

The Guyana Press Association (GPA) takes this opportunity to share its perspective on President Irfaan Ali's remarks at a government-sponsored brunch held to mark World Press Freedom Day (WPDF) 2025.

The GPA now responds to several aspects of the President's remarks which he sought to make in the context of this year's WPDF theme, "Reporting in the Brave New World: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Press Freedom and the Media".

The GPA views President Ali's statement as the embodiment of his government's policy directions. Therefore, the Association shall be sharing its views with the Association of Caribbean Media Workers, Inter-American Press Institute, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Article 19, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat and the Diplomatic Missions of the United Kingdom, Canada, United States and the European Union (EU).

1. Mr President, you referenced the "loose term of the media". There is absolutely nothing loose about the term media. Politicians should have no role in defining the media which are really the channels through which content is delivered to recipients. It will, therefore, be wholly misguided for you to forge ahead with your plan to present to fellow Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders "a paper that I want to develop on the evolving definition of the media" because media are the (technological) channels or means through which content/messages such as news, information, education and entertainment are transmitted in the public interest and necessity.

The GPA regards this specific plan as the precursor to government licensing and press censorship under the guise of protection against the impact of Artificial Intelligence on communication including journalism. Any attempt at blurring or muddling the lines between the press/journalism and social media at large is untenable. The use of social media for the dissemination of journalistic content is vastly different from the use of such channels by non-journalists/non-press. The professional editorial guidelines, principles and ethics that govern press/journalism are inextricably linked to their roles and functions in newsgathering and dissemination.

2. Mr President, relatedly, it is, therefore, a fallacy to redefine what constitutes the media. It is, therefore, important that the "very young, vibrant media family" is not misguided by what constitutes the media, journalism, information and the press. History is replete with examples of political parties and governments inculcating in young impressionable minds the practice of propaganda rather than good journalism in the public's interest.

3. Mr President, you raised a point about the "fundamental pillars of that expression" and who is doing so. The fact of the matter is that there is nothing to fear if state-owned and controlled as well as privately-owned media follow globally accepted standards and ethics of journalism, all of which are applicable with or without Artificial Intelligence.

4. Mr President, you stated that “everyone with an instrument that disseminates information is a reporter on that site is delivering a message with commentary, and then everyone who adds a comment on that image that is coming out is part of the reporting mechanism”. This is also gravely flawed and misplaced. This begs the question, if everyone who utilises Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and data analytical tools can be considered a Regional and Urban Planner or everyone equipped with a thermometer, syringe and a sphygmomanometer is a Medical Doctor. In the field of journalism, a reporter practices journalism based on established principles and ethics.

Further, it is at best erroneous to classify information consumers, who respond, react or contribute to primary content as being part of that reporting mechanism. The information consumers are not reporting, they are part of the feedback mechanism, a critical component of communication.

5. Mr President, “reach, responsibility, reliability and relevance” have always been factors that media houses, journalists and other content producers have had to contend with. This is nothing new. This predates Artificial Intelligence and goes back to the early days of newspapers. The GPA has already acknowledged the value and pitfalls of Artificial Intelligence in the media landscape in our WPDF statement. These can be addressed frontally through aggressive Media and Journalism Literacy and Self-Regulation by Journalists.

6. Mr President, the GPA notes your recognition that influencers with a large following care nothing about the ethics of information dissemination. You stated this: “Here lies the danger, tremendous danger, especially when you add AI and the power of AI to that formula, because it does not require intellectualism or professionalism to define the message anymore. You have the reach; you have the capability and capacity. You then have the intellectual ability of using a tool that requires limited thinking to do whatever you want that tool to do.”

The incontrovertible fact is that your party and government have shone like a beacon in this regard by virtue of embracing and tolerating a social media influencer of significant notoriety. Your administration and party at its highest level cannot be faulted for being a leading exemplar in this regard. Similarly, there are influencers who are associated with or are opposition actors. Influencers cannot be conveniently intermixed with the press, journalists and producers of broadcast content in accordance with the established tenets of journalism.

7. Mr President, you also remarked that, “If we don’t ensure that AI is utilised, especially when it comes to the press and information dissemination, because information is so powerful that it can destabilize instantaneously with little time to respond. And then also as media personnel, you also have to be aware of the changing environment.”

This is most regrettable because it is an indicator of the ominous clouds that hang over Guyana as far as freedom of the press is concerned. The Association notes with grave alarm and disgust that you slipped in references to the “press” and “media” which can only

be construed as precursor signals to new or amended legislation or regulation that will further restrict how and what can be said by reporters, journalists and current affairs content producers. At this juncture, may the Association remind you that already there are provisions in the Constitution of Guyana, Defamation Act, Broadcasting Act, Cyber Crime Act, Racial Hostility Act, Sexual Offences Act and the Protection of Children Act that empower the State to take action under certain conditions. History has demonstrated pellucidly that reporters and journalists in Guyana continue to act responsibly for the most part, even in media houses where there is censorship or self-censorship. The press is hardly ever the problem.

