Imagining Integration: The Role of Social Media in the Development of Regional Identity and Empowerment

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/03/imagining-integration-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-development-of-regional-identity-and-empowerment/

GWENDOLENE ROBERTS, OCT 3 2013

Introduction

The word 'Caribbean' invokes such a variety of definitions that scholars over the last several decades have generally failed to develop a clear picture of the region, opting instead to treat with segments as necessary. This confusion, over what constitutes the Caribbean, is what necessitates the following debate with respect to regional integration. Can a grouping that has not yet unpicked this term so readily bandied about truly merge forces, to form a successful integration movement? This issue has led to a gradual widening of the separation amongst the Spanish, French, Dutch and English states geographically located in the centre of the above definitions of the 'Caribbean.' For the purposes of this paper, the Caribbean shall be defined from a geo-historical standpoint as it provides the best articulation of what the term was originally created to classify.

In terms of regional integration (RI), a Realist outlook would dictate it as

'*…a worldwide phenomenon of territorial systems that increase the interactions between their components and create new forms of organisation, co-existing with traditional forms of state-led organization at the national level.…Since the 1980s, with the so-called 'new regionalism' wave, RI can be seen as a multidimensional process that implies, next to economic cooperation, also dimensions of politics, diplomacy, security, culture, etc.' (Hettne 1999).*

The foregoing statement is a reflection of the basic conceptualisation of RI. Evolution of research in the area and the changes wrought by globalisation has however led to a questioning of this original definition. Traditional RI speaks to a process largely involving institutional frameworks and governmental input as measurements of its success (Kritzinger-van Niekerk 2005). And this may in fact be correct if one samples its effects in largely homogenous societies with similar histories, ethnic groups, and legislative arrangements. Today, howeve,r I posit that true RI as it relates to the Caribbean will only be successful if it is navigated as a socio-linguistic undertaking. The history, demography, and culture of the states making up this region demands a novel approach. A recognition of the fact the language of the peoples of the region is as important, if not more so, than the purely politico-realist organisational models of traditional RI. No other region of the globe is as multicultural in its human expression as is the Caribbean; integration should reflect this reality.

Thus, whilst Realist-oriented, state-led growth and development continue to dominate and provide little space for the involvement of individuals and non-state actors in advancing RI in the region, this paper suggests that an inverting – or perhaps 'collapsing', may be the better word – of the ordering, is required. RI will in this case therefore, refer to communal identity building, through language to a great degree, as a key factor for the success of institutional framing or governmental accords.

Integration: A History

'Regional Integration (RI) is a major form of South-South Cooperation and a constructive alternative to the current pattern of inequitable globalization.' (Ortiz 2008)

In articulating such a view, Ortiz was, it may be assumed, referencing the ability of regions such as the Caribbean and Africa to collectively navigate the economic system of trade and international commerce. However RI takes many forms; here it will speak to the first half of her statement and the social, normative ways in which it can be negotiated within the Caribbean. The concern of this piece is not with the economic implications of merging, or how best to maximise trade profits; rather it seeks to offer a glimpse into the possibilities of integration that expands outward from the individual to the wider society. This is not to undersell the importance of governmental involvement, but rather to emphasise that governmental action should always be informed by the needs of its community.

a. CARICOM – Caribbean Community

Regional integration has been a theme in the English-speaking Caribbean from colonial times. In the post-colonial era, a number of distinct phases can be identified in the evolution of regionalism:

- Decolonisation and Federation – The West Indies Federation which lasted from 1958-1962.
- CARIFTA – The Caribbean Free Trade Association (1965-1973)
- The CARICOM – Caribbean Community and Common Market 1973-1989, replaced CARIFTA in 1973 with the signing of the Treaty of Chaguaramas. CARICOM was a stronger form of integration with three 'pillars' of economic integration, functional cooperation and foreign policy coordination. (UWI Institute of International Relations 2011)

In the years since the Treaty of Chaguaramas, very little has transpired that could lead one to suppose that any of the three pillars have been successfully implemented. Functional cooperation barely earns a passing grade with units operating in almost totally autonomous states as soon as the fiscal requirements of funding are met (Landell Mills 2012), whilst the foreign policy coordination and economic aspects remain the elephants in the room that no one speaks of.

Security was only mandated as CARICOM's Fourth Pillar in 2007, but it is already clear to see that it may the most successful of them all. What is also self-evident and does not reflect kindly on the governments of the region is that much of the impetus for this was not internally derived; rather it came on the heels of US pressure on the region to modernise in response to the U.S.' "War on Terror."

