



**Panel on open access in Africa and in the Caribbean:
progress and prospects**

No absolute truth: Is there open access in the Caribbean?

Susan Laura Lugo

Archives, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

E-mail: susanlauralugo@gmail.com

Meeting:

**141 — Access to information: the Afro-Caribbean connection /
Accès à l'information : parallèles entre l'Afrique et les Antilles —
Access to Information Network - Africa (ATINA) / Réseau d'accès
à l'information en Afrique (RAIA) Special Interest Group**

Abstract:

The question of whether there is open access in the Caribbean is not easily answerable. The query, like the Caribbean itself, must be interpreted contextually and any response necessarily must be a reflection of the regional forces and influences that exist. While these conditions may invalidate a traditional expression of open access through scholarly impact and user statistics, the answer may be more discernible and meaningful if one accepts the premise that, in this matter, there is no absolute truth.

Keywords: open, access, Caribbean, geography, politics, models, ICT, funding, truth

Before we talk about open access in the Caribbean it is necessary first to take a moment to define terms. Moreover, in order to determine if open access exists in that region and to what extent, we must first understand that in this matter there is No Absolute Truth.

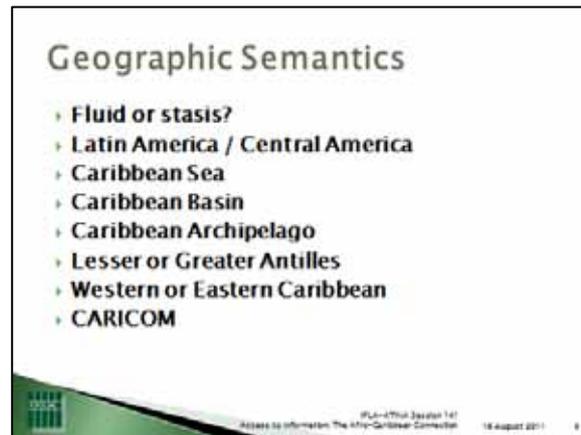
If we accept that premise, and all evidence supports the proposition that we must, then how should we answer the question “Is there Open Access in the Caribbean?”

Approaches to truth

There are certainly several approaches to discovering the truth about Caribbean open access:

- Geographic semantics – does geography define or delimit the Caribbean?
- Political Dependence – does political status determine inclusion or exclusion for open access?
- Research or Scientific Traditions – do models of investigation narrow or constrict our interpretation of open access?

- ICTs – do Information Communication and Technology strategies encourage technological advances, or impose a technocratic order that becomes yet another barrier to access?
- Funding – the present global economic disorder has heightened everyone’s sense of critical funding needs, including those seeking information access
- Through the Looking-Glass – are our actions a reflection of the past or a door to the future?
- The Truth Shall Set You Free – if increased freedom is a touchstone of truth, is open access in the Caribbean providing enlightenment or creating a new form of bondage?



“The Caribbean” – It is a concept in search of a working definition. It is sometimes grounded in actual interactions, connections and population movements. But, the challenge is that the Caribbean, like the body of water for which it is named, is fluid, i.e., changeable, and must be contextually interpreted. And, like a body of water, stasis or stagnation occurs when there is a period of little mobility or evolutionary change.

So is open access in the Caribbean going to be defined by the Antillean archipelago? Is it bounded by the concept of Latin America? The landforms of Central America? The history of South America or the New World?

Is an inquiry about Caribbean open access confined to the Lesser and/or Greater Antilles? What of the mass outward migrations to North America that include significant populations in both Canada and the U.S.A.?

Are information flows in the Caribbean segregated by language streams? Are Western Caribbean Spanish-speaking populations experiencing the same Open Access issues as the francophones in the French West Indies? Or the Dutch in the recently disbanded Netherlands Antilles? And can information promulgated in one language be shared in another?

Do proceedings and decisions of international economic or politically-based organizations like the Caribbean Commonwealth of Nations (CARICOM) and the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) provide access entry or barriers?



