Libraries and the Communication of Information: The Jamaican Situation

Yvonne T. Lawrence
Loughborough University
There is no doubt that developing countries face numerous difficulties - lack of adequate financing being a major factor. Many of these countries operate on meagre and rather limited financial resources, and they have often been left with no option but to produce priority lists for national development, which will include, primarily, those areas which will bring about speedy monetary returns. The consequence for library and information systems, which are not revenue earners is, that in most cases they are not considered to be priority areas. Through neglect therefore, development of these areas have been very slow.

Lack of progress in this field may also be attributed to the existence of high rates of illiteracy within some countries - the general demand for information being relatively low, while in others it could stem from the lack of interest by politicians who resist channelling funds into programmes from which they gain no political mileage. But, getting back to priorities - developing countries must take cognisance of the fact that if an environment for the communication is to exist, attention must first be paid to the development of the library and information centres in the country, as it is through these that information will be communicated.

Borchardt (1) has stated that "It is no longer seriously doubted that the economic development of any country depends directly on the availability of information services for the support of industry and technology". We must also note that it has been estimated that within the next decade, Third World countries will be producing material at the annual rate of 12-14 million documents. (2) Perhaps the situation is best summed up by Professor Havard-Williams -

"What priority should one give to education, information and libraries? Realistically, one has to agree that drains come before books, that industrial development is essential to greater prosperity. On the other
hand, if modern technologies are to be developed one must have an educated population. If education is to be exploited economically then information and libraries are essential."(3)

Third World countries must take the necessary steps to lay the foundation for the development of their information systems. They must seek practical and economic ways to organise and store information for speedy retrieval and dissemination, and to implement systems which will co-ordinate information and efficiently communicate it to the user.

The task is not a simple one. Surveys of existing services, formulation of guidelines, clearly defined objectives and sound justification are only a few of the factors to be considered and effected in planning a programme for the implementation of an information system. Robredo outlines the problems encountered in setting up information networks in developing countries and suggests that success in implementation will rely on a) technological b) infrastructural and c) human and environmental factors, (4) the latter being the most significant in terms of decision-making as governments and policies frequently change. The task requires careful planning, perseverance and support from the policy makers.

Jamaica, like so many other Third World countries has had and still has, its share of problems, which include shortage of foreign exchange reserves and a reduction in earnings from its major exports. The country is now facing a period of economic decline. It must therefore embark on a programme for economic recovery, and its success will largely depend on the availability of an adequate and efficient information system, which will cater for persons at every level of the society. Despite its many problems, Jamaica, in recognition of the importance of information to national development, has made significant strides in the development of its library and information systems, being the first Caribbean country to have made a positive move toward the implementation of the NATIS objectives. (5)

In this paper I will try to describe the information environment which exists in Jamaica, by looking at the scheme which has been established to eradicate illiteracy and thus procure an educated population, and by highlighting some of the institutions which comprise the networks proposed for the national information system as well as the role they play in the communication of information.
Background

Jamaica, politically independent since 1962, is the largest and most developed of the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean. Before becoming a British colony in 1655, the island was under Spanish rule from its discovery in 1494. Its area is 4,411 square miles and its 2,169,000 inhabitants are distributed among the 13 parishes of the island. Industry (bauxite), tourism and agriculture are the chief sources of national income, the latter employing a significant percentage of the country's labour force. Jamaica is accessible by sea and air and Jamaica International Telecommunications Ltd. (JAMINTEL) links Jamaica to the rest of the world through telephone, cable, telex and ancillary systems such as its Satellite Earth Station. Internal communications are effected by an automatic telephone exchange system (Jamaica Telephone Company Ltd.), 3,000 miles of main roads, and railroads. Post offices are established in every town and postal agencies are located in many villages.

Illiteracy and Education

For many years, the country experienced serious social problems which hindered its development, particularly in the area of illiteracy. Education was formerly the responsibility of church missionaries and it was only after the abolition of slavery that the makings of an organised system of education began to unfold. Primary education in Jamaica was never compulsory and so the country suffered the consequences - a high rate of illiteracy which up to 1970 was 50% (1970 Census).

Since 1962, great emphasis has been laid on educational and social programmes and perhaps the most significant of these was the launching of the National Literacy Board in 1972 for the purpose of eradicating illiteracy in the island by 1976. In 1974, however, the objectives of the Board were expanded and the Jamaica Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) was founded. Its objectives were:

"a) To eradicate illiteracy in Jamaica in the shortest possible time.
b) Improve the literacy skills of the adult population in Jamaica.
c) Develop human resources and so enable each adult citizen to participate meaningfully in the social, economic and cultural development of the country."(7)

JAMAL's aim was not only to eradicate illiteracy but to provide programmes of continuing education for the new literates, for the purpose of preventing lapsed literacy. This is being achieved through the holding of adult literacy classes on an island-wide basis, and through filmed and recorded lecture sessions for transmission on radio and television. Publicity for the literacy
programme is attracted by various methods e.g. a televised Literacy Quiz Championship programme and the Annual International Literacy Day. Harrison considers the programme a worthwhile one which would be used as an example for other countries with similar problems.

