

Environmental reporting in Jamaica is affected negatively by the small country's libel laws, low pay and Westernization.

island nation at risk

BY ELIZABETH BURCH

When I first told people I was going to teach at the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication (CARIMAC), they acted like I had hit the jackpot — and, in a sense, I had. After all, I did get to go to the tropics. But when I said I was planning to “work” in Jamaica, most people treated me like I was going on vacation, which became tiresome. Upon my return, I hear the same thing: “I’m so glad you got to rest while on your Fulbright!”

As a communications specialist, I understand why this is happening: Stereotypes of a country are all you have before you travel there, and Jamaica is known for a few particularly infamous labels. It’s the land of “no problem.” It’s a tourist vacation destination where everyone drinks rum and lies on the beach all day. And every Jamaican is a reggae-singing, ganja-smoking Rastafarian — a la Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff — *ya mon!*

But Jamaica also has a reputation for being one of the most violent countries in the Americas, mainly due to poverty. These are the realities and stereotypes local reporters have to overcome when covering health, science and environmental issues.

The bottom line is Jamaica will throw you into culture shock, but it’s not the shock you expect. Though small, Jamaica embodies many of the challenges typical to most developing nations. In that sense, it serves as a good case study for anyone interested in what constrains media coverage of health, science and environmental issues in the developing world: Westernization, libel laws and low pay.

But before discussing the challenges Jamaican media and reporters face, one must know what kinds of environmental issues exist on an island smaller than Connecticut.



Elizabeth Burch, third from left in the front, stands with the students she taught at the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication.

Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Burch

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY

Natural disasters play a large part in Jamaica's ability to address its environmental problems, and attempts at controlling Jamaica's internal debt have been derailed by infrastructure damage due to hurricanes and floods.

But the threats to Jamaica's natural environment extend beyond the hurricane season. And two of the country's leading sources of income — tourism and bauxite/alumina production — both create and suffer from the types of pollution found on the island, which include:

- Destruction of coral reefs from over-development,
- Air pollution from vehicle emissions,
- Deforestation — and, in turn, loss of biodiversity — from mining raw materials,
- Industrial waste and sewage from production processes.

The environmental effects of policies from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and the increased cases of HIV/AIDS are also critical issues within the Jamaican socio-cultural landscape.

WESTERNIZATION WOES

As Jamaicans say, "When America sneezes, Jamaica catches a cold." Historically, Jamaica's indigenous popu-

lation was wiped out following Christopher Columbus' discovery of the country in 1494. It has a violent colonialist history and 100s of years of slavery to overcome.

Today, Jamaica has become very Westernized — it's inundated with transnational corporations and fast-food chains and is home to a highly literate upper class. But Jamaica is also very underdeveloped, prompting scholars to call it an "in between" country. Although it's a prime escapist destination, Jamaica is no paradise.

Western influence has had an enormous impact on how media operate in Jamaica. For instance, World Bank- and IMF-driven deregulation of national economies and liberalization of domestic markets were touted as ways to resolve Jamaica's enormous foreign debt. But the negative effects of those policies are felt widely throughout the country — Jamaica suffers from a high unemployment rate, growing internal debt and double-digit inflation, according to the "2006 World Factbook." The resulting poverty causes media outlets to spin stories for a general public concerned with simply putting food on the table — and that means less coverage of environmental issues. Plus, the push toward privatization has led to greater competition between media companies, which, in turn, caused a trend toward sensationalizing.

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Clips from Jamaican newspapers attest to the obstacles journalists face in this Caribbean country.

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REPORTER PROBLEMS: LIBEL & LOW PAY

The majority of modern Jamaicans lives in urban Kingston — nowhere near the island's shores — and cannot swim. Imagine trying to get your audience to care about clean oceans when their only association with water is drowning. Caribbean journalists devoted to covering such issues face enormous challenges.

I asked reporters, editors and producers from print and broadcast media to conceptualize the state of health, science and environmental journalism in Jamaica and discuss how they do their jobs. The goal was to identify constraints on the press in hopes of overcoming problem areas. Most, who asked to remain anonymous, gave their fields a grade of “C” or “D” for quality of news coverage of environmental issues.

The biggest problem, according to my interview subjects, is that journalists are forced to self-censor under existing libel laws. Jamaica is considered to have a very free press, and its first Access to Information Bill, equivalent to the Freedom of Information Act in the U.S., passed in 2002. But there are still many levels of secrecy in the government, according to the Press Association of Jamaica. Also, many journalists do not use the new law because they feel government officials drag their heels even more once the act is mentioned.

Jamaica's leading environmental journalist, John Maxwell, a columnist for the *Jamaica Observer* and host of the radio talk show “Disclosure,” says that while the country is at risk of destroying its own natural beauty, the news media can still intervene. There is a strong tradition of activism in the press in Jamaica, and Jamaican journalists integrate that approach into their values toward objective reporting.

Six out of the 11 journalists in my Fulbright-sponsored study identified with the advocacy role of reporters covering environmental issues. Several wrote for news outlets while working for environmental groups, yet all said they were easily able to separate those practices from their professional standards toward objectivity. The idea that this would pose a conflict of interest in coverage of health, science and environmental stories was not considered a problem. As one reporter said, “I personally think that journalism is such a powerful profession and it serves so many purposes that nothing is wrong if it serves the purpose of persons who wouldn't ordinarily have a voice.”



Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Burch

Elizabeth Burch, third from right, stands with the students she taught at the Caribbean Institute of Media and Communication.

“Maybe that means we're not doing enough investigating,” one reporter said. “Or we're not stepping on enough toes, you think?”

Other findings from the study include:

- Environmental issues are still considered “soft news” in Jamaica, unless they are disaster stories (usually about hurricanes). Health stories, covered mostly by women, are higher on the agenda than the environment, and pure science coverage is limited. These stories compete for front-page coverage with crime, the economy and political news.

- Conflicts of interest have a chilling effect, especially those generated by the dealings of media outlet board members invested in non-media industries. This causes reporters to censor their stories. Still, the actual bribing of journalists is rare. One reporter said today's journalists may not be offered bribes because they don't cover the tough issues. “Maybe that means we're not doing enough investigating,” she said. “Or we're not stepping on enough toes, you think?”

- All of the interview subjects agreed that further training was a high priority for journalists in the Caribbean, and that competition from Western media forced journalists to compete for audience share rather than cover the most important environmental problems.

- Lack of reporter motivation due to low pay was viewed as the biggest challenge in Jamaica. “Journalism doesn't pay unless you are at the top,” one reporter said. “And there are some top journalists who have died poor. We're struggling, man.” These economic hardships have led to a high turnover of reporters and, therefore, fewer experts covering the complexity of government and industry business actions affecting Jamaica's natural environment.

I hope this study will provide a forum for media themselves to identify their own successes and failures on raising public awareness of Jamaica's health, science and environmental challenges. Hopefully, it will motivate them to create local guidelines for the improvement of news coverage in Jamaica.

To learn more about the real Jamaica, see the film “Life and Debt,” which contrasts the tourist view of Jamaica with the reality of Jamaicans' hardships. Aggrey Brown's “Color, Class and Politics in Jamaica” speaks to the role of colonialism and slavery in the developing world. So the next time you think of the Caribbean as just another playground for the West, remember the challenges Caribbean journalists face, and say what the Jamaicans say to each other: “Respect!” 🌍

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