The Internet, Cultural Networks and Diversity of Cultural Communication: The Case of the Caribbean

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The unique feature of the Internet is that it is simultaneously a source of enormous amounts of pre-packaged information (the World Wide Web) as well as a technology that facilitates communication between people (email, chat rooms etc.); that allows people the opportunity, in Paulo Freire's felicitous phrase "to name the world" for themselves.

In the context of the neo-liberal agenda of globalization, governments the world over recognize the economic potential of the Internet and seek to harness its potential to gain competitive advantage in the global market. In doing so, they promulgate policies and regulations that largely liberalize and privilege the telecommunications sector - itself a cause and a consequence of the contemporary version of globalization.

Since the mid-1990s, Caribbean governments have pursued such policies in keeping with the structural adjustment strictures of the US government's Caribbean Basin Initiative. Among other things, this resulted in deregulation and liberalization of markets, and divestment and privatization of state controlled entities including government monopoly telecommunications services, so that today the telecoms sector is open to competition in most Caribbean countries.

One result of this competitive market-driven environment is that most Caribbean countries possess to a greater or lesser extent cutting edge telecommunications infrastructures with tele-densities ranked high to medium high on the UN's Human Development Index. Jamaica's Ministry of Industry and Commerce for example, estimates that there are approximately two million mobile phones in the country with a total population of 2.6 million people. As a matter of fact, there are more mobile phones than fixed lines in Jamaica and the ubiquity of mobile telephones in the Caribbean, and the rapid evolution of wireless technology, make the traditional development indicator of fixed lines per thousand population obsolete if not entirely quite meaningless. The majority of countries also have multiple multi-channel cable television as well as Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

But with this plethora of technologies and highly developed telecommunication infrastructure, what is the reality on the ground? In particular to what extent has the Internet made for greater cultural networking and diversity between and among the people of the region?

While in comparison with other parts of the world, geography, historical circumstances and a common language locate the English-speaking Caribbean in a favourable position *vis-a-vis* the United States of America, the world's leading innovator in the telecommunications industry, "A large and growing gap remains between the technology (H)aves and (H)ave nots. Differences in access to computer and communications technology also exist by household income, educational attainment, age and gender, with greatest inequities occurring for those with the lowest income and the fewest educational opportunities" (Sanatan, 2003: 76). This quotation comes from the preamble to a paper describing a programmatic attempt by the government of Barbados to address the problem of Internet access of its citizens, but it is a statement that is applicable across the entire region.

It isn't overstating the case to say that governments of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in their attempt to ensure economic competitiveness in the global market and having facilitated the building of a modem and contemporary telecommunications infrastructure, now recognize the imperative of also ensuring access of all their citizens to the technologies if their countries are to reap the perceived benefits of a globalized economy. A brief description of a select few of these efforts is revealing.

The Barbados Community Technology Program seeks to "provide effective access to technology and the Internet by economically disadvantaged community members" by converting some fourteen community centers spread across the 431 square krn island into "Community Resource Centers" equipped with computers with Internet access, and available to the public from 10.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m. six days a week. The program which started in 2003 has so far trained nearly 4000 citizens ranging in age between 17 and 82 with females being in a 5: 1 majority in Windows, keyboarding, word processing and Internet skills, and is ongoing. It should be noted that Barbados has a total population of under 300,000.

In Suriname, the only Dutch speaking member of CARICOM and geographically located on the South American mainland, a similar but more ambitious entrepreneurial-driven project started in 2000. The Education and Communication Network (EDUCON) has the "... single objective of accelerating the socio-economic development of Suriname through the use of ICT" (Sanatan, 2003: 12). Starting with a single privately funded "Knowledge Center" in the heart of the capital, Paramaribo, EDUCON now has 22 such centers spread across the country and receives assistance from the Alcoa Foundation, UNESCO and UNICEF.

An EDUCON Knowledge Center is essentially a computer center that provides training in computing skills for persons from a wide range of backgrounds at a very nominal cost. With its own Server, EDUCON also provides Internet access to users of its centers and most importantly a structured distance education (DE) program utilizing both the Internet and other technologies for its "students". For a fee of approximately US$1.00 per month, any computer literate person can get daily access to computer and the Internet as well as a virtual campus offering primary and secondary school courses and educational content designed by Surinamese teachers. It also offers courses to teachers and via VSAT technology, online extension services to the agricultural sector. A sparsely populated country of 438,000 people and some 163,270 square km, the Surinamese project is one of the most ambitious of its kind in the region and to date has trained over 20,000 people in the use of ICTs. A paradox here is that the government of Suriname maintains a monopoly on telecommunications so that the EDUCON Server cannot be used to generate income commercially for the sustainability of the enterprise.

By contrast, in Trinidad and Tobago where government maintains a monopoly in telecommunications but within a deregulated environment, government policies have encouraged the consumption of computers by citizens. No taxes are imposed on computer imports and purchases and the government makes soft loans available to civil servants for such purchases - a policy also followed by private businesses. Computers are also accessible through schools, all public libraries and in cybercafes.

