking Caribbean and in Suriname are freer and under less threat than in any other subregion of the developing world. In its end-of-the-year statement for 2003, the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM) expressed concern about the inclination among some governments to criminalize the “spreading of false news”, as in St. Lucia, or to legislate media codes of conduct, which has been mooted in Grenada. ACM President Wesley Gibbings stated, “We believe there exists a basis for anxiety in some territories where official policy has recently tended to offer prescriptions that have the potential to undermine the right to publish opinions and information not always in conformity with official or popular views”. Nonetheless, in his overall assessment, Gibbings said, “the functioning of the free press generally obtains in most instances”.

In recent years there have been occasional reports of physical attacks or intimidation against media practitioners in the region, such as the assault against a journalist in Dominica in March 2003 and a handful of other attacks or threats against journalists in Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago since 2001. There also continues to be a tendency for governments to use state-owned media to their political advantage, an ongoing and longstanding phenomenon. For the most part, however, journalists and independent media

³⁶ *The primary sources are the reports and matrices provided by researchers contracted in each of the countries by the OAS Unit for the Promotion of Democracy. Additional sources include the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (Trinidad), Reporters Without Frontiers (Paris), the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York), the International Press Institute (Vienna), the annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the US Department of State, and news reports by international and Caribbean regional media.*

outlets in the English-speaking Caribbean and Suriname are free to carry out their work without interference or fear for their safety. Moreover, in each country most political voices are able to be heard; as television and radio have continued to expand, opinion polling has become more prevalent, and news coverage in both the broadcast and print media has generally become more open and sophisticated. At the same time, there has been a proliferation of call-in and talk shows in the broadcast media that has given greater voice to ordinary citizens and extended the debate on national issues.

Within this relatively free climate the media, particularly the broadcast media, have become increasingly important in Caribbean politics over the last decade and a half, especially during election campaigns. Generally in the region, access to the media for political advertising is governed by the marketplace. And, with airtime and newspaper space available to those who can afford to pay the going rates, use of the media has demanded ever larger percentages of political party and campaign budgets. Only in a handful of countries are political parties and candidates granted even a modicum of no-cost access to the media during campaign periods. This allotted airtime and print space is dwarfed by the amounts purchased during the media wars that now seem to dominate election campaigns in many countries, with additional and substantial resources spent by a number of political parties on media consultants from as far away as the US and the UK.

Still, traditional forms of ground-war politicking and electoral competition remain important, including rallies, motorcades, stumping, canvassing, posters and giveaways. All of these continue to be effective at the constituency and community level and in most countries remain vital for individual candidates, while media efforts tend to focus on selling political parties or party leaders to national audiences, particularly through television and radio.

The issue of access to the media, and the fact that political advertising is primarily a question of acquiring the resources necessary to purchase airtime and print space, has not prompted a great deal of public debate or concern in the region. Indeed, as noted in chapter one, the issue of political financing in general has a low profile. As lavish spending in the media by political parties has become common, there is speculation during campaign periods about the sources of funding, legitimate and illicit, and the actual amounts being spent. But given a lack of disclosure laws in the region and lack of popular demand for greater transparency in political funding, there has been little research, either by scholars or journalists themselves, on the intersection of media and money in Caribbean politics.

II. An Examination of the CARICOM Countries

Antigua and Barbuda

Electoral reforms implemented in 2001 called for political parties and candidates to have equal access to the country's media during election campaigns. But the rules and procedures necessary to carry out the policy were not established by the time of the elections on 23 March 2004. Still, these were the first elections in Antigua and Barbuda during which the opposition was able to promote its views through its own radio stations and, while the government remained in control of television broadcasting, citizens for the first time were able to hear extensively from both sides on their radios.

There are two daily newspapers, one weekly newspaper and a few other smaller publications, all privately owned. One of the daily newspapers, *The Observer*, and the weekly *Outlet*, were relatively free to express their often intense criticism of the former government of Prime Minister Lester Bird.

The only television station is government-owned through the Antigua and Barbuda Broadcasting Service (ABS) and was consistently exploited by the former government for its own political purposes and to the detriment of the opposition. One radio station is government-owned. In 2001, the Observer radio station, the first independent broadcast medium in the country, went on the air following an extended legal battle with the Bird government that had tried to prevent it. In mid June 2003, the opposition and now ruling United Progressive Party (UPP) started its own Crusader radio station, using the same name as its party newspaper. Access to the Internet is not restricted.

Amendments to the electoral law in 2001 led to the creation of a five-member Electoral Commission. Among other responsibilities, the Commission was authorized, upon the calling of elections, to consult with all electronic and print media in the country to draw up a timetable for political parties and candidates to have access to electronic and print outlets to promote their views and platforms. To carry out this process, the Commission was to have established rules to govern the use of the media during the election campaign and required media owners to provide time and space equitably among parties and candidates. However, no such rules were established in time for the 23 March 2004 elections and during the campaign the media remained polarized between pro-government and pro-opposition outlets. Meanwhile, despite the increasing importance of the media, substantial funds were spent by the two main political parties in March on traditional forms of campaigning such as rallies³⁷ and motorcades.