Keep in mind, that all we are trying to do is address the question of whether there is open access to information in the Caribbean.

So, setting aside for the moment the issues of geographic identity, the process of discovering an answer is still impeded by the colonial past and present in the islands and nation states that one might include in such an analysis . . .

In measuring open access, should we take into consideration the status of political units? Is it valid to compare accessibility to information between independent nations which are parliamentary governments, kingdoms, democratic federations, republics and protectorates? Should a measurement or evaluation of accessibility be filtered by the degree of political dependency? Is it equitable or accurate to measure access by one global standard regardless of the type of government rule? Or is a global standard in fact the only way to express accessibility?

And what of those political units in transition, like the recently disbanded autonomous country of the Netherlands Antilles? Consider the island of Curaçao which for 56 years was the physical location for the repository of the government archives of the Netherlands Antilles. After dissolution on October 10, 2010, the constituent islands of Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba became “special municipalities” of the Netherlands (known now collectively as the “BES Islands”) and Curaçao and Sint Maarten joined formerly transitioned Aruba as constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. How should we measure or describe open access to government records for these political entities? Are records for Saba accessible to Sabans? And who is responsible for facilitating that access?



Without question, accessibility issues in the region are complex and intertwined.

For example, scholarly traditions in the Caribbean have been institutionally-based, but most university and research institution libraries that do exist remain heavily underfunded. Will an evaluation of scholarly e-journals or citation analysis yield a valid interpretation of the presence of open access in the Caribbean?

There is a fundamental concern whether researchers and scholars in the Caribbean have the capacity to utilize open access to global information. Users with access to information infrastructures and the right device can log onto to open access sites to read articles, share data or research, manage information or just interact with others collaboratively. In this case, success can be measured by observable indicators: How many open access sites are made available, by whom, and how often are they used? But what may be more difficult to measure is whether the means of access, i.e., the technological infrastructure, is available, and if so, how is the quality of such access expressed in user data? Traditional citation statistics are often an inadequate measure for this purpose for the same reason.

On the other hand, those who benefit from open access include many scientists in the developing world. A key indicator of success might be the ability to report on the successful access to research emanating from the Caribbean and the Caribbean Diaspora. But this is not a simple thing to convey . . . What are the quantifiable indicators for measuring successful access?

Caribbean historical information, scholarly work product, political ideas, scientific concepts, philosophical thinking, social attitudes, bio-medical research and environmental innovation open to others through open access initiatives should be taken into consideration when measuring the impact of Caribbean open access. As has been the case in its colonial past, Caribbean-generated information may otherwise be at risk of being defined, validated and “socialized” by the publication portal through which it is disseminated or accessed.

It has been mentioned already that there is a natural fragmentation of intra-Caribbean cooperation due to multilingualism and multiculturalism. A lack of language skills may act as a further barrier to access to European and other research institutions and an impediment to sustained collaboration both regionally and globally.



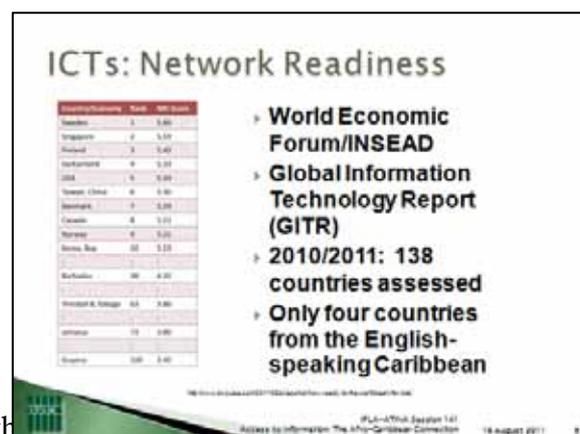
The idea of open access in the Caribbean must also be premised on the availability of technological infrastructures to support access.

