



Enhancing Democratic Systems: The Media in Mauritius: A Dialogue Session

An unfettered, independent and objective media is considered to be the guardian against any form of abuse, discrimination or malpractice in society. UNESCO's celebration of World Press Freedom Day this year with the theme *Freedom of Information: The Right to Know*, has highlighted the importance of freedom of information as an integral part of freedom of expression and its contribution to democratic governance. Celebrated as the Fourth Estate in many established and emerging democracies, the media has acquired formidable power and authority to influence / control events and shape opinions. However, what has been termed in certain quarters as the unbridled power / influence of the media brought in demands to control, regulate and put under greater scrutiny the latter. This saw the setting up in a number of countries of dedicated regulatory bodies and media councils backed and sponsored by either governments or manned by the media practitioners themselves who felt it was more to their advantage to opt for self-regulation than be imposed what they termed as the heavy handedness of governmental bodies. The experience with different forms of regulation has been varied depending on the manner in which the concept was implemented in respective countries and whether regulation in the medium to long term did contribute towards building a more responsible, fair and equitable society. In fact, these different regulatory country experiments act as an important repertoire of information in terms of good practices for countries faced with similar regulatory demands.

The Noughties has for its part opened up unimaginable opportunities with the advent of new media. New media has in fact challenged the traditional and established sources of power and authority namely the state and media producers / owners and increasingly tilted the balance in favour of the average citizen. Although still in its early stage of growth, citizenship journalism supported by new technology has the capacity to create an

important societal / political and cultural shift causing democratic revolutions even in the most closed, controlled and undemocratic regimes. The last decade has witnessed a host of new social platforms that has inherently transformed the world of media; the case of the 'Green Revolution' in Iran following the May 2009 election offers a compelling example.

Africa has been faced with similar considerations especially with the advent of democratization that has swept across the continent. In the case of Mauritius, the media is relatively well established (nearly 250 years of print media, 60 years of broadcast and 7 years of private radio stations presence) and has always been considered an important feature of the Mauritian democratic model. However, it is important to emphasize on the fact that the print and broadcast media follow two very different traditions – one which is highly unregulated and in the hands of private owners whilst the other state owned / controlled. It is only in the recent years (2002 onwards) that private commercial radio stations started broadcasting on the island. Regulation remains a highly contentious and charged issue –especially when it comes to that of the print media. As for the broadcast media, legislation was enacted in 2000 / 2001 and saw the setting of regulatory bodies - the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA). Despite their presence, a number of observers have commented on their limited scope of intervention and lack of independence from political parties in power.

The proposal for the setting up of a press complaints committee can be traced to 1999 with the commissioning of the Kenneth Morgan Report by the Media Trust and more recently the current Prime Minister commissioned Professor Geoffrey Robertson to draft a Media Commission Bill. The idea of regulation (imposed or self) has been a source of unease and tension and till date matters are still unresolved with on one side the government threatening to impose regulation across the board (through its Media Commission Bill) and individual initiatives of certain media groups to set up their own regulatory and complaints body.

On the other hand, the absence of a Freedom of Information Act and the prevailing culture of secrecy within the civil service (due to the severe threat of severe disciplinary action against public officers who communicate with the press and the existence of the Official Secrets Act) may represent an obstacle which impedes the proper functioning of the media as information channel and as watchdog in the Mauritian democratic setup.

Therefore the aim of this workshop is through a dialogue session to allow the key stakeholders to:

- Take stock of the existing battery of legal and regulatory framework with respect to the media in Mauritius.
- Revisit the various debates / exchanges about the changing role of the media in a democracy.
- Examine the relationship between the media and the different institutions such as the government, regulatory bodies and civil society.
- Explore the good practices available in the area of media regulation / self regulation.
- Engage into dialogue with key stakeholders in relation to the above and ensure a way forward for its prompt implementation.

Through this dialogue session, we also hope to build upon existing work already done such as the 2008 UNESCO-IPDC Media Development Indicators¹ or the 2008 African Barometer report for Mauritius² and to synergise efforts towards an enhanced democratic system that strikes the right balance between freedom of information or expression and media governance.

1 Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001631/163102e.pdf>

2 Available at: <http://www.fes-madagascar.org/media/pdf1/AMB%20Mauritius%202008%20English.pdf>