Media, communication and development: Challenges for the small Caribbean islands

Nancy Muturi

The following article briefly discusses the current situation of information and communication technologies and the challenges of adopting new media technologies in the Caribbean. It also offers some insights into the way forward post-WSIS citing examples from the region. The terms ‘new media’ and ‘communication technologies are used interchangeably throughout.

Development communication has steadily grown over the recent three decades as professionals from different fields and backgrounds recognize and continue to explore the critical role of communication in bringing about change at various levels – individual, community, society, national and international. Though the field has faced several challenges over time, to an extent that some have declared it a dead field, compared to others, the interests and collaborative contributions of researchers, scholars and practitioners have led to the dynamism necessary for the growth and development seen today.

The emergence of new media technologies, also referred to as information and communication technologies (ICTs), and recognition of their role in social, political and economic development in the 1970s, has enhanced media for development activities globally. From personal computers, internet with wireless connection and digital cameras to cable television, two-way call-in radio, mobile telephones and other digital devices, these have all contributed to the changes in information dissemination, while making sharing and networking possible among individuals and organizations almost in every field of development.

Internet and call-in radio for example contributes to the Caribbean markets, promoting the Jamaican culture including Reggae and Dancehall music, sports, or other local programming globally. Mobile phones also facilitate people’s participation in Caribbean affairs through call-in radio from any part of the world. Getting where they are today, many Caribbean islands have needed the support of the local and international communities.

New Media in Caribbean development

New media technologies are now widely recognized and promoted as tools for development, certainly in the less developed countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. A key

focus of the 2003 World Summit for Information Society (WSIS) for example was on the closure of digital divide enabling equal access and use of the technology globally.

Caribbean governments have responded positively to the WSIS call and recognition of ICTs in national development with recognizable contributions for connectivity. For instance, a $15 billion Jamaican dollar project granted to Fibralink Jamaica Limited and Trans-Caribbean Cable Company Limited (TCCCL) for the construction and operation of two submarine fibre optic networks, will link Jamaica to North America, and the rest of the world (Jamaica Information Service, 7 January 2005). The government has also widely supported new technologies through the Ministry of Commerce, Science and Technology initially with financial support of close to a US$17 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank, granted for e-readiness.

With such government commitment and support, the Jamaican government sets the tone for the rest of the Caribbean. Success in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago can be seen through the 2001 creation of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology to lead ICT initiatives. These initiatives have supported local and multinational ICT agencies and has contributed to a steady increase in teledensity through the penetration of mobile phones across the islands and to the mushrooming of Internet Café's across the islands. Internet connection at home is however still low in Trinidad compared to other islands due to high connectivity costs.

In Antigua and Barbuda, the government has committed to building a new economy based on degrees of information, knowledge handling and exchange. This is with the recognition that accessibility to ICTs and connectivity, specifically broadband connectivity, which is largely dependent on the development of an adequate infrastructure, is equal to economic opportunity and will determine the rate at which a knowledge-based economy will emerge.

With the goal of promoting Antigua as a Regional Centre of Information Communication Technology Excellence, the Ministry of Broadcasting, Information and Telecommunications launched in a two-day ICT FEST in September 2005, a programme to reduce the digital divide and to increase teledensity by beginning to provide ordinary citizens with access to ICTs at the community level.

Similarly the government supports the development of ICT policy and strategic plans for guiding the integration and adaptation of ICTs in many spheres including education, commerce, governance systems and law enforcement (East Caribbean news, Thursday, 12 May 2005).

The international community has had a fair share of contribution in ICT adoption Caribbean-wide. With the leadership of UNESCO, ICT adoption is demonstrated by the emergence and development of community media across the Caribbean islands. Radio, community radio and

local television stations as well as community newspapers are widely established with UNESCO funding. For example, UNESCO supported the development of a regional online newspaper Eastern Caribbean News an online news channels to serve the small islands in the region (http://www.ecnetnews.com).

