The Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers

...a reflection over 20 years

"[Development constitutes] reciprocal action between people and their environment that leads to the actualisation of human potential, in all its dimensions and the preservation and continuity and the preservation and continuity of the environment as they create society and history."
-Aggrey Brown

The latter quarter of the 20th Century was indeed a memorable – if not tumultuous – period for many of the nations that constitute CARICOM today. The generations that were the key players then, measured their lives in terms of events and happenings, rather than by the clock on the wall.

There were moves for independence and nation-state status by former colonies, there was uprising and revolt and there were the voices of reason that rose above the cacophony, seeking to put one foot in front the other, as proud nations marching into the future, demanding to be a part of the global conversation and a member of the international family.

Arguably, one of the greatest catalysts in some of the history-making moments of the time, was the free and democratic media apparatus that dutifully informed its audiences, provoked discussions and gave the ordinary person a platform to speak and be heard.

It was indeed a gargantuan responsibility that was hoisted on the shoulders of the reporters of the day; many of whom had not seen the corridors of a university, but who understood the critical nature of being the eyes, ears and mouths of the citizenry.

They were not just reporters and editors, but photographers and video camera operators… in fact, lithographers and press-room personnel fell under the banner of media workers. The industry had come of age, and had coalesced into a regional representation of persons who comprised The Fourth Estate.

And so, on November 26, 1986, the Caribbean Association of Media Workers (CAMWORK)

was born in Kingston, Jamaica, corralling media professionals of the regional industry, not as a representative bargaining body, but rather a professional network whose primary purpose was the exchange of ideas, opinion and open discussion among its members.

In fact, CAMWORK's statement of goals was to: "Foster and maintain a high standard of journalism in the region; encourage formation of national associations; safeguard rights and privileges of the Caribbean media and the interests of journalists and media workers; provide assistance to media workers and journalists on accreditation and coordination of events; undertake educational programmes."

Under President Rickey Singh – an accomplished Guyanese journalist who lived and worked throughout the region - and supported by a network of respected media personalities and academics CAMWORK persevered for over a decade and a half as a representative regional body.

Challenged by financial and other organisational challenges, CAMWORK's reach and influence however waned at the turn of the century.

Former CAMWORK President Rickey Singh

Following futile efforts to resuscitate the organisation, a decision was taken at a series of encounters during the course of 2000 to establish a successor organisation that would continue the work CAMWORK had begun and to also focus more intensely on the changing media environment.

On November 28, 2001, at a meeting facilitated by the late Clare Forrester in Barbados under the banner of the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), the birth of the Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers (ACM) was finally declared.

The name constituted a reformulation the CAMWORK moniker, and the organisation embraced the associations formerly affiliated with the now-defunct regional group. These included longstanding organisations established in Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica (eventually), Saint Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad & Tobago.

The "ACM" acronym was also meant to mirror the embrace of the wider Caribbean as expressed in the Charter that established the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) which extended beyond the Commonwealth Caribbean and included all countries "washed by the Caribbean Sea."

The ACM's inaugural meeting (2001)

As a consequence, ACM membership eventually included affiliated organisations from Curacao and Martinique with outreach touching the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Aruba and Bonaire. According to persons who were present during the founding of the ACM in 2001, the new organisation was never a "breakaway" of the original concept, but rather a regrouping, with a very similar mandate and an expanded membership. Even though Jamaica's press association was not among the original group.

The Port of Spain meeting that started it all (2000)

But as interest in CAMWORK's membership declined, Trinidad and Tobago became a hotbed for the press freedom debate in1995, as the government of the day published a Green Paper on media reform. It was the perfect storm, though CAMWORK was nominally engaged in the initial issues that arose.

Organisations representing journalists, television producers, public relations experts and advertising agencies joined in calling on the government to withdraw the controversial discussion paper on proposed changes in the laws affecting the operations of the media.

ACM Executive (2003-2005)

The Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago (MATT), representing the nation's journalists, described the paper as being guided by principles that "threaten the freedom of expression and of the press."

This had regional journalists worried. CAMWORK President Bertram Niles, noted that the development had regional implications. "In some of these English-speaking Caribbean countries, intimidation is rife," Niles noted. "The media in most cases are not strong

ACM Executive (2005-2007)

ACM Executive (2009-2011)

enough or varied or independent as in Trinidad and Tobago, so they look to you for leadership.

"We have a watchdog role that society has carved out for us — an important function as a guardian of democracy and a check on governmental abuse. Part of the debate in Trinidad and Tobago appears to be who is going to watch the watchdogs and who will check on media abuse which does occur," says Niles.

