Social media swirls in the Caribbean

Never mind the region’s low Internet penetration rates—there’s power in the underground

by Karel McIntosh
Social media: It’s a playground for the tech savvy, a cost-effective marketing tool for budding businesses and a community builder. And in the Caribbean it’s just beginning to gain momentum, leveling the playing field for small businesses and individuals in an environment where traditional forms of media are the preferred communication channels, and increasing visibility and dialogue among people throughout the region and beyond.

While the Caribbean is current with many technological developments, this is not necessarily reflected in Internet usage. The region has the lowest overall Web penetration rates in the Americas—an estimated 15 percent—due to a variety of factors, including household income, the cost of computers and Internet service (especially high-speed access), limited familiarity with technology, a lack of Internet education and awareness, and governments’ slow march toward information communication technology development. However, there is wide variation among countries’ Internet penetration rates: Barbados, for example, has an estimated penetration rate of nearly 60 percent, while Trinidad and Tobago’s is around 12 percent.

“For a long time, people were so intimidated by the Internet and computers,” says Ndelamiko Lord, a web developer, blogger and editor of the Caribbean online magazine sunheadmag.com. “But now more people are seeing the Net as a tool and using it as such.”

Growing interest
Despite the varying penetration rates, the Caribbean blogosphere has been an active, albeit small, community since 2000, comprising

“The main effect of blogs has been to make it easier to meet people from different Caribbean countries and learn a little more about their cultures.”

—David Mullings, blogger and Internet marketer
nationals living in the region and abroad. Bloggers hail from throughout the region and tend to come from the middle to upper classes. They write about a range of topics, including politics, social issues, current affairs, business, entertainment, sports and their personal lives. Some members of the "Caribbean Bloggers Massive" Facebook group cite as reasons for joining the blogosphere the desire to practice their writing, network and join like-minded communities.

"Social media in the Caribbean is similar to everywhere else, just much more limited because the percentage of online users is smaller," says Florida-based Jamaican blogger and Internet marketer David Mullings, who authors several blogs and web sites, including mullingsbrothers.blogspot.com. "The main effect has been to make it easier to meet people from different Caribbean countries and learn a little more about their cultures. The Caribbean is quite divided, and social media helps to bring people closer and correct some of the [cultural] misunderstandings."

Traditional media still at the forefront

Newspapers, television broadcasts, call-in radio talk shows and other traditional media lead the mass communication arena. Public relations and marketing campaigns still rely on these forms of media, making the adoption of new media a clear case of integrating communication. There is an obvious need for online communication channels, as the Internet-savvy in the region and the Caribbean diaspora abroad often turn to the Internet for information. Most Caribbean newspapers host web sites, yet few have maximized online tools to extend their reach, and most web sites lack true interactivity. 

The Jamaica Observer started its blog, Observations, only recently, with the goal of highlighting new ideas, innovations, inspirations, issues and people who are having an impact on development on the island. While traditional Caribbean media seems to be separated from social media, the influence of the Caribbean blogosphere is, in fact, being expanded by a few media projects in the U.S. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School runs the nonprofit online media project Global Voices, which focuses on highlighting content from bloggers all over the world. Global Voices and Reuters have formed an alliance that facilitates Global Voices' training and outreach to bloggers. New media is becoming charted territory for activists and influencers, causing established companies to analyze how to navigate this space and find a way to balance conservative, corporate behavior in this new world, where there are no rules except to be transparent.

Satisfied with their web sites and traditional media, many Caribbean companies have not yet latched on to new-media opportunities. Perhaps it's the...
braziness and transparency of the social media environment—the fact that it forces participants to engage in straightforward dialogue that is indexed and shared across the Internet—that scare the corporate world.

“A lot of Caribbean companies or companies with a regional presence, such as the one I work for, have not really engaged social media, for many reasons,” explains Candace Ali, group communications officer for the Neal & Massy Group, a Caribbean conglomerate headquartered in Trinidad, which operates across a range of industries including the automotive equipment, energy, financial, information technology and communications, distribution, and logistics sectors. “First, there is the lack of controls, as it is very difficult to control some forms of social media, which provide a forum and considerable anonymity to people who may wish to undermine a company’s reputation. Some companies with skeletons in their closets would be deathly afraid of such direct and transparent communication. Added to this are issues of culture. Many large Caribbean corporations are very conservative and somewhat hesitant to embrace such forms of media, which truly empower individuals.”

But dialogue and engaging audiences are clear benefits of new media, right?

“As communicators, we love the fact that social media empowers the individual, but empowers the individual to do what?” Ali asks. “Social media gives a voice to a number of people whose motives we know nothing about…. We need to effectively manage how it is used in the corporate environment, and there are issues regarding the notion of managing social media at all, because the beauty of social media is that it is relatively free from controls.”

Social media for artists and activists

Social media marketing does not require a huge investment, which makes it very attractive to those who can’t afford the high costs of traditional advertising. While large, established companies sit on the sidelines of the online world, individuals, entertainment and arts-based businesses, entrepreneurs, nonprofits and activists are leveraging the power of new media to seek new audiences and promote their brands.

