

Discuss the correlation between media theories and the development of jamaican me...



Print Media Era (1700-1834) Jamaica's media history dates back to 1718 when Robert Baldwin published the country's first newspaper, Weekly Jamaican Courant from his printery on Church Street. Between the period 1718 and 1834 no fewer than 33 newspapers were published across the island. These included The St Jago Intelligencer, Royal Gazette, Cornwall Chronicle and County Gazette, Kingston Morning Post and Trelawney Advertiser. Books and magazines developed at a slower pace than newspapers as only 12 books were published in the 40 years that followed the advent of the local printing press.

Among them were the account of the 1721 trial of notorious pirate captain Jack Rackham alias Calico Jack and his female ship mates Anne Bonney and Mary Read and records of legislative votes in the House of Assembly. The Jamaica Magazine (1781) signalled a new form of print medium, the magazine, its content was lighter than that contained in books and newspapers of the times. For reasons that are unknown, it seemed that most early magazines averaged a life span of two to four years. Early newspaper owners belonged to the powerful planter and merchant class that formed the establishment and as such the papers reflected their interests.

The Gleaner and Weekly Compendium of News rolled off the press September 13, 1834. The paper founded by Jacob and Joshua DeCordova, later became known as The Gleaner and remained under family ownership or management until 1948 and as the distinction as the oldest continuously published newspaper in Jamaica. The period was dominated by the system of slavery that divided Jamaican society into two groups; the powerless black

slaves and the powerful white plantocracy who controlled the political and economic life of the country.

Numerous revolts occurred as the tensions between both groups escalated. Many newspapers functioned as an extension of the establishment and reinforced the existing status quo. Karl Marx states that " in every epoch, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. " Marxist theory is centred on conflict of interest between groups in the society, since one group (dominant group) gains at the expense of another (subordinate group).

Marxist Media Theory purports that those who control the economic base of society (dominant group) also control the social, political and intellectual consciousness of the society and constitute the ruling class. The mass media is owned by this group. As a result media institutions are locked in the power structure and consequently act in tandem with the dominant institutions of society. Therefore, the media simply disseminates the ideas and views of the ruling class and deny or defuse alternative ideas. In Jamaica, the ruling class comprised members of the wealthy planter/merchant group who were the owners of newspapers.

It is not surprising that newspaper content was primarily comprised of shipping information, notifications of slave auctions and runaway slaves and advertisements for goods and services they offered and anything of interest to that group. Additionally the establishment was not interested in change and used every available means to neutralize or eliminate opposing viewpoints or any form of dissent, be it individual, group or newspaper. In

the case of persons and groups, the modus operandi was excessive brute
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force as witnessed in the Sam Sharpe Rebellion (1831) and the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) where no attempt was made at mediation.

In the case of newspapers, they simply withheld financial support in the form of donations and advertisements which ultimately crippled its ability to remain viable, as evidenced in the Edward Jordan and Robert Osborn publication, *The Watchman* (1831). Both men were coloured members of the House of Assembly who used the paper as the medium to advocate the rights and interests of free coloured persons in the society. Its often controversial viewpoint was not supported by the powerful planter group and the twice weekly publication ceased operations in 1832. In both instances the end result was death.

The education of slave was not encouraged but although they were illiterate, they were not stupid and kept abreast of the news by eavesdropping on the conversations of their masters and passing it unto each other. Samuel Sharpe was one of few slaves who could read and had access to newspapers and was thus aware of the work of the abolitionists in Britain. He wielded tremendous influence among the enslaved population and orchestrated a mass mobilization of slaves throughout the north-western parishes into what would be the country's first strike; a withdrawal of their labour until they were assured of remuneration.

The peaceful sit-in went awry with the burning of plantations from St

Elizabeth to Trelawny. It could be argued that in this context Sharpe

functioned as an opinion leader and utilized Lazarsfeld's Two-Step Flow

process of media influence. Lazarsfeld argues that persons are more likely to
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be influenced by their peers, particularly those they respect and admire (opinion leaders). Opinion leaders tend to have greater access to and an understanding of the news. They pay close attention to the media and pass on their interpretation of the media messages to others (opinion followers).

The hot topic of the times was the possible abolition of slavery and Sharpe passed his interpretation of all he read to his fellow slaves. It may further be argued that he manipulated the news to accomplish his own agenda. In that he knew that freedom had not been granted by the British Parliament and could have quelled the pervasive rumour among slaves. Instead he initiated a plan to accelerate the process. If this was his aim, it worked, as the revolt proved the catalyst that ended slavery. Print Media during the Post Emancipation Era (1834-early1900) More newspapers were published during the post emancipation years.

