

CARIBBEAN CULTURES AND MASS COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY  
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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## INTRODUCTION

A variety of interpretations can be brought to bear on the concepts of culture and technology, and hence, the topic of this Roundtable discussion. It is therefore appropriate before proceeding, to define how both concepts are being used in this paper and to show their relationship to each other.

Culture constitutes the symbolic, instrumental and social responses of collectivities of people to their environment. This holistic definition is similar to that of Peter Worsley for whom "Culture is those institutions in which the ideas we live by are produced and through which they are communicated."<sup>1</sup>

Technology refers to the physical and intellectual tools that people use to mediate their relationship with their environment. Environment then, is a common factor to both culture and technology. And in this context, "environment" comprises more than physical external space. It is descriptive of all that is outside of the ego self and is therefore dynamic: impacting on individuals as they in turn impact on it.

Culture and technology then, are analytically distinct but dialectically related phenomena. Technology helps to shape and produce culture as culture creates and employs technology. Thus, societies in their myriad manifestations are products of a complex dialectic: the interplay between cultural expression - itself a dialectic - and technological application.

But there is another narrower sense in which the concept of culture is generally understood and that is as emanation of the creative imagination. Art, dance, drama, music and so on, are forms of such creative expression. However, whether or not we are concerned with culture in its holistic or narrower sense does not change the basic dialectical relationship between culture and technology. Close analysis of all forms of creative expression will always reveal this irreducible relationship between culture and

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<sup>1</sup> The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.59

technology. So for instance, pan music would not be possible without the steel drum, the technology through which it is expressed.

The unique vision or perception of each individual artist is always subject to the tools at his disposal for realising his imaginings. In this sense, the "primitive" artist is only "primitive" because of the limits imposed on his expression by the tools available to him. Contemporarily, the genre "primitive" has taken on new meaning reflecting more a style of creative expression than it does the use of archaic tools to realise products of imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Although some traditional skills and techniques<sup>3</sup> for realising creative imagination may be lost to us contemporarily, available tools permit us to mediate our relationship with our environment in ways unheard of in the past. Some of these technologies, as we shall see, have also altered our temporal and spatial relationship to and with our environment, giving rise to forms of cultural expression that are more globally embracing than local and/or parochial.

More specifically, contemporary information/communication (infocom) technologies have ushered in an era in which humanity's environment has become global, giving rise to forms of cultural expression which, transcending both time and place, are themselves global. However, access to and the development and control of these media(ing) technologies by a few, limits the participation of the majority in creating this nascent global culture both in its technological as well as but more particularly in its expressive forms. As long as this remains the case, the potential richness of global creative expression cannot be realised.

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<sup>2</sup> Periodicity in this instance, is nothing more nor less than the dating of creative expression by the tools utilised to realise product.

<sup>3</sup> Every technology subsumes technique in its use: from the surgeon's scalpel (or laser), to the hand-held camcorder.

The pertinent ~~questions to be addressed~~ in assessing Caribbean cultures and mass communication in the 21st century ~~therefore~~, are both structural and instrumental: what are the extant and foreseeable ~~mass communication~~ technologies? Who owns and controls them? What instrumental value do they have for those who have access to them? And what are the options for those who do not have access to them?

While these questions are applicable to all the mass media, the focus of this paper will be the electronic media because they are internationally ubiquitous; they do not rely on literacy for their impact; and they are mesmerising. Particular attention will be paid to the visual media.

#### MASS MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES: FROM EVOLUTION TO REVOLUTION

Among other things, the invention of the printing press led to the development of newspapers - the first form of mass media - from as early as the first decades of the 19th century. This was a virtual revolution since no longer would the written word be limited to the few but information in the medium would be available to the many. This was followed almost a century later by radio broadcasting and less than a few decades beyond that by television broadcasting.

In their earliest manifestations, the broadcast media had relatively limited reach. The technologies were cumbersome and expensive and in application required skills that were not readily available but to a few. Furthermore, because of the fact that the Earth's electromagnetic spectrum constitutes an environmentally scarce resource, from the very beginning broadcasting, which utilises the spectrum, has been subject to national and international government regulation. The international regulatory agency, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), was established from as early as 1865. Most importantly, the broadcast media were, and remain essentially point to multipoint information transmitting technologies. They allow a single message source to reach multiple receivers simultaneously but not vice versa. That is, properly speaking, they are not communication

technologies.<sup>4</sup> The most significant, durable and far-reaching ~~socioeconomic~~ consequence of this observation is ~~that the mass media as technologies,~~ separate potential producers of cultural product from the consumers of cultural product and consequently, influence how both producers and consumers relate to the technologies.