Prior to the March elections, Baldwin Spencer, then leader of the opposition, sued the government to demand that ABS televise his weekly address to the nation. A settlement was reached in February whereby Spencer would be allowed two half-hour slots twice a week on ABS. During the campaign, there were reports in the *Antigua Sun*, a daily owned by Allen Stanford, the largest foreign investor in Antigua and Barbuda, that political consultants for Prime Minister Bird's party were in the ABS television newsroom on a daily basis to vet the nightly news program prior to broadcast. Spencer has vowed that under his government ABS would provide more balanced news coverage and more equal access.

Bahamas

Access to the state-owned media by political parties and candidates must be purchased, and the amount of time available for purchase for political broadcasts is limited under the terms of the official Broadcasting Rules, which are overseen by a three-member Electoral Broadcasting Council. Such terms and limits do not apply to privately owned media. While the importance and cost of using media for political purposes has increased, substantial amounts of campaign funds are still spent on more traditional activities such as rallies that now feature expensive offerings such as professional entertainment.

There is one television station, which is state-owned, one state-owned radio station, and at least five privately owned radio stations. There are at least three daily newspapers and

³⁷ See Chapter 1, p. 4.

several weekly newspapers, all privately owned and providing diverse viewpoints. The state-run broadcasting media also offer a variety of views, but the opposition claims that its views and activities do not receive the same level of coverage as the government's. Access to the Internet is not restricted.

The Broadcasting Rules instituted in 1992 regulate political broadcasts and advertisements in the state-owned media as follows:

During the official campaign period, between the dissolution of parliament and Election Day, each political party can purchase six fifteen-minute programs of airtime on television and six fifteen-minute programs on radio for the purpose of airing political broadcasts that feature candidates for election or reelection to parliament, or senators. The text of any program must be submitted to television and radio station managers for approval forty-eight hours in advance of broadcast. There are similar time allowances for candidates running in by-elections.

Also during the campaign period, a political party or independent candidate may purchase time for airing electoral advertisements, with a maximum of six ads per day on both television and radio for political parties, and a maximum of two per day on television and radio for independent candidates. Television and radio ads must be no longer than thirty seconds and must be made in the voice of either a candidate or a member of the staff of the broadcasting station. The content of all television ads must be submitted to television station managers for approval seventy-two hours in advance of broadcast, and forty-eight hours in advance in the case of radio ads.

Outside campaign periods, the governing party or coalition can purchase during any calendar year four fifteen-minute slots on television and the same on radio, while a party in opposition can purchase two fifteen-minute slots on both television and radio if it has at least one-third of the seats in parliament, or one fifteen-minute slot on both television and radio if it has less than one-third of the seats. A political party at any time in any year can purchase up to thirty-five hours of television time and the same amount of radio time for the purpose of broadcasting not more than three party conventions or meetings.

Barbados

Political party access to the media during an election period is governed by the General Elections (Allocation of Broadcast Time) Regulations, 1990. According to Section 4 (2) of the Regulations, the political party which commanded the support of the majority of the membership of the House of Assembly immediately prior to the last dissolution of Parliament is allotted two broadcasts of not more than fifteen minutes and a third and final broadcast of not more than thirty minutes. Moreover, under Section 6, the political party that commanded this majority is entitled to have the first and last election broadcast. The opposition party is allowed one broadcast of not more than fifteen minutes and a second, final broadcast of not more than thirty minutes.

Under Section 10 of the Regulations, each party is allowed a maximum number of radio advertisements (in relation to each radio station) calculated on the basis of five advertisements for each candidate, which are to be no more than thirty seconds in duration. Each party is allowed a maximum number of television advertisements (in relation to each TV station)

calculated on the basis of three advertisements for each candidate, which are to be no longer than 60 seconds in duration.

The ability of each political party to attract financing has impacted on its ability to exploit media access. As noted in chapter one, advertising constitutes the single largest portion of party expenditure in an election campaign and plays a critical role. The comparative disadvantage of the Democratic Labour Party in attracting adequate funding to run a substantial election campaign has been cited as a principal reason for its inability to take full advantage of broadcast time allocations during the General Election of May 2003. A representative of the Barbados Labour Party spoke of the high cost of advertising, but was unwilling to give details.

Belize

There are no state-run media and no laws that allocate time or guarantee equal access in the privately owned media to political parties or candidates, nor do the electoral authorities, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, have any authority in this regard. Generally, access to the media is governed by free enterprise — airtime and newspaper space are available to those who can afford to pay the going rates.

There are about ten privately owned weekly newspapers, two of them owned by the country's main political parties, and all are generally free to criticize the government without fear of reprisal. There are two privately owned television stations that produce local news and feature programming, and ten privately owned radio stations that promote free political debate through popular call-in programs. The Belize Broadcasting Authority has the authority to preview media broadcasts and delete defamatory or libelous material from political programs, but has not exercised this right in years. Internet access is unrestricted.

