GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online

Global Information Society Watch

2012

APC   Hivos
people unlimited

Global Information Society Watch 2012

JAMAICA

PROMOTING ONLINE ADVOCACY IN JAMAICA'S FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION
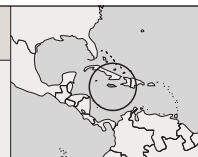
Mona ICT Policy Centre,
University of the West Indies, Mona
Hopeton S. Dunn and Michele D. Thomas
hopetondunn@gmail.com

Introduction

In 2011, Jamaica received a score of 3.3 (with 0 being highly corrupt) on the global Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International. While the country continues to enjoy stable government and growing inward investment, corrupt practices have been reported in the public and private sectors, with the country being ranked 86th of 183 countries surveyed globally. Ranking in this problematic range has been assigned to Jamaica for several consecutive years.

It is well documented that corruption as well as the perception of corruption in government and private sector institutions place a great burden on a country's ability to experience social and economic advancement and to compete ethically and successfully in the global space.[1] In Jamaica, as with other such challenged economies, various activities including the forming of advocacy groups and watchdog institutions, as well as legislative reform, have taken place in the past few years in an effort to tackle the issue of corruption.[2]

The media have come to be regarded as one of those sets of institutions with a formidable role in combating corruption.[3] In addition to traditional forms, new media are now contributing to the democratisation of access to information, as well as its creation, consumption and use for advocacy on socio-political issues such as corruption. This has effectively altered the coveted "gate-keeping" and public "agenda-setting" roles usually ascribed to traditional media.

At the same time, a new relationship is emerging between these Web 2.0 media platforms and their traditional media counterparts. While newspapers, for example, sometimes rely on less encumbered online sources for "cutting edge" news exposés, the new media entities also often count on the long-established traditional media institutions to provide credibility and critical analysis of their web-generated news content. This was evident in the relationship between the whistleblowing site WikiLeaks and a number of traditional news organisations, including the *Jamaica Gleaner*.[4]

It is against this background that this report examines the use of online and social media news outlets in discussing transparency, new media and good governance in Jamaica. With the rise of the networked economy and the transformational role of the internet, we have seen a rise in these "new media" platforms which challenge the traditional modes of media operation while creating opportunities to engage in new and innovative ways of exposing issues of corruption and promoting transparency and good governance. At the same time, traditional media remain important because of the relatively low levels of internet access, estimated by University of the West Indies (UWI) researchers to be below 30% for households in Jamaica in 2010.[5]

Background: Politics and policy

The history of corruption in Jamaica is well documented through qualitative and quantitative studies such as those of the Carter Center, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CaPRI). As in many other countries, the linkage between corruption and the political culture is well known. Unethical elements within political parties often form corrupt partnerships for their mutual benefit, including around issues of contracts and procurement, contributions to political parties, and in the securing of needed votes at times of elections.[6]

Policy and legislative reforms over the years have sought to address these issues. These have

1   Neuman, L. (ed.) (2002) *Fostering Transparency and Preventing Corruption in Jamaica*, The Carter Centre. www.cartercenter.org/documents/1038.pdf

2   USAID (2008) *Corruption Assessment of Jamaica*. www.acb.gov.jm/pdf/USAID%20-CorruptionAssessmentofJamaica2008.pdf

3   Munroe, T. (2011) *The Role of the Media in Combating Corruption and Strengthening Governance*. www.cba.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/110718_Roleofmedia.pdf

4   Dunn, H. (2012) '*Something Old, Something New...*' : WikiLeaks *and the Collaborating Newspapers - Exploring the Limits of Conjoint Approaches to Political Exposure,* forthcoming 2013.

5   Dunn, H., Williams, R., Thomas, M. and Brown, A. (2011) *The Caribbean ICT and Broadband Survey Jamaica*, Telecommunication Policy and Management Programme, University of the West Indies, Mona.

6   Waller, L., Bourne, P., Minto, I. and Rapley, J. (2007) *A Landscape Assessment of Political Corruption in Jamaica*, Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CaPRI). www.capricaribbean.org/sites/default/files/text/Corruption%20Report.pdf

included the passing of the Corruption (Prevention) Act, 2001, the Access to Information Act, 2002, the Proceeds of Crime Act, 2007 and the Protected Disclosure Act, 2011. While the media in Jamaica are generally considered to be free, there are worrying issues, highlighted by the national regulatory Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica, which concern the practice of "payola" in the on-air music selection processes, involving broadcast personnel engaging in unauthorised and secret pay-for-play deals with corrupt artists and music producers to the detriment of others artists and producers of high-quality music. At the same time, the media sector plays an important role in questioning government policies and practices, and radio talk show hosts in particular provide a forum for the avid participation of citizens, contributing to government accountability and transparency. To the credit of the government, the restrictive Official Secrets Act was replaced by the Protected Disclosures Act in 2011, thereby enhancing the flow of information through both the traditional and new forms of media.