Other international communities in the region, with interests in communication for development, have included the World Bank offering grants and loans for ICTs for e-readiness and e-business, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) focusing on gender and development issues, and the Commonwealth of Learning with interests in education and the agricultural sector. UNDP, UNIFEM, UNICEF, and the European Union have also contributed through support of communication programs including website development and maintenance for information dissemination.

Not all small Caribbean islands, however, have the same capacity and capability as indicated above. Political problems in Haiti and economic challenges in Guyana and in other small islands are examples of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) where support for ICT development and adoption is needed. In Guyana, the lack of capacity and proper infrastructure is a crucial challenge. The country struggles for a government-wide ICT policy and strategy where technology benefits all sectors but this requires an enabling environment and infrastructure to implement such a policy.

Challenges for the Caribbean

The use and application of media and communication technologies for development has attracted the interest of researchers and scholars who question their potential as well as challenges and effectiveness in addressing the development needs of the region. One of the visible challenges in ICTs for development is the lack of financial resources to adopt and maintain the technologies in several islands across the Caribbean.

Financial issues particularly in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) including the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) was one of the issues left unresolved at the 2003 WSIS along with the thorny issue of Internet governance (Hambly Odame, 2005). Financial strains related to connectivity in the small islands are largely felt by NGOs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) that struggle to keep or update websites due to high costs of subscription and maintenance. The prohibitive costs for IT consultants to create and maintain a web site prevent many organizations from using the Internet for their communication efforts.

An example of such organizations is Women's Media Watch Jamaica, an advocacy organization that monitors the media concerning violence against women and other media-related gender

problems. With support financial support from CIDA's, gender and development program that ended in 2005, the organization developed a website and offered internet access and IT training including PowerPoint presentations and desktop publishing as empowerment to its members. Though the organization still has few computers, they could not maintain a website but produces a monthly electronic newsletter sent out to members and other affiliates globally via email.

Related to connectivity is the cost of individual Internet access. The prohibitive costs of computers due to a government levy on technology imports as well as high internet monthly fees ranging from US$40 to $60 depending on connectivity time make it impossible for Internet access from home for the majority of Jamaicans. This situation is worsened by the high cost of fixed-lines telephones that puts an additional strain on consumers. As such many Jamaican people rely on access at the workplace, school or public places like libraries, Internet cafés and more recently, post offices. Internet connection is also available via the mobile telephones along with some service packages but limited by the high costs.

Lack of diversity among service providers also poses a great challenge Caribbean-wide. In Jamaica for instance, Cable and Wireless a UK subsidiary, enjoys a monopoly in fixed-line services and until recently the Internet and mobile phones. The provider holds a significant stake in the Telecommunication Services of Trinidad and Tobago (TSTT), thus enjoying similar monopoly in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and several other Caribbean islands.

The emergence of Digicel, a subsidiary of the Irish based Mossel Engineering Limited, recently broke that monopoly through an investment of US$630 million in mobile communication. Smaller telecommunication companies have also emerged to compete with the two telephone provider giants. However, the lack of guiding ICT policies and regulations across the Caribbean hampers this competition but many islands are in the process, some struggling to develop them as in the case of Haiti.

From a user perspective, access and effective use of computers is dependent on resources, skills and comfort with the technology. Many computer users in Jamaica have very limited IT skills thus only utilizing the technology for basic functions including word processing, data processing and email (Francis-Brown, 2002). A gender-gap also exists in the access and use of communication technologies Caribbean-wide, which calls for gender sensitive and gender-inclusive policies.

In Jamaica, for instance, few women have unlimited access outside of their workplace. Added to the connectivity challenges mentioned above is the issue of crime and violence, particularly gender-based violence, that prevent many women from such access to Internet cafés or public facilities, some of which are not accessible through public transportation (Muturi, 2006).

Related to gender issues are cultural factors that determine access to media and communication technologies. In rural Africa for instance, many women had little access to the family radio, which was controlled by the man and the older boys. In the Caribbean, men are considered techno-savvy and therefore required to know more about the technology such as computers, television and to some extent radio, which makes many women take a back seat in regard to media and other communication technologies and skills.