During election campaigns, the deep political polarization in the country is reflected in the media, with party-owned newspapers leading the way and the various other media outlets leaning in one direction or the other. Political ads saturate television and radio broadcasts in a rambunctious free-for-all that occasionally results in libel suits.

As political parties and candidates are under no legal obligation to account for how campaign funds are spent, there is no available data indicating how much money is spent on use of the media. Media operators say that there is no difference in the advertising rates offered to the political parties, and the rates do appear to be relatively uniform and competitive. The media profits more during political campaigns than at any other time.

At the same time, it is widely believed that media owners often make in-kind contributions to favored political parties and candidates, and the media are viewed with great cynicism by the general public. Third parties and independent candidates remain at a disadvantage because they do not have sufficient resources either to compete with the two main parties in the media market or to produce advertisements or programs of good technical quality. There are no laws or regulations that would limit a ruling party's use of government resources to purchase airtime or advertising space.

Mudslinging is prevalent in political advertising, and media outlets often add on disclaimers saying they are not responsible for a program's content. The publication of opinion surveys or broadcast of debates between candidates, however, is not an issue as polls and debates are not part of Belize's political culture.

Dominica

There are no laws, regulations or bodies that limit, control, or guarantee access to the media by political parties or electoral candidates, and the government makes no financial or in-kind contributions to enhance access. Access to the Internet is not restricted. Media access, like other aspects of political campaigning, is regulated only by the market. The amount of newspaper space and airtime a party or candidate can utilize is determined by the ability to pay or negotiate credit with the various media outlets. Political parties in Dominica, as in other Caribbean island states, can normally afford to spend on media publicity only during election campaigns.

All of Dominica's political parties say that use of the media—including television, radio, newspapers and printed matter such as manifestos—is now their second highest expenditure during election campaigns, accounting for an estimated quarter to a third of campaign budgets. But traditional forms of campaigning remain very important and the highest expenditure is on transportation, including motorcades, which accounts for between a third and half of campaign budgets, with the cost of rallies and public meetings coming in third.

But there are no disclosure laws and the political parties and the media outlets are reluctant to provide any records that would provide a clearer picture of how specifically funds were acquired and spent on media or other aspects of political campaigns.³⁸ Greater transparency in political financing seems unlikely in the future as there is little or no popular demand for it and because of the general view that no party or candidate is at a disadvantage under the current system.

Dominica has two television stations, four radio stations and three weekly newspapers, all privately owned. The national radio station is a statutory, state-owned corporation. Ruling parties make more use of the national radio station than other media, apparently because they can obtain easier credit terms than opposition parties. All political parties receive coverage from the various media outlets, while talk shows in the broadcast media provide additional opportunities for exposure. The tendency of one of the radio stations to favor any political party that is not in government ensures a diversity of opinion both during and between political campaigns. Opinion polls are covered in the media but are not common in Dominica and are generally considered to be unscientific and unreliable.

There is little disparity in rates for purchasing advertising space in newspapers or for acquiring airtime in the broadcast media, and parties and candidates usually buy from outlets based on perceived value. Advertisements are locally produced, meaning that all parties and candidates have access to the same levels of technology and competence, again limited only by the ability to pay. Media outlets, in turn, like private corporations, reserve the right to review and reject advertisements or programs based on libel concerns, moral standards, or other criteria that could have a bearing on the company's profits or reputation. Name-calling and personal attacks are therefore far more common at public meetings and rallies than in the media.

By law, all parliamentarians should have equal access to the Government Information Service (GIS), which produces programs for airing in the broadcast media. Opposition leaders

³⁸ See Chapter 1, p.10.

complain, however, that equal access is not always guaranteed. Still, the governing party must pay for airtime to have its programs broadcast and at least one observer in Dominica said that people generally shunned government programs in favor of popular entertainment, meaning the opposition was not at any real disadvantage with regard to the GIS.

Grenada

There are no laws or bodies that regulate or guarantee access to the media by political parties or electoral candidates, and the government makes no financial or in-kind contributions to enhance media access. Media access, like other aspects of political campaigning, is regulated only by the marketplace. The amount of newspaper space and airtime a party or candidate can utilize is determined by the ability to pay the going rates or to negotiate credit with the various media outlets. Some political parties say the rates are excessive but nonetheless believe that intensive media outreach is necessary for election campaigns to be effective. On occasion, privately owned media outlets have provided free time or space to favored parties or candidates, or given access at reduced rates. There are no restrictions on access to the Internet.