In the last ten or more years, there has been a general recognition in the Caribbean of a need for integrated networks, systems for connectivity and information exchange, e-commerce and regulatory frameworks. This need drove many CARICOM nations towards establishing Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) as the scaffolding for their Caribbean economic framework. With improvement in e-government systems ICT technology could not only be a powerful engine for economic growth, competitiveness and jobs but will facilitate communication between organizations and individuals.

Traditionally, the model for sharing information in the Caribbean has been unfettered by considerations of a fee to access. Now, as more global models for publication are being super-imposed on those traditions, the region must understand the economic impact and benefits of open access and avoid the temptation to adopt a business model that may seem more sustainable but may in fact impede the flows of information.

So how much progress has there been? Have ICTs impacted the capacity for information sharing significantly over the last decade? Or have the technocracies that resulted in some cases actually slowed the pace of capacity development and thus access?

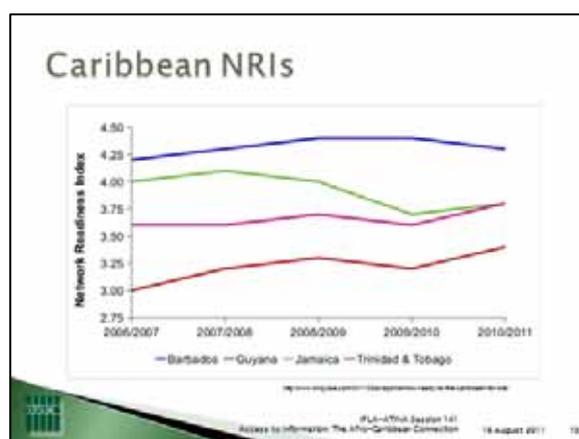
Some statistics are useful in this case—principally those which quantify ICT results and timelines. National and regional rankings are also helpful—but do they accurately reflect the use of Open Access, or its potential for use?



“No Absolute Truth”
Susan Laura Lugo

The Network Readiness Index (NRI) is an assessment conducted by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and INSEAD, a world-renowned international business school, to determine a country's readiness to harness ICTs. Over the last ten years those institutions have published the *Global Information Technology Report* (GITR), which has been tracking the development of ICT around the world.

The *2010/2011 edition of the GITR* assessed 138 countries, but included only four countries from the English-speaking Caribbean. The NRIs for the top-ranked countries are shown here. [See: <http://www.ict-pulse.com/2011/05/snapshot-how-ready-is-the-caribbean-for-icts/>]



This graph presents the NRIs for Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago over a five-year period. Of particular note and with the exception of Barbados, all other countries experienced a decline in their NRIs between 2008/2009 and 2009/2010.

A possible reason for the decline, although it might not be the sole cause, could be the global financial crisis which occurred in 2008, the effects of which are still being experienced worldwide, and especially in the Caribbean. With the crisis, many economies in the region contracted, and spending and development initiatives across most sectors had to be deferred.

The stagnation of ICT development means the stagnation in growth of access to information of all kinds, including open access. But even here the statistics do not tell the full tale.

Over the period of review, Barbados consistently had the highest NRI of the sub-Caribbean grouping, and in the most recent exercise it was ranked 38th. It was also the highest ranked country in Central and South America and the third highest in the Americas (after the United States and Canada). Barbados is considered to have a fairly conducive environment for ICTs, with a well developed political and regulatory framework, and comprehensive infrastructure.

However, although individual readiness and usage of ICTs are high, Barbados scored (relatively) poorly in relation to creating an enabling market environment, as well as the interest and preparedness of both business and government to use ICTs. Improvements in technological capability seldom include a presumed certainty that their use can be properly maximized for the benefit of the user.



Funding , of course, is a major factor in the progress of the ICT capacity build-outs. Broadband initiatives, project scalability, trans-oceanic cable networking all demand intensive cash flows and drains on dwindling cash and manufactured resources. Knowledge resources are also further depleted when access to current information is impeded.