Suitable reading material for the new literates, is in short supply and therefore JAMAL has embarked on a publishing programme of "readers" covering topics of general and national interest. The reluctance of commercial publishers to participate in the venture is rather unfortunate as by so doing it prevents distribution of this type of material to other countries having similar programmes. It is here that the public library service can make a very valuable contribution to the programme by its supportive role in the provision of material. This certainly applies to the Jamaica Library Service which provides large-print books for slow readers, in all its libraries throughout the island. The tremendous success of the literacy programme is evidenced by the fact that in 1975 the literacy rate was recorded as 86%.

A recent announcement by the Minister of Education to introduce compulsory education at primary school level, was welcomed. JAMAL's role will include an Illiteracy Prevention thrust which will involve it in liaison between the home and the primary school, and provide skill training for 15-20 year old dropouts from the education system.

Planning the library and information system
Jamaica has been indeed fortunate in that with the exception of a National Library, most of the fundamental requirements necessary for the building of a national information system, were already present when the idea was born. In 1972 an Exploratory Committee on Arts and Culture was appointed by the Prime Minister to "assess the cultural situation and recommend action." The recommendations of that committee resulted in the appointment of the National Council on Libraries Archives and Documentation Services (NACOLADS) in 1973 which was directed to inter alia, make recommendations for the development of a national library and information system for the island, and the establishment of a national library. This move was a timely one, as September 1974 saw the adoption of the NATIS concept at the Intergovernmental Conference on the Planning of National Documentation Library and Archive Infrastructures.

In response to this Conference a follow-up Workshop on the Planning of National Information Systems for the Caribbean was organised in 1975 for the purpose of
examining the existing systems in the Caribbean and to formulating guidelines for the establishment of suitable systems for each island. In Jamaica, NACOLADS, proceeded towards the first stage in the formulation of its Plan by firstly identifying the library and information organisations. Six Working Parties representing various types of libraries (including archives) were set up, to determine the number of types of libraries in the island, to examine their role and contribution to the system, and to make recommendations as necessary for the development of such libraries. Four other Working Parties comprising supporting areas were also set up to examine a) Manpower Resources, b) Publishing, c) Automation and d) National Priorities, Legislation and Financial Resources.

NACOLADS has proposed a group of networks in the Plan which has been adopted by Government. These comprise:

a) National Library
b) Public Libraries
c) College Libraries
d) University Libraries
e) Archives and Records Management
f) Science and Technology
g) Law
h) Physical Planning
i) Socio-economic areas

These networks are designed to facilitate the flow of information, to build on existing strengths and to develop weak areas. Based on recommendations made by NACOLADS since the adoption of the Plan, the National Library was created by The Institute of Jamaica Act 1978. This library, based on the former West India Reference Library collection, houses the largest collection of West Indiana in the Caribbean. The National Library will have responsibility for co-ordinating and supervising all government libraries which are represented in the networks. Each network has a focal point - an established library, which will in turn be responsible for the co-ordination of information within that network. This information will be stored at the focal point to facilitate the Referral Service which the National Library will offer as one of its functions in satisfying requests and arranging interlibrary loans. Each network will:

"co-ordinate and/or integrate all government aided library services thus obtaining greater effectiveness and economical use of limited resources while at the same time maintaining the significant traditions and specific functions of individual library services." (10)
The institutions

Professor Saunders in discussing the role of libraries in the communication of information identifies four major functions which should obtain and which are of vital importance to the national development of any country:

"a) the furtherance of technological, scientific and industrial advances
b) the process of education
c) the preservation and transmission of the national cultural heritage
d) the fulfilment of social and recreational needs."(11)

These factors are essential to the planning of the information infrastructure as it is necessary to make adequate provision of information to all levels of the society. With so much emphasis on scientific, technological and other professional information needs, there is a tendency to neglect a large percentage of the population, usually those living in rural areas who need information to assist them in their daily routines. (12) If we are to relate the above functions to types of libraries, they fall into groupings of a) special, b) academic, c) national and d) public libraries. How therefore do the libraries on the Jamaican scene measure up?