Fighting corruption online in Jamaica

The rise in social networks has promoted collective action and campaigning by widening awareness and creating what has been referred to as a "cognitive surplus" through increased access and collective creativity.[7] There is growing evidence of the impact of the internet in general and social media in particular in exposing corruption in Jamaica. New media have helped to provide additional information to key communities of interest and to the general population about issues of accountability and public probity.[8] Jamaican and Caribbean society has demonstrated a need for information at a faster pace than the timeline of traditional news cycles.

Both of the major newspapers in Jamaica, the *Gleaner* and *The Observer*, now have very active online editions which facilitate faster and more direct interaction with the part of the population with internet access. Increasingly, the most important breaking news is published online on the websites of these newspapers before the print editions. In addition to websites, traditional media also engage in the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to present and discuss issues reported in the news.

The case of *On the Ground News Report*

Apart from the traditional media presence, sites such as *On the Ground News Report* (OGNR) have sprung up in recent times in response to this growing trend of rapid online information consumption. OGNR is an entirely internet-based news provider that was initially established on Facebook in May 2010 as Jamaica's first social media news network. It was established in response to the perceived lack of rapid news availability during times of unrest in Jamaica.[9] The timing of OGNR's start-up is related to a major news flare-up involving the eventual arrest, extradition and conviction of local gangster Christopher "Dudus" Coke, who was wanted by the United States (US) for various criminal offences. Coke was linked to a range of criminal and corrupt networks in the country and was becoming of increasing international interest, especially for Jamaican diaspora communities in the US, Canada and the United Kingdom.[10] During this time of great unrest in the nation, OGNR – with its tag line, "Fast, Accurate, Concise Citizens Journalism" – opened up reports on this episode to a global online audience, including mainly young Jamaicans and attentive Caribbean citizens in the diaspora.[11] In addition to reporting news from its online "reporters" on the ground, it provided access to news from the traditional media, both in Jamaica and abroad, including from the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* newspaper, and *The Economist*.

It was estimated that there were about 429,160 Facebook users in Jamaica in 2010 and reports indicate that the number has continued to grow at a fast pace. The latest estimate by monitors at *Silicon Caribe* suggests that just over 690,000 Jamaicans were on Facebook in 2012.[12] According to Internet World Stats, there were approximately 1.58 million users of the internet in Jamaica in 2010.[13] This would represent access by close to half of the national population to internet from all sources, including the mobile phone and not just in the household. UWI studies in 2010 indicated that the majority of

7   Shirky, C. (2010) *How Cognitive Surplus will Change the World*. www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cognitive_surplus_will_change_the_world.html

8   Bekri, D., Dunn, B., Oguzertem, I., Su, Y. and Upreti, S. (2011) *Harnessing Social Media Tools to Fight Corruption*, London School of Economics and Political Science. irevolution.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/harnessing-social-media-tools-to-fight-corruption-1.pdf

9   Murphy, X. (2010) Interview with the founder of OGNR. www.jamaicans.com/articles/primeinterviews/InterviewOntheGroundNewsReports~print.shtml

10 Freedom House (2012) *Freedom in the World 2012 - Jamaica*. www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/503c722c2d.html

11 Paul, A. (2010) Why is Dudus called Dudus?, *Active Voice*, 28 June. anniepaulactivevoice.blogspot.com/2010/06/why-is-dudus-called-dudus.html

12 Riley, I. (2011) Over 500,000 Jamaicans now on Facebook... ohh yeah!, *Silicon Caribe*, 23 January. www.siliconcaribe.com/2011/01/23/over-500000-jamaicans-now-on-facebook-ohh-yeah

13 Internet World Stats (2010) Usage and Population Statistics – Jamaica. www.internetworldstats.com/car/jm.htm

persons on the internet were those in the 15-34 age group and that a great proportion of time is taken up using social networking sites.[14]

Overall then, both online and traditional news networks provide the opportunity to obtain news from diverse sources, with new media outlets providing a useful means for engaging in exposing corruption and helping to build a participatory democracy.