In Europe, the regulations governing the use of the electromagnetic spectrum, that is, the context within which broadcasting developed, was paternalistic. European governments adopted a proprietary approach to the application of these technologies in the service of the "public good". The broadcast media in the US, on the other hand, were from the very beginning cast in a competitive environment in which government merely regulated, by licensing private citizens, the uses to which these media could be put. The "public good" was market-determined; not what government prescribed as being desirable. Therefore two entirely different broadcasting practices emerged in Europe and North America. In the former, radio and television broadcasting were government-supported and controlled activities whereas in the latter, the free enterprise ethic led to the emergence of commercial broadcasting.

Additionally, in television broadcasting three different and incompatible technical standards for propagating electronic signals emerged in Europe and North America.(PAL, SECAM and NTSC). Programmed material originating in one system cannot be broadcast in the others without first being converted technically.

These historically different approaches to broadcast media ownership and control as well as to technical standards on both sides of the Atlantic continue to affect the evolution of broadcasting internationally in spite of the presence of the ITU. In fact the politics of the ITU is defined by the

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<sup>4</sup> By definition, communication is an interactive social process. See, Aggrey Brown, The Dialectics of Mass Communication in National Transformation, CQ, Vol. 27, Nos. 2 & 3.

need to ameliorate differences between international actors of differing capacities.

For well known colonial historical reasons, we in the Caribbean inherited the British regulatory approach to the broadcast media. Economic as well as geographical imperatives however, gave rise to a hybrid form which combined government media ownership with commercial broadcasting - a nuanced departure from the strictly tax-supported BBC model. However, the potency of the broadcast media for influencing mass opinion and shaping popular values, was recognised by the colonial government from the inception of broadcasting in the region in the 1940s. And either governments or government surrogates would be the arbiters and purveyors of culture (in its narrow sense) and the masses of Caribbean people consumers of cultural product. Consequently, throughout the region, private ownership of radio broadcasting facilities was limited to the British-based Rediffusion broadcasting group. That is, in the colonial dispensation, broadcast media ownership and control meant either government ownership and control or British private ownership and control albeit in the case of the former with a liberal, paternalistic slant.

Forms of ownership and control in radio broadcasting evolved to include private ownership and control in the post-independence era. However, the tradition of public ownership and control was maintained even after independence with the introduction of the new technology of television broadcasting in the decade of the 60s. The potential of the "new" medium for influencing opinion and "culture" in its narrow sense, was too great to cede to popular control.

Governmental authority notwithstanding, technological considerations also imposed limits to popular access to and use of broadcast technologies. Widespread consumption of the cultural products of radio and television was limited by infrastructural supports such as the availability of electricity ~~supplies; availability of repair and maintenance skills;~~ the bulk, size and cost of radio and television receivers and their consequent lack of mobility. In their infancy, the specialised skills required for producing

programmes for the broadcast media, in particular television, also ensured the transmission of elitist values through these media.

However, by the mid 1970s, with the introduction of computer chips and common use of transistors (particularly in radio receivers), mass consumption of electronic media had become a reality not only in the Caribbean region but also globally. Simultaneously, the means of propagating, transmitting and storing broadcast signals were being revolutionised with the digitising of electronic signals. Frequency Modulation (FM) as opposed to Amplitude Modulation (AM) made for clearer, cleaner, crisper sound broadcasting as well as greater accessibility to broadcasting technologies by potential new owners and managers.

By the end of the decade, the reach of broadcast signals also became global with the introduction of satellite and optical fibre transmitting technologies. Audio and video cassette recording devices such as compact and laser discs (CDs) would also become popular mass consumption technologies allowing consumers time-shifting capabilities hitherto limited to all but a few. In essence, a new revolution, similar to that which was unleashed by the newspaper as a mass medium, was being launched in the last decades of the 20th century.