CARICOM has long been accepted as the preeminent vehicle of organisation of the region. Its traditional structure however – English-speaking Caribbean membership with notable exceptions being Suriname and Haiti (the introduction of the Dominican Republic under CARIFORUM is further stretching this original English-speaking context) – had begun to be considered among citizens of the region as archaic, obsolescent; a millstone around the region's neck depending on which island one visits. In fact, for decades Suriname and now Haiti have been faced with requirements to attend conferences, workshops or meetings that have not catered for the non-English-speaking members of the supposed Community, either in terms of materials provided for use during the event or summaries after the event.

Within the past four years, driven largely by calls from regional NGOs, academics, columnists and community action groups, CARICOM has begun an attempt at reformation with respect to its communications mechanisms. As of 2010, the Community formally recognised that real-time, consistent sharing of information, inputting of national and regional feedback into the analysis of priority projects and programmes would be more readily done, had been made. The work now is in getting the 'doing' activated.

b. ALBA – Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas

The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) is a coalition of countries devoted to regional integration based on principles of solidarity, cooperation and complementarity… Inspired by Simón Bolívar's vision of

uniting the region in a single political body. (Stone 2010). ALBA's policy of regional solidarity to pursue social transformations at both national and regional level (Ortiz 2008, 8) has been successful thus far in that it is rapidly expanding its reach to islands of the Caribbean region. This outreach was signalled strongly when the groupings' name was changed to include the Caribbean. It now reads, The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean. This has been a major selling point for the grouping and its social programmes are growing exponentially backed significantly, it must be stated, by funding from oil-rich Venezuela and the medical expertise of the Cuban contingents which jointly propel this grouping.

A drawback of the grouping however rests with the fact that it is dominated by Spanish speaking countries and those in its membership with English as their first language are often lagging the rest of the grouping in terms of acquiring translations of documents and being able to formulate appropriate responses within reasonable timeframes. Moreover, whilst large countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia are able to easily manage their ALBA requirements, much smaller economies with even smaller populations are hard pressed to maintain an equitable delegation, much less finance their representatives at a similar level as their counterparts.

c. UNASUR – Union of South American Nations

Since its conception in 2004 and its eventual ratification in March 11, 2011, UNASUR has been engaged fully in overcoming the physical barriers to the Southern Cone's integration. Politically, several projects are underway to improve the complementarity of the various models across the continent (UNASUR 2012). With a staff populated and originating from all governments party to the agreement, and with its Secretariat fully functional now that it has been installed in its new home, UNASUR has been able to act decisively on several issues emanating from within the Cone such as its response to the ousting of President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras.

Interestingly, UNASUR membership, just like ALBA, overlaps with CARICOM. This grouping however also raises the spectre of the language barrier. Whilst the major language used in the grouping is Spanish, English is spoken in Guyana and Dutch in Suriname. In several cases there have already been instances of a lag between agreements thrashed out at the conference level and their transmission to these two members. Moreover, these two economies, one strained from years of low growth in the case of Guyana, and a newly recovering one for Suriname who only recently separated itself financially from the Netherlands, have experienced some strain in terms of managing its commitments to UNASUR whilst maintaining strong links with CARICOM.

When Guyana was installed as the 2011-2012 Pro-Tempore President of the Union, the sheer number and regularity of communiqués emanating from the membership forced Guyana, whose staffing for the role numbered less than six, to accept only a portion of the responsibilities of the position. This was in sharp contrast to Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina or even Venezuela whose Unit contingent required whole office buildings with different sections devoted wholly to specific aspects. [1]

What is Social Media? Is it relevant?

Social Media are considered to be the cumulative group of information sharing/exchanging sites accessed via the world-wide web. Opinions, emotions and value systems all coalesce through these Media to form pictures of the individuals that utilise them. The social media networks, almost rivalling those of the traditional news Media today, have expanded the knowledge bases of societies that were once quite ignorant of each other. But how is this relevant to Regional Integration?

The study of the power of social media and its implications, utilities and drawbacks, is a relatively new discussion within the framework of International Relations and RI in particular. Defined here as a virtual tool of casual communication accessed through a framework of interdependent virtual existence, Social Media capture the personal, intimate details of an individual's life whilst interlinking it – through commonalities to like-minded persons and groups. In the Caribbean, Social Media have become a casual link between one society with others across the sea. A report from Internet World Statistics indicates that "Caribbean internet usage as a percentage was 0.5%

which equates approximately 11,893,504 users out of a population totalling some 41,427,004 as of 2011" (Internet World Statistics 2011). Interestingly as of March 31st, 2012 the figures for Facebook usage had risen for the Caribbean from 12.9% to 15.3% signaling an upsurge in the numbers online.

