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Jamaica Bans Music Promoting Violence and Other Illegal Activity

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Jamaican artist Skillibeng in his music video "Whap Whap", with lyrical content that includes gun violence.

The Jamaican Broadcasting Commission announced on Tuesday that all broadcasters had been ordered to cease and desist from airing any audio or video that supported practices deemed harmful to the social order, including scamming, drug use, gun violence, or any other type of criminal behavior.

The commission's decree includes a ban on live editing and original edits, such as from the producer or label, and a ban on substituting similar sounding words in lieu of expletives and other offensive vocabulary.

The decision to take immediate action is in keeping with the agenda to rid national airwaves of harmful content, as the Commission noted the influence media has on the minds and actions of the general public.

The press release announcing the new paradigm drew attention to what it termed the "wrong impression" being given, that it was acceptable to partake in criminal activity, due to the hitherto unchecked broadcasting of music which normalizes, and some might say glorifies, illegality.

The Commission spoke of the influence musical content can have on young Jamaicans, saying, "It could also unwittingly lend support to moral disengagement and further normalize criminality among vulnerable and impressionable youth, and the young adult demographic."

The release quoted Executive Director Cordel Green saying that there was extensive work done before this course of action was decided upon. JBC officials engaged in focused monitoring, deciphered the meaning of local dialect and slang terminology, took into consideration freedom of expression concerns, and consulted with industry stakeholders before issuing the order.

Directly addressing the question of freedom of expression, Green said that such freedoms come into conflict with responsible broadcasting standards when it comes to normalizing criminality through music and videos.

Green said while the commission embarks on this newest effort to keep the airways free of illegal influence, it was mindful that these very efforts could bring unwanted attention to the very exact issue it is trying to curb.

"The Commission also has to be circumspect in its actions, knowing that regulatory attention can have the unintended consequence of giving exposure to, and popularizing subcultural phenomenon," Green said.

The commission maintained its commitment to protecting children and impressionable youth from dangerous and suggestive media content through its regulatory powers.

The question that now arises from some quarters is the efficacy of the Commission's efforts to curb the presumed influence the music has on the society, and more specifically the youth.

With online digital steaming platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and Soundcloud, among others, now ubiquitous, it remains uncertain as to whether the Commission's regulatory control over legacy broadcast media will deter recording artists from producing music containing the restricted lyrical content.

Revenue for many artists comes from online streaming in much greater sums than from their radio plays, and thus it could be argued that the financial hit from having their music scrubbed from the airwaves would be minimal at best, leaving little incentive to adjust their approach.

Despite the Commission's stakeholder consultations, reaction to the new decree from the music industry has been largely negative.

Outspoken recording artist Tanya Stephens penned a letter in the Jamaica Observer that called the ban "archaic". She skewered the tendency of policymakers of resorting to bans of this type as a way to look tough when public pressure to curb crime or antisocial behavior rises.

Music Producer Romeich argued via his social media platforms that artists wrote about what they witnessed in their environment, and as opposed to glorifying criminality, many songs were just chronicles of the unpleasant reality many experience in their quest for fame.

Romeich questioned whether Jamaican authorities will attempt to ban the international platforms, to which most of the youthful population has access.

Tarik "Rvssian" Johnston scoffed at the perceived futility of the Commission's move, posting "Good thing we don't need radio anymore. I can't remember last royalties they paid me. YouTube d ting deh anyway. This is crazy lol. Let's just ask them to write the songs too."

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