



Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers

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The Impact of Digital Technologies on Journalism and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean

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"Effects of digital technologies on journalism and democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean – What has changed so far and what transformations lie ahead?"

By Peter Richards

INTRODUCTION

When the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) was started in the 1970's in Japan to provide error-free transmission of information at far higher speeds than was possible at the time with the ordinary telephone network, it was ridiculed by consumers in the developed world as "Innovation that Subscribers Did not Need", probably because of the high cost associated with it.

But since then ISDN, which utilises fibre optic technology to improve bandwidth, has expanded across the world, providing the infrastructural support for a far wider range of services such as video-conferencing, vastly improved sound quality, high speed data transfer in addition to high speed and colour fax.

With the advent of ISDN sound quality has vastly improved, so too has intra-company communications for large firms, which can now afford to operate the same facilities at both head office and remote sites. The outcome is an enhanced level of communication across the entire company.

Moreover, as a new range of ISDN products becomes available, prices are falling as awareness of this technology's usefulness and potential heightens.

A few years ago, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and many other state-owned and private commercial media enterprises, announced the discovery of a new application utilising ISDN. They called it home broadcasting. At the time, the BBC used theirs to improve upon its phone-in programmes, while others used it to enhance sports coverage. Ultimately it moved into the main stream news gathering.

As a result, the trend is now towards digital. Before, electrical signals were transmitted in analogue format but along came digital, whose discrete, discontinuous, on-off forms have proven to be far more beneficial than these continuous wave like patterns.

As indicated already, digital transmission enables advantage to be taken of higher technology common to many other advanced electronic applications leading to prospects of further improved economics. It also provides the basis for an integrated approach to transmission and switching functions. The high quality of transmission is achieved independent of distance, simply because the digital signal is



regenerated at intervals along the line unlike an analogue system which amplifies both the signal and the noise accumulated on route.

Social Implications-Caribbean

I cannot speak with any authority on the situation in Latin America. I therefore will confine my paper to the situation in the Caribbean. But I am sure my Latin American colleagues around this table share at least some of my experiences.

The global context of the 21st century is one in which telecommunications, high speed computers, satellite systems and other new technologies have transformed the way we work, live, market goods, conduct business and even go to war.

Through the ages, societies have developed and survived in geo-physical circumstances because of ideas born in the human mind, disseminated through communication within the community and preserved for practical application from generation to generation either through tradition, custom, folklore and latterly through books, journals, records and newspapers.

Along the way, these societies have shifted gears from agrarian to industrialised nuclear societies deploying innovations in energy sources to create competitive material advantages for economic growth and human advancement. Yet we have never labelled them as information or knowledge societies, whose distinguishing feature is the harnessing of the Information and Technological networks as the vehicle for swift, rapid and efficient delivery of information. The Internet has become the tool and symbol of this group.

However, there is no denying the existence of a digital divide. I alluded earlier to the development of ISDN and the hope that it would have allowed for people everywhere to have access to any kind of voice, data, and image service in any place at any time with maximum convenience and economy.

ISDN was seen as a logical extension of the concept of Integrated Digital. But the investors did not take into consideration the fact that not all subscribers want all the services, except some businesses that already anyway have integrated services.

This scenario is perhaps best applied to the Caribbean, a region stretching from Suriname in the South to the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Bahamas and Cuba in the north, and whose governments are pre-occupied with initiatives aimed at poverty eradication in the face of declining commodity markets.

Professor Vaughan Lewis, a former senior lecturer at the University of the West Indies (UWI) notes that the regimes which took these former English speaking British colonies into independence after 1962 expected the systems of "protected integration" into the global economy to continue indefinitely.



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Sadly, that has not occurred but even as the Caribbean seeks to find itself within a more complex globalised community, Caribbean governments have pledged their commitment to the goal of creating an information society.

“The Information Society represents a phenomenal challenge and opportunity for the countries of the English speaking Caribbean. We are in the midst of a new revolution - one which will have more dramatic implications than any other in the history of the World.