Nonprofit organizations have seized the opportunity to increase their visibility and reach young volunteers online. Activists are also making the most of these tools. In 2006, when Alcoa, a multinational company, announced plans to build an aluminum smelter in Chatham, Trinidad, and had secured the government’s support, activists protested not just on the roads, but also on the Web via blogs such as rightsactiongroup.blogspot.com and social networking sites. In a surprise move, the prime minister announced (on Christmas Eve) that the smelter would be built in another area. While the influence that online activism had on these events has not been measured, new media is proving to be a forum where activists can reach out to the Internet-savvy local citizenry and an international audience.

Local political parties have joined their international colleagues in integrating social media into their campaigns, particularly in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Cuba, and St. Maarten, all of which held elections in the past year. The tactics were more or less the same: Parties and their followers posted political advertisements, rallies, debates and propaganda on YouTube, and new Facebook groups supporting various parties and issues were created daily.

“The Caribbean blogosphere has certainly become more active, even within the last year,” says Janine Mendes-Franco, Caribbean editor for Global Voices. “It may or may not be a coincidence that the surge of activity corresponded with many regional territories holding general elections, and bloggers were quite vocal about political issues. It was the first time in the history of Caribbean politics that the Internet, and specifically Web 2.0, was used as a means of communication on the campaign trail.”

Social media presents a real opportunity to connect with the Caribbean, its diaspora and consumers of things Caribbean. While it still holds underground appeal, it is seeping into the consciousness of the savvy, educated and influential Caribbean circles, young and old. Companies that fail to leverage new-media tools—or at least keep logged into what’s taking place in the digital Caribbean—may well find themselves out of the loop.*
The game of the name

A rebranding effort helped solidify Vale’s new position as a global leader

As the Brazilian mining giant Companhia Vale do Rio Doce grew to reach the second spot in the global mining league, its management team realized it was time to develop a new image. CW asked Olinta Cardoso, the company’s communication director, about its transformation into Vale.

Q: What was the company’s reason for the rebranding and its vision of the new brand?
A: Vale’s rebranding was a natural consequence of the company’s growth strategy in the past few years. In 2001, we were the sixth-biggest mining company in the world, mainly in iron ore mines. Now, especially after our acquisition of the Canadian mining company Inco in 2006, we are the second-biggest diversified mining company in the world. As we grew and acquired new companies, we realized that we had several names with different identities. We figured out that we had to do a brand project.

It’s important to mention that before embarking on a brand project, Vale reviewed carefully and thoroughly its mission, vision and values. And that’s what made the need for changing the brand even more evident. We want to be the No. 1 mining company. We have been working hard

going green

A commitment to socially and environmentally responsible practices is part of the Vale brand. The company is a member of the International Council on Mining and Metals, a consortium of companies whose goal is to make the industry “widely recognized as essential for society and as a key contributor to sustainable development.” Groups such as Earthworks independently monitor the environmental records of companies in the industry.

A rebranding effort helped solidify Vale’s new position as a global leader.

Is it possible to strengthen a commitment to generate value and sustainability by changing a brand? Yes, it is possible.
to achieve this position, and it’s key that our efforts are translated by a brand that can be understood anywhere in the world.

Q: Can you describe some specific changes related to the rebranding effort?
A: We needed to define our position. We researched all of our competitors and found out that all of them talked about social responsibility and the environment, which we also talk about. But we chose to focus on making the connection between mining and people’s day-to-day lives. The car that you drove or the subway that you took to work today was built from ore, from iron ore, from manganese, from copper, from silver. Our goal is for people to know that we are a company that provides the raw material for products like computers, watches or stoves—the minerals that you need for your modern, daily life.

Q: What advice or recommendations would you give to other companies that are considering a major rebranding project?
A: To use the branding debate process from the first moment to transform the organization. It’s the moment when we discuss our identity and [that] allows us to design the company’s future.

The advertising campaign for Vale’s new brand was designed to be sensitive to global communication and respectful of other cultures. Different versions of similar illustrations were designed for each country where Vale operates, so that people everywhere could identify with the materials.

brand-new appeal
An internal survey of 3,000 Vale employees about the communication surrounding the new brand revealed that:
- 83% rated the content of internal vehicles concerning the new brand as good or excellent.
- 84% rated the way the brand was revealed as good or excellent.
- 95% rated the new name as good or excellent.
- 86% rated the new logo as good or excellent.
In the 21st century, corporate social responsibility, or CSR, has become a catchphrase. But while many use the term, few understand what it means.

CSR is described as “the integration of business operations and values, whereby the interests of all stakeholders including investors, customers, employees, the community and the environment are reflected in the company’s policies and actions,” according to CSRwire, a private firm that provides news and information on various social responsibility and sustainability initiatives. In recent years there has been growing global interest in learning about and practicing CSR principles, to the extent that a variety of organizations and institutions offer sessions on it—from the World Bank Institute’s CSR and Sustainable Competitiveness course, to professional development courses through Harvard University’s CSR Initiative, to myriad corporate training programs.

