

## ABSTRACT

### Access to Information in the English-Speaking Caribbean

The paper proposes to describe the status of information access illustrated by examples drawn from the English-speaking Caribbean and to suggest strategies for Librarians to enhance their management of future developments in the electronic information explosion. Though the information superhighway is becoming a reality in more developed countries, it has not yet materialized in the Caribbean. This can be demonstrated by the limited access to Internet in most territories. At the regional level, librarians experience varying degrees of difficulty in accessing information. Problems revolve mainly around a lack of telecommunication links and funding. There have been a number of networking efforts and the establishment of specialized information systems but the full potential of these have not been realized as a result. However, at the national level in most states access is much better and, though, there has been improved bibliographic control, information retrieval and document delivery systems users, especially researchers, claim to have little or no access to information. The information superhighway promises to be a panacea but it bring its own complications. So librarians and library associations will have to recognize the need for reassessment of their role and responsibilities in electronic age.

## **ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING CARIBBEAN**

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As we all know, this is the information age—a time when an indescribable amount of information is available to society. Rapidly evolving communication technology has made the information superhighway a reality. Systems have been designed which enable sound, data, and images to travel on a single line. One of these systems, called the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), would allow one conduit to provide electronic-based services such as television, fax, telephone, and computer links to individuals upon request, and would be able to do so at any time, from any place. It would be accessible from anywhere: home, work, or elsewhere. [1, p. 5] The information superhighway, as a tool for the transfer of information, is the ultimate at this time.

This scenario is now materializing in the Caribbean and the changes are characteristic of a great explosion. The Caribbean states, considered part of the developing world, comprise the island arc separating the Caribbean Sea from the Atlantic Ocean. Extending from Cuba in the north, to Trinidad in the south, the region also includes three mainland states: Guyana, Belize, and Surinam. Due to a mixed colonial heritage, the four major languages spoken are English, French, Spanish, and Dutch. This paper seeks to describe the present status of information access in the English-speaking Caribbean, and raise issues that librarians should consider when managing future developments.

Information access, in the context of library science, means to retrieve stored information for patron use. In order to do this, one needs to know what information is available, where it is, and how to get it “in hand” or “on screen” so that it may be used. Therefore, activities from bibliographic control to document delivery are involved.

In the 1970s, Daniel Bell postulated an “information paradigm”: in post-industrial society, the new economy will be based on the new “intellectual technology” of computers and telecommunication networks, and will produce a new class of information professionals offering expert and neutral guidance. [2, p. 14] This implies that librarians can shrug off the time-worn dowdy image of being custodians of the book and accept a new role in an information society. Currently, a school of thought proposes that the electronic information explosion, especially easily available online full-text material, will make librarians virtually redundant in the near future. This pessimistic point of view, expressed by many in the profession, is founded on the latest innovations in the electronic information systems.



The revolution of information access created by the personal computer has been outdone by the revolution of networking. As one writer says, "Personal computers are great but computers become something special when they are connected." [3, p. xix] This connection can be illustrated by the Internet ("the Net"), the network of networks, which is only one of the routes on the information superhighway. There are more than 40 million people in more than 100 countries who either "surf, walk or navigate the net." There is a projection of one billion users by the year 2000. Use of a standard set of protocols, TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), allows users to be linked despite the size or model of the computer being used, or where in the world it may be located. In addition to searching online databases using tools with names like Gopher, Archie, Veronica, WAIS, Yahoo, Lycos, and Alta Vista, software such as ftp, IRC, WHOIS, DNS, and Finger facilitates other methods of using the Net: e-mail, BBS, newsgroups, Usenet, computer conferencing, Listserv, DE/DL and, of course, WWW (Worldwide Web, or "the Web").

Connecting to the Internet from the Caribbean is now fairly easy (dial-up access through a local or nearby service provider), but relatively costly. Expenses are for hardware, software, and monthly bills including a subscription fee and telephone bill, the cost of the latter increasing with the distance from the provider and the length of time spent on the Net. This last is relevant in the larger countries or those without a service provider. However, compared to the cost and intricacies of publishing books and magazines where there are few writers and many readers, networks allow anyone to "publish" anything with accompanying advantages and disadvantages, of course. Hence, networking tremendously increases access to many and varied sources.

Internet access started, on a limited basis, in certain territories in 1994. Today most of the English-speaking countries have full Internet access. In some states, the public has access through public libraries at minimal cost. Where this is not possible, Internet access continues to elude the "man on the street." The access to Internet, because of limited infrastructure such as appropriate band-width lines and the high cost of leased lines, is not in real time. Therefore, files have to be downloaded and replayed. There are plans to introduce ISDN systems in some countries in the near future.