This has contributed to gender imbalances in training reflected in the job market where more women hold less technical positions in media and communication and dominate the call centres, most of which have emerged due to outsourcing of the US and European companies.

The way forward post-WSIS

In spite of challenges faced by the Caribbean islands, the recognition of ICTs in Caribbean development has contributed to continued efforts to improve the situation while creating the proper environment for their application. Jamaica has demonstrated this effort in financial support and a recent development and launch of IT policies in various government Ministries. Though the initial grants are from external sources, the commitment of the government has ensured a budget within the ministry of commerce science and technology for maintenance of the technology.

Building up the local capacity in ICTs and the need for skilled human resources is now recognized as a critical sustainability issue in the development of the Caribbean with the goal of eliminating or reducing the number of expatriates. The Jamaican government has introduced IT training courses to build the capacity required for effective use of technology for e-readiness, e-commerce, e-government and other e-business, which is done collaboratively with the academic institutions. The Creative Production and Training Centre Limited (CPTC) for instance equips the Jamaican youth with skills in media production on various cultural and community development programs (see CPTC website for more information - http://www.creativetvjamaica.com).

At the tertiary level, the Caribbean Universities, Northern Caribbean University, University of Technology and the University of the West Indies (UWI) have established ICT training programmes across the Caribbean along with several other vocational centres and privately owned training programmes. Worth mentioning is the UWI's Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication (CARIMAC) which focuses primarily on media and development in the Caribbean at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Participants in the Masters in Communication for Social and Behaviour Change are equipped with a laptop computer with wireless internet card for connectivity while the University provides hot spots at various locations on campus. This connectivity has enhanced access to information and

online resources in this resource poor Caribbean Island where laptops are excellent networking tools with professionals and programs in the development field.

With this strategy, however, there is still the need to move forward in the use of the technology for development purposes, addressing real problems that affect people in their daily lives. HIV/AIDS, for example, has become a women's problem in the Caribbean affecting more women on a daily basis than men. However, even though women form the majority of telephone consumers, the technology has not been used to disseminate education or prevention directly to them. Based on the success (or lack of it) other development programs could learn from the health model. Research is however required on the possible challenges and drawbacks in the use of this new medium in disseminating such sensitive information to the public.

To use the technology as mass media there is a need for the development of policies and regulatory measures. Most of the policies in the SIDS have been in draft form for several years, hampered by the lack of human and financial resources to acquire technical support to complete and implement them. As indicated in the case of Guyana, a lead agency is required to enforce the agreed standards and maintaining appropriate regulatory policies. Policy issues are facing several other islands that still struggle to develop and implement them across the Caribbean partly because of the requirement of government support and commitment.

Support for the development of such policies as indicated in the 2005 WSIS would be a welcome step for the Caribbean islands. Policies also need to address the social, cultural, economic and gender factors that hinder the access and effective use of new media for development purposes and as a step toward the closure of the digital divide within the islands.

Finally, a collaborative effort between governments, private sector and non-governmental work is necessary for the adoption of ICTs for development in the Caribbean. For small islands, such collaborative efforts would reduce reliance on the international funding agencies in the adoption and maintenance of ICTs by pooling their resources and through proper coordination.

It is probably possible for such collaboration to occur between the islands, most of which have very small populations and, therefore, inadequate human resources. The technology, however, if properly utilized could fill the human resources challenges in the Caribbean regions.

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Nancy Muturi is an assistant professor at Kansas State University with teaching and research interests in gender, health and development communication. Until 2005, she was the graduate studies director at the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication (CARIMAC), University of the West Indies, Jamaica. During her tenure in Jamaica, she helped develop the Masters programme in Communication for Social and Behavior Change. She now teaches as an adjunct lecturer at CARIMAC with research focus on Africa and the Caribbean where she is consulting with several international agencies including UNESCO and CIDA. She can be reached at nmuturi@yahoo.com