The last two decades of the 20th century saw a revolution in the nature of information and the way that it can be created, used and transmitted. Vast opportunities have opened up. Developing countries that have insufficient capacity to generate, disseminate and effectively utilize educational information and knowledge, may finally be in a position to accelerate their development (Shabalala 2007).

This acceleration can only take place however, with the buy-in of the citizenry. Across the region, governmental programmes geared towards literacy, or even simply awareness, have had mixed success rates. Often, the responses of government officials on the reason for low turnout revolve around the lack of dissemination. Without the rationale of input from civil society, even a cursory attempt to connect with the wider populace via the social network has often been the difference between a full audience, and a mere handful of attendees.

Having a presence in social media networking, maintaining a virtual infrastructure and ensuring broad access through language fluidity on one's sites are key elements in the struggle to create an independent, yet integrated region. It will also aid significantly in the likelihood of building stronger relationships between the regions at other than a governmental level. But these 'simple' process (for technology exists in vast amounts to facilitate them), have yet to be undertaken by most governmental bodies in the region. In the case of CARICOM and its web presence, it is abundantly clear how far the organisation lags in terms of its visibility. The site is archaic and reminds one of the MS-DOS days of the internet. Links are routinely missing and information accessed today may be 'lost' tomorrow. In an era where "image is everything," this is a virtual nail in the coffin. Persons seeking information are easily frustrated at the rigid and un-user-friendly image it presents and the obvious lack of regular updates to the site. As a reflection of the Community, it does not present a palatable first look.

Empowerment: Confidence in Speak!

As defined by the World Bank:

'Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes…In essence empowerment speaks to self-determined change.' (World Bank 2011)

Empowerment speaks to a strength of purpose and focus that is best acquired through internal development; having agency over oneself without fear of negative fallout. This is a key piece of the puzzle as it relates to identity building. A key element of citizens' capacity to be confident in their interactions rests on the strength of their commonalities. Knowing that when one says something, it is readily understood; being able to express oneself confidently without fear of being misunderstood, is what drives most of today's social communication.

Texting or "txtng" requires an in-depth understanding of one's societal peculiarities. In this region *Chaa!', 'Jah!' and 'wha de hell/jail is this!'* are all correct responses to things that shock, perturb, or cause frustration among the English speaking population. For Spanish speakers, phrases such as '*Madre de Dios', 'Increíble!' are common,* though often mixed in with some that are much more colourful. French speakers in expressing similar sentiments will often be heard to exclaim '*Mais Non!', 'Mon Dieu!', or 'Sacre Bleu'* to get their point across. To understand them, context is required, since as with any other society, social changes infiltrating the language may break even these simple phrases down much further.

Above all, though, is being understood. Time and again it has been shown that conversing in another language helps immensely in building strong rapport that supersedes formal, often superficial links. Understanding someone's culture is made easier through investing time in learning their language. Building social, business, academic links, stepping away from the tour guide or country map is easier negotiated if one is empowered through language to

explore and see the 'real beauty' of a country. Building a family of friends across the region requires the same. How many have noted that even a basic grasp of a stranger's language largely paved the way for it to become a friendship?

Identity: I am my Language!

Sir Edwin Carrington once said

'…linguistic diversity, which is a vital part of our cultural heritage and wealth, can sometimes pose a challenge to the progress of our regional integration process, which is, after all, the most viable path to the development of our Region.' (Carrington 2008)

His comment neatly encapsulates the second major concern of this paper. Institutional building, passage of laws, and mandates for projects across the Community without a concomitant focus on lessening the linguistic barriers amongst the states inhabiting the Caribbean cannot hope to enjoy the same levels of success as do regional groupings that have either treated with this problem or do not have to face it. Language is mankind's most important form of communication. Second only to that displayed through our postures and attitudes. Knowledge of it determines to a large degree how we interact with others and how we understand what they are trying to explain. Some 'tongues' encourage a communal identity, others promote individualism. In this part of the globe, several languages hold sway at the national level – Spanish, English, Dutch and French.

