

Tout Moun

Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

Intersections:

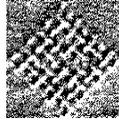
Caribbean and British Literary Imaginaries

Vol 4: No. 2 ▪ November 2018

<http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/epubs/toutmoun/index1.htm>

© The University of the West Indies, Department of Literary Cultural and Communication Studies

An Approach to Freedom: An Interview with Wesley Gibbings on Journalism and Activism in the Caribbean



AMÍLCAR SANATAN

Introduction

Wesley Gibbings is a Trinidad and Tobago-based journalist whose career in the media landscape spans over three decades. He was a former president of the Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago (MATT) and currently holds the position of President of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM). In 2017 he was awarded the Percy Qoboza International Journalist Award by the National Association of Black Journalists in the USA. Throughout Gibbings' career he has written on governance, the arts and environmental issues. He also witnessed the technological and industry transitions in media that have transformed the journalism profession. This interview highlights his experiences as a journalist in the Caribbean region in relation to society and social change.

The notion of 'objectivity' is an essential aspect of journalism training, in which writers must interpret events and issues outside of their opinions and personal experiences. This expectation shapes the 'code of ethics' within the profession. However, many journalists "...get personally involved [in reporting]. In politics they can become partisan, in a social context they can become advocates for a special cause, in a conflict situation they can take sides, becoming attached" (Ruigrok 2010, 86). Thus, activist writing and political activism is not uncommon in journalism. Gibbings practice of a "journalism of accountability" (Ruigrok 2010) involves holding the state accountable, teaching, professional development of media workers and advocacy at national, regional and international levels. With the rise of digital media and alternatives to mainstream media organisations, media literacy among audiences has become an even more significant issue today. This should not be only viewed as a problem of contemporary society but as an expansion of choice for audiences. Gillmor writes that "...the kind of neutral journalism that people talk about has never fully existed at all. It is a unicorn. And now that audiences have choices, I hope we can let the unicorn fade away" (quoted in Leidel 2014). This interview explores Gibbings' experiences of activism by journalists, the freedom of the press, the freedom of speech and social issues.

In Trinidad and Tobago, recent legislation – the Cybercrime Bill, the Whistleblower Protection Act, the Data Protection Act and the Broadcast Code – have initiated wider public debate about the constraints to press and media freedom. For this reason, I wanted to ask Gibbings:

1. How do national politics and political participation influence the practice of journalism?
2. What is the significance of freedom of the press and the freedom of speech in the context of the Caribbean?
3. What are the current challenges and future opportunities for Caribbean journalism in today's media landscape?

This interview reflects broader perspectives in Caribbean Communications Studies and Journalism. Gibbings was often very emotional as he discussed 'freedom' in the Caribbean and the persistent threat of hurricanes because of climate change. His passion in the field serves as a guide to upcoming journalists and scholars in Communication Studies who are interested in examining the role of the media in Caribbean development.

I interviewed Wesley Gibbings in Maracas, St. Joseph, Trinidad and Tobago on the 23rd of December 2017. The interview was transcribed with bracketed notes to clarify casual references or abbreviations. In addition, I edited the interview for clarity where necessary but I have generally preserved his articulation and colloquialism.

Political Formations and the Practice of Journalism

AS: *In 1981, you were an electoral candidate for the Lloyd Best-led TAPIA¹. TAPIA's political communications were central to their political project. I'd like for you discuss your participation in the political fray as a journalist.*

WG: I was not full time in the media then, I was freelancing in 1980 [writing for] the *Challenge* newspaper. At the time I was involved with my family's insurance business. My father was one of the founding members of TAPIA. Lloyd's son and I went to QRC [Queen's Royal College] together. Lloyd picked us up at QRC all the time, and then we later went to the river on some afternoons. We had a good personal relationship. We sold TAPIA out on the street. All the young boys in the area, Lloyd Best would pass in his white Holden and give out papers and we would get fifty cents or something a copy for selling it.

My political awareness was awoken in the QRC experience.

¹ The TAPIA House Movement was a political party led by the public intellectual Lloyd Best in Trinidad and Tobago. The party contested the 1976 and 1981 general elections.