The dramatic and rapid developments in electronics that characterise the infocom industry today, led one analyst from as early as 1980 to observe that "The latest developments in telecommunications make it possible for all the internal mail of major companies, all of the content of radio and television stations, all the material which passes into newspapers, all of the monetary transactions between large organizations and within them, all of the new sensing devices which analyze weather, harvests, troop movements and mineral deposits, to be conducted electronically rather than by normal physical means."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Smith, The Geopolitics of Information, NY. OUP, 1980, p.111.

In short, contemporary media technologies have expanded enormously the human environment and human consciousness of the environment. And as the drama continues to unfold it is futile to predict the ultimate impact of these technologies on mankind. However, in terms of the structure of the entertainment sector of the global infocom industry, the sector with which this paper is particularly concerned, certain trends have already begun to emerge which indicate the role and scope of the sector in human affairs.

### THE GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY: THE PRODUCERS

There are two intrinsic limiting aspects of infocom technologies that define the parameters of their use. First, as already asserted, they are not communication technologies. Rather, they are potent information transmitting technologies. And second, and as a consequence, they separate the producers of cultural product from the consumers of cultural product. Moreover, they are simultaneously physical as well as intellectual tools. That is, they have both a "hardware" and a "software" dimension. To illustrate: the consumer of a television receiver (the hardware), also consumes television programmes (the software). The consumer of a Compact Disc player, (the hardware) also consumes the CD (the software). The consumer of a VCR (the hardware), also consumes video tapes with programmed material (the software). The consumer of a satellite dish receiver (the hardware) also consumes video information (the software), and so on.

The production of both hardware and software for global consumption therefore constitutes gigantic business which, particularly in the case of the former requires enormous financial outlays in research and development as well as investments in highly developed electronic engineering skills. Needless to say, the returns on hardware R & D are enormously rewarding.

It is estimated that by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the entertainment-hardware market alone will be worth U.S \$3 trillion, that is, three million million U.S. dollars.<sup>6</sup> After aerospace, the entertainment

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<sup>6</sup> The Economist, "Survey The Entertainment Industry", Dec. 23, 1989.

industry is the USA's second largest source of foreign earnings generating \$5.5 billion or 5.5 thousand million dollars in 1988.<sup>7</sup>

The incipient hardware-software nexus that arose out of the development of television technology in mid-century and which, initially, saw the emergence of a division of labour between hardware producers and software producers, has today resulted in the convergence of the two, a direct consequence of the development of inexpensive global information transmitting capabilities which have generated an almost insatiable demand for software. The deputy president of the Sony Corporation of Japan, one of the world's largest and best known industry participants, is on record observing that the "hardware and software parts of the entertainment industry can no longer be talked about separately."<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore, not surprising that the intrinsic economic logic of hardware/software technological convergence has led to the formation of an oligopolistic structure of the global infocom industry, in which it is estimated that by the turn of the 21st century there will be no more than approximately three vertically and horizontally integrated players.<sup>9</sup> By itself this would be cause for concern. That the technologies involved are consciousness- altering technologies makes this development doubly so.

Contemporarily, among the megaconglomerates vying for a permanent niche in the global industry, are the following:

1. Time-Warner (a \$13 billion merger in 1989), Thorn EMI, Gulf and Western and MCA which subsume such well-known names as Home Box Office (HBO), Cinemax, Paramount and Universal Studios, Time Magazine, Sports Illustrated, Simon and Schuster, as well as lesser known entities involved in defence

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7 Op. cit.

8 Op. cit.

9 Chesterman and Lipman, The Electronic Pirates, Comedia, 1988.

systems, electronic security systems, computers, semi-conductors and telecommunications.

2. RCA, General Electric, Coca Cola-Citicorp subsuming NBC television, Random House and lesser entities involved in cable TV, electronic hardware, defence and security systems, home appliances and consumer electronics.

3. Sony Corporation, Columbia Pictures, CBS Records (the world's largest record manufacturer), Loews and the News Corporation (Rupert Murdoch) including Twentieth Century Fox, Fox TV network, Sky Channel (which carried for the first time from the Caribbean live global satellite transmission of the 1990 Test series between England and the West Indies), and lesser entities involved in telecommunications, consumer electronics, including the Walkman, the Watchman, digital audio tape (DAT), CD players, Betamax VCRs and newspaper publishing.

4. Fujisankei Communications which includes television and radio stations, newspapers, records, (including Virgin Records which acquired Island Records which had previously acquired the rights to the Bob Marley legacy) and video and film production.