Online-linked anti-corruption agencies

In addition to news organisations, a growing group of anti-corruption entities have emerged in Jamaica and have some measure of an online presence. Many of these agencies are visible through websites and portals, online flyers and news releases, debate threads in social media networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Blackberry Messenger (BBM), and by way of short video clips on YouTube. Some specific Jamaican anti-corruption entities with an online presence are:

- National Integrity Action Limited (NIAL)
- Citizens Action for Free and Fair Elections (CAFFE)
- Jamaicans for Justice (JFJ)
- Office of the Contractor General (OCG)
- Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica (BCJ)

All five websites provide crucial information and education on access and disclosure issues, anti-corruption measures, and legislation and practices, while encouraging citizen advocacy. Of the five entities surveyed, all but the Office of the Contractor General also have a social media presence on Facebook. The level of participation on the majority of these sites is vibrant, suggesting the growing use of social media as a source for information and education, and the agencies' web presence as emergent spaces for new engagements on corruption and similar socio-political issues.

News outlets and anti-corruption organisations with their online presence offer low-cost environments and dedicated outlets for the rapid diffusion of information. In the more traditional settings, dissemination is slow, and more rigidly regulated. Further, online environments can be viral in nature, while providing anonymity, aggregation, interactivity and instantaneity.[15] They also offer what Bakshy et al. refer to as the power of "weak ties"

in a networked society, which have more access to diverse, mutually exclusive and novel information.[16] OGNR, for example, did not constitute a network of Facebook friends, but rather a section of mutually exclusive citizens that craved participation in Jamaica's democracy in more rapid and interactive ways. These weak ties allowed for diffusion of information which would otherwise not have spread so widely. This kind of "fast" online journalism and information consumption means that information on corruption and other activities can get to the populace in its original form at a faster rate than the traditional media could have made it available.

At the same time, news entities, whether traditional or based on social media, all strive to remain credible so as not to become purveyors of rumour or misinformation. Some of the online outlets face journalistic and ethical challenges about what to publish and when. These challenges provoke discussion on how this new form of online journalism outlets can avoid becoming sources of social pathologies themselves. They also engender discussion as to whether the traditional ethical codes of media are suitable for these new forms of media engagement, or what alternative deontological guides will be appropriate. The question remains how we can ensure the maintenance of ethical and quality journalism which is necessary in the fight against corruption while welcoming and encouraging the growth of new online outlets and the speedy dissemination of anti-corruption information and analyses.

Conclusions

The report examines the growing but still limited presence and impact of online sources of information and news on corruption in Jamaica. It highlights the need for expanding online news dossiers on corruption, including the provision of information which may not otherwise have been made available to the general public. We also highlight the increasing tendency of traditional anti-corruption agencies in Jamaica to be more engaged with the citizenry via new media online.

These sources have assisted in filling an information/participation gap in the fight against corruption. However, as with other organisations like WikiLeaks, continued success in exposing issues of corruption in government and the private sector will depend to a large extent on the conjoint relationships between the old and new media and

14 Dunn et al. (2011) op. cit.

15 No Bribe Corruption Free India (2010) Why Social Media Can Fight Corruption, 27 May. www.nobribe.org/why-social-media-can-fight-corruption

16 Bakshy, E., Rosenn, I., Marlow, C. and Adamic, L. (2012) *The Role of Social Networks in Information Diffusion*, International World Wide Web Conference Committee. www.scribd.com/doc/78445521/Role-of-Social-Networks-in-Information-Diffusion

between civil society organisations and government watchdog agencies. This new media landscape provides outlets for citizen journalists, often young persons who may not otherwise have a voice in the country's quest for democracy. The online anti-corruption channels create an invaluable connection between the local community and the global diaspora and provide information to those who do not use traditional outlets.

Social and other online media can function most effectively as tools for transparency in national affairs when there is an anti-corruption legislative and policy framework and citizens who demand greater probity from their leaders, private sector investors and activists.

Action steps

Clearly, the fight against corruption in Jamaica will require close partnerships between the private and public sector, civil society and the media in all their forms. It is also clear that social media through the internet have a real role to play in shaping democracy through exposure, education, consultation, and by serving as a catalyst for investigation and action. Accordingly, it is recommended that:

- Civil society should expand its reach using emerging technologies and social networks in providing information to the public while advocating for increased transparency and accountability.

- Anti-corruption websites and social news media outlets should seek to increase their role and advocacy both in and out of crisis situations.

- Online citizen media should become more active in exposing inept governance practices.

- These outlets must continually seek to improve their professional quality to reflect the tenets of good journalistic practices, adapted to the speed and flexibility of the information age.

- New and traditional media should continue to interact as channels of exposure and information, especially in societies where internet penetration remains limited. ▪