AS: *It is. It is an elite secondary school that trained boys for a particular kind of performance of masculinity, part of which deals with public leadership and political consciousness.*

WG: Yes and the education was secular. That was a powerful thing. A lot of the teachers were QRC old boys. My father went QRC too. I started QRC in 1970. I was very aware of Black Power. When I went to QRC there was a lot of focus on that. The guys who went in that time were very politically aware. As a youth, you focus on cricket and football but there was NUFF and TAPIA was formed around that time too. TAPIA went into the election in 1976. TAPIA actually thought that they would win that election but I went in Couva and saw that the ULF [United Labour Front] was fighting elections and DLP [Democratic Labour Party] was on the way out. I got to meet the late Simbhoonath [Capildeo]. [On] the night of the election we went to TAPIA house to listen to the result. They lost. But I knew down in Central, TAPIA was in no one's consciousness.

I kept in contact with TAPIA and Lloyd Best encouraged me to publish my first set of poems in 1977. One day Lloyd Best asked if I wanted to be a candidate in the election. I was recently married in July of 1981. What was instructive during that period is that I got to know [Basdeo] Panday. I got to know [A.N.R.] Robinson. I also knew that Lloyd Best had no respect for them, he thought they were hustlers and smart men.

I only went in to full-time journalism in 1985. I edited the *Trinidad and Tobago Review* for a time. By this time, I thought I knew what politics was about and totally dislodged myself from it. I could not be involved. But after the election in 1986 I did a column titled The Debate Column in the *Express*. In one of my columns I described Robinson's victory as a "bourgeois revolution". It was seen as very offensive.

I did not say that in 1983 I was enrolled to do course at the Free University of Amsterdam, but they did not have enough people subscribed to do the course. I ended up on my own. That is where I considered my conversion. I learnt about socialism from that standpoint. Best was against that word and I understood the point of shaping our own philosophy and so on. But I was a bit offended by his dismissal. This early experience informed my view about what was shaping with the government. One of the big issues was the dismantling of PTSC in order to invite more private operators. The political activism that I had [pursued] in my earlier years rolled over later into press freedom.



Gibbings at a public rally for TAPIA, 1981.

Fighting for Freedom: The Press, Speech and Caribbean People

AS: *You are widely known as a journalist with a career spanning longer than three decades in the Caribbean. In more recent years you have developed an international profile as a campaigner for the freedom of the press and freedom of speech. What is the significance of these campaigns in the context of the Caribbean?*

WG: I have different takes on this question but let me give you the background in terms of my involvement. My work really started in this area in 1986 when the Media Association of Trinidad and Tobago [MATT] was formed. I was on its very first Executive Committee. It did not start off as a press freedom body; it was more of a professional development association. It described itself as a professional association of journalists.

The more you look at the issue of media performance and media development, the more you tend to pay attention to the environment in which people operate. I saw to a growing extent how freedom of expression and freedom of the press were becoming more pertinent to media development and overall development.

I remember when the NAR [National Alliance for Reconstruction]² came into power in 1986 they did a constitution review and I voluntarily testified before the constitution commission because

² The National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) was a political party that unified the opposition against the ruling People's National Movement (PNM) and governed Trinidad and Tobago between 1986 and 1991.

the question arose: “Should freedom of the press remain as a discrete right under the constitution of Trinidad and Tobago?” The commissioners were asking me questions, “Why should that be there?” They wanted to know what was the big deal if it’s not there. Serious people in the society don’t get that freedom of the press is a very distinct and discrete right. Like freedom of expression, which is multidimensional, freedom of the press is not a waste of time or something just geared towards the protection of the media industry. They don’t understand a basic principle of freedom of expression is not only the right of somebody to express themselves but also the right of people to seek out other people’s expression and receive it. Freedom of the press is not the freedom of the media industry, it is freedom of the audiences who might be seeking out expression.

In 2001, I led the formation of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers [ACM]³ and one of the things I thought we should do is extend our arms internationally for people who have more experience and expertise in this area. We joined the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX)⁴ which was very important for the ACM because it helped us broaden our perspective of the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression.



Gibbings' chairs an IFEX panel, Cambodia, 2013.

³ The Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM) is a professional network of journalists and media workers. The organisation was established in 2001. See: <http://acmpress.org>

⁴ The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) is a global network of NGOs involved with advocating the freedom of expression and human rights. See: <https://www.ifex.org>

AS: *While an infrequent publication, the ACM produces a “State of Caribbean Media Report”. How do the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech feature in your reporting on the region?*

WG: It is very difficult to assess region with classical notions or concepts. For example, we don't see freedom of the press in the same way as Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières) or the Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ] do. Their metrics are standard and understandably limited because they are global in scope. They ask questions such as, “How many journalists have been kidnapped? Who has been killed?” and they keep close count on that. They examine online bullying. In the Caribbean we need a more nuanced way in examining the freedom of the press. Over the years we have tried to capture that in terms of our reporting. Unfortunately, since 2003 we have not been able to pull together a cohesive freedom of the press report for the Caribbean. In March 2018, we will have a meeting to refine the questions we plan to ask. We have the silencing of journalists and self-censorship. We need to be able to ask nuanced questions in order to capture that. If you ask, “Are the media in the Caribbean free?” Under classical definitions, we are very free and that is reflected in Reporters Without Borders and their annual reports. If you were to ask me as a Caribbean person with an understanding of how the media works in the Caribbean, “Are we free?” I would say “No”.