There are as well a handful of large, independent transnational entities that participate in the global industry in either the hardware or software dimensions and whose size allows them to compete effectively for the time being. These include The Japan Victor Company (JVC) whose Video Home Service (VHS) video recording and playback system became an industry standard in the 70s and the well-known - though comparatively speaking, small - Turner Broadcasting system, a subsidiary of which is the world's first global and best known television news service, Cable News Network, CNN.

A noticeable feature of all these players in the global infocom industry is their multinational character comprising Western European, North American and Japanese participants. Transnational, vertical and horizontal ~~integration of the conglomerates~~ give them strategic access to the world's major media markets. And, brooking no opposition, their dominance allows

them to determine when and what technologies - both hardware and software- are introduced to the global marketplace.

By way of example, when in 1988, the Sony Corporation planned to introduce digital audio tape - DAT - on the world market, its initiative was resisted by CBS records, at the time the world's largest record manufacturer. CBS perceived in the move by Sony a threat to the record industry since DATs would allow technically perfect multiple tape recordings of audio material. Undaunted and unwilling to have its strategic designs subverted, the Sony Corporation acquired CBS records and proceeded to put DATs on the global market. DAT has not yet become a popular consumer item globally but the Sony Corporation's influence in the hardware and software sectors guarantees that it will become so in due course. The Corporation will not only be able to produce DAT recorders and tapes, but also will be able to guarantee, through CBS records, programmed material to be played on the hardware. (Quite incidentally, Mr. Michael Jackson is a contractee of CBS records.)

But as well, the limited high-stakes competition within the global media marketplace propels technological innovation. So the JVC company, Sony's homegrown archrival, has recognised that "Digital sound is the wave of the future..."<sup>10</sup> and has introduced its own version of digital sound on its internationally dominant VHS video recording system. And in order to ensure that the new technology takes to the market, JVC makes its blank video tapes (the software), compatible with older hardware models and has invested over \$100 million in a Hollywood joint-venture to develop appropriate programmed software.<sup>11</sup>

At the macro level therefore, the global infocom sector is not only structurally and horizontally integrated and dominated by a handful of megaconglomerates, but also it is divided into discrete but interrelated subsectors comprising information, entertainment, news; hardware and software manufacturing, research and development, and distribution and marketing. Competition within the sector in the global market place

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10     Chesterman and Lipman, The Electronic Pirates, Comedia, 1988.

11     The Economist, op. cit.

continues to spawn ever newer hardware and software technologies which, in turn result in expansion of product consumption internationally. Planned obsolescence, a tested technique of transnational hardware marketing, helps to delay the onset of entropy within the sector as a whole.

Paradoxically as well, the consciousness-raising capacity of the industry has helped to expand temporally and spatially the human environment even as the electronic gimmicks, gadgets and gismoes result in passive participation in an emerging global culture by the majority of the world's people. And it is to the consumers of these technologies that we now turn our attention.

### THE GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY: THE CONSUMERS

With but few exceptions, every man, woman and child of planet Earth is a potential consumer of the products of the infocom sector. Video and audio signals can be transmitted to and received from any place on the Earth's surface where the sun shines, thanks to the wonders of solar power. Satellite information transmitting technologies will have entered their fourth generation by the turn of the 21st century by which time as well, the globe would have been encircled by an interconnected network of the cheaper and even more reliable distribution technology of optical fibres.

Events occurring in any part of the world can be witnessed vicariously in real time (as opposed to delayed broadcast) by anyone with access to receiving equipment. The release of Nelson Mandela in South Africa in February, 1990, was witnessed in such a manner by approximately a quarter of the human race. So too were the events in Tiananmen Square in Peking and the destruction of the wall separating East from West Berlin in the latter part of 1989.

Of course it is only a very small fraction of all globally transmitted material that is as momentous as the foregoing. By far, the vast majority of electronically transmitted material is made up of entertainment - the vehicle for advertising messages -with the bulk of it originating in the USA.

From as early as 1974, the authors of a comparative study on international television programming trends concluded that "Most television programmes in international distribution are produced to satisfy audience tastes in the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan and Western Europe...there are two indisputable trends to be discovered in international flow: (1) a one-way traffic from the big exporting countries to the rest of the world, and (2) dominancy of entertainment material in flow. These aspects together represent what might be called a tendency towards concentration."<sup>12</sup>

Similar and subsequent studies conducted in the mid 80s, drew similar conclusions although one researcher found that globally, approximately one third of television programmes were imported.

