

JAMAICAN MEDIA:
RINGING THE CHANGES - 50 YEARS AND BEYOND

by
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When the proud black, green and gold standard of the new Jamaican nation ascended the flagpole at the national stadium at midnight on August 6, 1962, there was no Jamaican television station to mark that momentous event. Jamaica's first television station, JBC TV was established in 1963, the year after independence.

The national independence ceremony was visually captured by the film unit of the government of Jamaica (now JIS) , but it was left to the nation's two radio stations to provide broadcast coverage, alongside the print media, then dominated by the Gleaner Company's newspapers.

In the 50 years since independence, Jamaican media have come a long way! As of June 2012, there are 27 radio stations in the country, alongside three (3) free to air television stations: TVJ, CVM and LOVE. There are 41 cable providers, some offering over 300 international TV channels, including approximately 15 local cable channels. The arrival of the internet some three decades after independence has added the Worldwide Web as a digital multi-media communications platform, which has since been enhanced by such social networking sites as Facebook, LinkedIn and My Space, micro-blogging sites such as Twitter and the pervasive video-based network YouTube, among many others.

Mobile revolution

One of the more remarkable developments in Jamaica's communication history since independence has been the phenomenal growth of voice telephony. In just over a decade, the country moved from the grips of a limited and inefficient monopoly operated by Cable and Wireless, into what has become a mobile phone revolution. In 1992, the monopoly wired network provided a service to only 278, 872 wire-line telephone subscribers. With the advent of competition, starting in the year 2000 with the arrival of Digicel and Centennial , the wireless networks has

mushroomed, evidenced by over 3 million mobile handsets in use in both rural and urban Jamaica in 2012.

The three current competing telecommunications providers, Digicel, Flow and Lime (Cable and Wireless) now enable local and global communications, including via the Internet, to friends and relatives and business associates at home and abroad. The movement has been from clunky rotary phone dialing, long queues at public call boxes and longer waiting lists for home phones, to what some regard as the unimaginable: more phones than people, strong growth in the acquisition and use of smart phones, phone-based cameras that have made Kodak and photographic film obsolete, increasing presence of portable tablets that scroll at the touch of a screen, e-readers that open up new vistas for reading books, blogs and websites, and computers that enable data archiving, social networking, mobile banking and electronic commerce.

Print Media

Although the expansion in print media has been less dramatic, the country still maintains two competitive morning dailies: the **Gleaner**, still a broadsheet established in 1834 and the **Observer** which became a daily in 1994. There is also the popular afternoon tabloid newspaper, **the Star**, published by the Gleaner Company since 1952. A plethora of weekly and regional newspapers, magazines and other periodicals, some linked to websites, have emerged to match a wide variety of tastes and styles.

The **Western Mirror**, under the editorship of Lloyd B Smith, has been the longest surviving of the current weekly newspapers, having been established in 1980 as a successor publication to Montego Bay's Beacon newspaper. The **North Coast Times**, edited by Franklyn McKnight and **The News**, formerly the Boulevard News, edited by Clarence 'Ben' Brodie are also still in print and serving their communities after several years.

In the intervening 50 years since Jamaica's independence many media outlets have also come and gone. Public Opinion, which pioneered hard hitting political journalism in the pre-independence era, did not survive. The Daily News, representing the first major competitor to the Gleaner, survived for some ten years between 1973 and 1983. The Record newspaper, which started in 1987 had an even

shorter life span until its demise in 1992. Its progeny The Herald appears to have disappeared in late 2011, after starting in 1992 as a daily publication, contracting to becoming a weekend paper in 1996.

Television origins

In television, the JBC, whose TV service started 1963, remained a monopoly for 30 years, until 1993 when CVM television began its operations. (CVM received its license in 1991), and in 1994 National Religious Media Commission began operating LOVE TV. By 1997, Jamaica witnessed the controversial decommissioning of the JBC for financial and political reasons. Its television service was taken over by its old rival, the Radio Jamaica and two of its three radio stations were integrated into RJR's stable of radio outlets to create the country's biggest electronic media conglomerate, the RJR Communications Group.

Radio: the Foundations

Radio Jamaica and Rediffusion (RJR) originally emerged out of the colonial wartime shortwave transmissions of ZQI in the late 1930s and became Jamaica's first radio station in 1949, owned by the British Rediffusion Group. RJR remained a monopoly radio service for 10 years until the government-owned JBC radio was established in 1959 under Premier Norman Washington Manley.

In a Ministry Paper presented to Parliament in 1958, Norman Manley's government justified the proposal to introduce competition in radio on the basis of building up the "self expression, culture, information and entertainment" of the Jamaican people. He saw the need for this as an antidote to the spread of colonial ideas that were considered pernicious to the national psyche. The Ministry Paper of 1958 alludes to that concern:

[P]resent broadcasting facilities do not and cannot meet the special needs of the people of Jamaica in the fields of self-expression, culture, information and entertainment. It is also clear that, unless specific measures are taken to guide the development and use of broadcasting in such a way as to maximize its contribution to the fulfillment of

Jamaica's special needs and aspirations, the natural commercial pressures may result in its being developed along lines detrimental to those interests (*Ministry Paper No. 5, Appendix CX* , January 31, 1958).

