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Follow the Yellow Brick Road: Websites as Catalysts for National Development

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ABSTRACT

Small-island developing states (SIDS) enhance their competitiveness by advertising development initiatives that promote and encourage direct foreign inward investment opportunities in major markets. Failure to make use of information communication technologies (ICTs) can undermine national development initiatives with transformative potential. Based on this logic, some Caribbean governments have followed international best practices of businesses and have moved towards the creation of websites and the establishment of portals or gateway sites on the World Wide Web to announce their presence. One of the practical implications of such initiatives is based on the assumption that once websites are built, persons will come. Although for many, the development of a website appears to be an innocuous endeavour this mistaken perception in most cases has led to several sites being designed and commissioned as technical projects mostly employing techno-centric approaches. These policies often ignore the accompanying important socio-technical institutional considerations, such as the importance of timely and accurate information to potential business clients or prospective developers, language capabilities, and a range of standards, guidelines, rules and legislative changes. The central thesis of this conceptual paper is that if member states of the region properly conceptualise and design websites and portals they can be used to achieve strategic national and international development objectives of egovernance in its broadest meaning. The arguments are intended to stimulate thought among policy makers and the private sector alike in the Caribbean with a view to bringing about change that will promote sustainable development

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1.0   Introduction

The website: a term that describes a collection of web pages, media files and other digital assets that are all combined in the URL. It is usually a single web server that hosts a website and can be accessed via the Internet (www.jetpeppers.com; see also Awad, 2006; Schneider, 2013). This definition betrays the strategic importance and significance they can have on promoting national and regional development. In the eyes of many policy planners and private sector specialists in the region, the website is a storefront with the name of the store and representative product displays and the customers are cyber-customers. Indeed, most web administrators or their agency directors view the innocuous website as a goal to be accomplished, that is, many agencies appear to have decided "we want a website" and set out to create one. They give little thought beyond the goal of getting a presence on the web (Christensen and Hughes, 2000, p. 572). This paper will show that for small island developing countries (SIDS) [2] in the Caribbean, the role of websites in national development cannot be just another ordinary design project, but they must be considered as a sine qua non of national development as they are the only method through which the world can know of their existence. For countries in the Caribbean, with limited budgets during the best of financial times, these chronic recessionary times call for even more creative, efficient and innovative development paths while simultaneously delivering existing services effectively. Moreover, as the Internet continues to expand enabling global enterprises to harness its ability for successful innovative entrepreneurial activities, so too must firms and governments in these countries see it as a viable tool well into the millennium to scour for new and innovative uses that enable increased productivity by allowing them to do more with the available manpower and technology. Most businesses, governments, educational establishments and just ordinary citizens create a website to showcase and manage their activities over the web (www.jetpeppers.com; see also Awad, 2006; Schneider, 2013). Properly designed and implemented websites can assist the realisation of egovernance. For example, egovernment can expand throughput by improving efficiency in the delivery of government services while at the same time simplifying compliance with government regulations thus yielding cost savings for citizens. In edemocracy, the very fabric of democracy is strengthened by access to information, increasing citizen participation thereby reducing social exclusion and building trust in government ensuring more transparency in its functioning by minimising corruption (Ntulo and Otike, 2013). In ecommerce, websites serve as virtual marketplace hubs through which interactions with businesses, industry, and domestic, regional and international society can occur. Their ubiquitous presence provides greater convenience and the potential for the better delivery of services to generate revenue growth, particularly much needed foreign exchange earnings for businesses and the government itself (Ntulo and Otike, 2013, p. 5). With the increasing emphasis among regional policy planners on the development of an entrepreneurial culture and the search for markets to exploit this potential, the internet allows entrepreneurs to reach more people for less money. The website therefore must be seen as a new pathway for national development because of its technological capacity to leapfrog development barriers such as geographical remoteness to enable these states to achieve and sustain competitiveness through enhancing, combining, reconfiguring and projecting the national enterprise's intangible and tangible assets. Equally important, they can be the catalysts that generate new ideas by enabling effective electronic government strategies to expand and diffuse more extensively to support social and political development while contributing to the well-being of citizens. A website can also represent a cheaper