There are three independently owned weekly newspapers that favor different political lines and, taken together, provide an outlet for all points of view. They routinely publish columns expressing the views of the government and the opposition. There are up to ten radio stations and at least three television stations, all independently owned. The main radio station and the principal television station are part of the Grenadian Broadcasting Network (GBN), which since 1998 has been majority-owned and operated by the privately held Caribbean Communications Network of Trinidad and Tobago, with the government of Grenada as a minority owner. Coverage of the political opposition's views and activities, as well as criticism of the government, are regularly aired on all broadcast media.

The importance of the media during election campaigns, particularly television and radio, has increased greatly since the mid-1990s. The ruling party saturated the broadcast media with paid advertisements during the 1999 and 2003 elections and bought a great amount of space in the newspapers as well. The opposition also advertised in the media, but apparently had fewer funds at its disposal. Because there are no disclosure laws, parties do not have to make public their campaign expenditures. Nonetheless, while use of the media has increased, it is evident that the parties and candidates continue to devote substantial resources, time, and energy to traditional forms of campaigning, particularly rallies, motorcades and assorted giveaways.

Although there are no overt attempts to curtail media freedom, some outlets operate carefully to avoid slander and libel suits, which are sometimes filed against journalists. In 2001 the government advocated for legislation establishing a media code of conduct, with provisions possibly similar to those in the legislation regarding the media passed in St. Lucia in November 2003. It subsequently appeared to back away from the proposal, but the draft of the so-called Media Policy remains on the table.

In late 2003, the government came to an agreement with the opposition to establish at some point a joint committee to consult with the local media regarding access to the media by both government and the opposition and the possibility of live coverage of parliament.

It was also agreed that discussions would begin on giving the opposition formal input into the operations of the Government Information Service (GIS).

That accord, however, remained on hold amid a heated dispute between the government and opposition that began in May 2004 over alleged corruption and threats against the media for its reporting of the allegations, including the brief detention by police of a Grenadian correspondent for the Cayman Islands-based Caribbean Net News and threats to charge him with criminal libel.

Guyana

There are no laws that govern or guarantee access to the media by political parties or electoral candidates, and the government makes no financial or in-kind contributions to enhance media access. Expenditure on political advertising is therefore a question of affordability—the amount of airtime and newspaper space a party or candidate can use is determined by the ability to pay the going rates.

The two principal daily newspapers are the privately owned *Stabroek News* and the government owned *Guyana Chronicle*, which displays a clear anti-opposition bias in its news coverage and editorial policy. There is also a wide range of weekly publications published by political parties, religious groups and other organizations.

The government owns and operates the country's sole radio station and, in response to private interests wanting to establish new stations, has said that there is no legislation in place to govern the allocation of frequencies. Despite a similar lack of legislation to govern television frequencies, there are twelve privately owned television stations that freely criticize the government. In addition, there is state-run television, formerly Guyana Television (GTV), now the National Communications Network (NCN) following the recent merger of GTV with the state-owned Guyana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC). According to opposition leaders, both state-run radio and television exhibit a clear political bias in favor of the government. In recent years, the government by executive order has temporarily suspended private television broadcasting licenses on at least three occasions for what it claimed was irresponsible journalism. Access to the Internet is not restricted.

Since the early 1990s, political use of the media, and particularly the broadcast media, has increased steadily and substantially, to the point where during the last national elections in 2001, the public was inundated with political advertisements in every medium. The ruling party in 2001 hired a Trinidadian advertising firm to develop a media strategy and produce campaign ads. Use of the broadcast media increased during the last two weeks of the campaign, particularly the purchase of radio time as parties apparently heightened their focus on the interior of the country, where there is little access to television and newspapers.

Despite a voluntary Media Code of Conduct calling for balanced and objective reporting, the broadcast media during the 2001 elections were highly polarized between the clearly pro-government, state-run television and radio stations, and a number of intensely anti-government, talk-show-driven television stations, with obvious excesses committed on both sides. Some privately owned television stations sought a degree of balance by voluntarily offering a certain amount of free airtime for discussion programs in which the contesting political parties could state their policy positions.

In 2003, in response to continuing criticism that the legal and regulatory environment for broadcast media is weak, and following negotiations with the main opposition party, the government proposed new media legislation that would create a broadcasting authority to issue licenses and supervise broadcast operations. Journalist groups said there was potential for abuse and undermining of free expression if such a body were established. The draft broadcasting bill was rejected by the opposition because, among other things, it did not include a previously agreed provision that the new law would guarantee access to state-owned media based on a political party's level of representation in parliament.

Jamaica

There are no laws that restrict or regulate access to the media by political parties and candidates, and use of the media for political purposes is contingent only on the ability to purchase airtime and advertising space at market rates. Access to the Internet is not restricted. At the same time, there are no laws that limit or prohibit the dissemination of political propaganda by the government during election campaigns. During the 2002 campaign, various agencies used state resources to promote government programmes in the private media.

Fifteen years ago there was one television station and two radio stations, all government owned, and one privately owned newspaper. Today, there are three television stations, more than a dozen radio stations, two major daily newspapers and a number of weekly and monthly publications, all privately owned. In recent years there has been no evidence of government interference in the privately owned media and public vigilance against such intervention remains strong.