The European Union has political presence in the Caribbean only through the French départements of Guadeloupe and Martinique, and its overseas collectivités St. Martin and Saint Barthélemy. Only in recent years has it recognized the economic inter-dependency between these Caribbean possessions and the status and welfare of their Caribbean neighbors. In addition, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of the region—both economically and politically—to the strategic well-being of the wider global economy.

In 2008 the EU’s INTERREG funding program established a separate program – INTERREG IV (Caribbean) to assist the French possessions as well as their Caribbean partners – in collaborative programs to benefit the entire region.



Approved by the European Commission on March 26, 2008, the INTERREG IV (Caribbean) program has goals that encourage collaboration and cooperation within the region. These goals are facilitated with a generous 63 million Euros budgeted for approved projects taking place during the period 2007-2013.



Axis 1 and Axis 3 of the project parameters target potential funding results that can also directly benefit the goals of Open Access:

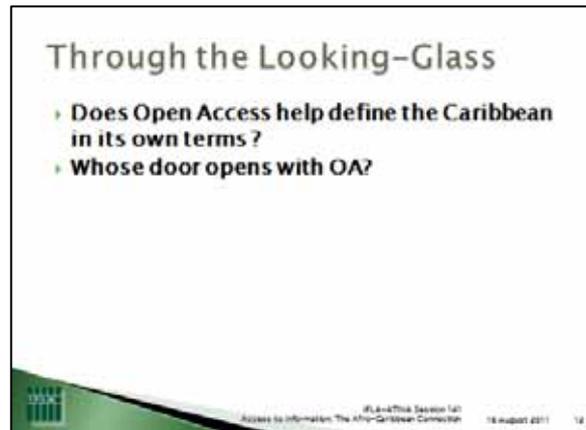
Axis 1 - To promote growth and employment through innovation and the knowledge economy; to reinforce attractiveness by improved accessibility and connectivity of the territories

Axis 3 - To stimulate the bringing together of the populations, the development of common services and synergies between governmental institutions and territories to reinforce social cohesion and integration in the Caribbean.

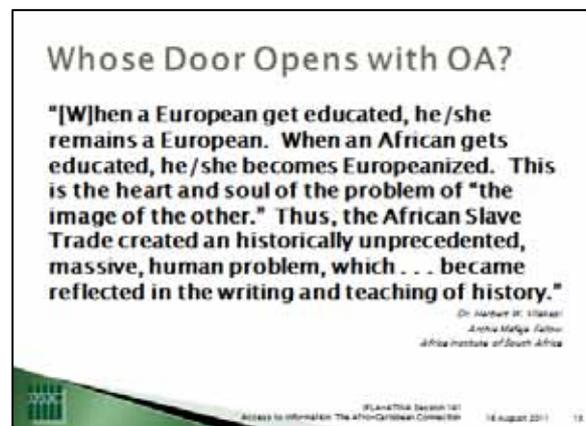


The presence of former colonial powers still pervades the region, some historical, some political. But few have designated funding programs which specifically undertake to encourage the growth of open access to information resources. Most have enabled the access that does exist as a peripheral output of a larger ICT or electronic networking plan with overarching economic benefits and strategies.

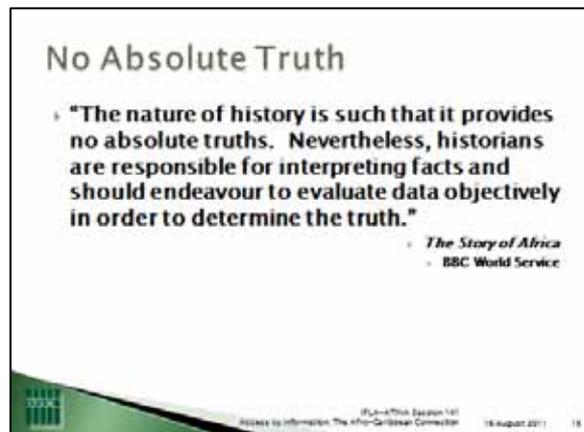
This is just one more reason why the truth about the state of open access in the Caribbean is so difficult to discern and measure.