8. Mr President, the Guyana Press Association views with consternation our long-held belief that you and your government no longer value periodic press conferences. The message here cannot be clearer. The most recent example is the failure of the Guyana Police Force to hold one news conference on the death of Adriana Younge.

You and your administration see little value for officials to be questioned periodically about decisions and policies. Rather, you prefer to engage in one-way communication through Facebook Live statements that cannot be subjected to questions, verifications or clarifications. This is nothing short of bad governance.

This remark of yours: “Many media leaders today would engage the media in public, would engage the media in an environment where there are other contributors to the discussion, because leaders realize that there is power behind every instrument, and if you want your message not to be distorted, you have to maximize the potential of the power behind every instrument so that your message is not distorted. So media persons will be operating in different environments as the future evolves. In my humble opinion, the historic and traditional press conferences and press media room is changing rapidly because everyone understands the changing nature of information, dissemination of information access, and information availability” is indicative of your reluctance to hold press conferences and instead opt for brief interviews on the sidelines of public events or Facebook Live statements.

It is rather unfortunate that you seemed to have inferred that two-way interactions with the media result in distortion of messages. Thankfully, your fellow CARICOM politicians in and out of government do not think so and we are confident that you will be unsuccessful in convincing them to engage in such misguided action.

9. Mr President, your concern that “the most important aspects of fair and ethical reporting is sacrificed” is at best contradictory to what obtains in the State-owned and government controlled radio, television and newspaper as well as a number of privately-owned entities that enjoy incestuous relationships with the government, governing party and sections of the private sector. Except for a period of Guyana’s history when the privately-owned media were very few and the private sector generally was very small, both the People’s National Congress Reform-led and People’s Progressive Party Civic-led administrations have controlled the State-owned media as their ‘personal’ property, offering little or no balanced

reporting, contorting the truth, attacking critics and shutting them out, and instituting a culture of self-censorship and censorship. Direct ministerial and political/governmental interference in the media houses continues to be an incurable ulcer across all governments hence you lacked the moral authority to make such an utterance

10. Mr President, you referred to “facts-driven news, preference -driven news or personal opinion driven news”. By doing so, you demonstrated that you ventured into an arena that either you know nothing about, was ill-advised by propagandists or you seized the opportunity to consolidate your intent on seeking to drive government policy on what should be defined as news. This is an arena that is best left to journalists who are expected to consider the standard elements of news in making decisions on what to publish. It must be noted that not every utterance a politician or anyone else makes must be newsworthy. A good starting point would be to acquaint yourself with what are the elements of news.

11. Mr President, you are absolutely incorrect when you stated that “In Guyana, freedom of expression, including the freedom of the press, is enshrined in our Constitution”. Guyana’s Constitution guarantees freedom of expression but not freedom of the press unlike, say, the Constitutions of Trinidad and Tobago and the United States of America which explicitly guarantee freedom of the press.

12. Mr President, you cited the speed and distance of digital Artificial Intelligence news to reiterate the need for “greater responsibility on those that are disseminating that news because of the instantaneous nature of it, and the speed and the reach, the burden of responsibility is different, and those are the things we have to look at, the best practices wherever they exist, to be part of the reform”. This smacks of an unnecessary intention by your government to suppress freedom of the press. The Guyana Press Association reiterates that journalism content producers do not violate any criminal laws. There is absolutely no need to harness the press with more laws.

13. Mr President, you again referred to “my government's unwavering commitment to this noble principle of press freedom” and ensuring that “the media operates without censorship and within an environment that respects diversity of thought and opinion”. In this regard, the Association reiterates that there is press suppression through political directives/instructions and the fostering of a culture of self-censorship for fear of disciplinary action including suspension or dismissal. Private sector actors, who see themselves as beholden to the government of the day at any given time instead of principles regardless of which party is in government, see little value in a free press except when it suits their interests solely.

14. Mr President you stated that “the media must strive for fairness, balance and commitment to the truth in all reporting. It is imperative that journalism does not descend into sensationalism or partisanship, that it remains anchored in the principles of professionalism and objectivity”. The Association hopes that you sincerely believe that it must transcend all media houses if this is to be taken seriously. The Guyana Press Association acknowledges that there are instances of sensational and partisan reporting but

this is an unfortunate feature in both State-owned and government controlled as well as a number of privately-owned publishing houses.