News coverage is based on the editorial judgment of the individual media outlets. Reporting may be influenced by the political bias of individual members of the media, but the intense competition that exists among the various outlets and the general expectation of objective reporting among advertisers and consumers of news programs mitigate against slanted coverage.

Originally, political party activities were decentralized, communications were rudimentary, and the focus was on individual candidates in local communities. Today, Jamaica's two main political parties are highly centralized bureaucracies that depend heavily on the use of modern mass communication, with ever-increasing use of the broadcast media during election campaigns and rising use of cable television and the Internet. Nonetheless, along with use of the media, parties and candidates continue to spend substantial sums on transportation, employment of campaign workers, and the staging of rallies.

As in other Caribbean countries, the amounts spent on political advertising are difficult to ascertain because of the absence of reporting requirements. Radio is the most widely used medium because it is the most cost-effective and because of its deeper penetration in the population. Television is the most expensive medium but generally considered essential because of its visual impact. An estimate by one analyst put spending on all media advertising by each of the two main political parties during the final 2-3 months of the 2002 campaign at J\$ 80-100 million (between US\$ 1.23 and US \$1.54 million). Another analyst estimated that together the two parties spent more than J\$ 15 million (about US \$231,000) for print ads in just the two main daily newspapers.

Although all media are privately owned, the government does make a minimal contribution to media access during election campaigns. The government-run Jamaica Information Service (JIS) is regularly allocated airtime by the various broadcast media, as stipulated under their broadcasting licenses. Prior to the October 2002 elections, the JIS allotted part of its airtime for use by the four participating political parties: a fifteen-minute slot on both television and radio for each party – a pittance compared to the amount of airtime purchased by the two main parties during the course of the campaign.

The two main political parties have ratified a Political Code of Conduct that calls upon party representatives and candidates not to make inflammatory, slanderous, or malicious statements. The Code is policed by the recently established office of the Political Ombudsman. Generally, media advertisements and broadcasts by the political parties have only infrequently violated that section of the Code, and when that has happened the parties have been persuaded to rectify such breaches.

St. Kitts-Nevis

There are no laws or bodies that regulate or guarantee access to the media by political parties or electoral candidates. Existing electoral law dates back to independence in 1983 and has not been updated since. Use of the media for political reasons has increased in recent years, particularly in the broadcast media during election campaigns. Still, traditional forms of campaigning remain important, especially public meetings held by the political parties.

The ruling party makes extensive use of the government owned media, including the country's single television station. The government-owned radio station was recently privatized (though the government still appoints three of five board members) and the opposition now appears to have greater access to respond to government pronouncements, despite the lack of any statutory guarantees or oversight. There are also several other privately owned radio stations. Political parties must pay for airtime in the private media and print space in newspapers at the prevailing rates. The government does not restrict access to the Internet.

Since mid-2003 the main opposition party, with an eye toward parliamentary elections due by Spring 2005, has been advocating for a package of electoral reforms that would include guarantees for greater and more equal access to the broadcast media.

There is one daily newspaper published Monday through Friday that provides a forum for all political voices, and at least four independent weeklies. In addition, each of the two main political parties publishes a weekly or biweekly newspaper. The independent publications freely and regularly criticize the government.

All broadcast media emanating from St. Kitts can be received on Nevis and some of the publications published on St. Kitts are also available. Nevis itself has a number of independent radio stations and a few weekly publications, providing channels for all political points of view, particularly during elections for the Nevis Island Assembly and, on occasion, referenda regarding the status of Nevis in the two-island federation.

St. Lucia

Political advertising in the media, particularly in television and radio, continues to gain in importance. As elsewhere in the Caribbean, recent elections have been dominated by

media coverage of the campaigns and the increasing use of broadcast advertising. Political parties say the costs are onerous but necessary to carry out effective campaigns.

There are no laws that regulate spending on media advertising, either for the purchase of airtime or space in newspapers, so political parties and candidates are limited only by their ability to pay the going rates. The best estimates are that political parties spend at least 30-35 percent of their resources on advertising in the media, with the high cost of purchasing television time weighing the most heavily on party budgets. Also increasingly costly is the employment of professional media consultants and 'spin doctors', especially during election campaigns.³⁹

There are three television stations, two privately owned and one owned by the government, and up to five radio stations, all privately owned except for one owned in part by the government. There are five privately owned weekly or biweekly newspapers. There are no restrictions on the publication of opinion polls and no restrictions on use of the Internet.

Opposition parties complain that the ruling party makes unfair use of the Government Information Service (GIS) and the recently established, government-owned National Television Network (NTN), both of which are overseen by the Department of Information Service (DIS). To the degree that this is true, it is balanced somewhat by the provision of a small amount of free airtime on the partially government owned Radio St. Lucia during election campaigns. Still, the ruling party remains at an advantage as the time allotted is based on a political party's relative strength in parliament. During the last elections in 2001, for example, Radio St. Lucia gave one fifteen-minute and one twenty-minute slot to the ruling party, one twenty-minute slot to the official opposition party, one ten-minute slot to any other party that had nominated candidates, and a five-minute slot to independent candidates.