Social networking is an extension of this reality. The way in which people engage, or choose not to, with networking sites are all indicators of personality and priorities. The through-thread marking all of them however is the consistent manner in which special languages built within these frameworks become easily understood across states, regions and continents. New languages are being created daily! To master them, even as we cannot master that of our neighbour's – that is the power of Social Media!

Adelante! Allons-y!

The immediate future offers a blurry image of CARICOM. For several decades it has fed images of the insular Caribbean by virtue of its exclusionary model and it presupposition of the superiority of the English language. In fact for all that has happened in the intervening years since Federation, it is the view of this author that the region, barely covered by CARICOM, has only succeeded in stymieing the wider possibilities of the region. Why should President Martelly – newly installed in the Haitian seat of power in 2011 have to subtly reproach an organisation with this history behind it for not being capable of meeting the language needs of a member state whose population equals the cumulative numbers of all the other members? (Haiti Libre 2011, Martelly 2011).

Perhaps the argument that the overwhelming core-periphery relationship that presupposes the importance of English over less capitalist international languages is extreme, but the historical tendency to focus on aligning more with mainly English-speaking capitalist Core countries does make it a provocative, if incendiary argument.

Interestingly, using language acquisition as a launch pad may be of significant benefit to the region in terms of keeping valuable currency within the region. Commitment to raising the linguistic capacity of the region can serve to benefit and indeed encourage, intra-regional tourism. The current ache that is air passenger duties and visa requirements to visit Northern Core countries can be mitigated if the entire region comes on board. Engagement at this level will ensure that benefits accrue not just to the citizenry, but to the coffers of regional governments who depend greatly on tourism.

A concerted drive towards bilingualism provides uncapped opportunities for states and individuals to capitalise on the growing media thrust around the region. Trade, tourism, education and security concerns only stand to benefit from such a drive especially in the face of the fact that there are so many languages spoken in this little region of the

world – a mini-UN as it were. Conversing in the mother tongue of one's partner gains one untold respect and smoothes the way a lot faster than the 'greasing of hands' ever could.

Conclusion

"Caribbean people are already integrated. The only people who don't know it are the governments" (George Beckford)

Integration is a chess game of immense proportions. It requires delicate assessment of the self. What are the weaknesses, strengths? How can it best be managed? What should be the role of governments in regional organisations? How can organisations such as CARICOM marry its mandate to advance the needs of the population with that of the governments? Is it possible for citizens to drive this machinery along? This is the knife's edge on which successful regional integration sits. For the Caribbean it also means navigating a language divide that has grown wider due to inactivity for almost five decades. And it can be done.

As the opening to this paper suggested, CARICOM is not meeting its mandate of creating a community or serving its needs. The alternatives offered in the ALBA and UNASUR are not yet fully articulated and may prove to further reduce the import of these smaller economies as they are lost in the shadow of much larger counterparts. Even more so is the fact of the language barriers across the region. This breakdown in communication further stymies the process of community building and proves to be the more pervasive block to truly building a one Caribbean identity. This then is the benefit of incorporating a social media approach into the debate. It offers one way in which two blocks can be confronted. In the first instance it can be used to bring the Community closer to the citizens it services, and secondly it provides a feasible opportunity for language acquisition and retention.

___

Gwendolene Roberts *is currently pursuing a PhD in International Relations. Her research focuses on regional integration and the impact of media, language acquisition and issues of Identity on its articulation in the Caribbean and Latin American regions.*

Bibliography

ALBA. "What is The ALBA -TCP." *Alianza Bolivariana Para Los Pueblos de Nuestra America.* December 03, 2009. http://www.alianzabolivariana.org/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=2080 (accessed July 10, 2012).

Boas, M., M.H. Marchand, and T.M. Shaw. *The Political Economy of Regions and Regionalism.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Bruntland Commission. *Our Common Future.* World Commission on Environment and Development, Oxford: Oxford Press, 1987.

Bruntland Commission. "World Commission on Environment and Development's." 1987.

CARICOM. *CARICOM: A Five Year Regional Information and Communication Technology for Development Strategy. Development Report.* Consultant Report, Georgetown: Caribbean Community, 2010.

Carrington, Sir Edwin. *CRITI Will Enhance Co-mingling of Region's People.* Paramaribo, Jan 22, 2008.

Chinotti, Luca. "South-South Regional Integration and Sustainable (Co-)Development: Beyond Ideological Mainstream Analyses." *South Centre: South Bulletin-Reflections and Foresights*, May 2008: 12-14.

