

Hon. Members of the Council of Ministers,

I am motivated today to address the issue of professional Journalism as a result of the most recent headline that appeared on a website namely SMN, whose main proprietor one can assume is Bibi Shaw.

The headline published on the online website said: **"SWW3 Government Collapses - -- Laville pulls the plug"** dated August 22 2013.

This was a case of irresponsible reporting or 'yellow journalism' which has devastating effects on our country's image, but more so, on the people of this country. Our people already went through an un-nerving situation with the second fall of government back in May that unfolded over a period of six weeks.

Therefore, as a Council we need to look at what measures can be taken for the media in general where it concerns responsible journalism, media credentials with the end result of weeding out those that can't meet the criteria.

At the same time of course, we would not want to create the impression that we are attempting to stifle journalists or media houses in any manner or form with respect to freedom of speech as guaranteed in our Constitution. One journalist should not be allowed to create a bad name or image for the other journalists in the field.

I foresee a phased media accreditation policy being developed whereby some immediate steps can be taken while other steps over a phased period such eg. Media houses and journalist being part of an association who also has a code of ethics that they operate under, and for those media houses to be a part of the association they should abide by this code and if not they are not considered accredited. At the same time Government should also have their own media code of accreditation which would be another layer; foreign journalist especially those who cover news on the Dutch side should be required to have a work permit especially if they want to take part in press briefings, and Government needs to lead by example by setting criteria for journalist to report in a responsible manner.

Much has been written about the topic of responsible journalism, interestingly primarily by journalists or societies of journalists. Our country does not have a media association comprising of the media houses.

For the purpose of establishing a point of departure I have quoted from two sources the following regarding responsible journalism:

SPJ Code of Ethics

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is

to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

## PRINCIPLES OF JOURNALISM

In 1997, an organization then administered by PEJ, the Committee of Concerned Journalists, began a national conversation among citizens and news people to identify and clarify the principles that underlie journalism. After four years of research, including 20 public forums around the country, a reading of journalism history, a national survey of journalists, and more, the group released a Statement of Shared Purpose that identified nine principles. These became the basis for *The Elements of Journalism*, the book by PEJ Director Tom Rosenstiel and CCJ Chairman and PEJ Senior Counselor Bill Kovach. Here are those principles, as outlined in the original Statement of Shared Purpose.

- 1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth*
- 2. Its first loyalty is to citizens*
- 3. Its essence is a discipline of verification*
- 4. Its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover*
- 5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power*
- 6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise*
- 7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant*
- 8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional*
- 9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience*

If we as a council agree that the headlines as quoted above by SMN is not only misleading but completely inaccurate and unsubstantiated;

That this is not the first time, but rather one of many occasions that SMN has reported what can be unsubstantiated stories;

That these stories violate widely and universally accepted principals based on which journalists should operate;

Then I suggest to this honorable Council:

That the honorable Council of Ministers takes a firm position against journalists and media houses who violate universally accepted principals of journalism of which the first is to report the truth;

That the honorable Council Of Ministers condemns stories that are written which are baseless, untruthful, unfounded and harmful;

That government issues an assignment to further look into the subject of responsible media reporting and the use of the social media taking into account that it is not the intention to violate the freedom of speech, but rather to establish universally accepted guidelines which will serve to insure responsible reporting and publication in both the main stream media as well as social media, addressing, but not limited to the issue of social consciousness by authors.

Perhaps it's time to initiate regulation that requires social bloggers to sign their names to their comments. Taking responsibility for what you say and write, should be equally important to the media as it is to the citizens. This is an area that should be looked into.

Consider establishing the requirement to obtain Press & Accreditation Cards making distinctions between resident and non resident media houses and reporters with the objective to ensure that those reporting do so in accordance with universally accepted guidelines taking full responsibility for above all, reporting the truth.

None of the aforementioned would be new ground that St. Maarten will be treading upon. Specifically internet laws are becoming more prevalent the world over.

In June 2013, Legislators in Grenada approved a bill that makes it a crime to offend people through websites such as Facebook and Twitter and blog sites. The measure was approved as part of an electronic crimes bill. The same bill also imposes penalties on other online activities including electronic stalking and identity theft. For the latter we have seen people freely assume the names of prominent persons in this community to open Facebook accounts with and post derogatory comments under.

The government of Grenada saw the importance to put structures in place to ensure that persons and, in some cases, companies and characters are not tarnished. According to the bill complaints about offensive comments would be filed with police. A judge would then decide if the message was offensive. Those found guilty could be fined up to \$37,000 or face three years in prison. A person will be able to take that evidence of the posting and use it as evidence in the court.

Then in August 2013, one of the world's largest political websites, The Huffington Post, in an effort to weed out the so called "trolls" or nasty anonymous commenters, will now

require readers to identify themselves by name in the comments sections of the news site. *"Freedom of expression is given to people who stand up for what they're saying and who are not hiding behind anonymity," Ariana Huffington.*

I would like to thank the honorable Council for considering the aforementioned proposal as we seek to bring the level of media reporting to a higher responsible level. There are some exhibits of text included from several sources regarding responsible journalism.

**Maurice Lake**

**Hon. Minister of Public Housing, Spatial Planning, Environment and Infrastructure**

**Saturday, August 24, 2013**

**Exhibit 1:**

SPJ Code of Ethics

Preamble

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues. Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty. Professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility. Members of the Society share a dedication to ethical behavior and adopt this code to declare the Society's principles and standards of practice.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behavior. The code is intended not as a set of "rules" but as a resource for ethical decision-making. It is not — nor can it be under the First Amendment — legally enforceable.

For an expanded explanation, [please follow this link](#).

## Seek Truth and Report It

Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- Test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible.
- Diligently seek out subjects of news stories to give them the opportunity to respond to allegations of wrongdoing.
- Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability.
- Always question sources' motives before promising anonymity. Clarify conditions attached to any promise made in exchange for information. Keep promises.
- Make certain that headlines, news teases and promotional material, photos, video, audio, graphics, sound bites and quotations do not misrepresent. They should not oversimplify or highlight incidents out of context.
- Never distort the content of news photos or video. Image enhancement for technical clarity is always permissible. Label montages and photo illustrations.
- Avoid misleading re-enactments or staged news events. If re-enactment is necessary to tell a story, label it.
- Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information except when traditional open methods will not yield information vital to the public. Use of such methods should be explained as part of the story
- Never plagiarize.
- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

- Support the open exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- Give voice to the voiceless; official and unofficial sources of information can be equally valid.
- Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.
- Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two.
- Recognize a special obligation to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open and that government records are open to inspection.

### Minimize Harm

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.
- Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.
- Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.
- Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.
- Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.
- Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.
- Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.
- Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.

### Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

#### Be Accountable

Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.

Journalists should:

- Clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct.
- Encourage the public to voice grievances against the news media.
- Admit mistakes and correct them promptly.
- Expose unethical practices of journalists and the news media.
- Abide by the same high standards to which they hold others.

#### *Exhibit 2:*

*The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of writers, editors and other news professionals. The present version of the code was adopted by the 1996 SPJ National Convention, after months of study and debate among the Society's members.*

*Sigma Delta Chi's first Code of Ethics was borrowed from the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1926. In 1973, Sigma Delta Chi wrote its own code, which was revised in 1984, 1987 and 1996.*