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[2] This article is not intended to be an expository discourse on the semantic definition of small island states. Rather, the category of states referred to here is the Small Island Developing States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) which are Antigua and Barbuda, The Commonwealth of the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago.

communication alternative from the users' point of view, especially if they are located abroad, as a phone call through an internet service provider is often cheaper than a long-distance call, or a physical visit to the agency (Ntulo and Otike, 2013, p.6) Not surprisingly therefore, progressive-minded governments and businesses are looking to adopt this technology.

This conceptual paper provides an overview of selected changing and increasing demands and challenges that confront small island developing states (SIDS). The paper builds a case to show that factors such as geographical remoteness give rise to development constraints associated with the high cost of transportation and communication which impact on doing business. In addition, problems continue to exist for public administration and its ability to deliver cost effective services because certain expenses are not divisible in proportion to the number of users (Bruglio, 1995). Simultaneously, the challenging and rapidly changing scenes of globalization, regionalism and declining preferential treatment also have dire implications for these states' realising their strategic national, regional, and international development objectives (Caribbean Export, 2010). It is within this context that the paper builds a case for the use of new website technologies to be strategically harnessed as an additional innovative cost effective development solution in efforts to address pressing issues in areas of governance, democracy and commerce. The use of these technologies by policy planners and the private sector can also support and serve as integral marketing strategies to raise the awareness of international markets to the productive sectors of these countries, by assisting them in surmounting some of the perennial constraints of small domestic markets and of a financial inability to penetrate global export markets because of the increasing costs of traditional print media production to businesses and to governments. The paper concludes by arguing that a confluence of all these developments will not make egovernance and ecommerce a reality in the near future, but points out to national and regional development actors that by failing to see and use these technologies appropriately for transformative purposes they will continue to be culpable for not rectifying some of the prohibitive barriers that constrain their development.

2.0   Selected problems of small island states

Most small island states in the region achieved political independence less than half a century ago. Their track record confirms that despite the innate limitations and vulnerabilities arising out of "smallness" it was still possible for them to prosper with several achieving significant sustained growth rates in the time of preferential trading concessions for primary commodity exports. Changes over the years in the global institutional arrangements however, have seen many of them being characterized by variegated processes of socio-economic change reflected in the patterns of economic structure and performance (Northover, 2004, p. 4). "This has been especially true for the countries depending largely on tourism, like Jamaica. In these countries, growth has averaged less than 2 percent a year since the mid-1990s—and less than 1 percent in Jamaica" (Lagarde, 2014). Although, Trinidad and Tobago with its oil-resourced economy has been regarded as economically "out-performing" the others, this success masks its ingrained volatile socio-political challenges (Ramsaran, 2002). Moreover, "the Caribbean has had a tendency to get stuck in the doldrums of stagnation—low growth, high debt, low competitiveness, high unemployment" (Lagarde, 2014). "The Caribbean was vulnerable going into the global financial crisis, and was hit with its full force" (Lagarde, 2014). "Six years on, output has still not returned to pre-crisis levels, and public debt is still at record highs—almost 100 percent of GDP in tourism-dependent countries, and 140 percent of GDP in Jamaica" (Lagarde, 2014). These challenges have further exacerbated their political, economic and social importance within the global economy and their difficulty in finding and adopting innovative solutions to these new geopolitical and strategic configurations. "As always, the poor and the vulnerable were hit hardest by the crisis" (Lagarde, 2014). By and large, all today remain vulnerable small states (Northover, 2004, p. 4) trying to weather the economic vicissitudes of change.