These included The Falmouth Post (1835-62), Colonial Standard and Jamaica Dispatch(1850-95) and The Jamaica Advocate (1894). The period was characterized by the mass exodus of newly freed persons from the plantations and the formation of free villages and a new way of life as former slaves made the transition to small landowners. The black majority who were denied an education during slavery now had the opportunity to read and write but even then, the practice was not encouraged as the authorities felt that it would engender notions of ambition that would and make them unfit for labour.

The ruling class tried to thwart the efforts of the masses to empower

themselves and improve their social, economic and political conditions

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through the imposition of excessive taxes, rental fees and inequitable laws.

But by the 1890s increased literacy led to their entry into the fields of education and religion and the emergence of a black middle class. The Jamaica Advocate newspaper was borne out of the refusal by The Gleaner to publish letters by Dr Robert Love, a member of the new middle class. Love articulated the plight of the Jamaica's predominately black lower class.

The paper printed a progressive agenda of black empowerment through active participation in every aspect of the society ??? the social, political and economic ??? and the ultimate goal of self-rule. Several editions that ran from May to December 1895 focused on increasing the number of black representatives in the Legislative Council and the number of black voters. Consequently, the 1896 elections recorded the highest voter turn out at that time. Its publication of the first Pan-African Conference (London, 1900) led to increased membership, as one month after an estimated 500 persons joined the Jamaican branch.

Dr Love and his paper were viewed as subversive and the paper eventually folded when illness forced his withdrawal from the public arena in 1910.

National Hero Marcus Garvey, who was greatly influenced by Dr Love, commented " One cannot read the Jamaica Advocate without getting race consciousness. " Similarly, it was the non publication of his letters by the established press that resulted in the launch of Garvey's first newspaper, The Watchman (1909) The ruling elite were equally opposed to Garvey's message of black consciousness and pride and The Watchman ceased publication after a few months.

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He later published *The Blackman* (1921-31) and *New Jamaican* (1932-33). Ironically, Garvey achieved greater newspaper success outside of Jamaica, with his New York paper, *The Negro World* which served as the voice of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the peoples of the African Diaspora. To further the cause for self-determination, he formed the Peoples Political Party (PPP) in 1929. The non publication of these two men's letters by *The Gleaner* was the establishment's response to a perceived challenge to their power base.

The response mirrored that outlined in Dissonance Theory. The theory states that when a person is confronted with new or conflicting information, he invariably experiences some form of mental discomfort and works to limit the discomfort. When both men ventured into the newspaper business, no doubt, the establishment withheld advertorial support in a further bid to eliminate both publications as the source of their discomfort.

On the other hand their message resonated among other social groups, who according to Marxist Media Theory gravitated towards such 'oppositional readings' as their social situations led them to adopt a stance that conflicted with the 'preferred readings' of the dominant group. But these groups do not control the economic base and are unable to extend the kind of financial support that would ensure a paper's profitability and longevity. Print Media during Jamaica's Social Revolution (1930-1950) The decade of the 1930s commenced with the effects of the Great Depression.

As in any crisis it is those positioned at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder that are severely affected. Low wages and the scarcity of jobs and <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-correlation-between-media-theories-and-the-development-of-jamaican-media-between-the-18th-century-and-the-1950s-assignment/>

money fuelled a climate conducive to yet another unrest in the society. The Frome riot in May 1938 marked the start of the struggle for improved social conditions and empowerment of the masses. It produced a ripple effect across Jamaica as the people vented their frustration and clamoured for change. Two leaders emerged, Norman Manley, and his cousin, Alexander Bustamante, both coloured members of Jamaica's middle class.

Between them they formed the country's two major political parties and trade unions; the Manley-led Peoples National Party (PNP) and National Workers Union (NWU) and the Bustamante-led Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) which started the political party-trade union affiliation that became a powerful force within the society. Some opine the affiliation as a political response expressed in trade union terms as the working class sought to build consensus among themselves and those sympathetic to their cause. Both men utilized the print media.

Bustamante was known for his letters to *The Gleaner* that criticized the Governor and local authorities and won him support among the lower class. Additionally, he was a newsworthy subject as his flamboyant style and exploits were covered by the media. Manley utilized *Public Opinion*. The paper founded in 1937 by O. T. Fairclough, and H. P Jacobs, both founding members of the PNP pursued an anti-establishment (British colonial system) stance and its agenda echoed that of the PNP. Although the paper became known as the mouthpiece of the party, it levelled criticisms at the PNP when there were differences of opinion.