“New structures and business models are evolving but, unlike in previous times, these developments are taking place at breakneck speed. Rapid response is needed to ensure that the benefits of the Information Society can be availed of by all CARICOM citizens and businesses, thus contributing to the ongoing improvement of society and economy. Failure to act would also mean missing out on the opportunities to improve the social inclusion and functional cooperation processes through the use of information and communication technologies.

The intention is that this document will form the basis of the regional framework”. (Draft Framework for CARICOM 2010-Information Society Strategy)

The World Bank in a report “Information and Communications for Development 2009” found that Internet users in developing countries increased tenfold between 2000 to 2007 and that there are now over four billion mobile phone subscribers in developing countries.

This expansion is mirrored in the Caribbean where telecom has become a major growth area, particularly in the mobile sector. In the Caribbean, mobile usage was, on average, 70 per cent in 2007 - well above the world average of 58 per cent. The bank identified the mobile platform as the "single most powerful way to reach and deliver public and private services to hundreds of millions of people in remote and rural areas across the developing world” and that broadband provides the basis for local information technology (IT) services industries which create youth employment, increase productivity and exports, and promote social inclusion.

World Bank Vice President for sustainable development, Katherine Sierra, said access to broadband completes the information foundation for a modern economy and should be a priority in national development plans," and that is why the financial institution has offered to help the Caribbean.

President of the Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU) Kennedy Swaratsingh, a Trinidad and Tobago government minister, earlier this year urged Caribbean countries to accelerate the pace of information and communications technology adoption to keep up with the rest of the world.

"It is imperative for our security, the social and economic advancement of the region, your country and your businesses in an increasingly globalized era."



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The media landscape across the Caribbean is as diverse as its peoples and cultures. The issues and challenges facing the media vary widely and while there may not be consensus on the solutions, there is no disagreement as to the crucial role played by a free and independent media in a democratic Caribbean although there is the basis for some debate as to whether this conventional view can be applied to Cuba, the biggest of the Caribbean islands.

Press freedom goes hand in hand with democracy. As countries seek a more democratic political structure, the concept of press freedom is often assumed, perhaps because international instruments with freedom of expression provisions were established as early as 1948 when the United Nations included Article 19, the Universal Declaration of Human rights, in its charter.

What is happening, though, is that depending on how the media are positioned within the state and society, media can function either as a tool for development and therefore are subject to restrictions by the state, or the media can function within the marketplace with the ability to freely express themselves and risk the instability that that market may bring.

Press freedom often can be challenged even in countries, like in the Community, that have enjoyed democratic freedoms for many years. These challenges can be in the form of interruptions that are long term or temporary.

Trinidadian attorney Dana Seethal in a paper entitled “Press Freedom in the Region” noted that “Freedom of the press is, like other fundamental human rights, not absolute. It is inherently subject to respect for the rights and freedom of others and the public interest”.

But in most of the Caribbean, the right to government information is marked by the absence of any “Freedom of Information” act, perhaps because, we operate in a climate that all government information is secret until positively and authoritatively disclosed to the public. Media lawyers and organisations have long argued that access to government information should be recognised as a basic right limited only by exigencies of national security. The argument being, in the market place of ideas and good governance, the citizen needs information to effectively participate in and influence national decision making processes.

Information Technology has revolution modern society and nowadays it deeply affects our lives in ways perhaps we are yet to fully understand. The rapid diffusion of micro-computers, along with the recent advances in telecommunications has not only had profound effects on the ways in which people communicate with each other, but mico-computers and telecommunications have also substantially increased the volume of information being disseminated around the Caribbean, and more specifically the world.



Countries, which in the past used to compete for power as a means to wealth, have now undertaken a reversal of that policy. Underlying such a change is the integration of a number of activities under the heading “information processing”. Thus the opportunities opened up by the technical innovations are so large and exciting that it is hard to grasp the full extent of the change.

This paper while it attempts to look at the changing character of news in light of the current developments within the communication and information technology environment, will also allow me the opportunity to argue that any development within ICT and the move by Caribbean governments to establish a meaningful Information and Communication Technology environment, should not be used as a means for stifling the free flow of information by the media to the peoples of the region.