Special libraries

With few exceptions these represent libraries located within Government Ministries and their departments, as well as statutory bodies which are funded by government. No single body administers these libraries as each one is the responsibility of a particular Ministry. Although the co-ordination of these libraries is being carried out by NACOLADS, at the present time it is only a recommending body.

Some special libraries are well organised and are run by qualified librarians. These represent such areas as Education, Health, Law, Mining, Agriculture, and Statistics. More recently established and rapidly developing are libraries of statutory bodies such as the Urban Development Corporation and the Bureau of Standards. The largest collection of maps is housed at the Survey Department. On the whole these libraries are in dire need of attention and when one realises the important role they play in the decision making process, their development is urgent. These are the resources from which the policy makers will need to draw rather heavily. There is a vast amount of duplication of stock and the fundamental problems of budgetary requirements, accommodation and staffing are consistent among these libraries. NACOLADS' networks have effected organised grouping of these collections and amalgamations in some areas to eliminate duplication and overlap. The weaker areas will form part of a subsystem to be closely supervised by a qualified
member of staff of the designated focal point of the group. A wealth of information is to be found in many of these collections as well as in offices, but because of absence of trained staff to organise the collection, their potential remains unexploited through under-utilisation.

Special libraries in the private sector are on the increase and the most active of these is the Alcan Technical Information Centre attached to a Bauxite Company. Recent additions to the special library scene are the libraries of the International Bauxite Association and Jamaica International Telecommunications. Newspaper libraries attached to the island's leading daily newspapers also play their part in the communication of information by opening their doors to students and other researchers, while at least one law firm has already employed a librarian to organise its resources for use by its partners and other members of staff.

The adoption of the Plan has created an awareness of the implications for library development and it has had effect on the provision of new posts in areas which hitherto lacked trained personnel. The recent appointment of a Librarian at the National Planning Agency completed the picture and all focal points are now manned by qualified personnel.

Academic and other educational institutions

The largest academic institution in Jamaica is the University of the West Indies - a regional institution funded by the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean. Its main campuses are in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados. The Mona campus (Jamaica) is served by a main library and its two Branches - the Medical and Science Libraries. Although their primary function is to provide research facilities for staff and students of the university, the libraries are not averse to participating in a national information system and thus extending the use of its resources outside of the University to assist research. There will be limitations, however, with regard to its priorities as its principal concern is for the university community. The libraries recognise their role in the communication of information and must effect the best methods to achieve this. Students can be introduced through library orientation programmes, to methods which will enable them to exploit the resources to the fullest because communication is a two way system. In the words of Saunders "... drawing on them" (resources) "itself means communication; means transfer from one source, or one person, to another."(11)

Several other libraries are located on the Mona campus. Some are well
established - the libraries of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, the School of Education, and the Department of Library Studies - others are not organised. Two independent libraries - the United Theological College Library and the Norman Manley Law School Library may also be found on the campus. The major libraries are co-operating in a venture to co-ordinate the resources of their libraries in a Union catalogue at the Main Library of the University. The entire collection of the Law School Library is already recorded in this catalogue.

There are some government-supported colleges which include the College of Arts, Science and Technology with an active library serving staff and students, and ten teachers colleges with organised libraries, five of which employ qualified librarians. The oldest professional school, the Jamaica School of Agriculture houses a library which again lacks trained staff, but the collection is well utilised.

Secondary schools are largely grant-aided but they belong mainly to private institutions such as churches, and are governed by independent school boards which determine library budgets. This means that the standard of the libraries were not very high in the past but the increasing awareness of the contribution that libraries make to the education process is evidenced by the fact that a number of recent library school graduates are being employed to organise these collections.

Primary and infant schools are serviced by the Schools Library Service which is based at the Jamaica Library Service Headquarters. Distribution of books to these libraries is effected by Bookmobile services to all the island's schools at this level of education. Because of inadequate accommodation problems experienced by many schools, the library collection varies in size. The Ministry of Education, through which this scheme is funded, adopted the School Library Standards, which were compiled by the Jamaica Library Association, for implementation in schools. There is room for improvement in accommodation facilities for school libraries and this has been brought to the attention of the authorities.

A junior secondary school programme for primary school leavers not going into high schools was established in 1969. Each of the 68 schools was built with accommodation for a library. These libraries are being supervised by teacher/librarians who are encouraged to take the library science courses which have been included in the curricula of at least two teachers colleges.
National Library
The establishment of the National Library of Jamaica and its co-ordinating role has already been mentioned, although its importance in collection, storage and preservation of the "national cultural heritage" cannot be overemphasised.