JBC started its broadcasts on June 15, 1959, providing 19 hours of transmission per day on the AM band. The new station had earlier been formally institutionalized on December 19, 1958 with the passage of the Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation Act. Electronic media competition in Jamaica therefore started with radio some three years before political independence in 1962.

In the mid 1970s, the government of Jamaica, under Michael Manley, acquired Radio Jamaica Limited from the British Rediffusion group and eventually allocated its share capital to a range of "people based organizations" including trade unions, credit unions, farmers, professional associations and staff. While many of these shares have changed hands since then, the legally mandated dispersed nature of the company's shareholding remains intact as a safeguard against any single corporate predator.

Radio Innovator: Irie FM

Maybe the most historic addition to the competitive radio landscape in the decades since independence came through the establishment of Jamaica's first reggae music radio station, Irie FM in 1990. Against the confident predictions of pundits, the Reggae format quickly amassed a strong radio listening audience, and today Irie FM competes successfully for the honour of being dubbed the leading radio station in Jamaica. It operates in a diverse and competitive landscape ranging from the religious broadcasters, all music formats, sports specialists, a dedicated French language station, to the dancehall music presenters and the providers of news and talk formats.

Historic rivals

In retrospect, it was the competing operation of rival stations RJR and JBC that captured a major portion of Jamaica's early electronic media history in the period before and since independence. The pioneering RJR established a solid reputation

in live and up to the minute news coverage, and also became the morning sound track to a nation getting ready for work. Its Sunday evening music collection remains a nostalgic songbook of vintage compositions especially for the generation that ushered in independence. For its part, the JBC was the celebrated conduit of cultural and popular creativity in the decades following independence. It pioneered political talk radio, through the Public Eye, and made many local radio dramas, such as Dulcimina and Lime Tree Lane, household names. But its television service was dominated by foreign content and repeats of local programmes, despite airing some memorable public affairs and dramatic productions.

With the demise of the JBC, it was the Creative Production and Training Centre Limited, (CPTC) that carried the flag of the leading public sector media house in Jamaica. Established in 1984 from the remains of the Educational broadcasting service (EBS), the production house grew in influence and productivity. It incubated a host of local talent both in television production and presentation skills and established one of the country's best audio visual archives.

Private production houses, notable Media Mix led by Lennie Little White and Phase Three, owned by the Forbes family, joined a wide range of privately owned advertising and PR agencies that enrich what has become a private sector led industry. Nevertheless, some public sector entities have emerged and are surviving in the current environment.

New Cultural Standard Bearers

In 2004 CPTC's training arm Media Technology Institute (MTI) emerged as a registered tertiary level college for certificate and degree-level qualifications in the use of 21st century technologies to create television and multi-media productions to global standards.

The subsequent establishment of the Public Broadcasting Corporation of Jamaica (PBCJ) in 2006 provided an additional public-sector production facility that enables live coverage of Parliament and other public events and facilitates transmission of nostalgic programmes from the archives of the JBC.

BCJ: Quality and Innovation

Regulation plays an important role in protecting vulnerable segments of the population, helping to charting the policy course for growth of the electronic sector and ensuring an orderly environment for citizens and media enterprises alike. The Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica (BCJ), has provided that leadership since its establishment in 1986 but especially in the more turbulent recent phases of the country's electronic media emergence. Stations have been bluntly told to clean up their acts and licensees kept in line by a BCJ that has garnered a reputation for fearless insistence of quality and the promotion of innovation. But even so, reform beckons. The Broadcasting and Radio Rediffusion Act is now in need to replacement. Carried over from the older Broadcasting Authority, the BRRA speaks to a different era and will eventually be repealed in favour of a technology neutral and more forward looking Communications Act.

Technology Adoption

Jamaica was an early leader in media technology adoption in the English-speaking Caribbean, reflected in its early adoption and diffusion of new broadcasting technologies since independence. The switchover from AM to FM by both JBC and RJR took place in September 1972 ahead of the rest of the region. Despite the FM being available from the 1940s, its diffusion into Jamaica as a commercially viable means for radio broadcasting coincided with a similar industry-wide uptake of FM radio broadcasting in the USA during the 1970s.

By 1975, the country also made the switch from black and white to a colour television service and adopted the NTSC standard already in use in the United States. Amid current global plans for a new switchover, this time to 'all digital technologies', several providers have already made the transition and others have started to implemented aspects of the change-over. One provider now offers mobile television via a telephone handset and others are introducing high definition programming and Internet Protocol Television (IPTV).

Conclusion

Transitioning from its embryonic state in the early 1930s, the media and communications industry in Jamaica has evolved into a formidable element of our economic, civil and social life 50 years into independence. Today, the media sector is a vital part of our democracy and our press regarded as being among the

most liberated in the world, comparing favorably with similar industries internationally.

However, there is still much more to be done in continuing to use the available talent, content and technologies to liberate rather than enslave, to repel an emerging cultural crassness and to promote innovation over imitation. Despite the gains made in the era of analogue transmission, the future is digital and belongs to our youth, the deserving legacies and digital natives. The next half century is inextricably bound up with our ability to educate, re-skill and re-tool our people to take advantage of new media and the constantly emerging digital opportunities.

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