

The Media Association Jamaica Limited, MAJ has for several months been discussing with the government its proposals to change how it uses the allocation of government reserved time on radio and television stations (see attached schedule).

The plans would on weekdays abandon the 30 minute programmes done by the Jamaica Information Service (JIS) to introduce ten news headline programmes each weekday on all stations to be called GOJ News Headlines and to also introduce three - five minute programmes called GOJ Update for a total of thirteen of the same programmes on all radio and TV stations each weekday.

MAJ and non-MAJ members disagree with the plan and have raised concerns about how this would negatively affect broadcasters – forcing them to sound alike, reducing their diversity and therefore their competitiveness and potentially destroying their formats – including music stations. The MAJ instead offered some free and discounted airtime through matching funding for specific campaigns that would allow the government to promote activities that are designed to meet specific national challenges.

Media also noted that there is government time that was not utilising on some stations and urged that the JIS could utilise this with stations agreement for some flexibility even as they preserve their formats.

In the process media have discussed components of the plan with the Minister with responsibility for Information, have met with consultants of the government on the matter and have written to the Prime Minister who is the substantive Minister of Information and appealed to him to review the proposals. The Prime Minister, among other things has indicated that the government's view is that there is a need to move away from many of the old practises, such as these 30 minute programmes.

The Media Association is convinced that to order media houses to carry out these changes, to unilaterally change our licenses or to in any other way to force these changes would be against media freedoms, would harm our businesses and could confuse, mislead and short-change the public with the information given.

So as not to respond without foundation, the MAJ solicited information from the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association, CBA and the Caribbean Broadcasting Union, CBU. Neither organisation could find any evidence in the Caribbean, nor in the Commonwealth to support actions like this.

So shocked was the CBA by the proposed new measures that at their meeting in Johannesburg last week they discussed the matter and wrote to the government through the Jamaican High Commission in London (see attached), urging that the proposals be abandoned. The CBA noted that they know of no other country in the Commonwealth which has adopted such measures.

It says such moves by the Jamaican government would damage the independence and credibility of the media in Jamaica.