The DIS has the authority to bar from government-owned media any political advertising that it deems to be against St. Lucian law, racially discriminatory, obscene or inflammatory. Meanwhile, between elections, Radio St. Lucia provides time to the government for a weekly program without giving equal time to the opposition.

In addition to paid advertising, the country's newspaper and broadcast media provide wide and varied channels for political opinion and coverage of political activities. The newspapers, two of them owned by political players, tend to be slanted one way or another, while the current ruling party alleges that the two private television stations are biased against it.

Since the mid-1990s there has been a proliferation of talk and call-in shows on television and radio that have given a voice to ordinary citizens and extended the debate on national issues. But this has also resulted in what local analysts call "vulgarism" on the part of some journalists and program hosts, which has moved politicians, particularly within the ruling party, to push for new media regulations.

In November 2003, parliament passed a controversial Criminal Code that includes a section on 'spreading false news.' It states that anyone who publishes a statement he or she knows is false, or that causes or is likely to cause injury to a public interest, may be imprisoned for up to two years. Until the passage of this legislation, private media owners were relatively

³⁹ See Chapter, p.21.

free to publish or broadcast whatever they wished and codes of conduct issued by electoral authorities and religious groups during political campaigns tended to be disregarded. The new legislation was roundly criticized by press freedom advocates throughout the Caribbean and elsewhere. It remains to be seen what effect the new code will have on the media in St. Lucia.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

Beginning with the national elections in 1998, the importance of the broadcast media as part of the political landscape has increased substantially. There are no laws or bodies that govern or guarantee access to the media and most political advertising in the media must be paid for at the prevailing rates.

There are three weekly newspapers and a number of smaller publications that appear less frequently. All are privately owned and taken together provide channels for most political points of view. Some newspapers regularly and voluntarily provide space to political parties to publish columns for free. Faced with continuing criticism that government advertising was sometimes withheld from those publications whose stance toward it was more critical, the current government recently adopted a policy of distributing advertising revenue equally among the principal newspapers.

The sole television station on St. Vincent is privately owned, operated without government interference, and generally provides balanced news coverage. There are seven radio stations, all but one privately owned. Access to the Internet is not restricted. The state-owned radio station and the television station are required by law to provide two hours per week to the government's Agency for Public Information (API) to report on government activities. One of the two main political parties runs a daily two-hour program, Monday through Friday, on one of the private radio stations and pays for the broadcast time.

At the time of the 1994 elections, radio was owned solely by the state and the principal station generally reflected the line of the government. The granting of a number of FM licenses led to the creation of radio call-in and talk shows that extended political debate to opposing voices and ordinary citizens and became a daily mainstay, particularly during the 1998 and 2001 elections. Since 1998, the two main political parties have spent heavily on media consultants and political advertising in both the print and broadcast media, adding substantially to the overall costs of election campaigning. Nonetheless, traditional forms of campaigning such as mass rallies featuring high-priced entertainers from around the Caribbean, posters, and the distribution of political party hats and T-shirts continue to play an important role.

Suriname

There are few laws or regulations that limit, control, or govern access to the media by political parties or electoral candidates. Access to the Internet is also unrestricted. The public strongly embraces the idea of free media as stated in Article 19 of the 1987 Constitution: "Everyone has the right to make public his thoughts or feelings and to express his opinion through the printed press or other means of communication, subject to the responsibility of all as set forth in the law". Although government officials occasionally try to pressure media outlets that produce critical stories, any sustained attempt to interfere in media operations

would produce a public outcry. This sensitivity to the possibility of censorship stems in large part from the experience of having lived under military rule (1980-1987) marked by violent crackdowns against freedom of expression. During the most recent national elections in May 2000, a European Union Media Monitoring Team concluded that there was no infringement of freedom of expression, journalistic coverage of the campaign was generally objective, and the state-owned media exhibited no favoritism.

There are three daily newspapers, two weekly newspapers, about two dozen radio stations, two of them government-owned, and thirteen television stations, two of them also government-owned. Parties and candidates are able to utilize the privately owned media to the extent that they are able to pay for airtime and advertising space and will adhere to rules regarding decency and other concerns as established by media outlets. The government broadcast media have a self-imposed rule against selling airtime to political parties. The only cost-free access to media is a single program, aired solely by the two government television stations during election campaigns, in which each participating party is allocated about five minutes.

The extent to which political parties utilize the media is related to the ethnic and linguistic complexity of a society and a political culture that continues to be very much based on patronage. The country's ethnic makeup is as follows: East Indians (about 36 percent); Afro-Creoles, descendents of slaves (thirty-one percent); Indonesians, principally Javanese (fifteen percent); Bush Negros, or Maroons, descendents of escaped slaves (ten percent); Amerindians, the original inhabitants (two and a half percent); Chinese (two percent); Europeans (one and a half percent); and others, mainly Sephardic Jews and Syrians (two percent). While the national language is Dutch, many Surinamers generally conduct themselves in their own languages — for example, Hindi and Javanese.