Public libraries
Since 1948 the Jamaica Library Service has played a major role in the communication process by provision of a free library service to the Jamaican population. It is administered by the Jamaica Library Board through its Headquarters and 13 Parish Libraries and therefore its service is extended to every corner of the island in approximately 450 service points which comprise Branch Libraries, Book Centres and Bookmobile stops. A free postal service operates for the benefit of those persons to whom the library is not easily accessible, and delivery vans penetrate those areas inaccessible by heavy bookmobiles.

This library service caters for adults and children of every level of the society and provides good research facilities, material for recreational purposes, special types of literature for certain categories of persons e.g. slow readers or persons visually handicapped, as also services to prisons and hospitals. These are but a few of the libraries' activities but worthy of note is its wide range of cultural activities for individual development as well as group involvement within communities. These activities also serve to attract the potential user to the library to enable him to avail himself of the many and varied services provided. An interloan service is available and excellent rapport is maintained with other libraries and institutions which creates the environment for the efficient transfer of information. As was earlier mentioned, it plays a supportive role in the provision of literature for JAMAL's new literates.

The Jamaica Library Service is not without its problems. Funding for new equipment, expansion of existing buildings and services, need for increased manpower resources, are some of the problems being experienced, but it is nevertheless a fine example of a library organisation in a developing country which endeavours to make information available to the society at large by communicating it through strategically based service points to reach the rural communities which are often neglected and which, in the case of Jamaica represents three-quarters of the total population.
Professional Associations

The role of the Jamaica Library Association in the field of librarianship in Jamaica, is a commendable one. Through its Executive Committee, several Working Parties and an active Schools Section, it has made outstanding contributions to library development in the island particularly in the field of library education as was evidenced by its involvement in the establishment of the Department of Library Studies at the University of the West Indies in 1971.

The Association attracts members from public and private library organisations and makes representations to Government on behalf of librarians in matters concerning the status of librarians and conditions of service. It has been instrumental in the compilation of a directory of libraries in Jamaica and more significantly, the compilation of School Library Standards which have been adopted for implementation by the Ministry of Education. Standards for College Libraries have recently been completed. There is no doubt that the Association has its role to play in the furthering of the development of the institutions vital to the communication of information.

Automation

In considering the role of the library in the communication of information in developing countries, we often think in terms of traditional methods of imparting information to the user, e.g. by provision of the literature through interlibrary loans. Our means of communicating information extends to types of communication such as the telephone, post office, cables, transport, but as we seek to improve ourselves we turn to other and more efficient methods of transferring information, in terms of speedy retrieval and transmission, and we find ourselves in the area of the new technology, which is vital to a national information system for rapid, effective nationwide communication of information.

When the Working Party investigated this area it discovered that although technology was being increasingly applied to industry, very little was being implemented in libraries and information systems, although several libraries have access to computer services. One system is already in operation at the National Library of Jamaica - the computerisation of the Index to the Daily Gleaner. (13) Alcan Technical Information Centre is also operating a periodicals routing system by use of a computer. The problems which Jamaican librarians are likely to experience in the move toward library automation, fall into the areas of personnel, equipment and finance. These
are discussed by Chan (14) who argues that while librarians "may not be expected to become fully-fledged computer programmers", they should be sufficiently informed about such systems and how they function by attending appropriate courses, to enable them to decide on the system most suitable for their purposes, and to have a voice in its operation.

The new technology will enhance, certainly not hinder the communication of information, but it is an area which will necessitate careful evaluation and the conducting of surveys, to ascertain the kind of systems which will be suitable for our purposes. On-line systems appear appropriate to the needs of Third World countries, but while one might be able to identify required articles, there are difficulties in obtaining copies of these articles when they are not locally available. The setting-up of computer services are costly and as they have to be purchased outside of the country, progress could be impeded owing to the severe problems in acquiring foreign exchange.

New developments
The framework for Jamaica's national information system has been laid, and successful implementation now depends on the availability of adequate financial resources. In recognition of the role of science and technology in national development, NACOLADS has attempted to have that network established as early as possible. The services of a consultant were acquired to advise on its establishment and efforts are currently being made to secure technical assistance for its implementation. (15)

Meanwhile the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) Technical Assistance programme for developing the National Library of Jamaica and establishing and developing the Socio-Economic Information Network came into operation with the arrival of the IDRC Adviser, and a documentation centre is being established at the National Planning Agency - the network's focal point.

While we are busy organising information and trying to improve our methods of communicating it, we must ensure that our users are given the opportunity, through teaching, to exploit these resources to the fullest, because communication of information is a two-way process. I therefore close with the words of Borchardt, (1)

"... if developing countries want to keep developing they must make sure not only that all citizens can read, but also that all citizens can use libraries."
REFERENCES


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