Research undertaken by the National Institute of Higher Education, Science and Technology (NIHERST) in 2001, showed that 13% of the 350,000 households in the country had computers and access to the Internet with the majority of these being held by upper income households and least by the lowest income households. Impressively, over 70% of the households used the computer daily for between two and five or more hours with use being evenly split between male and female users. A majority of users were teenagers followed closely by the 30-39 year olds and the majority of users were secondary school graduates with only 3.8% having university level education.

Forty three per cent of all businesses surveyed in Trinidad in 2004 used computers and the Internet for public relations purposes and to enhance customer service, with 19% actually engaging in some form of e-commerce (White in Sanatan: 2003).

In the most comprehensive study of the cultural impact of the Internet undertaken in the Caribbean to date, ethnographers Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) found that in Trinidad and Tobago, "The heaviest and most universal use was of email, for correspondence between relatives and friends and between businesses." They also found that chat and "... surfing popular culture, such as MTV, games, music and sports" was the preferred use among young Trinidadians, with surfing pornography ranking high as well among these users. "Impressive" was the word they used for describing the level of diffusion of the Internet in the society including among squatters with no running water in their huts. A mostly urban society with a population of 1.2 million, access to the Internet is low in the rural areas of Trinidad and Tobago.

Jamaica has the most liberalized telecommunication sector in the CARICOM with three telephone companies and 20 ISPs serving its population of 2.6 million people. Eight per cent of the population owns computers with 5% having Internet access at home. However, diffusion of the Internet is more widespread since over 900 public schools have computer access and 234 of these also have multimedia facilities. Computer and Internet access is also available in the island's post offices, public libraries, and numerous cybercafes. Mobile telephony which covers the entire island is readily available. However, given the island's mountainous topography, Internet services are limited in many rural communities and where they do exist, are relatively expensive since they are provided by wireless technologies.

All 13,000 students of the University of the West Indies' (UWT) campus in Kingston have access to the Internet (a ratio of approximately 14:1) and the University, itself an ISP, offers many courses online and a full B.Ed secondary degree by distance using a mix of technologies including the Internet. Course registration by the University's students and other administrative functions such as fee payments, are done online.

Typically, students of the UWI use the Internet primarily for research but a majority of students also indulge in chat, game playing, listening to and downloading music as well as surfing sports, and some pornography as well.

The Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation (C-CAM), an environmental NGO located in a rural town on Jamaica's South Coast, apart from publicizing its activities on its website, also operates a small cybercafe providing basic computer training and Internet skills for members of the community and primary school children. The dominant use of the Internet by adult users is email with the children indulging in chat and games.

As in Trinidad, most businesses in Jamaica use the Internet for customer relations purposes but banks and other financial services offer online facilities as well.

Recently an enterprising journalist discovered numerous "hot spots" in Kingston's financial district where it was possible to boot up his laptop and access the websites of a number of corporate businesses. Following publication of his story, they all shut down their systems temporarily for obvious security reasons.

The Jamaican government's policies of attracting international e-business has resulted in the establishment of numerous call centers across the island in both urban and rural areas, employing some 2,900 persons, mostly women. This has had the unintended but positive spin-off of developing literacy and Internet skills among these employees (Sanatan: 2003).

Given the global reach of the region's popular cultural expressions especially in music, *(reggae* and *calypso),* there is genuine and growing concern for issues related to intellectual property rights. Internet streaming of programs by some of the larger radio stations that connect the significant Caribbean diasporas, particularly of New York, London and Toronto, to their home countries and the online publication of a number of the region's major daily newspapers, makes these issues particularly pertinent to the producers of information.

By way of summary then, a number of issues emerge. The first is the lead role played by Caribbean governments in developing their countries' telecommunications infrastructure in response to the imperatives of the dominant neo-liberal ideology that gives primacy to the global market and hence, a perceived need to achieve competitiveness within such an environment. Liberalization of the environment followed, and with it, emergence of a relatively technologically advanced ICT sector.

Second, demand for ICT trained and skilled personnel across various sectors, places the issue of access to ICTs high on the agenda of governments, and the business sector. And as the rather random sample of cases that I have described indicate, responses vary in approach but not in outcome. Though still a small percentage of national populations, more citizens are becoming computer literate and have access to the Internet thereby slowing the rate of increase if not narrowing the real gap between the information haves and have-nots. In all countries of the region however, personal ownership of computers is concentrated in upper income groups with majority access being in public facilities such

as government offices, educational institutions, public libraries, cybercafes and facilities of NGOs and CBOs.

Third, the region's governments' preoccupation with the neo-liberal agenda of developing marketable skills, backgrounds the potential cultural impact of the Internet as a unique technology through which culture can be and is expressed. As a discernible consequence the majority of Caribbean youth who have access to the Internet appear to be drawn to it both as information content provider and as *bonafide* communication technology - a technology that gives them the opportunity to "name the world" for themselves. However, Web surfing, music, game playing, and chat - the most popular uses of the Internet by Caribbean youth, expose them to virtual worlds that are essentially not of their own making but which nonetheless, are communities of interest to which they have the opportunity to link globally, hampered only by language barriers and the perennial stultifying effects of illiteracy - two phenomena that can be overcome by a less market-driven and more socially conscious use of the Internet itself.

References

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