But studies have found that so far CSR has been slow to catch on in the Caribbean. Estrella Peinado-Vara, a consultant in the private enterprise and financial markets department at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), conducted a study in June 2004 on behalf of the IDB titled “Corporate Social Responsibility in Latin America and the Caribbean.” Her report found that:

- **CSR activity still looks relatively weak and unevenly distributed in Latin America and the Caribbean, with very few companies adopting a formal CSR agenda that ensures healthy working conditions and livable communities.**

- **CSR can be considered a growing movement, still in its infancy, and in many cases is still viewed as corporate philanthropy.**

- **Although there are signs of increasing interest in CSR, there is still much to do in promoting real implementation of CSR programs and in disseminating the social and economic benefits of CSR practices.**

- **Responsible companies can make a significant—if not critical—difference in the social and economic development of the region.**

Although there is increasing interest in CSR in the Caribbean, there is still much work to be done to establish programs and practices.
Since the report’s publication, some Caribbean-based companies have become active in CSR projects, making efforts to incorporate CSR concepts into their mission, vision and policies. Ian Cooper, former country manager of Scotiabank Guyana, is quoted on the BBC website as saying, “We [Scotiabank] define CSR as the way we interact with all of our stakeholders (shareholders, customers, employees and the community) to meet our social, economic, environmental and ethical responsibilities.” He said the company practices CSR through strong support of projects such as West Indies Cricket and Kiddy Cricket, HIV/AIDS awareness programs, Breast Cancer Day fundraising, and a recycling program.

Trinidad and Tobago has approached CSR even more directly, signing on to the U.N. Global Compact on 15 January 2007. The South Trinidad Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers’ Association are the first two local organizations within Latin America and the Caribbean to join the Compact. The Corporate Social Responsibility Mapping Project, as it is called, is expected to be the catalyst that takes Trinidad through the transition from philanthropy to CSR. As its main objective, “the CSR Mapping Project is to provide a baseline and a resource that will inform and direct the development of corporate social responsibility in Trinidad and Tobago in order to help the private sector play a more meaningful role in T&T’s social development.”

The first report from that project, published in late 2007, figured prominently in Barbados at a conference promoting CSR in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Caribbean, a partnership between the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Young Americas Business Trust, and the Caribbean Association for Industries and Commerce. The first of these “training of trainers” workshops was held in Trinidad and Tobago in September 2007. The five main objectives were:

- **Define CSR** and its main concepts, and understand international frameworks, standards and guidelines and how they can be applied to SMEs in the Caribbean.
- **Share, use and adapt** case studies and practical CSR examples from international and Caribbean sources.
- **Support and encourage** SMEs already involved in CSR to continue the journey toward social and environmental responsibility.
- **Use tools, resources** and lessons learned to support the implementation of CSR in SMEs.
- **Understand** the Caribbean business environment and provide material for trainers interested in supporting the implementation of CSR in the region.

In March 2006, Kami Huyse’s Communication Overtones blog (overtonecomm.blogspot.com) included a post stating that CSR is public relations of the highest magnitude because it requires actions and not just words: “CSR is more than just donating money or getting involved in community causes; it is also engaging stakeholders in their concerns, driving principled behavior through strong corporate values, and using the corporate influence to ensure a sustainable world.”

Business professionals, particularly those at the management level, should always be mindful of this definition. It speaks to the fuel that drives the CSR engine in any corporation. CSR cannot exist without the implementation of sound, effective and sustained communication tools via a well-trained, professional and motivated communication team.

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**IABC participates in CSR standards project**

As a global professional organization, IABC took the lead in exhibiting its commitment to CSR. In March 2007, IABC became an official partner of the ISO 26000 initiative, which is being developed by a consortium of experts in various countries and from 35 liaison organizations, including the U.N. Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, the World Health Organization and the Centre for Social Responsibility. An IABC subcommittee has been set up to drive the project.

“We know that professional communicators not only provide exceptional communication guidance and leadership but also can serve as strategic partners to their organizations. We not only communicate change, we drive change,” says Michelle Bernhart, head of the committee.

The group is currently providing recommendations on a section of the ISO guidance document that focuses on communicating about social responsibility, emphasizing the role of the communication professional in planning and implementing social responsibility programs. Says Michael Zimet, a committee member and head of IABC’s Advocacy Work Group, “The ISO project truly gives IABC and the communication profession a seat at a very important global table. Not only are we able to contribute to an important ISO standard, but our involvement with ISO also ties in with the work of the Advocacy Committee and serves as a first step for exploring our own role in social advocacy.”

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**about the author**

Cloret Greene, ABC, is a strategic communicator, certified facilitator and entrepreneur. She owns and operates the communication consultancy Wild & Wonderful, and was 2006–2007 president of the IABC Caribbean chapter, which serves 13 Caribbean territories.