These are therefore defining times for small states who continue to consider themselves as the "poor" and the "powerless" (Thomas, 1988; Ramsaran, 2002). This is premised on their narrow specialisation in

primary export commodities, worsened by an inelastic demand in the markets of developed countries from the production of synthetic substitutes made possible by advances in technology. Additionally, a protective agricultural commercial policy reduced the likelihood that the industrialised countries would absorb increasing amounts of agricultural commodities from the less developed countries. Their asymmetrical dependent economic relationships with larger and more developed societies, particularly in major trading and hemispheric agreements, have therefore resulted in adverse terms of trade (Lalta and Freckleton, 1993; Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997; Ramsaran, 2002; Klak et al., 2004; Hall and Benn, 2005; Gomes, 2014). With the erosion of protectionist policies, the countries of the region have not benefitted in the same way from the promises of prosperity that advocates of free trade had envisaged in global markets (Klak et al 2004; Hall and Benn, 2005; Gomes, 2014). These dependent relationships have not been ameliorated by globalization nor stymied by their characteristically inherent open economies (Menon, 2009; Gomes, 2014). Moreover, the countries of the region face further developmental challenges due to their remoteness and isolation making cooperation between them problematic because of the considerably high economic and administrative costs. These features have been exacerbated by high transport costs and inadequately serviced shipping and air transport routes as well as the lack of supporting infrastructure which makes it even more difficult for these islands to access regional markets, and more specifically major global markets (Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Task Force, 2000; Gomes, 2014). Integrally linked to the challenge of remoteness is also the lack of coverage, that is, a general level of unfamiliarity by the global community with the peculiarity of these states. Under contemporary pressures of globalization these countries' vulnerability continues to be heightened by the spectre of marginalization (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997; Klak et al., 2004; Menon, 2009).

3.0   Competing from the periphery

Taking into account these national and regional socio-political constraints and conditions impacting their development, policy makers have always been constantly challenged to find the kind of emancipatory solutions that consider the proper management and utilisation of their limited resources while still creating innovative opportunities to successfully navigate these states through these turbulent times (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997; Klak et al., 2004; Gomes, 2014). As with governments globally, governments in the region have been forced to undergo a range of policy-initiatives for addressing macro-structural impediments such as reducing and/or containing public spending through increasing efficiency in administration, as well as reductions in employment and social security. Some of these changes in policies and the accompanying implementation of new institutional structures are of their own making, while others have been imposed on them by global international financial organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In 1973,[3] as in 2014, Caribbean leaders constantly announce that small states meeting of their economic and social objectives, will depend on a change of mind-set that calls for the pro-activeness and flexibility of their policymakers and the ability of entrepreneurs to promote strategic competences that enable their economies to achieve competitive advantage at home and overseas (see Hall and Benn et al., 2002; Bourne, C. 2010; Infodev, 2014; McGinnis, 2015). It has become a truism that the enveloping knowledge economy and globalisation have both changed the scenario for small states. As a consequence, their emphasis must now be more on developing and exploiting distinctive competencies and capabilities for their products and sectors that consciously considers their knowledge assets, strategic location, creativity, natural beauty, speed and any other resource that can enable them to manage their interfaces with the global economy from their isolation from core markets.

4.0   The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)

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[3] The year 1973 has significance in the life of the Caribbean region as the year the Treaty of Chaguaramas was signed establishing the Caribbean Community and Common Market with its three principal objectives to promote economic integration, foreign policy coordination and functional cooperation.

In view of the reality that several regional and international developments such as the demise of preferential trading arrangements will inevitably impact on the region's global competitiveness the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) was signed by 14 CARIFORUM Member States (all except Haiti) and the 27 European Union (EU) member states in October 2008[4]. Under the EPA, both CARIFORUM and the EC have made significant binding commitments on the liberalization of trade in cross-border services, which cover the provision of services through electronic means. All things considered, the potential of e-commerce has been proposed under this agreement for reducing barriers and costs to small CARIFORUM firms as they pursue opportunities to penetrate international markets to access and derive the benefits of the electronic marketplace. Given the small size of most Caribbean firms, and the very limited capital base, e-commerce seems ideally suited to provide opportunities for reaching customers in distant markets without the cost of establishment or use of intermediaries. Besides access to new and bigger markets, such electronically mediated trade can also help to bring about reduced costs and faster turnaround times by streamlining and integrating processes along the entire business value chain. The argument is that the sun never sets on knowledge work, the economy is open for business, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and information-based services are expected to be the lynchpin in the new knowledge economy. The development of an ecommerce approach will complement the need for developing technological mechanisms for boosting the expansion in international trade of the narrow range of products that are available to be traded (Caribbean Export, 2010). Although, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica have e-commerce legislation in place, and several other countries in the region notably the OECS[5] are considering or are in the process of preparing legislation, there still exist a number of significant challenges affecting its development. CARIFORUM Governments need to develop appropriate e-commerce regulatory and facilitating regimes; and firms would need to increase their capabilities in e-marketing, e-transactions and their security in order to capitalize on these possibilities (Humphrey, et al., 2003; Caribbean Export, 2010).