Media and New Technology

The primary role of the media is to provide accurate information to society to the point that it can be argued that most people today depend on the media for news outside their own immediate boundaries. Yet it is such news, according to the classic theory of liberal democracy, which occupies a central position as the crucial information needed by citizens for effective participation in a modern democracy.

Liberals have long contended an individual should be free to publish what he or she likes and is thus an extension of other rights, such as to hold opinions freely, to express them, to assemble and organise with others. In the present era however, these ideals have remained in some instances, mere possibilities, in the sense that they are ideals which have been trampled and negated as a result of development in the political and economic realities of the environment in which media establishments have found themselves.

The Caribbean is not immune from the trend as governments, corporations and big businesses make deliberate efforts to interfere with the final news product that goes out for public consumption. This is done either by direct or indirect censorship as well as eliminating any information that could be against the interest of these powers.

In addition, the computerisation of newsrooms and modern ways of gathering and storage of information subvert the journalist’s independence and as a result, what the public is offered is some kind of concoction of news, entertainment, advertisement and some government image making product in the form of public relations.

The lucrative nature of information business is attracting established businesses in both media and non media interest to join in the technological race with adverse effects on the news product that goes to the general public. Further, as some regional media organisations seek to transcend their national boundaries, what are also occurring are the displacement of news as a commodity and the transformation of the media establishment into big business.



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In many Caribbean countries, ownership of the media includes participation in the insurance, textile and retail industries. There are many examples of this in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. These conglomerates have become interested in newspapers, television, radio and other new forms of the media. They have moved into the media not only for prestige, but as a strategy by which they sought to influence the environment in which they operated. But despite their entry, governments have used many methods to control what the public may read, hear or see. A further consequence of government pressures is that journalists and management practice self censorship.

Further, economic circumstances combined with the rigours of licensing requirements have resulted in the creation of a monopolistic state-owned broadcasting media in some parts of the Caribbean. The policy of governments has been to restrict access to state-owned broadcasting stations to ministers of government. Some Caribbean countries require that newspapers obtain a licence for a substantial fee and to provide bonds of surety above and beyond the ordinary registration requirements. Some lawyers have argued that such licensing requirements run counter to the fundamental right to Freedom of Expression.

In his study "Individual Rights", Mexican scholar Ignacio Burgoa said: A community comprised of individuals condemned not to express their thoughts to their fellow citizens will always be abject and servile, incapable of any cultural development. Regimes that consecrate the free flow of ideas, open discussion and healthy criticism will be able to provide society with the possibility of intellectual advancement. Otherwise when the free flow of thought is choked off, forbidding polemics, discussions, lectures, conferences and so on that lead to the free exchange of ideas, society is being led down the path to cultural slavery and moral ruin".

Caribbean countries, such as Trinidad and Tobago and those in the smaller Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), are moving to implement broadcast legislation as one of the means of dealing with the transformation of the broadcasting sector as a result of the "rapidly evolving information and communications technologies, fuelled by the market forces of a globalised environment".

The draft Broadcast Code issued by the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) in explaining the need for the new legislation notes that while "positive discussions on our radio and television stations on issues such as race, religion and politics as well as programmes and broadcasts, that deal with real life issues such as rape, violence and relationships can aid in shaping social consensus on acceptable behaviour and introducing positive values, unfortunately, there has been the persistent dissemination of offensive information in some of the local broadcast media which denigrates and humiliates various sections of our national community, and may prompt negative inter-group perspectives and stereotyping and may even incite violence. This can over time lead to the erosion and ultimate collapse of our democracy."



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But what is interesting in the document is what persons like Leonard Sussman (*Power, the Press and the Technology of Freedom, The Coming Age of ISDN -1989*) argue is the use of official measures to control the flow of information.

The TATT draft document notes that the National Broadcasting Code document “gives broadcasters and the general public an understanding of the factors which should be taken into account when making editorial judgements.”