The storm eventually died in the teacup of public scrutiny and discussion, but it was a wake-up call that media practitioners needed to be on their guard. In late 2000, regional tobacco giant West Indies Tobacco Company (WITCO) sought to bring together regional journalists in Trinidad, under a corporate event. The sponsorship was met with mixed reactions, but eventually, there was a compromise. Journalists would congregate for the regional event, but instead of being what would have been considered to have been a public relations exercise, it was transformed into a national debate on tobacco, with a significant input from PAHO.

The approach was welcomed by the media fraternity and was an overall win-win situation for both the company and its invitees. It was an opportunity for regional practitioners to begin the process of considering their organisational options, against the backdrop of a retreating CAMWORK.

The official records show that the Association of Caribbean Mediaworkers was founded in Bridgetown, Barbados in 2001.

The aim of the new body was recorded as to "promote free movement of journalists in the region; free press legislation; training; ethics; welfare of freelance journalists; improved international relations; freedom of expression."

At the Barbados meeting, an inaugural executive committee under Trinidadian journalist Wesley Gibbings was launched. Gibbings had previously been at the forefront of efforts first to revive CAMWORK and, eventually, to initiate development of the ACM.

ACM Executive (2007-2009)

ACM Executive (2011-2013)

ACM Executive (2013-2015)

Other notable contributions came from Bert Wilkinson of Guyana, Peter Richards – a Saint Lucian journalist based in Trinidad & Tobago, the late Samuel "Jerry" George of St Vincent and the Grenadines, Jerry George of Saint Lucia, Wayne Modeste of Grenada, Matt Peltier of Dominica, Ivan Cairo of Suriname, Terry Ally of Barbados, with administrative support from a Media Association of Trinidad & Tobago (MATT) team including the President Dale Enoch, together with Deborah John and Nylah Ali.

The ACM immediately began work on a number of important fronts, including more aggressive promotion of the free movement provision of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) for media workers; and the forging of international and regional relationships with institutions such as the CARICOM Secretariat, the Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), PAHO, the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA).

In 2002, the ACM was appointed to the Advisory Council to the Prime Ministerial Sub-Committee on the Single Market and Economy.

Among its earliest campaigns was invoking the rights of regional media workers under the CSME provision for freedom of movement. This arose as work permits were increasingly being weaponised against certain journalists by political administrations from Trinidad and Tobago, to Saint Kitts and Nevis.

Laws on libel and defamation, and the subsequent court proceedings were also under the microscope of the ACM, especially championing the defence in cases in Trinidad and Tobago and in Suriname

in its early years.vBy that time, the ACM already had a robust and active membership in the majority of the CARICOM nations; in so much that that the Association included non-CARICOM representatives among its membership.

And, as per its constitution, the ACM held its internal elections in a democratic manner, allowing and encouraging leadership of the organization through different jurisdictions in the region.

The ACM's history of leadership:

- **Barbados (2001) – Inaugural Meeting, Wesley Gibbings, President (TT)**
- **St Lucia (2003) – Wesley Gibbings (TT)**
- **Barbados (2005) – Dale Enoch (TT)**
- **Trinidad & Tobago (2007) – Wesley Gibbings (TT)**
- **Grenada (2009) – Wesley Gibbings (TT)**
- **Dominica (2011) – Wesley Gibbings (TT)**
- **Trinidad & Tobago (2013) – Clive Bacchus (SKN)**
- **Trinidad & Tobago (2015) – Wesley Gibbings (TT)**
- **Barbados (2018) – Anika Kentish (ANU)**
- **Virtual (2021) – Nazima Raghubir (GY)**

ACM Executive (2015-2017)

The ACM has had five Presidents over the past 20 years, all of whom have been recognised as significant contributors to the field of journalism.

More importantly, the Association has embraced a rich history if inclusion and diversity over the past two decades; something which only became relevant to the global community many years after.

Indeed, the global pandemic of 2020 was a catalyst for the growth of telecommuting and remote operations for many businesses.

However, the ACM had employed digital technologies from inception, knowing that its memberships was a geographically diverse one. In addition to email, the Association employed listserv services, hosted FTP servers, and cobbled together real-time regional conferences and meetings using live streaming video platforms, complemented by third-party chat services… all before the explosion of Zoom and

Live-streaming the ACM'S biennial (2009)

Microsoft Teams.
Some of the affiliated associations over the years include:

• Antigua and Barbuda Media Congress (defunct)
• Barbados Association of Journalists (now Barbados Association of Journalists and Media Workers)
• Curacao Media Organisation
• Media Workers Association of Dominica (defunct)
• Dominica Media & Communications Association
• Media Workers Association of Grenada
• Guyana Press Association
• SOS Journalistes (Haiti)
• Association of Haitian Journalists (AJH)
• Press Association of Jamaica
• Club Presse Martinique
• St Maarten Journalist Association (defunct)
• Media Association of St. Kitts and Nevis (defunct)
• Media Association of Saint Lucia
• Media Workers Association of Saint Lucia (defunct)
• Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago

• Union of Surinamese Journalists

In addition, country representations have included:
• Belize
• Bahamas
• Dominican Republic
• Puerto Rico
• Aruba/Bonaire/Curacao

In 2006 one of the events that shook the world occurred in Guyana, as employees of Kaieteur News newspaper were felled in a hail of bullets in 2006. In its global release following the incident, it stated: "The Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers (ACM) strongly condemns the brutal slaying of six persons at the printing facility of the Kaieteur News in Guyana on Tuesday August 8.