AS: *What you suggest is that the threat of physical violence is not as prevalent but there is an environment of risk for media workers. Is this the case?*

WG: Yes. The way I usually put it is that journalists are not killed in the Caribbean but many stories die. The objective behind killing a journalist is to generate silence. But there are other ways to generate silence by not making them lose their lives to making them lose their livelihoods. In the Caribbean you can move quickly from being a highly respected and well-placed journalist to selling insurance overnight. The industry is very thin on resources and opportunities are scarce. The job is not very high paying. We need a nuanced approach and develop a ‘freedom approach’. Given our past and the lack of freedom as a people - slavery, indentureship and other circumstances - we are in a place where freedom means something special.

[Gibbings breaks into tears]

Why is it that the default way we frame legislation is not one of freedom? If there is something new, such as social media, the first instinct we have is to see how we can clamp and control it. People with our background, our orientation should be, if something emerges, ask, “How do we set it free? How do we liberate it?” The starting point for addressing our problems should be liberation and not capturing, controlling, and putting things in a cage. Every single government in the Caribbean, for example, wants to look for a way to get their hands on the internet. They want to regulate Internet content. The Telecoms authority here, early in the day, discussing the

broadcast code was looking at ways to control the Internet as part of the broadcasting legislation. I said at the time, “I wish them the very worst luck with that.”

Those with power will target the powerless who are threatening their positions of power. Out of the millions of Tweets, Facebook posts and information on Instagram, they focus on individuals. Why you? Invariably, those with power target the powerless in an attempt to silence the public because some words are seen as “offensive”. This is not freedom and being offensive is also part of the democratic process.

I have gone before the Equality Opportunity Commission to raise the issue of the inclusion of LGBTQ citizens. The Equal Opportunity Act very explicitly excludes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. How could you have an Act which addresses the exclusion of people and it does not recognise sexual orientation? That is crazy. This is very much into the freedom of expression fold. This is what we are dealing with. We operate in societies where prohibition is the preferred route.

Media and Society

AS: *You recently published a column on the history of media in Trinidad and Tobago⁵. In the article you highlighted the wider social actors and forces that were involved in the development of the press, from the elites who established print for industry purposes to Leftist writers who used “little magazines” to advance their ideas. Discuss the impact of the media and the social organisation of society.*

WG: The pace of technological innovation in the colonies during slavery slowed changes to the plantation system. Innovations in printing in Europe took a little while before they caught on in the Caribbean. Less information helped maintain the slave society and the social organisation of the time. New technology would have disrupted that order significantly. Technology and innovation are invariably linked to the social order, especially the elites in society.

Even today, there is robot journalism, news services that harvest news without the human touch. Today journalism it seems is more data driven instead of information driven. Today technology has changed minds from being linear. My practice as a journalist has changed. In journalism, we were interested in timeliness, in the digital age the emphasis is on timelessness.

In this current era, the conventional and mainstream media have lost their monopoly. I don’t subscribe to this thing about citizen journalism. I consider journalism to be a profession. In terms

⁵ See: Gibbings, Wesley. “A Brief History – T&T and the Caribbean”. Blog, published September 12, 2017. <http://wesleygibbings.blogspot.com/2017/09/a-brief-media-history-t-and-caribbean.html> . Accessed January 10, 2018.

of mainstream media, however flawed and defective it may be, it is not dysfunctional, there is a sense of transparency. In the mainstream media you know who wrote the article, the editors, the owners, if the organisation is publicly traded. The global focus now therefore is on media information literacy, which turns its spotlight on audiences and not just the generators of media content. Our societies must pay attention to creating better men and women instead of attempting to control and clamp down expression. People are discerning and if they know that the source is not transparent they will know that the writer cannot be held to account. Mainstream media has professional standards and ethics guiding it, generally. I know the value of mainstream media through its relationship with audiences when crises occur. Who do people really turn to? We had the recent experiences of hurricanes.

