Professional journalism and democratic deficits in the Commonwealth

Chris Cobb

A call for a free and independent media

In its report to Commonwealth leaders at the 2011 Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Perth, Australia, the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) made numerous recommendations and comments about the sorry state of human rights in many of the 54 member countries. Especially significant for the Commonwealth’s community of journalists was specific mention in the EPG report of the rights of print and broadcast journalists to work in a safe and respectful environment:

All individuals are entitled to information from unbiased sources relating to the conduct of their country’s affairs...attempts at silencing those whose job and duty it is to report the information have become prevalent. We are concerned that there is abuse, including killings, of journalists and broadcasters in several Commonwealth countries and that many of these abuses go uninvestigated and unpunished. The values of the Commonwealth demand that the media and their representatives be allowed to operate with responsibility, in freedom and without fear. Serious and persistent abuse of media representatives should be cause for inquiry by CMAG (Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group).

Following the embrace of this and most other sections of the report by Commonwealth leaders, it is fair to conclude that this unprecedented statement in support of a free and independent news media is now a commitment – a Commonwealth political value. But as any student of

Nobel Prize-winner Professor Joseph Stiglitz giving an interview (Commonwealth Aid for Trade Round Table at Marlborough House, August 2012)
Commonwealth affairs knows, consistency on Commonwealth values is a work in progress – as the fate of various EPG report recommendations only confirms.

Throughout the Commonwealth, journalists are abused – both physically and psychologically – by agents of governments and goons hired by opposition or special interest groups. Their goal is intimidation or elimination, and in many jurisdictions they pursue that goal with impunity.

The Commonwealth Expert Group that observed The Gambia election in November 2011, and of which I was a member, noted in its report on news media: ‘A free and independent news media is a vital organ in the body of any democracy.’ In other words, if you don’t have one, you can’t claim to be the other. Yet news media in The Gambia is by no means the worst. There are plenty more examples in the Commonwealth where the sector is not operating as it can and should. So what to do? As we say in Canada, there is no silver bullet – no instant cure for this disease that eats at the very essence of a democratic society.

An honest change in attitude from leadership is an obvious answer, but in the worst regimes this cannot be realistically expected, and so begs the question. External pressure from individual Commonwealth leaders, and exposure of abuse by international civil society, is also crucial, even though effecting change in this way is a slow process.

**Getting the facts right**

As The Gambia and many other examples show us, the Commonwealth and those who do business within it also have an important role to play in building news media capacity through journalistic training in its various forms. Recently, a judge in The Gambia briefly jailed a journalist for making factual errors in the reporting of a court case. International groups condemned the judge’s ruling, which was somewhat mitigated when it emerged that the reporter had not actually been in court to hear evidence.

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I am reminded too of the newspapers and broadcast enterprises that print and broadcast gossip and pass it off as fact. I have seen it in many countries and occasionally been able to challenge reporters who have produced such material and the editors who have allowed it to be published. These are not malicious people for the most part, but simply journalists desperately in need of professional training – and the improved standards that all forms of capacity-building can produce.

The arrival of social media and the new chaotic world of information dissemination by self-styled ‘citizen journalists’ only emphasises the desperate need for enhanced professionalism among journalists. We might start by removing the term ‘citizen journalist’ from our lexicon. It suggests that any untrained citizen can purchase a mobile phone, digital camera or more sophisticated piece of equipment and say to themselves, “Today I’m going to be a journalist”. Admittedly, they can add to a story and in some cases have powerful global impacts, but they can also distort reality and cause damage to themselves and to the reputation of journalism itself.

Take, for example, the case of two women journalists who were sentenced to long sentences in Rwanda for crimes against the state and insulting the head of state. The harsh punishments damaged Rwanda’s image internationally and have obviously brought hardship and misery to the two women involved. While the indelible impression remains that Rwanda meted out disproportionate sentences to two journalists, my own inquiries when I was in that country suggested that the two women were not trained journalists but people with a political point of view and access to the social media sites able to deliver it. They were, by some definition, ‘citizen journalists’. In fact, it’s clear from the words and images they produced that they had no journalistic training and no understanding of the checks and balances that are the lifeblood of ethical, reliable journalism. Perhaps they didn’t care, but I would prefer to think they just didn’t know.

A professional journalist is someone different. He or she is someone who has been schooled, trained and mentored in journalism’s basics – how to conduct an interview; how to construct an effective story; how to act at a news conference; how to write a profile of a person; and how to make the appropriate checks and balances. All of these in turn lead to fair and balanced reporting. I have travelled extensively throughout the Commonwealth running training workshops and helping with election reporting, political reporting, even sports and business reporting, but I have never once left a workshop without being asked to talk about the basics.

**Creating the best journalism**

Journalism across the globe is undergoing a massive, technology-driven transformation. News and information is coming at us from all directions. Most consumers are no longer content with one or two national morning newspapers or news broadcasts. We travel the world from our desks, reading national and international news websites – perhaps the BBC or The New York Times – and most critically, our own local, regional and national news sources. But in whatever form we receive the news, all sources have one thing in common – we invariably trust what they have to say. And in a sense, news organisations are like any other well-established marketed commodity. If consumers trust you, they stay loyal. Break that trust and they’ll turn to a competitor.

So it is very much in everyone’s interests to nurture a corps of well-trained journalists on whom the population can rely
for fair and balanced news reporting and reasoned, well-researched opinion. Journalists also need to be paid a living wage – a wage that can raise a family and encourage long-term commitment and pride in the work rather than a pittance that encourages a jump to the nearest lucrative public relations job at the first opportunity or take bribes, which many are forced to do.

In newsrooms across the Commonwealth we need mature, experienced journalists who enjoy the security and dignity of decent wages and who can mentor those just out of journalism school – pass the baton of professionalism, in other words. Newsrooms permanently staffed by ill-paid, ill-trained, inexperienced workers will not produce good journalism.

If governments insist on pursuing the controlling policy of issuing licences to private media houses instead of allowing the far more effective policy of self-regulation, they must also start demanding business plans that contain proof of financial viability and promise that journalists will be paid a living wage and paid on time. If they renege, there should be consequences.

The best journalism often has to speak truth to power, and power rarely likes being spoken to in such a manner. So if journalists are going to do it, they need to do so at the highest possible standard and with the protection not only of basic Commonwealth values and international pressure but of their own values rooted in fair, balanced and ethically grounded reporting produced in an environment where intimidation from thugs – government or otherwise – is just a bad memory.

Endnote

1 CMAG, established in 1995, deals with ‘serious and persistent violations’ of Commonwealth political values.

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