Like the well-known characters in Lewis Carroll’s tales of *Alice in Wonderland*, we must also be very careful to understand that the way in which information is being accessed or being bundled for access may be more a reflection of what others wish users to see rather than the “truth” of the underlying information itself. In this case we must inquire . . . Does open access help define the Caribbean in its own terms? Whose door opens with open access?



Dr. Herbert W. Vilakazi of the Africa Institute of South Africa exhorts his fellow Africans not to use Western education as a prism through which to view African Cultural Heritage, and in doing so he reminds us also that culture is dynamic—it is done and communicated. The Caribbean culture is a confusing blend of the European and the African, the East Indian and the Asian, the indigenous and the immigrant, the North and the South, the past and the present.



“The nature of history is such that it provides no absolute truths. Nevertheless, historians are responsible for interpreting facts and should endeavour to evaluate data objectively in order to determine the truth.”

This quote taken from a BBC World Service report on *The Story of Africa* is a caution for information providers as well as historians. In our eagerness to evaluate the prevalence of open access, we must remember to take into consideration the context in which that access is provided and prevented. We must consider the traditions of information sharing in the region, and the capabilities for electronic collaboration available for information dissemination and retrieval. We must understand and make clear to others the defined terms on which our conclusions are founded, and always, always be open to recognize multiple truths.

And, above all, we must continue to scrutinize and re-assess the effectiveness of the measures of reliability, impact and benefits in order to make them relevant.



In conclusion, it is not the purpose of this presentation to provide statistics or definitive developmental models to cite as real measures of open access in the Caribbean. It is hoped that you will take away something much more valuable—the truth is that open access is a not an absolute precept, it is a concept still under development and subject to interpretation.

Furthermore, as a concept in the Caribbean, open access exists within the traditions of the research and scientific communities according to “mother country” or “northern” models.

There is little funding for open access within the Caribbean independent of ICT programs and recent EU INTERREG support, and the pace and quality of future growth will undoubtedly be affected by the persistent scarcity of economic resources in the region.



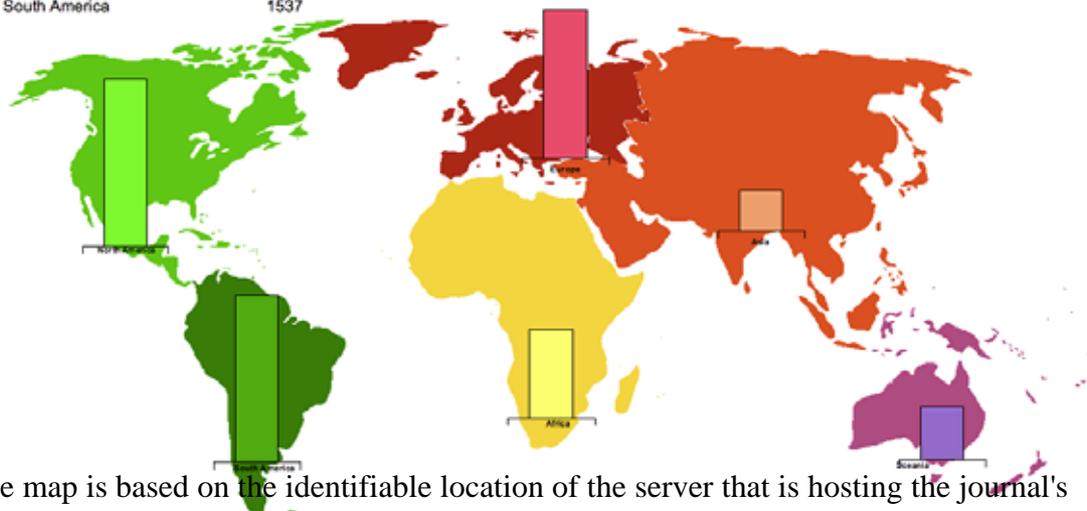
What is certainly at risk in the region if open access is inhibited or discouraged, economically or otherwise, is the ability for the Caribbean to share with others, cultivate and perpetuate its identity, memory and regional scholarship.