Ethnicity continues to be a defining element of Surinamese politics and the nation's traditional political parties, organized on an ethnic basis, continue to dominate. In the 2000 elections, newer multi-ethnic parties made extensive use of media advertising, while the old parties generally stayed with traditional forms of campaigning such as rallies and public meetings, spending only minimal amounts on media. In the end, the new parties gained little ground.

This unusual situation reflects the fact that carrying out a media-driven campaign is difficult because the broadcast media reflect the fragmented society they serve, with most radio and television stations targeting specific groups in specific languages. To reach out to all voters through the broadcast media is therefore complicated and costly. Another reason is that advertising in the print media is expensive and not cost-effective because of limited circulation and distribution. A study conducted by Dr. John Krishnadath in February 2003 showed that 50.3 percent of voters believed the best way to reach the electorate was through public meetings and rallies, 21.6 percent said through personal contact by politicians, 11.4 percent said through television, 6.6 percent said through radio, 6.5 percent said through newspapers and 3.5 percent said through other channels such as family and friends. One of the conclusions of the study was that the high preference for direct-contact campaigning was rooted in people's desire to benefit from party patronage, to be part of the party machine.

Still, there continues to be a slow but steady increase in the role played by the media in politics. For example, politicians are becoming media owners. As of 2003, two radio stations

were owned by chairmen of political parties and at least another five by ranking officials of other parties. In response to live, partisan programming on these stations, other outlets have created live call-in programs. This new media trend, coupled with the detailed opinion polling of the Institute for Development Oriented Studies (IDOS) whose results are duly reported in the media, has served to amplify the voices of ordinary citizens in the country's political discussions.

Trinidad and Tobago

There are no laws, regulations or bodies that limit, control, or guarantee access to the media by political parties or candidates, and the state-owned broadcast media provide only a minimal amount of free airtime. Political activity is privately funded and much, if not most, of the funding provided for election campaigning is spent on television, radio, and newspaper advertising. There are no laws that regulate campaigning in the media, and political advertising is limited only by the ability of the political party or candidate to pay the going rates for airtime and newspaper space, and by the standards of public decency as determined and imposed by the media outlets themselves. There is no regulation of media advertising content by the state and access to the Internet is unrestricted.

There are three daily newspapers, all privately owned, several weekly publications, two television stations, one of them state-owned through the National Broadcasting Network (NBN), and more than a dozen radio stations, including one owned by the NBN. The NBN and the privately owned broadcast media operate in similar ways with regard to selling airtime, with both requiring payment up-front and rates determined by the marketplace.

The only cost-free political advertising is provided by the NBN, which during election campaigns allots a ten-minute television spot and a ten-minute radio spot to each political party that fields candidates for at least one-third of the seats in parliament, with the NBN determining the time of broadcast. This pales in comparison with the enormous amounts of airtime and advertising space purchased by political parties and candidates, as election campaigning has become a media war fought through television, radio and newspapers. As part of this battle, substantial amounts of money are now used to hire media consultants and pollsters, many of them coming from the US and UK and charging steep fees.

When in opposition, political parties accuse the party in power of exploiting the NBN to its advantage. Though there is some evidence of unbalanced or unfair news coverage of political activities, the bias, to the extent that it exists, is subtle. Plans by the current government of Prime Minister Patrick Manning to privatize NBN were shelved because the costs of severance for employees were considered prohibitive.

In an ethnically bipolar society divided between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians, many of the privately owned radio stations cater to specific groups, particularly through call-in and talk shows. Supporters of the East Indian-based United National Congress (UNC) believe that the establishment of a pro-Indo-Trinidadian radio station in 1993 was at least partly responsible for the UNC's electoral victory in 1995. While such radio programming allows for a diversity of views on national issues and gives voice to ordinary citizens, there were concerns that some shows serve to deepen ethnic divisions and incite racial violence. In May 2004, the government warned broadcasters that it would no longer tolerate ethnic

divisiveness on the air and was moving forward with legislation against it, prompting expressions of concern among some in the media about inordinate government controls.

Traditional forms of electoral competition, or “ground wars,” including motorcades, rallies and the old-style “rum, roti and sardine” giveaways, still play an important political role. But the cadres that carry out the street level campaigning and canvassing now constitute a mercenary army, expecting to be paid rather than working out of loyalty to a political party or candidate.