"This action, by what has been reported to be a gang of up to 10 men, constitutes a grave act of criminality with serious implications for the free press. We hope it does not signify the commencement of attacks aimed at preventing media houses from performing their duties."

The ACM has been a stalwart defender of freedom of speech and freedom of information. It has confronted corporate and political entities to preserve this virtue, to allow the masses a voice.

To most people in the media, the superiority of self-regulation over official regulation of media content is as self-evident as the story that ought to lead a newspaper or newscast.

In 2006, the ACM made a regional case for self-regulation of media, by saying: "We are generally quick to suggest that state-imposed measures promote outright censorship and that those most subject to media scrutiny will be permitted to compose the terms of that level of public engagement.

"Regulations imposed by law also go hand in hand with the already substantial legal requirements of defamation laws, decency regulations, how we cover the courts, how we cover parliament and how we cover many aspects of both public and private life.

ACM Executive (2018-2021)

"Even when there are measures such as access to information legislation, they are quickly circumscribed by exemptions and provisos that often render them ineffectual. The best media law, we then say, is no media law."

In fact, international and hemispheric declarations from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Chapultepec Declaration all declare the indispensability of free speech, a free press and freedom of expression. The world community has essentially agreed that the starting point on the question of personal expression is one of freedom not one of restriction or hindrance.

The ACM made it a point that there is no doubt that with such freedom there is an accompanying level of responsibility and accountability – the words responsibility and accountability, of course, being as subject to ambiguity and self-serving definitions, as the word freedom itself.

For, there is also no doubt that liberty can become license of the kind some believe is easily converted to tyranny or dictatorship.

"So, how can we then guard against the human defect that guides us in the direction of abuse? How can we exercise our great freedoms and not lose the will to remain both accountable and responsible for our actions?" the Association stated.

"There is absolutely no denying that in our midst there is dishonesty, mischief, prejudice and other weaknesses that seemingly challenge our right to rights.

For this reason, there is the proposition that the intervention of official regulation is necessary, as it is with acknowledged offences such as defamation and sedition, for example.

Not that we would not wish to re-examine the legal framework with respect to defamation in particular. The ACM, for instance, has joined hands with many other organisations the world over in calling for an end to criminal defamation.

The question is: do we, at any stage, need to prove ourselves worthy of our rights? Perhaps not. Perhaps the fact of being human comes with a list of inalienable rights from the right to life to the right to express oneself."

In 2008, the ACM developed a Journalism Mentorship Programme for 10 young and emerging Caribbean journalists

The position of this Caribbean organisation - and its tenacity – was enough to attract the interest of a number of international organizations representing journalists' interests, advocating for free speech and taking strong position s against impunity, especially in developing nations.

As a further testament to its foresight the ACM went on to draw on its qualified pool of regional resources to produce a number of publications which up to this day serve as guides for all mediaworkers – veteran and newcomer alike – on the best practices to covering issues that continue to affect the region.

These publications are well researched, credible, and verifiable, and remain available on the Association's official website, acmpress.org.

• The Looming Storm – Caribbean Media Reports (2005)
• Climate Change Handbook for Caribbean Journalists (2005)
• Our Children, Our Media (2016)
• An Election Handbook for Caribbean Journalists (2009)
• A Tool Kit for Media in the OECS (2011)
• Our House – An Introduction to the Parliament of Guyana (2017)
• A Framework for Caribbean Media Coverage of Disasters (2018)
• Reporting the Climate Crisis – A Handbook for Caribbean Journalists (2020)

This did not go unnoticed by the international community, and the ACM soon became collaborators – and then members of the International Press Institute (IPI) and the international freedom of expression network of NGOs (IFEX).

The ACM eventually hosted global conferences of both organizations in 2012 and 2015, respectively.

Advocacy event in Dominica (2009)

The ACM has been represented more than once on the Steering Committees of the Latin American and Caribbean Alliance of IFEX and the Global Forum for Media Development. Former President, Wesley Gibbings, has also sat on the Council of IFEX serving multiple terms.

The organisation has also enjoyed working relations with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters with Borders (RSF), the International Press Institute (IPI) and the International Center for Journalism in the America (ICFJ).