[Gibbings breaks into tears]

It's hard to talk... that is the source of my current state, the hurricanes. In Dominica for example, at the height of the hurricane, violent winds and disappearing homes – where were the bloggers and the online forums that are politically charged? There is a concerted attempt to diminish the credibility of mainstream journalists. If the mainstream media are so irrelevant, weak and not influential, why were they so central to bringing relief to people in Dominica during the crisis?

AS: *Globally the media industry has been on the back foot for sexist practices against women journalists and media professionals. Do you believe that the Caribbean media “fraternity” has sought to address the needs of women within the profession?*

WG: We support the Global Alliance on Media and this has become an explicit focus. I remember when Corinne Barnes did her doctoral thesis on women in the media. Marjan DeBruin also produced work in the area. At that time in Trinidad and Tobago, for the major newspapers, the senior reporters and editors were women. That is why data should not be applied simply. I do not know, however, if men in the occupation earn more. You cannot go on the numbers alone. Where specifically is gender inequality? Men dominate all the boards. In technical areas, men dominate. There is need for research on the quantitative and qualitative data. This is important because when there are attempts to undermine the media, women journalists are the first point of attack.⁶ “Which man she had? Who she had child for? What is her relationship to a politician?” There is need for academic work to look at this.

⁶ On March 24, 2015, the ACM published a statement condemning the character attacks on women journalists involved in investigative and analytical work. See: <http://acmpress.org/2015/03/24/statement-on-social-media-attacks-against-female-tt-journalists/>

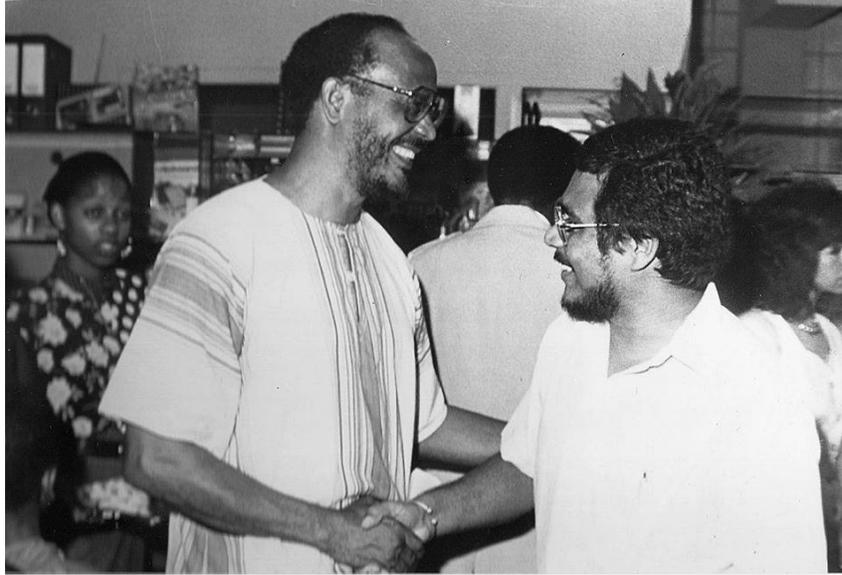
Journalism and the Media Landscape

AS: *While state owned media is not new, today we have the presence of state-run media houses with global distribution networks for their information and perspectives. Not only do Al Jazeera and RT News broadcast in American markets, TeleSUR English has mobilised many writers on the Left in the Global North and South. However, there is a great deal of talk about “fake news” in today’s media landscape and a growing skepticism for media with explicit political agendas and interests. How have these media houses impacted the profession of journalism?*

WG: Their agendas are very clear and it is political communications. A lot of it is journalistic in nature but it does not necessarily mean it is journalism. They make people aware of what is happening that perhaps would not otherwise be covered. *RT News* is journalistic but it politically motivated with Russia in mind. The same is the case for *Al Jazeera* and *TeleSUR*. There is a space in the landscape for this news. *Fox News* is right wing and sometimes totally disgusting in their broadcast but they have the right to be there.

AS: *This is a more institutional question. The early raison d’être of The Caribbean School of Media and Communication (CARIMAC) at The UWI had in part to do with training a professional cohort of media workers in the region. Do you think it has lived up to this promise? And is the organisation relevant today?*

WG: I don’t think CARIMAC has lived up to expectations of the media industry in the region and, even though it is not at the forefront of the minds of the media audience, it has not performed the function it ought to have. One [reason] is that the scatter shot focus of the early years needed to become far more channeled in a more systematic way. Only now you have a Degree in Journalism coming out of CARIMAC. We really did not have this focus on journalism. Now they are envisioning social media and the landscape. CARIMAC is lagging behind media development and in the process we have not produced the quality of personnel to lead the media in the Caribbean. I have respect for the work it does and there is a role for CARIMAC. It [also] needs to be more regional in character. Over the years it has become “Jamaicanised” in terms of faculty and the student population.