It boasted a cadre of who's who in local journalism and literature that included Roger Mais, Vic Reid, Frank Hill and Fred Wilmot. Roger Mais was imprisoned on charges of seditious libel for an article he wrote, " Now We Know" that criticized the colonial government. In the early 1940s the paper relocated from Water Lane to Edelweiss Park (Slip Road) on premises believed to be previously owned by Marcus Garvey. This was where Garvey held political meetings and was the headquarters of the UNIA, and it seems such a coincidence the location later housed the offices of the Public Opinion and the headquarters of the PNP.

For over two centuries the print media had been the provider of news and entertainment to the Jamaican public. But its position was challenged in the 1940s when technological advances gave birth to the electronic media and its first baby, radio. The new medium did not result in the demise of newspapers but forced them to revamp to expand their readership base. In the 1950s The Gleaner Company launched two publications, a children's paper The Children's Own and an afternoon tabloid, The Star. The Electronic Media Era (1930-1950s)

One of the most exciting developments in local media history occurred in 1939 when station VP5PZ aired the first radio broadcast. This was done on behalf of the colonial government and comprised weekly updates on the war (World War II). The station was renamed ZQI and by 1941 live music was added to its programme menu. However in November 1949 the government turned over operations to the Jamaica Broadcasting Company, a subsidiary

of the British Rediffusion Group, a move that heralded the birth of commercial radio.

The move however displeased listeners who had grown accustomed to uninterrupted programmes. With the news and most programmes sponsored by the leaders of industry, radio had effectively delivered its audience over to this powerful group within the society. The new entity, Radio Jamaica and Rediffusion Network consisted of a rediffusion system whereby programmes from a central station were transmitted to speakers (rediffusion boxes) initially installed in the homes of wealthy subscribers within the precincts of Kingston and St Andrew.

This defined the elitist stage of radio in Jamaica. Boxes were eventually installed in key public locations such as police stations, schools and village shops across the island. The erection of short, medium and very high frequency transmitters in Kingston, Mandeville and Montego Bay facilitated island wide coverage. Additionally the introduction of frequency modulation (FM) in 1953 made Jamaica the first country in the British Commonwealth with the new technology. The medium experienced steady audience growth throughout the period, moving from 80, 000 in 1950 to 570, 000 persons six years later. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) provided training and technical assistance to the station. Early programmes mimicked those produced in Britain. Thus RJR became a localized version of its British based counterpart. The attainment of universal adult suffrage (1944) brought increased participation by the people in the socio-political life of the country

and a shift in political power from the elite white minority to the predominately black majority.

The 1955 General Elections were the first to be covered by radio with both political parties, the JLP and the PNP, being allotted broadcast time in the run-up period. During his tenure as Chief Minister, Manley utilized radio's ability to connect with large audiences and frequently addressed the nation on important issues and at pivotal times in the nation's history, such as the attainment of self governance (1957) and the West Indies Federation (1958).

By the 1950s the movement for self governance was well advanced with many Jamaicans exhibiting a confidence coupled with the realization that they and by extension Jamaican culture was as good as the British or any other people and culture. This consciousness made its way into RJR with the introduction of locally produced programmes that utilized the Jamaican dialect. Veteran print and electronic media practitioner, Archie Lindo was one of the architects of this 'Jamaicanisation' along with Ranny (Mass Ran) Williams.

Life With The Morgans, a sitcom written by Williams was the first of these and was blamed for the decline in Sunday evening church attendance. The Jamaicanisation of the medium was akin to the British Cultural Theory that emerged in the 1950s when working class Britons who had fought for their country in WWII refused to accept the 'old ways'; a society and media dominated by traditional notions that favoured nobility and the privileged class. They instead advocated for media to serve and be a true

representation of all within the society.

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RJR's monopoly of radio ended with the arrival of a new player, Jamaica Broadcasting Corporation (JBC) in 1957. JBC signalled government's re entry into radio broadcasting and coverage that extended as far as the Cayman Islands. Although the JBC was a state owned entity, it was to be free from political interference. The government through the minister with responsibility outlined policy directives but was barred from interfering with the day to day operations of the station.

The new station was established with the mandate to promote Jamaican culture and give radio a Jamaican flavour and be the vehicle for national development and empowerment of the Jamaican people. Radio opened doors for many persons such as Ranny Williams, Reggie Carter, Olive Lewin and the Jamaican Folk Singers who later became stalwarts of Jamaican entertainment and culture. The development of Jamaica's early print and electronic media although occurring later than its U. S. and British counterparts mirrored similar transition from the elitist minority viewpoint to the broad based content structure reflective of the majority.

Even so media in general can hardly attest to being impartial as careful examination of media content tends to reveal some underlying ideology, be it of an individual (Garvey), social group (plantocracy) or political party (PNP). Therefore the importance of cultivating an awareness of what is referred to as the fourth estate of the society cannot be overstated if we are to fully maximize media's potential to impact positively on the society.

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