In Trinidad and Tobago and some other countries governments are in the process of creating national telecommunication policies. Such policies will make recommendations which would serve as guidelines for telecommunication development. At the regional level, librarians experience varying degrees of difficulty in accessing information. Problems revolve mainly around funding. Though e-mail allows easier information exchange and interlibrary loans may be arranged, it is not yet economically feasible for documents and text to be transferred electronically.

Regional networking efforts include the organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States OECS.INFONET project, started in 1987. It supports the establish-



ment of national documentation centres in each member state and the training of required staff. Though such centres are fully automated, the lack of telecommunication links among the islands has kept this network on an informal, human basis rather than online. Since funding by the United Nations was discontinued in 1991, document delivery by fax or express mail is no longer affordable. However, since full access to the Internet was made in 1995, information transfer has been facilitated.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC) has developed regional networks in the areas of agriculture, trade, patents, energy, and planning, but these, too, remain human rather than online. They have established an electronic information-exchange system called Ambionet. This bulletin board system is being prepared to provide full Internet access to its users, in the short term, and to be put on the Net, in the long term. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat in Guyana has an in-house database called CARSEC (CARICOM Secretariat). It covers a wide range of information affecting the Caribbean. It is expected to go online in the near future.

Within the English-speaking Caribbean, a number of specialized information systems, mainly indexing and abstracting services, have been organized. Some are listed below:

Year Established	Database	Name of System	Scope/Area Covered
1979	CARISPLAN	Caribbean Information System for Economic and Social Planning	Multi-disciplinary
1985*	CARSTIN	Caribbean Science and Technology Index	Science and Technology
1985*	CARGRIS	Caribbean Information System for the Agricultural Sciences	Agriculture
1983*	CARIS	Caribbean Agricultural Research Projects	Agriculture
1985	CARINDEX	Caribbean Index	(i) Social Sciences and Humanities (ii) Science and Technology (iii) Agriculture

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<b>Year Established</b>	<b>Database</b>	<b>Name of System</b>	<b>Scope/Area Covered</b>
1986	CARTIS	Caribbean Trade Information System	Trade
1987*	CARSIC	Caribbean Abstracts in Science and Technology	Science and Technology
1987	CEIS	Caribbean Energy Information System	Energy
1987#	CARREV	University of the West Indies Theses	Theses
1988#	CARNEW	Trinidad Newspapers	Current News
1992	Med-Carib	Caribbean Health Information System	Health
1993	EDLIS	Index to Journal Articles in Education	Education
1993	Theses	Theses in Education	Education Theses (UWI)+
1993	Carib	Caribbean Index to Education Documents	Education
1994	SECLAC	Cultural Information System for Latin America and the Caribbean	Culture

**NOTE:**

\* - discontinued

# - published in CARINDEX

+ - University of the West Indies

Of the above, only CARISPLAN and CEIS can be searched online.

There are a number of planned databases as well, in the areas of agriculture, health management, macro-economics, and the environment. All are regional in coverage.

CDS/ISIS (Computer Database Systems/Integrated Set of Information Services), a UNESCO-designed database software promoted in developing countries, has been used extensively in Caribbean libraries. Though created especially for libraries with search facilities, it has been described as a dead-end programme which is not user-friendly. However, at the first CDS/ISIS conference held in 1995, developments discussed were a WINDOWS version, as well as making CDS/ISIS databases available on the Internet without an interface.



Few Caribbean libraries have used the MARC (Machine Readable Cataloguing) format, which has been the choice of developed countries where millions of MARC records have been made available on CD-ROM. A conversion utility does exist to convert MARC format into CDS/ISIS output version, but its efficiency has to be determined.

Most librarians will agree that information access within countries is much better than access among states, despite the proximity of the islands to one another and cooperation among librarians. At the national level in many states, there has been improved bibliographic control in recent years, especially of government documents. However, organization of official collections that are considered personal property remains problematic.

In the more developed Caribbean countries, most special and academic libraries are fully automated and have qualified staff. In the smaller Caribbean states, the national documentation centres contain most special collections present on the island—there is usually insufficient qualified staff to maintain these collections separately. Public libraries in the region are generally not automated. Few school libraries are computerized; if they are, it is to a lesser extent than other types of libraries.

