

The Other Side: Censorship of the Media

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This letter is in response to an Editorial which appeared in the January 27th edition of the Caymanian Compass.

The Editor referred to comments made by “one radio talk show host” in an editorial entitled “Media Relations 101”. Let me confirm that I was that Host and I take full responsibility for the opinion expressed. My comments simply were, though said in a broader context, “I could understand the logic behind both sides of the argument either for or against control of the media”. Before I begin let me first concede, that Censorship, in any form represents a slippery slope and therefore any such action should never be entered into lightly. I also accept the Editorial’s opinions coming from a standpoint of opposing censorship of the media. I, on the other hand, believe there is likewise room to support media censorship in certain circumstances, and I will attempt to qualify my previous remarks herein.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was the Supreme Court Justice at the turn of the Century, argued in the 1919 United States Supreme Court case *Schenck v. United States*, that “*Freedom of Speech does not permit an individual to yell, ‘FIRE!’ in a crowded theatre, causing panic.*” He argued that while *Truthful*, this statement is also *Dangerous*.

I believe the same is true about Sensational News Headlines. Headlines which are designed to grab our attention or sell papers may be considered what Holmes described as being a “*clear and present danger*” which Government has the right to prevent. Most recently the Commissioner of Police, David Baines commented that he believed sensational news headlines have lead to the belief that crime is worse than it really is. There is, in my opinion, some truth in that.

It is my opinion that in any well run society, a degree of control must be applied, especially if that society has a small, fragile economy or an economy, which is largely built on public perception. As unpopular as the actions of then Leader of Government Business, now Premier, were following Hurricane Ivan, to restrict media access in order to protect our Tourism business; I can understand the dilemma that faced the Leader and the impetus behind his ultimate decision, given the Income the islands derive from this sector. One future visitor who changes their vacation plans can just as easily turn into thousands or hundreds of thousands who change their plans. Imagine what the absence of that Income would do to our currently fragile economy?

Similarly, following Tuesday’s Earthquake; if the Premier’s comments, which were made when he called the programme, inferred a similar action, for similar reasons, I saw those fears as being well founded. The spoken or printed word is a funny thing. Once uttered, it is difficult to take back. When larger issues such as the life of our national economy are at stake, greater care and attention needs to be given to the information that is disseminated, otherwise it can, as Holmes argued, represent a clear and present Danger, and must, out of necessity be suppressed.

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Follow-up: (written January 31st, after reading some of my criticism on CNS)

Most of the comments on the Blogs in my opinion, are written by non-Caymanians hence, their perceived need to post anonymously. But they also represent a difference in Cultural norms. They come from countries such as the United States, Canada, or UK where it is blasphemy to censor the press. The press can say anything as long as it is not slanderous or libelous. But even then, they can still say it, though they run the risk of being sued for it.

The comments were expected to draw criticism from those bloggers. I am learning to accept criticism, so I have not read all the comments. However, I think Cayman's accepted cultural norms are somewhere to the Left of US, Canada, UK thinking, which is why I say, I can clearly understand both sides of the argument, even if I am the only one who is willing to admit it.

To the extreme Right of this thinking however, we have China, for example, in which censorship is considered an Absolute Right of the government. I don't suggest for a second that Cayman leans anywhere near to mainland China. Even though our Premier admires the Singapore Solution (and really, what's not to like!), I urge listeners/readers to read the January 2010 publication of National Geographic. It's an eye opener and may be where our Premier has us headed.