And yet at the same time, seeks to provide a hands off attitude by indicating that “the provisions of this Broadcasting Code therefore, should not be construed as preventing or impeding the broadcast of the wide range of material necessary to help broadcasters fulfil their obligations and to operate in the public interest and be viable corporate entities. The challenge to the broadcaster would now be to determine how to cater suitably for the complexities of human behaviour in our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious society within the parameters of the Broadcasting Code”.

The Dominica government, which among the OECS countries, is seemingly on course to introduce Broadcast Code legislation in 2009, is encountering stiff resistance from media practitioners on the island.

President of the Media Workers Association of Dominica (MWAD), Thalia Remy warned that the passage of this legislation could present problems to the operations of a “pluralistic, independent media in Dominica”.

“The nature of the relationship between media in any country and government is such that it is inadvisable for the government to regulate the media’s activities. The Media Workers’ Association of Dominica contends that the media, civil society and our democracy would be better served if government facilitated a broadcasting-community-led establishment of a truly Independent Broadcast Authority,” Remy said.

In his paper “Technological Challenges to Traditional Media in the Caribbean”, presented to a UNESCO conference in Jamaica in 2003, Claude Robinson argued that the new communication technologies are altering journalism, both newspaper and radio. He said the Internet, which is not an extension of either broadcasting (the mass media) or the telephone (personal media) is a medium that can extend the number and variety of communication opportunities.

Robinson further argued that the new media technology would ultimately influence journalism by facilitating the emergence of what he termed ‘contextualized journalism’ a form of reportage that relies less on objectivity, sees journalists as interpreters of events, empowers the audience, and reconnects communities.

In fact John Pavlik, of the Center for New Media at Colombia's Graduate School of Journalism, (Journalism and New Media, New York: Colombia University (2001) describes how new media encourage these transformations through fluid online architectures, customizability, instantaneity and interactivity. These developments will enhance the potential for journalism to better serve democracy.

Prominent Caribbean attorney Bernice V Lake (Legal, Economic and Policy Challenges to Creaking Knowledge Societies in the Caribbean 2003) argues that the transition to knowledge societies in the Caribbean will challenge the political will to effect fundamental changes to a prevailing mind-set with respect to the citizen's right of access to information and to harmonise the approach to the legal framework governing traditional media with the approach being adopted for information and communication technological networks.

She said the policy of liberalisation fashioned for the telecommunication industry must be remodelled to meet the requirements of the traditional media if the Caribbean is to create a knowledge culture for the advancement of the democratic process, instead of a society limited to the use of knowledge based skills as a way out of poverty only.

"Only in an environment where knowledge is promoted for the sake of knowledge can there be an explosion and cross fertilization of ideas for the creative use of knowledge, whether the avenue be the economic, the social political or personal".

CONCLUSION

Caribbean countries are now seeking to take full advantage of the declaration emanating from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in Geneva in 2003. The Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action encourages the involvement of various stakeholders in the policy formulation and implementation processes, with special emphasis on the private sector development and poverty reduction efforts.

As already pointed out, Caribbean countries acknowledge that failure to act would also mean missing out on the opportunities to improve the social inclusion and functional cooperation processes through the use of information and communication technologies.

To this end, they have established a regional working group to help formulate strategies to develop the ICT sector taking into consideration the views of the various stakeholders including the media.

Accordingly, a draft document prepared by the group makes a case for increased cooperation and partnerships between governmental and intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, civil society and the media.



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The group argues that the mass media – in their various forms – should be recognized as important means of fostering public information, societal development and social cohesion and functional cooperation.

Moreover, there is the argument that public policy should foster the creation of varied information content, which helps to preserve and disseminate local and national culture, language and heritage, and to safeguard family and community cohesion.

Further, investment should be made in the development of regional media content as well as new technologies and there should be support for independent production and pluralistic media as well as the promotion of appropriate multilateral television networks.

We look forward to full implementation!

Peter Richards is Vice President of the Association of Caribbean Media Workers.

He holds a Masters Degree in Communication Policy Studies.

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