Two studies conducted in the Caribbean by Hosein and Brown respectively in the mid 70s and mid 80s revealed that an average of over 70% of television programmes transmitted in the region originated from outside the region. The Brown study of the late 80s found an increase in the percentage of foreign content in regional television over that found by Hosein in the mid 70s.<sup>13</sup> Comparison with international data led Brown to conclude that the Anglophone Caribbean, with an average of over 80% imported content, was the most penetrated region of the world by foreign television content.

As of the beginning of the decade of the 90s, together Latin America and the Caribbean account for approximately 10% of the world's television audience having approximately 35 million TV receivers. The extended region formally accounts as well for 5% of the world's television programme purchases.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Nordenstreng and Varis, Television Traffic - A One-way Flow?, UNESCO, Reports and Papers on Mass Communication, No. 70, 1974.

13 Everold Hosein, "The Problem of Imported Television Content in the Commonwealth Caribbean", CQ, Vol. 22, No. 4, Dec. 1976 and Aggrey Brown, "TV Programming Trends in the Anglophone Caribbean: the 1980s", CARIMAC Occasional Paper No. 2, 1987 - an original study for UNESCO.

14 Telecommunications Update, Vol. V, No. 19.

However, when private satellite reception and video tape recordings are added, the figure more than doubles.

The vast majority of formal programme purchases are of course, from the USA, not only because it is the world's largest supplier of software but also because of geographic proximity and familiarity. The fact too that the population of South America comprises a larger market than North America, is not lost on the scions of the infocom industry. A report on the 1989 convention of the US National Association of Television Programme Executives (NAPTE) - a major annual trade meeting - concludes that "Latin Americans generally have been more in tune with (the) commercial orientation of the U.S. market than Europe. Latin broadcasters tend to show a disdain for Europe's long tradition of government-dictated content restrictions. The Latin love affair with action-adventure programming seems impossible to satiate, and police dramas or detective series are often at the top of broadcasters' shopping lists. Latin viewers are accustomed to the U.S. style of pacing, as reflected in their keen interest in U.S. movies and miniseries. However", the report goes on " few situation comedies or reality-based shows seem able to bridge the culture gap."<sup>15</sup>

What is clear from this is that access to video technologies affords the consumer some degree of choice regarding what he will or will not watch and when. However, the viewer's choice is predetermined by those responsible for selecting and transmitting programmes. Often, the latter's choice is determined by commercial advertising expedience and not what is necessarily culturally relevant to a particular audience segment.

In the CARICOM region a number of corollary factors determine consumer choice.

The first of these is geography. As opposed to the rest of the hemisphere, our proximity to North America permits easy access to signal spill-over from North American domestic satellite transmissions. In the Northern Caribbean

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<sup>15</sup> Telecommunications Update, Vol. V, No. 17. (Emphasis added)

which is closest to the U.S. mainland, a dish antenna as small as six feet in diameter is now capable of accessing such materials. And the owner of such an antenna has access to over 432 channels. KU band direct broadcast satellites (DBSs), planned for launch by mid-decade will permit access to signals by dishes no larger than 18 inches diameter. Technologically, this will also double the number of channels already available for transmissions. What is more, "It is an axiom of satellite broadcasting that as the dish size shrinks, the market grows."<sup>16</sup> The reason for this, esthetics aside, is that the economic cost of dishes correlate positively with size. In the Southern Caribbean, access to KU band signals will be possible with dishes varying in size from 4 to 6 feet in diameter. Since the channel capacity of satellite dishes more than quadruples the capacity of coaxial cable which is used extensively in the Southern Caribbean, we can anticipate widespread consumption of DBS technology within a few years throughout the region with highest concentration in the Northern Caribbean.

A second corollary factor determining growth in consumption of video technologies in CARICOM in the near future is that of shared language and by extension culture, in its narrow sense. As opposed to shortwave radio broadcasting, where it is not the case, English is the language of international television broadcasting. While it may therefore take longer to "bridge the culture gap" as in the case of Latin America, that is not the case in the CARICOM region where the "Cosby Show" is almost as popularly received as "Oliver At Large".

