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**“MEDIA AS CHANGE AGENT IN THE PROTECTION  
OF OUR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN”**

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**Introduction**

Belize is a face-to-face society, with a population of 250,000 persons strong, approximately 50,000 households and 200,000 families with diverse structures, home ownership rate of 62%, electricity and water systems in our most remote villages. Our demographic and social indicators of well-being are viewed as so good that invariably some international agencies don't see the need to be in Belize. Yet we have been experiencing unstable environments in Belize that is difficult to quantify as the abovementioned indicators. The social landscape has changed dramatically and our unstable environments are primarily due to the continuing abuse and injustices against the most vulnerable in our society--our very own children. The patterns are insidious, but ones that we have acculturated, what we have accepted as okay. I am talking about the way in which the media sector persist in traumatizing us by delivering repeated assaults because of the insensitivity in using pictures and publishing names and violations of privacy against our little ones and their families.

The media sector constitutes radio, print, internet and the audio-visual--the almighty T.V. For the purpose of this paper media refer to the local programming of radio and T.V. news and current affairs. I have singled these out, as these are the conduits for information, beamed right into Belizean homes today. The perception of power generated in the story-telling format of news on the audio, the audio-visual and internet media is tremendous. Some have expressed concerns about the inclination of the media to misread the nature and significance of events by presenting these events solely through highlighting or exploiting the emotional, graphic or sensational. Those with these concerns often view the media as intrusive, serving as agents of voyeurism into personal distress.

Recent tragedies raise fresh questions about the role of media in situations of trauma: For example between Nov. 1999 to present:

- A child was interviewed on the media after witnessing the death of a sibling.
- The photograph of children on the front page of a newspaper after witnessing the decapitation of their mother by their father.
- False lead stories of near abduction of a child whose name was mentioned with nary a ruffle from that newspaper.
- The report of a brawl in San Pedro
- The report of a death at Rose Garden

You may ask yourself the million dollar question—Why didn't the story on over 200 youths excelling at CXC make the front page or headlines of the media?

### **Media's Place As A Social Institution**

In my various capacities in this society, I have worked well with the media sector. Therefore I would like to depart from the common observation mentioned above which stated that the media is very often intrusive, voyeuristic and superficial-- little is achieved through such social stereotypes. I am suggesting that media today plays a very important social role. You see, mass media have developed and integrated to such an extent that together they are one of the social institutions that make up the processes of social construction, meanings and reasoning--just like the Police Dept., Education Department--except bigger. Media have become fundamental to our lives in that Media have redefined the societal netting—"A wan tell Dickey" is a threat to complain to the Talk Shows. In this example, media no longer simply communicates what happens, but is the mediator through which things happen. Media are no longer just one of the players in the game of social relationships; rather media have become the arena. This new place or role of the media in the process of social de-construction is BIG, POWERFUL, and SIGNIFICANT.

### **Media and the Personal and Communal dimensions of Trauma**

How BIG? Take any one of the graphic headlines abovementioned -- it is a situation of trauma. Trauma is personal but also communal, not only in its practical impact but also in its symbolic bearing, as it reminds us of our own vulnerabilities. Modern media, particularly audio-visual and internet media have amplified the scope of trauma by extending the communal beyond the immediate community or geographic contacts to the superhighway, far beyond the country. As a result, more grief to the already traumatized.

Just as the personal and communal scope of trauma need to be moderated; in similar manner, media involvement as a part of the communal scope also needs to be moderated. But who does the moderating? You see, Trauma is generally seen as problematic by individuals whose rights are most directly affected by the trauma, and likewise, the media become problematic when they begin to impinge on the rights of the individuals. When these situations occur though, it is generally because some journalists are insensitive, unethical, and just out to get the “**best**” story. One needs realistically to recognize that most media are activities of commercial organizations, with their own business interests, perspectives and preferences—their own agendas. The specific interests of media personnel at times are overtaken by the business interests of the owners of the media and hence become a part and parcel of the power interaction.

However, there is no need for negotiations in presenting or reporting on families and children in Belize. The boundaries are clear--it is illegal to traumatize our children as the law protects them. Section 150 of the Families and Children’s Act states that the privacy for children involved in court proceedings must be maintained. It is an offence for any person to publish any material which is intended or is likely to identify the child. Any person who violates this law shall be guilty of an offence and may have to pay a fine not exceeding \$5,000.00 or may be imprisoned for a term not exceeding 12 months or both.

**Amen.**

## **Conclusion**

As a chronicler of current events and creator of public opinion, the media are a potent educational tool that is still under-utilized. The role of the media is crucial to the issue of child protection both in terms of **how** media report (or distort) the issue, and **how** media may be used as a tool to raise awareness through balanced, reliable reporting. Access to information is essential as it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices. Therefore media activities need not be viewed in isolation. As change agents we all play a role in the protection of our families and children. We can be watchdogs, analyse news for violations of children rights and violators of our laws pertaining to children, develop and understanding of the ways in which the media tells the story and consider the headline—how language is used, is it fact or opinion, is there evidence—is the information valid and reliable.

Today would be wasted if we walked away without some commitment to protect families and children. I am suggesting as a strategy for child protection, to formulate a Child Rights Network, spearheaded by NCFC—Media, Government and N.G.O. as partners in this endeavour. Is anyone listening?!

***Thank you***

***Myrtle Palacio***

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