Falk, Richard, and Andrew Strauss. "Toward Global Parliament." *Foreign Affairs*, 2001: 212-218.

Fréchette, Christine. *Language issues in the Integration of The Americas.* Consultant's Report, Quebec: Conseil de La Langue Francaise, 2001.

Girvan, Norman. "ALBA, PETROCARIBE, and CARICOM: Issues in a New Dynamic (Part I)."*South Centre: South Bulletin-Reflections and Foresights*, June 2008: 8-11.

Haiti Libre. "Haiti – Politic : Remarks of Martelly to the 32nd Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the CARICOM." *Haiti Libre.* July 1, 2011. http://www.haitilibre.com/en/news-3288-haiti-politic-remarks-of-martelly-to-the-32nd-meeting-of-the-conference-of-heads-of-government-of-the-caricom.html (accessed July 4, 2011).

Hettne, B. "Globalization and the New Regionalism: The Second Great Transformation." In*Globalism and the New Regionalism*, edited by B. Hettne, A. Inotai and O. Sunkel, 1-24. MacMillan Press, 1999.

Internet World Statistics. "Internet Usage and Population in the Caribbean." *Internet World Statistics: Usage and Population Statistics.* 2011. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats11.htm (accessed August 10, 2012).

Jamaica Observer. "CARICOM Must be Enlarged to Survive." *Jamaica Observer*, February 29, 2012.

Kritzinger-van Niekerk, Lolette. "Regional Integration: Concepts, Advantages, Disadvantages and Lessons of Experience." *World Bank.* May 2005. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTAFRREGINICOO/Resources/Kritzinger.pdf (accessed January 5, 2013).

Landell Mills. *Turning around CARICOM: Proposal to Restructure the Secretariat.* Consultative Report, London: Landell Mills Consultants Limited, 2012.

Livemocha. *About Us.* 2013. http://livemocha.com/pages/about-us/ (accessed January 20, 2013).

Martelly, President Joseph M. "Press release 235/2011." *Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat.* July 1, 2011. http://www.caricom.org/jsp/pressreleases/press_releases_2011/pres253_11.jsp (accessed July 4, 2011).

Ortiz, Isabel. "New Developments in South-South Cooperation – China ODA, ALternative Regionalism, Bank of the South, ALBA." *South Centre: South Bulletin-Reflections and Foresight*, May 2008: 7-9.

Ramphal, Sir Shridath. "Careless with CARICOM." *Normand Girvan: Caribbean Political Economy .* May 4, 2010. http://www.normangirvan.info/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/ramphal-careless-with-caricom-as-sent.pdf (accessed January 22, 2013).

Shabalala, Dalindyebo. "Towards aDigitial Agenda for Developing Countries." *South Centre*, 2007: 1-72.

South of the Border. Directed by Oliver Stone. 2010.

Synthesio. "Social Media in Latin America." *Synthesio: Social Media Monitoring and Engagement.* January 2011. http://synthesio.com/corporate/wp-content/uploads/case_studies/DZN-SYNTHESIO-Social_Media_in_Latin_America-EN-whp.pdf (accessed July 14, 2012).

UNASUR. "Organos de UNASUR." *UNASUR.* 2012. http://www.unasursg.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=294&Itemid=342 (accessed August 29, 2012).

United Nations. *Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development.* 2012. http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1226 (accessed January 02, 2013).

Université de Provence, Universidad de Salamanca, Università degli studi di Roma, and Universidade de Lisboa. "EUROM 4." *Eurom 4: Método de enseñanza simultánea de las lenguas romances español, francés, italiano, portugués.* Florencia: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1997.

UWI Institute of International Relations. *Caribbean Regional Integration.* Development Report, London: UKAID, 2011.

Weisbrot, Mark. "Independent Latin America Forms Its Own Organization." *Center for Economic and Policy Research.* February 25, 2010. http://www.cepr.net/index.php/op-eds-&-columns/op-eds-&-columns/independent-latin-america-forms-its-own-organization (accessed January 20, 2013).

World Bank. "What is Empowerment." *World Bank.* 2011. http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTEMPOWERMENT/0,,contentMDK:20272299~menuPK:486417~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:486411,00.html (accessed January 20, 2013).

[1] This author had the honour of being selected as an intern to UNASUR through the support and funding of UNU-CRIS Belgium Office in 2011. During my time at the Georgetown, Guyana Pro-Tempore presidency Secretariat I gained significant first-hand experience of this disparity.