5.0   Unrealized development potential: www.egovernment

Like governments elsewhere, some in the region are recognizing the value of website technologies and are looking for ways to use them more effectively for egovernance. There are several reasons why these technologies are important to all government and private institutions. First, the government, like the private sector, provides a service for the people and as such websites are not only the signposts to navigate the web but they are the entrances to cyber institutions. A well-managed website is the conduit through which institutions can provide information-based services such as:

- Government forms and general information about the products offered, and request processing,
- Publication and filing of income tax,
- Passport applications,
- Online Land and Real Estate Tax Services
- Regulations for establishing a business, renewing driver's license,
- Filing and registering complaints,
- Ordering government publications, even

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[4] This reconfiguration of Caribbean/EU relations, replaces the trade provisions of the Cotonou Agreement, signed in 2000, in which the European Community (EC) unilaterally granted goods from African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries non-reciprocal trade access to Europe in preference to other countries. Under the EPA CARIFORUM states in return also committed to the reduction of tariffs and non-tariff measures usually imposed on European goods.

[5] The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) is a sub-grouping of countries within CARICOM. They are: Antigua and Barbuda, Anguilla, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint. Lucia, Monserrat, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

- Searching reservations and parking information.

These services have significant information components related to tourism, health, agriculture, small businesses, job opportunities, sources of credit and education destinations among others, key economic growth sectors for these economies (The Advocate newspaper, 2014 B).

Darrell West in his study of Global E-government, 2002, examined the delivery of public sector information and online services through the internet from the static process of the delivery of announcements and notices to interactive citizen and business participation. Consistent with this approach, governments around the world are not only creating websites but also web portals — macro-websites that can become information centers to enable citizens to make contact with a number of agencies via a single point on the Internet. The ability to access and provide information from a variety of sources, places, or systems from one location with one consistent user experience can prove to be very powerful for users. Tourists can book hotels through the websites of many Caribbean and Pacific countries. In Australia, citizens can register government complaints through agency websites. Nations such as Bulgaria and the Netherlands, are attracting overseas investors through their websites (West, 2007). The governments of the Caribbean therefore have an opportunity to use eGovernment online services to expand the economic contribution that their citizens at home and abroad can make in these challenging economic times by harnessing their economic contribution in a government-to-citizen service and support-oriented manner while servicing the diaspora worldwide (US, UK, Europe, Africa) who need many of the online services mentioned (The Advocate Newspaper, 2014 C). To accomplish this, policy-makers can implement a range of user-fees for online government services to support the many needs of citizens locally and abroad. Not only can egovernment serve as a conduit for accommodating the Caribbean diaspora in developed countries, but the reverse is equally important, that is, the accommodation of a substantive cosmopolitan population from around the world that has adopted countries in the region as their new home. Already, remittances from family and friends via regular wire transfers represent an important source of financial support to family members to cover basic needs in education, health, housing, and small businesses in every Caribbean country. According to the Inter-American Development Bank Report on Latin America and the Caribbean, in absolute terms remittances inflow to the Caribbean in 2012 were US$8.3 billion. In the case of Jamaica for example, it represented a rise of 0.6 per cent from the previous year to US$2.04 billion (IADB, 2012). Remittances continue to play a central role in helping support national economies through providing governments in almost all of the region with additional foreign exchange, constituting for example more than 10 percent of the gross domestic product in countries, including Haiti, Guyana, and Jamaica (Jessop, 2013). The region already has several successful case studies from developed and developing country contexts alike, such as the USA, UK, Canada and Costa-Rica who all earn significant revenues annually from egovernment initiatives, of how best to make it happen. In instances like these technologies are crucial in "bringing home to them" and all things being considered can also be employed as a value-added resource for the region.