Other recent developments in information access include the CD-ROM. This format allows a vast amount of information to be retrieved repeatedly at no cost beyond the initial cost of the discs and drive. CD-ROMs can be used for bibliographic as well as full-text data, and have potential for multimedia applications. Data can also be accessed through CD-servers on telecommunication networks. [4, p. 35] *Libraries in the Caribbean which can afford to do so have invested in CD-ROM technology.*

With budget cuts increasing every year, fundamental decisions need to be made about optimum use of available funds. For example, what should be done if only two percent of users in an agricultural library request online searches, and the increase in the prices of agricultural journals between 1989-1993 is 55 percent? [5, p. 44] One has to decide to whether to embrace automation and educate patrons in its use, or to keep hard copy, which although costly in dollars and space, makes the information easily available and allows for browsing. Most users in the Caribbean are more comfortable with the traditional print formats, despite the fact that published information tends to go out of date rapidly in some disciplines, and searching printed materials can be time-consuming. There has been improved bibliographic control of grey literature produced in the region, and recent developments in scanning/imaging technology have allowed easier delivery of these unique documents. All in all, librarians will agree that there have been improvements in information retrieval and document delivery of late, though opinions vary as to the impact on information access overall.

Some users, until recently, claimed that there is little or no access to



information. Those who now have Internet access no longer make this complaint, but they are faced with problems of how to find exactly what they want; how to search authoritatively through the quantity of data presented; and how to verify data. Too, they are limited to what is presented on the Net: e.g., there is a bias toward English language information, toward citations rather than text, and toward the sciences rather than arts and humanities. Soon users may also be required to pay for information.

Users of information on or about the Caribbean are faced with other difficulties. Some researchers may be unable to articulate their research request thoroughly; some may not even know where to start. Initial problems encountered may be of a bureaucratic nature. In the Caribbean, much primary research exists, and often the special collections containing such research have restricted access. They may also be poorly disorganized and unwieldy to search. Time and transport can be considered constraints when a number of referrals are involved. Interlibrary loans of the material are made cautiously.

When the assistance of a librarian is enlisted, other problems may arise. Some procured items may contain inaccuracies or be irrelevant, biased, at an unsuitable level, dated, inappropriately categorized, quantified, or compiled (the last criticism refers to statistical data). In general, user expectations of what a reference service is supposed to provide do not always agree with the constraints under which librarians operate. This discrepancy may result in a breakdown in communication, with librarians held responsible for the inadequacies of the data they furnish. Of course, there should be a differentiation between generators and providers of information, but this concept is appreciated more by librarians than by users.

The information superhighway promises to be a panacea, but it brings its own complications. Some advocates of the information age declare that "The world of information has become overwhelmingly complex, and most 'ordinary men' are simply too lazy, too uninformed, or too irrational, or too uninterested to make any sense of this avalanche of information without guidance." [2, p. 7] This opinion contradicts the one that foresees the obsolescence of librarianship, holding that librarians will have more responsibility as information is made available at an exponential rate. As search time increases and the need arises for ranking of relevant items according to source authoritativeness, the retrieval skills of librarians should acquire greater significance, even if systems become more user-friendly. Furthermore, librarians must make decisions regarding what catalogues, databases, or full-text documents should be accessible; what security measures should be implemented to ensure confidentiality of activities and files; and if charges are to be instituted, how to rate and collect them. If, for example, a Web site is to be created, files may have to be rewritten (in the hypertext markup language in order to have hypertext links) and re-created (if sound and graphics are to be included). This kind of preparation will require the acquisition of new competencies by library personnel.



Librarians in the Caribbean should not view the future with apprehension. Instead of hoping for a delay in the superhighway's arrival, they should prepare to do the job with which they have been mandated: that is, to provide timely and relevant information. Therefore, librarians should reassess their approaches in the light of emerging technology. In order to do this, and to create strategies to handle the issues involved, they must come together within professional bodies, as time and cost constraints do not allow individual approaches. One issue to be addressed is the need to keep up to date with the latest research and new terminology in the field/discipline within which one is employed, as well as that of library and information science and communication technology. This will enhance one's ability to perform efficiently and confidently.

Librarians, most definitely, need to acquire training to manage computer and networking developments. Training can range from basic computer literacy to familiarity with networking systems and basic electronic mechanisms. As resources become more limited, librarians may have to become entrepreneurial or solicit funds. Public relations and communication skills will be an asset to either of these approaches. Networking can provide a forum for realistic Caribbean integration, as well as international interaction. Familiarity with more than one language will enhance this process, and so training towards this end is imperative. Whereas library professionals recognize the need to evolve or become redundant, library education programs must revise their prospectus in a fundamental manner to ensure that graduates are competent and capable of functioning in the new environment.

There is a role for national library associations to play in the professional development of its members, a role which is normally enshrined in their constitutions. Associations can provide training which may prove too costly on an individual basis. Regional library associations, such as the Association of Caribbean University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL), also have the mandate to lobby regional governments for the required communications infrastructure and funding. In turn, librarians should support their local and regional associations to this end.

There is no need for the unquestioning acceptance or rejection of the new technology. Librarians can consider becoming evaluators of the new information technology by objectively identifying the strengths and deficiencies of both electronic and print sources and designing new infrastructures. [6, p. 49]

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# The Caribbean