15. Mr. President said: “We’ve ensured that the media operates without censorship and within an environment that respects diversity of thought and opinion. This commitment is evident in our efforts to create a larger democratic space where journalists can investigate, report and critique government actions without fear or favour.”

This is at variance with the truth and reality. References to sections of the press as “hostile media”, “carrion crows” and “vultures” by then President and current Vice President, Bharrat Jagdeo as well as his response/ reaction at times is intimidatory and serves to have a dampening effect on press freedom that you boast about.

The Association hastens to assure and recognise that any

government, political party, organisation, group or individual must enjoy the right to rebut or offer different perspectives, but it is the crass manner in which this is often done on a weekly basis by branding virtually all sources of dissonant views as ‘anti-government’ or ‘anti-PPP’. Let it be noted that the diversity of Guyana’s journalism landscape was not handed on a platter by any government or political party but evolved as a result of technological evolution. This is the conundrum that faces Guyana’s major political parties. They want to cling tenaciously to the information-controlling remnants of leftist ideology while operating in a capitalist, liberal economic environment. The free press/journalism is a critical component of good governance which cannot be divorced from democracy. Harassment of the non-governmental community, including the Guyana Press Association, and media houses that provide critical perspectives of the government of the day do not deserve a retaliatory hard push to control and muzzle through ownership, funding etc. in what appears to be a shift towards an authoritarian rule.

16. Mr President, the Guyana Press Association notes your call: “The vibrancy of our media associations and leadership must also have a vibrant, democratic and open process where all media workers feel a part of the collective whole. You must also now contemplate whether the narrow original confines of who are members must now be redefined to include the broader disseminators of information, so that they can also be part of a responsible system, that they can also be checked in what they do within your own Association. Not doing this is not also adapting to the changing realities of our country and the world, to our local media”. You may wish to be enlightened that the Constitution of the Guyana Press Association has several tiers of membership. To use an analogy to simplify this for you, participants in the construction sector cannot all be members of a contractors’ association, assuming there is one. Depending on their roles and functions, there may be different self-regulatory bodies for different categories of workers. The Guyana Press Association has always been the subject of direct and indirect attacks over the past 40 years by incumbent governments and opposition parties. There have been numerous efforts within the past 35 years by the government, through the State media and privately-owned government aligned media, to take control of the Press Association to ensure the narrative

conforms to that of the ruling party and government locally, regionally and internationally. However, the will of right-thinking members, as exercised through free, fair and transparent elections, has always prevailed.

Your idea facilitates the backdoor entry of squatters parading as reporters but who care less about the professional rules and ethics of journalism. This approach cultivates 'cuss-birds' who have no regard for defamation, decency or even utilising aspects of the Broadcasting Act as a self-regulatory guide.

Evidently, you, as the President of Guyana, sought to seize the WPFDD theme on Artificial Intelligence as an entry point to signal your government's intention to pass legislation or regulations to curb press freedom. The Guyana Press Association rejects this plot and will do everything in its power to resist this move.

Penultimately, the Guyana Press Association advocates for:

A non-legislative but self-regulatory mechanism of journalists and current affairs producers and presenters.

A Media and Journalism Literacy Campaign to educate the public about differentiation between the press and other purveyors of information such as influencers so that the public is more aware of what they consume, from whom and where.

Ongoing training and education in the Principles, Standards and Ethics of Journalism.

Ongoing training and education about the Journalistic application of Artificial Intelligence and other emerging technologies.

Introduction of a Code of Conduct that insulates the State-owned and publicly funded media from political interference and the strict adherence to editorial guidelines which can serve as a gold standard for privately-owned media.

The provision of international bilateral and multilateral assistance to the security sector must be linked to improvement in that sector's media communications through meaningful consultations with the Guyana Press Association.

In conclusion, the Guyana Press Association is disappointed that the President of Guyana did not use the opportunity of World Press Freedom Day 2025 to:

- i) announce reform and administration of the Access To Information mechanism
- ii) propose that press freedom be made a constitutional right
- iii) outline his plan for Intellectual Property of journalistic works in an era of Artificial Intelligence
- iv) state his plans for the enactment of Copyright legislation in the context of Artificial Intelligence
- v) digitisation of newspaper, audio and video archives of media houses as a matter of national record

vi) amendment of the Broadcasting Act to ensure parity in addressing content concerns

vii) amendment of the CyberCrime Act to address free speech concerns

viii) articulate the importance of Artificial Intelligence in informing and educating Guyanese and the world about the Venezuela-Guyana border controversy

ix) establishment of a Content Fund for the production of current affairs and public interest content without the influence or interference of the government

x) policy guidance on the unconditional facilitation of human, technical and other resources for journalism studies at the University of Guyana

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