Resources for Open Access Information for the Caribbean

1. Juan Pablo Alperin, Gustavo E. Fischman and John Willinsky. "Open access and scholarly publishing in Latin America: ten flavours and a few reflections," *Liinc em Revista*, v.4, n.2, setembro 2008, Rio de Janeiro, p. 172-185. Viewed at <http://revista.ibict.br/liinc/index.php/liinc/article/viewFile/269/167>
2. Caribbean Centre of Excellence for E-Government. Viewed at <http://cceeg.dec.uwi.edu/drupal/>
3. World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Platform of Communities: Discussion of Open Access (OA) issues. Viewed at <http://www.wsiscommunity.org/pg/groups/58145/open-access/>
4. Herb, Ulrich. "Open Access Statistics: Alternative Impact Measures for Open Access Documents? An examination how to generate interoperable usage information from distributed open access services." Viewed at <http://www.ifla.org/files/hq/papers/ifla76/72-herb-en.pdf>
5. Dickson, David. "Open Access: not just about citations," *Sci-DevNet Editorials*, April 15, 2011. Viewed at <http://www.scidev.net/en/editorials/open-access-not-just-about-citations-1.html>
6. Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) (an Open Access health information network). Viewed at: <http://www.scielo.org/php/index.php?lang=en>
7. The Open Journal System, inaugurated in 2002, is actually a Pakistani-based initiative.

Journals Using OJS by Continent

January 2010	Number of Journals
Asia	678
Europe	961
Africa	429
Oceania	96
North America	1343
South America	1537



[The map is based on the identifiable location of the server that is hosting the journal's installation of OJS (unless the journal is known to being a service elsewhere), and may not reflect the actual location of the journal editor or publisher.]

The following OJS e-Journals re the Caribbean are just some of the peer-reviewed and professional journals concerning the region that are presently generated through this publication profile:

- a. Caribbean Geography
- b. Caribbean Journal of Psychology
- c. West Indian Medical Journal
- d. Caribbean Journal of Philosophy
- e. e-Journal of the Caribbean Academy of Sciences

8. Directory of Open Access (DOAJ) e-Journals re the Caribbean:

If you take a look at the some of the so-called Caribbean journals indexed on the Directory of Open Access Journals, you will see that two of the journals originate in Argentina – here is where Caribbean has been interpreted through a LAC (Latin America and Caribbean) lens– and two in Colombia – arguably part of the Caribbean Basin but somewhat marginalized as a result of its political system and lack of embracing the EU. Can this affect the value of information provided through Open Access?

- a. Caribbean Journal of Science (Puerto Rico)
- b. College of the Bahamas Research Journal (Bahamas)
- c. Cuba Arqueológica: Revista Digital de Arqueología de Cuba y el Caribe (Cuba)
- d. Études Caribéennes (Martinique)
- e. Historia Caribe (Colombia)
- f. Integración y Comercio (Argentina)
- g. International Journal of Bahamian Studies (Bahamas)
- h. Journal of Caribbean Archaeology (South Carolina)
- i. Memorias: Revista Digital de Historia y Arqueología desde el Caribe (Colombia)
- j. Revista de Economía del Caribe (Colombia)
- k. Revista Redbioética/UNESCO (Argentina)
- l. West Indian Medical Journal (Jamaica)
- m. International Journal of Education and Development Using Information and Communication Technology (Barbados)
- n. Asian EFL Journal (BVI)
- o. Linguistics Journal (BVI)
- p. Études Caribéennes (Martinique)
- q. Ciencia y Sociedad (Dominican Republic)