A third corollary factor is the continued monopoly of television broadcasting by governments in the region. It is a self-evident paradox that government monopoly of the television medium since its introduction in the 60s, contributed significantly to the high consumption of video technologies subsequently throughout the region. Certainly in the instances of Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and Barbados, government monopoly limited consumer choice at the very moment that the global entertainment industry was taking off, that is, when dishes and VCRs were being introduced as

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<sup>16</sup> Telecommunications Update, Vol. V, No. 20.

~~consumer~~ technologies. While cost and other factors, including domestic politics, contributed to the maintenance of government monopoly of the medium, consumer awareness of alternatives led them to exercise their options. That in the case of Belize, St. Lucia and Guyana, extra-regulatory initiatives were taken by private entrepreneurs to introduce cable services, merely substantiates the point. The mesmerising effects of the medium are particularly demonstrated in the case of Guyana whose government from the late 1960s had consciously adopted a "no television" policy.

Finally, the ease of travel between CARICOM and North America has also had an impact on the consumption of media technologies in the region. Relatives, friends, returning residents and guests have all been sources of supply of media consumer electronics hardware and software throughout the region. The burgeoning of video cassette rental shops throughout CARICOM in the mid to late 1970s, with most of the tapes recorded directly from North American transmissions including commercials and station identifications, testifies to the impact that these supply sources have had in the regional media marketplace. The ready availability of Orbit and other publications of satellite TV programme attractions throughout the region, also testifies to the permanence and high consumption of visual media technologies in the environment.

#### REGIONAL IMPACT AND RESPONSES: CONSUMERS AND OFFICIALDOM

The notion of "cultural imperialism" gained prominence throughout the region beginning in the late 1970s and continuing up to the present especially in official, academic and professional circles. With the exception of the two studies mentioned earlier by Hosein and Brown respectively which generated some useful empirical data on the amount of foreign content on regional television, there have been no other such published works.

There have however, been other unpublished thoughts and speeches on the subject by students of the media, media professionals and others.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Judith Forth, Harold Hoyte, Gladstone Wilson, William Demas et al.

Still, virtually no research has been done to measure the impact of the visual media on regional cultural expression. There is nevertheless, some documented and undocumented empirical evidence that supports the assumption that the visual media in particular, have had some impact on regional culture.

Popular responses to such local television productions as "Gayelle" and "No Boundaries", (Trinidad), and "Oliver at Large" (Jamaica), would indicate a yearning on the part of regional television viewers for more regional programming. The explosion of music videos that complement local soca and reggae hits, reflects as well external influences and the popularity of the format within the region.

Regional efforts by the Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU) to produce regional news exchange programmes and documentaries, albeit with external financial and technical assistance, and the popular acceptance by regional audiences of these efforts, also indicate the importance that regional viewers attach to such fare.

On the other hand, the importance that a growing number of local community self-help groups throughout the region attach to alternative media and to alternative uses of mainstream mass media, would indicate that there is not widespread consensus concerning the instrumental significance and cultural relevance of the mass media to all our citizens. As consumers, these citizens do not attach as much importance to the entertainment value of the mass media as many other citizens do. Rather, they wish to see the media used to enhance real **communication** possibilities in the service of **development** understood as individual and collective self-actualization.<sup>18</sup>

At the political level, some regional leaders have, over the past decade, voiced appropriate platitudes about the role of the media in national and

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18 See Aggrey Brown and Roderick Sanatan, Talking With Whom? A Report on the State of the Media in the Caribbean, Kingston, UWI, 1987.

regional development but, for the most part, have been found wanting in terms of meaningful policy formation and decisive action. MDC governments continue to monopolise television even as they reluctantly expand the scope of radio broadcasting by licensing new entrants to the field as is the case in Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. For the most part they however, remain oblivious of the fact that contemporary media technologies and delivery systems, have all but nullified the official cultural gate-keeping role of a past era. And LDC citizens have long since coopted the visual media to their commercial and entertainment purposes. And so we face the 21st century.

#### RETHINKING THE CONCEPT OF "CULTURAL IMPERIALISM".

Earlier on, I cited some of the salient characteristics of contemporary mass media technologies and suggested that, among other things they are not communication technologies but they are potent information transmitting technologies. Too, that they have the capacity to expand the human environment spatially and temporally. As well, by affecting human consciousness, they are also, as technologies, products of culture and products through which culture is expressed. But their most unique feature is that, as technologies, they separate the producers of cultural expression in its narrow sense, from the consumers of cultural expression as product.