In promotion of stronger actions in the area of professional advancement and training, the ACM was also pivotal in establishment of the Media Institute
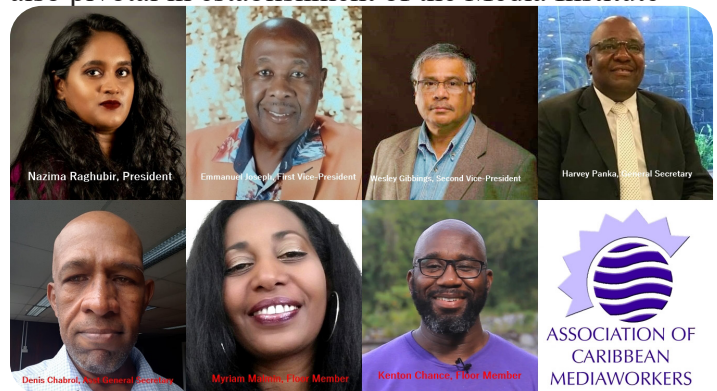
Current ACM Executive (2021-2023)

The ACM remains resolute in the doctrines in which it was birthed; after 20 years, it remains the voice of justice, reason and resolve across the insular and continental Caribbean… there are even members who work in in media houses in North America and Europe.

The ACM was a seed of an idea 20 years ago, which has, over the course of time, has grown into an entity that has a place at the regional table on matters of regional importance. To what does the organisation owe its longevity?

According to its founding President, Wesley Gibbings, "A big part of the strength of the ACM is the fact that it is founded on the strengths and weaknesses of the national associations. So I think our longevity can be credited to the fact that our network, or at least the key members of the network, have remained strong over the years.

ACM "Fearless Five" in Haiti (2011)

"So, they have been important pillars and I could point to the Press Association of Jamaica, the Guyana Press Association, and even a Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago (MATT)… a very special role in the formation of the ACM. And I know that after we met in 2000, it created a route to get people together."

The ACM remains one of the most powerful and influential and authoritative pan-Caribbean NGOs to this day. Its role has become even more critical in today's world that has to navigate the labyrinth of fake news, misinformation, social media gaslighting, cyber bullying, fake profiles and "old school" information hacking and phishing.

There is no doubt that even in the changing mediascape, the ACM shall remain resolute in serving its members and its audiences in order to protect the cherished and sacred Fourth Estate.

However, many across the region will recall the involvement of ACM teams in the coverage of many regional election campaigns, from the ring of the bell, until the dust settled. Contentious polls in Haiti and Guyana were disseminated to international audiences without favour, sometimes to the bane of incumbent officials.

The ACM has also embarked on more humanitarian missions:

• 2002 Mission to Haiti, in the aftermath of the murders of two prominent journalists
• 2004 Relief effort to Grenada mediaworkers, in the wake of Hurricane Ivan
• 2011 Mission to Haiti, following the magnitude 7.0 earthquake
• 2017 Relief effort to mediaworkers in Anguilla, Dominica, Tortola and Barbuda, following Hurricanes Irma and Maria
• 2017 Relief effort to mediaworkers in St Vincent who were affected by the La Soufriere volcano eruption

Its membership includes media professionals and their representative organisations from countries of the Caribbean Community CARICOM) and the Dutch, Spanish and French-speaking Caribbean.

ACM hosts IPI in Port of Spain (2012)

It holds membership of the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) and the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) and is represented on the Latin American and Caribbean Forum for Media Development.

The ACM remains committed to its established mission to:
- *Collaborate with national media associations and related organisations in promoting professional and ethical standards, safeguarding and promoting the rights and privileges of the media in all Caribbean countries*
- *Respect and promote freedom of information, media freedom, and the independence of journalism*
- *Encourage the formation and strengthening of national groupings and associations*
- *Maintain and improve the professional status of its members and member associations*
- *Protect and advance the interests of journalists and media workers at the national and regional levels*
- *Facilitate the exchange of information about the media in the region*

- *Undertake educational programmes for the furtherance of the professional skills of journalists and media workers in the Caribbean region*
- *Promote greater understanding of media issues through research, seminars, and conferences*
- *Promote co-operation and collaboration among members*

The ACM has had significant partnerships and/or working relationships with:
- CARDI
- CARIMAC
- CDB
- CIJN
- CPJ
- GECOM
- ICFJ
- IPI
- OECS
- PANCAP
- UNDP
- UNICEF
- UWI
- TTPBA
- CARICOM Secretariat
- CBU
- CEHI
- CMEX
- CTA
- GFMD
- IFEX
- OAS
- PAHO
- Parliament of Guyana
- UNESCO
- University of Texas at Austin

IFEX in Port of Spain (2015)