6.0 Strengthening hemispheric relations

As referenced earlier, countries such as Costa Rica have been focussing on how best to modernize a range of diverse bilateral trade agreements with such countries as Canada to include cross-border trade in services and government procurement (Strange, 2012). Of particular importance to Costa Rica is strengthening their tax information exchange agreement between countries, and expansion of market access for cross-border trade in services, investments, electronic commerce and telecommunications. Like Costa Rica, as countries within the region move towards rebranding themselves as legitimate international financial jurisdictions, they have been signing tax information exchange agreements (TIEA) with several advanced countries central to this exercise to help fight international tax evasion and protect the integrity of the tax system, (Harper, 2011; Chase, 2011).

7.0   E-democracy and democratic services

As with egovernment, one of the major potential advantages of egovernance is that it can facilitate the introduction of new services to enhance the electorate's participation and consultation in the democratic process (edemocracy). For example, democratic services such as online voting, campaigning and fund raising, voter registration, opinion polling, representative-voter communication can be made possible (Cave, 2012). Beyond the economic benefits to be derived from these services to enable edemocracy, the Internet is also transforming the political communication environment worldwide. The Internet with both e-mail and web pages extends technical means of communication and expression to a far wider number of people. Citizens are organizing online through a diversity of politically oriented groups operated by social networking sites such as Facebook, and the growing use of blogs and micro-blogging sites, particularly twitter and YouTube, to facilitate participatory democracy. This allows citizens to engage in debate with the government on issues of concern, providing public feedback, sharing content, projecting opinion, coordinating activities, enhancing government's transparency in order to reduce corruption, provide better information and service delivery while reinforcing political credibility and accountability. There is also evidence of a new type of selection bias, with search engines (particularly Google) acting as key Internet gatekeepers just as selective as news organizations, although in a different way. But another key difference in political communication is that various kinds of 'news' are spread through a series of point-to-point connections in online networks, rather than broadcast from central media (Dutton, 2013, p.428). In other instances, another important development comes from the growing use of 'Web 2.0' applications for the emergence of peer production of online goods. This is based on the idea of 'user-generated' content, typified by Wikipedia, blogs and social networking sites (Murugesan, 2010).

Drawing on the example of Singapore, Netchaeva (2002) notes that Singapore developed a government portal, 'e-Citizen', to maximize its use of e-Government to enhance people's participation in democracy. This has also led to the country being the first nation in the world to conduct a population census online. Here again, websites have been instrumental in providing the opportunities for citizens to access affordable information and for governments to disseminate as well as systematically collect information about their clients and users to provide qualitatively better services. In countries where there is a high level of voter apathy specially designed interest group websites have been opening doors towards reducing that apathy by building contact with people who were not engaged in the political process (Ntulo and Otike, 2013). It is difficult to quantify the scale of these activities and the extent to which they replace or augment traditional forms of political participation. Of note, this analysis is not purporting that a sense of nirvana has been reached to the extent that websites have suddenly reinvigorated development, but it is illustrative particularly of how some societies are focusing on an innovative mixture of online and offline activities to breathe oxygen into flagging democratic processes.