The formative phase of a global oligopoly of megaconglomerates that control both the hardware and software aspects, especially of the visual media, will be consolidated by the middle of the decade. And given present trends, this competitive oligopoly, through research and development, will continue to produce and market globally new hardware - the core of the infocom industry - for which software will be required and not all of which they will be able to produce. By the turn of the 21st century, the infocom industry as a whole will be the world's largest industry and its entertainment subsector, hardware and software, the most financially lucrative.

In light of all of the foregoing, present conceptions of cultural imperialism and the limited, tangible responses to it in the region, are misconceived. And inevitably so, since the very concept of cultural imperialism constitutes a misdiagnosis of the situation.

As is true of all the mass media, but particularly so of the visual media, Caribbean citizens have been willing consumers of both hardware and software. We have not been coerced into consumption. That the images reflected on our television screens are not often enough likenesses of ourselves, cannot be denied. But cultural ennui is the price we pay for passive consumption.

Furthermore, the majority of our countries are members of the ITU, which formulates the regulations governing the use of the Earth's electromagnetic spectrum. While we do face some disadvantages - primarily lack of cutting-edge technical information and political/economic clout - vis-a-vis the industrial countries, we do participate in the decision-making process.

The obvious ascendancy of capitalism in the world at the close of the 20th century and the imminent dominance of the infocom sector in the world economy, are auguries of what I am here calling the globalisation of culture (in its narrow sense). And the geography and history of the Caribbean can be used to our strategic advantage to participate fully in the evolution of world culture.

More specifically, while the enormous sums required for research, development, production and distribution of infocom hardware will be beyond our collective capacity perhaps permanently, CARICOM does possess the technical skills and creative imagination to participate decisively in the development, production and distribution of visual media software. The region's international successes in music in particular (reggae, soca, calypso), but in dance and drama as well, demonstrate the obvious and what our poets, novelists, playwrights and other artists have demonstrated for

over half a century, namely, that no nationality has a monopoly on creative imagination.<sup>19</sup>

Meaningful participation in the evolution of global culture through the visual media however, will require the formulation and implementation of regional and national infocom policies that nurture the requisite skills and resources for doing so. Matters to be addressed include: (1) formulating and promulgating policies that allow free movement of personnel, equipment and supplies around the region for the production of internationally marketable visual material ; (2) investing more in the training of the skills required for creating visual media software; (3) providing appropriate incentives for cultural entrepreneurs; (4) coordinating cross-sectoral infocom plans nationally and regionally; (5) creating technical infocom information banks and allowing open access to citizens; (6) linking development of the infocom sector to all other sectors, in particular tourism; (7) recognising tangibly the significance of the infocom sector in the global economy of the 21st century; (8) facilitating access of regionally produced material to global markets; (9) encouraging, by underwriting if necessary, research efforts for the development of appropriate infocom technologies within the region; and (10) encouraging through the region's school system the formal study of the infocom sector as a sine qua non for entry to the 21st century of the region's young.

By no means exhaustive, the foregoing merely draws attention to a number of neglected aspects of the infocom sector within the region.

In light of CARICOM's political economy; the emergence of Japan as a global power and the dawning European union, it is incomprehensible that the

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<sup>19</sup> Already one Caribbean citizen, Franklyn St. Juste of Jamaica (and CARIMAC/UWI) has won more than one international award for cinematography - one of the awards, the Cleo, being the international advertising industry's equivalent of the Hollywood Oscars. Both awards were for television commercials made in Jamaica for local and regional television consumption. Another Jamaican, Trevor Rhone, a playwright, won the Canadian equivalent of an Oscar for film script-writing in 1989.

region has so far all but neglected the infocom sector of the global economy which, by the first decade of the 21st century, will be worth over three thousand billion dollars and which is already having profound impact on human consciousness and global culture. The region possesses the potential to participate in the sector by producing software, if not hardware, that could earn significant revenues while simultaneously contributing to the evolution of global culture.

The steel Pan, reputedly the only original musical instrument (hardware) to have been developed in the 20th century, emerged out of the Cultural dialectic of Trinidad at the start of the century and Reggae (software) out of a Jamaican dialectic near the end of the century. Facing the technologically mediated global environment of the 21st century, Caribbean people need to be reminded of and inspired by these two singular human achievements.