FIGURE 1: MEDIA OWNERSHIP IN THE CARIBBEAN

Country	Television	Radio	Printed Press	Internet Access
Antigua and Barbuda	State	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
Bahamas	State	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
Belize	Private	Private	Private/Political Party	Unrestricted
Dominica	Private	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
Grenada	State/Private	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
Guyana	State/Private	State	State, Private/Political Party	Unrestricted
Jamaica	Private	Private	Private	Unrestricted
St. Kitts and Nevis	State	Private	Private/Political Party	Unrestricted
St. Lucia	State/Private	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	Private	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
Suriname	State/Private	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted
Trinidad and Tobago	State/Private	State/Private	Private	Unrestricted

FIGURE 2: MEDIA ACCESS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Country	Regulation	Regulatory Body	Free Access	Paid Access	In-Kind Access
Antigua and Barbuda	Pending	Electoral Commission	No	Yes	No
Bahamas	Yes	Electoral Broadcasting Council	No	Yes	No
Belize	No	No	No	Yes	No
Dominica	No	No	No	Yes	No
Grenada	No	No	No	Yes	No
Guyana	No	No	No	Yes	No
Jamaica	No	No	No	Yes	No
St. Kitts and Nevis	No	No	No	Yes	No
St. Lucia	No	No	Minimal	Yes	No
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	No	No	Minimal	Yes	No
Suriname	Minimal	No	Minimal	Yes	No
Trinidad and Tobago	No	No	Minimal	Yes	No

III. Looking Ahead

Generally free and open media are one of the principal reasons why democracy among CARICOM nations has proved to be more effective and durable than in any other subregion in the developing world. Still, the parliamentary democracies of Caricom continue to be buffeted by the demands of the global economy, the drug and money-laundering networks that thrive within it, population pressures, and a growing lack of confidence among citizens in the abilities of politicians to address these problems. The result has been mounting stress on democratic systems and the institutions upon which they rest, including the media.

Most media outlets in the Caricom countries, both the established mainstays and the newer entries, have striven to keep up with the changing global and political climate. They have worked in different ways to enhance their roles not only in reporting and questioning the behavior of governments and opposition parties, but also in acting as social agents and in providing channels through which ordinary citizens in between elections can have a say in how they are governed.

This has caused heightened tension between the media and the political class, particularly political parties in power who find themselves — their record and actions — the focus of ever greater media attention, whether through traditional channels such as newspapers or newer forms such as talk and call-in shows in the broadcast media. Greater media scrutiny has, in turn, led to more intense use of libel laws and other pressures upon the media by governments, including threats of legislation that criminalizes vaguely worded offences such as ‘spreading false news’. This situation casts a pall and raises the spectre of increasing self-censorship at a time when more light needs to be shed on the political landscape, not less.

The relatively regulation-free, market-driven media environment in the region also has a downside. The voices of those without resources tend to be heard less; traditional political forces remain entrenched; and those actors who might be better equipped or could offer viable alternatives for responding to the new challenges are often left on the sidelines.

Lack of regulation also comes at the cost of transparency with regard to the substantial and untracked flows of political funding. This is an ever more important concern given the increasing penetration in the region of assorted swindlers, offshore hustlers, high-tech buccaneers and powerful criminal organizations that seek political leverage and challenge more traditional multinational enterprises for influence, posing a threat to the sovereignty of small nations.

At the same time, the issue of the relationship between new media forms and ethnic tension, and the question of whether there should be free or subsidized access to media to create a more level playing field, are increasingly resonant in the region. In most of the countries under review here, these questions are being addressed, with varying degrees of resolve and interest, in the ongoing constitutional reform process, as was discussed at the conference on “Constitutional Reform in the Caribbean” organized by the OAS Unit for the Promotion of Democracy in coordination with the UNDP in Barbados in January 2002 as part of the OAS “Democratic Forum Series’.

As political parties in the region, in power and in opposition, address the challenge of strengthening democracy in the Caribbean, they would do well to consider the recommendations of that conference with regard to the media: the creation of new media

programming, including citizen referenda conducted through the broadcast media, that promotes civic education and discussion on issues such as constitutional reform and ensures that citizen voices are regularly heard in the halls of government; the strengthening of laws guaranteeing access to information from official sources; and more democratic use of new technologies, particularly computers and the Internet. The degree to which the Caribbean democracies can strengthen themselves through constitutional reform, and the role of political parties and the media in advancing the process, will be telling for the rest of the world.

One recommendation for a follow-up exercise would be a survey of media outlets themselves — from state-run print and broadcast media and traditional private outlets, to the newer media forms such as talk and call-in shows and internet communication — including owners, journalists, editors, producers, broadcast personnel and hosts, and Internet operators. How do they conduct themselves during election campaigns and why? How do they operate in between elections and during times of political crisis? How do they finance themselves and how does this and the trend toward greater media concentration affect independence and objectivity? Do they believe in providing free access to political actors or do they prefer a market-based approach, or a combination of the two? Do they feel threatened in any way by governments or other elements because of their reporting or programming? Do they see a social role for the media and, if so, how can it be carried out? How do they address the issue of media and ethnic tension in bipolar or multipolar societies? And, more generally, how do they see themselves operating in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world?