Compositely, these development initiatives can be transitioned online. So far however, the use of ICT tools for development in the Caribbean has been tentative, ad hoc and usually glanced over. It should be borne in mind that there exists a CARICOM 'ICT for development' strategy but its complexity like other strategies, often defies implementation. The biggest challenge facing the region is not so much the void of ideas, but the disconnection between them. Often the different stakeholders have not made the connections as to how best their ideas can be transitioned from conception to reality. They are those who would argue that this author's [re]formatted role of the value of websites is being stretched too far. Moreover, for many, how can a seemingly innocuous website promote development without the requisite concurrent institutional changes? This tentativeness, understandably so in their argument, centres around the logic that with the advent of social media networking sites, the necessity for websites has declined, if not been displaced. This author acknowledges both these concerns, but disagrees with the latter argument.

8.0   Do websites still matter today with mobile apps and social media?

There is no doubt that the popular use of social media has become *sine qua non* with communication firms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter becoming *en vogue* as the new marketing tools, begging the question, if websites still matter. It is easy to see and understand how and why the intense use of social media sites can distract and tempt users' attention away from the seriousness of purpose of creating their individual spaces. With a hashtag and a tweet there is the prospect of an instantaneous response. The popularity of social media is entreating because of the levels of user interactivity to talk about products and services, and keep in touch with clients while connecting with prospective ones for businesses or society. Social media is a powerful force for word of mouth and maintaining current awareness (www.ondigitalmarketing). They have become the number one go to place when someone is looking for information and other requirements online so it makes sense to use them (Cave, 2012). Given the scale and reach of the Internet such that even a very small proportion can represent huge revenues consummates in the minds of the user why connected networks such as these represent so much value (www.ondigitalmarketing; Schneider, 2013; Laudon and Traver, 2007). In these contexts, the role of social media lures users away from their responsibility of understanding the value and importance of designing websites (www.smalltimemarketer.com; Schneider, 2013; Laudon and Traver, 2007; Cheinman, 2013).

In spite of this chimera, a website still matters. Whereas the marketer may have paid for this click or earned this engagement with remarkable content, its proprietary use of property brands is effectively renting the real estate from these social media companies. Control and autonomy of content have been forfeited as the host can alter changes for any reason. In essence, the individual or entity on social media networks is reduced to the roles of tenant/renter in digital spaces (www.ondigitalmarketing; Cheinman, 2013; Belicov, 2011; Laudon and Traver, 2007) because the owners of the social media spaces control who and what they will allow on their social spaces. Thus the brand experience and terms and conditions of service are dictated by the rules of that platform. Issues of control and autonomy of content by users are however often misunderstood, or ignored, or the implications are unknown because of the hype surrounding the importance of the fashionable "link me" slogans on social media. To earn a deeper engagement, like closing a sale, the final conversion and profit for the majority of businesses still needs to take place back on the website creating a "Hub" to drive traffic/prospect to and from the social media spaces (www.ondigitalmarketing). In these instances, owners of the individual website and/or portal, be they businesses or government agencies', have the elasticity of use of the IT and engineering jurisdiction to control data, information, content, code, hosting environment, page count, plug-ins and more at will and/or to optimize the user experience in ways that directly support the users brand-related goals. The use of websites/portals therefore delimits competition of the users' products and services, without having a competitor turn the user in to the social space for not following some obscure rule (Belicov, 2011; www.ondigitalmarketing; Wordpress, 2010; www.smalltimemarketer.com). It is within this context that the importance of websites cannot be underestimated or ignored.

9.0   Conclusion

As more people gain access to the Web, the variety of business and non-business uses will become even greater. The website technologies can be used to harness, influence and project political, economic and social development and change. They can compel and empower the visitor to take meaningful action. They can create real value – both for the visitor and for the company (Cheinman, 2013). It is within this context that they must be discussed and considered as a strategic policy tool for development, given our social and economic landscape. However, to really understand how this can be achieved there is a need to focus on how the attributes of these technologies can be incorporated into policies to assist in the implementation and delivery of high-value government strategies. Being online is not enough. There is need for a new emphasis on an integrated development plan that will require a more focused and greater effort from governments and the private sector to commit financial

resources, the human resources with the necessary skills to collect and organize information, as well as the physical resources to ensure that this still largely unfulfilled potential for development in the region is realized.

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