



**Address**

**By**

**The Honourable Maxie Cuffie, MP**

**Minister of Public Administration and Communications**

**At the**

**Regional Seminar of Broadcasting Licensing in the  
Digital Age**

**Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago**

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Let me begin by congratulating the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago and the World Intellectual Property Organization for this most timely discussion on an important topic here in Trinidad and Tobago and I suspect in several parts of the world.

The question of “Broadcasting Licensing in the Digital Age” seems almost a paradox from the start. The digital age has seen the concept of ‘free to air’ being increasingly replaced by the ‘free for all’ that currently obtains in cyber space. This places regulators like TATT and others at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to any attempt to bring sanity and method to the levels of irresponsibility that abound.

This is compounded in a society like Trinidad and Tobago which has a long and rich tradition of unbridled speech. Trinidadians and Tobagonians, as we like to say, have no cover for their mouths.

The lives of innocent citizens have been irreparably damaged in many cases by persons with the ability to broadcast material that is either sexually explicit and compromising or containing many untruths, simply by hitting the “send” key on a smart device. The most recent case of the young attorney who was wrongly identified as the complainant in the rape case against a Trade Union leader immediately comes to mind. How does she recover from that unwarranted expose on her otherwise apparently sheltered life?

There is also the converse to that position of absolute laxity, where others believe that regulators like TATT should be so stringent in their application and enforcement of all broadcast laws, that the slightest of infractions would result in the immediate revocation of licenses or the imposition of hefty fines that would serve as a strong deterrent against future repetitions.

The issue of broadcasting licensing must be the end result of an attempt to bring regulation to a sector that is growing exponentially, and where all the players don't always see beyond the bottom line.

In its 2016 Special 301 Report released only last month, the Office of the United States Trade Representative congratulated Trinidad and Tobago for being removed from its Watch List.

This removal was due principally to action taken by the TATT. According to the report, “In Trinidad & Tobago, the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad & Tobago (TATT) took concrete steps to enforce its concessions agreement that requires broadcasters to respect Intellectual Property Rights and to obtain all required permissions from IP owners prior to broadcasting programs, information, and other material.”

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, Trinidad and Tobago was removed from the Watch List, because TATT has been doing its job as a regulator and, this morning, I want to thank them for it.

The question then, seems to be one of balance. I would want to suggest though, that it must be a balance which takes cognizance of the arguments on both sides of the debate, as well as the extent of the role to be played by governments, if any at all.

There must also be an honest recognition that the attention paid to regulating broadcast content of any medium, is dissimilar, and I daresay disproportionate, to that paid to the content of newspapers and the publishing sector on the whole. The idea seems to be that all regulation and any state intervention are undesirable and seen as a threat to and violation of press freedoms, and that citizens should be able to freely decide from themselves which content in newspapers and books they consume.

This “hands off” approach for print media stands in sharp contrast to the regulatory burden on broadcasting.

Undoubtedly, regulation in the broadcasting sector was triggered by technological concerns, for example, the scarcity of spectrum, and by the delicate relationship between mass media, mass deception.

Based on the premise that quality and pluralism could be achieved only through government intervention, content related regulations, for example, quotas and protection of minors, as well as structural regulations, in terms of ownership rules, are now widespread in the broadcasting sector.

But how far are we to go with broadcasting licensing? Is it too late and the horses of free broadband connectivity, cloud computing, instant messaging and extensive mobile penetration have already bolted so far from the proverbial stable that it is too late to turn back now?

Earlier this week, the announcement of Liberty Global Plc's acquisition of Cable and Wireless in a deal valued at approximately 7.4 billion U.S. dollars created shockwaves through the bandwidth of many other providers. The combined entity has a footprint in 20 Latin or Central American markets and is expected to generate over 3.6 billion U.S. dollars in revenues per annum with an asset base of 10.2 billion U.S. dollars.



The shock would have been exacerbated locally by the recall of Cable and Wireless's acquisition of Columbus Communications in November 2014.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am certain that there is concurrence on the view espoused by Oxford University's Andrew Graham, that broadcasting is currently undergoing its biggest period of change since the arrival of television. Today, cable and satellite channels are booming, digital television is everywhere, and here in Trinidad and Tobago, we stand precariously at the cusp of an information age where broadcasting, computing, publishing and telecommunication technologies are all converging into one market.

Indeed, it has been argued by many that this change, which is occurring on a global level, is the most significant development in communications since the introduction of the printing press by Gutenberg more than a half a millennium ago. The result of this change is that broadcasting is moving inexorably into a far more competitive and market-driven environment.

The question for me, as the Minister on whose shoulders the responsibility for telecommunications now rests, is how will this burgeoning market serve the public interest? Additionally, how will these new communication giants like Liberty continue to operate in a market still populated by small community broadcasters like Radio Toco and Trico Industries of Tobago?

How far can TATT go in its quest to ensure or at least maintain sobriety in cyber space? Are we really whistling in the wind when we talk about broadcasting licensing in a digital age that has no boundaries and where it is assumed that 'free to air' has been replaced by 'free for all'?

I have perused your programme and find myself quite interested in some of the presentations scheduled for delivery over the next two days. I look forward with great hope to the outcome of your deliberations, as I have every belief in the nobility of your intentions. On behalf of the Ministry of Public Administration and Communications, please accept my best wishes for fruitful deliberations and a compelling plan for the way forward.

May God bless you all, and may God bless our nation.