Wesley Gibbings and Michael Als at the launch of "No Half A Loaf", 1992.

Media and Activism

AS: *I want to understand more about climate change and the media. If you lectured in a class on "media and climate change", what is the core message you would to communicate to your students?*

WG: In journalism you are not expected to take to the story an ideological or philosophical position. You are trained to try your best to approach a story with a clean slate. When it comes to climate change, we discuss it as a survival issue for the Caribbean. If we have seen climate change unfold as it has, the question is not "How will the media thrive in the Caribbean?" The question is, "How will the Caribbean thrive?" It is a survival issue and to me it is no question whether we support or against. It is a matter of survival and similar to communications in a time of crisis.

We need to take an informed perspective on it. One of the first things the ACM did was work with the Climate Change Centre and published a handbook for covering climate change in the Caribbean.⁷

⁷ See: Mainstreaming Adaption to Climate Change Project. 2005. *Climate Change Handbook for Caribbean Journalists*. <http://acmpress.org/files/2014/12/20050000-ClimateChangeHandbook.pdf> . Accessed January 10, 2018.

AS: *In 2017, you were awarded the Percy Qoboza International Journalist Award for foreign journalists by the National Association of Black Journalists (USA). Do you think that in the region we have produced the quality of writers involved with social justice as Qoboza had done in South Africa?*

WG: The challenge of South Africa was a very peculiar kind of challenge that was political in nature. It called for a high level of fearlessness to present the truth or journalism that sought to illustrate the truth. [Qoboza] was tenacious and there is room for journalism to play that role in terms of survival issues.

To me, there is a Caribbean crisis in terms of international diplomacy and the recent vote on the Palestine issue showed this⁸. We need informed journalism that will explore what is the dynamic that took us to this point on an issue that is so important we did not come up with a cohesive approach. It is not about taking position it is about accepting the challenge to produce professionally composed information on issues you believe are central to our survival as a situation. We pay close attention to governance, but much less climate change. A journalist has to be against corruption and undemocratic practices, there is no ideological neutrality there. The CSME [CARICOM Single Market and Economy] is a special interest issue too. This is a natural reason for our integration as Caribbean nations, our survival.

Conclusion

Gibbings' contribution to development of journalism in the Caribbean and activism beyond the professional realm mark the significance of the field in Caribbean development. His career involves professional services in activist organisations, civil society organisations and the academy. Transition from one field to the next is not easy, however Gibbings multi-level advocacy and activism as well as his closeness to Caribbean culture allowed him mobility across geographies and professions throughout his career.

This interview also illustrates Gibbings disenchantment with political party politics and the state of contemporary Caribbean political leadership. Future studies should take into account the role and development of political communications – including pamphlets and little magazines – on the Caribbean media landscape.

⁸ This refers to the CARICOM split votes at the United Nations General Assembly on a non-binding resolution that challenged the Trump-led US administration's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Five of the fourteen CARICOM members states who voted at the UN Resolution on the Status of abstained, including Trinidad and Tobago. Two members were not present for the vote.

References

- ACM. 2005. *Climate Change Handbook for Caribbean Journalists*. Mainstreaming Adaptation to Climate Change (MACC) Project. Accessed January 10, 2018. <http://acmpress.org/files/2014/12/20050000-ClimateChangeHandbook.pdf>
- 2015. "Statement on Social Media attacks against Women TT Journalists." Association of Caribbean Media Workers (Online). Published March 24, 2015. Accessed January 10, 2018. <http://acmpress.org/2015/03/24/statement-on-social-media-attacks-against-female-tt-journalists/>
- Gibbings, Wesley. 2017. "A Brief Media History – T&T and the Caribbean." Caribbean Journalism (Blog), Published September 12, 2017. Accessed January 10, 2018. <http://wesleygibbings.blogspot.com/2017/09/a-brief-media-history-t-and-caribbean.html>
- Leidel, Steffen. 2014. "Can journalists be activists? A conversation with Dan Gillmor". Blog, *onMedia*, June 24, 2014. <http://onmedia.dw-akademie.com/english/?p=19753>. Accessed January 11, 2018.
- Ruigrok, Nel. 2010. "From Journalism of Activism Towards Journalism of Accountability." *The International Communication Gazette*, 1748-0485; 72 (1): 85-90. <http://www.arifyildirim.com/ilt510/nel.ruigrok.pdf> . Accessed January 11, 2018.