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At

**LIBRARY AND INFORMATION ASSOCIATION OF JAMAICA
RECORDS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYMPOSIUM**

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(These views are not necessarily those of the Broadcasting Commission)

“Information Overload: Finding the Tree in the Digital Forest”

Mr. Chairman, Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

It is my distinct pleasure to be associated with this symposium and to have the opportunity to make some remarks.

Since this is a meeting of persons who are experts in processing information, I must tell you the best story I have heard on the subject. It is about how a US War Ship and Aircraft Carrier sank off the Canadian coast. The ship's Captain saw what he assumed was a small vessel ahead. The seemingly small vessel sent out an emergency signal and message "This is an emergency warning, veer 15 degrees to the north to avert a collision. The Captain replied, "No, you veer 15 degrees; we are maintaining course." Shortly after he heard, "this is your final warning, veer 15 degrees immediately." The captain replied "This is Aircraft carrier, USS Missouri, we are bearing full speed ahead, you veer to avoid endangering your vessel, who are you? Pause, the answer "prepare to abandon ship. This is the lighthouse" [of course the aircraft carrier ran into a reef and sank]

The theme of today's symposium is meant to highlight the paradox of the age in which we live.

If we take the forest as a metaphor for information, then to paraphrase Bill Gates, we are creating information at the speed of thought. Cisco systems describes it as "approaching the zettabyte era" – in which it is expected that by 2013, the Internet will be nearly four times larger than it was in 2009. That means that by year-end 2013, the equivalent of 10 billion DVDs will cross the Internet each month. And It would take well over half a million years to watch all the online video that will cross the network each month in 2013.

In the face of that technological revolution we have seen 3 recent reports that must cause us to pause and be worried into action.

The first report was published in the Gleaner on Friday April 1, under the caption “Caribbean Companies Poor at Record Keeping”. We were told that millions of euros being made available by the EU, for business support, had not been taken up because some businesses could not qualify. Why? Well, according to the fund distributors “The primary challenge we are having is that people just do not have adequate and proper documentation”.

For me, that is a shocking and unbelievable reality, given we are in the age which offers the greatest capacity to store and manage information, through digital record keeping. In fact, the price of storage has plummeted over the past 50 years, to such an extent that it is now 10 million times less expensive to store information. The sky is therefore the limit for information management.

The second story ran on March 29, 2011, and concerned a Caricom Secretariat release about a seminar “to help address capacity related issues that have contributed to the paucity of ‘relevant and reliable’ data on creative industries in the Caribbean”. The release stated that “historically there has been a dearth of statistics on several aspects of the creative industries in the Caribbean. The economic value of creative industries has thus remained largely un-documented, and as a consequence their economic contribution is often underestimated.”

In a paper titled “National Audio-visual Archives and Caribbean Cultural Patrimony” presented eight years ago at the First Caribbean Audio Visual Information Conference, in Jamaica, (Cavic 2003) Elizabeth Watson, a Barbados based University librarian drew attention to the same problem.

She said “Preserving and protecting the cultural patrimony or heritage and history of the Caribbean, for future generations is a cardinal responsibility and a moral obligation that must be neither aberrated nor relinquished by the creators and/or keepers of information.” However, we have been singularly deficient in ensuring that we have kept

records of the cultural and other achievements of our citizens.” She goes on “there are more Marley archives outside of Jamaica than there are within the country; Derek Walcott’s archive is being parsed because of economic realities and the Kamau Brathwaite archive, already diminished because of a natural disaster, is languishing uncatalogued and unprotected, prone to further ruination for a multiplicity of reasons.”

The tragedy is that the problem being lamented about continues to exist at a time when the creative industries are being reported as an economic mainstay of the world economy.

This is subject-matter of the third story I want to reference. On April 1, 2011 the United Nations reported that creative industries had beaten the recent world crisis. According to UN’s Creative Economy Report 2010, creative industries doubled their profits in 2008 while the world economy was in recession.

It is in the face of this upbeat report that CARICOM is seeking to ameliorate a dearth of information about the creative industries in our region.

Of course, we must acknowledge efforts by persons such as Dr. Keith Nurse who has responded to the challenge through an initiative called the Creative Industry Exchange, a project of the Shridath Ramphal Centre for International Trade Law at the UWI Cave Hill Campus. The CIE provides a welcomed regional framework for the production, sharing, collection, and publication of data and information on the creative industries of the Caribbean.

Nonetheless, there is urgent work to be done and I urge your association to see how you can become proselytizers and stronger advocates for intra-regional co-operation in the archiving and management of information, particularly about our cultural industries.

I am also confident that you, as information management practitioners, are seized of the crucial role that information management policies must play in development. I am sure you join me in calling on executive leadership, management and policy makers to come quickly to the understanding that information management must be elevated to a prominent position of priority in any meaningful exercise of strategic planning, whether for business or national development.

But I believe that we need a revolution, of sorts, in the way records management and information practitioners conceptualize and operationalise their role in organizations and the society.

To begin with, we need a counter-intuitive diagnosis of the information problem. Perhaps it is that we do not suffer from information overload, but moreso, a lack of effective access, under-production of information (too much downloading and too little uploading) and an information “filter” failure.

In that regard, my further exhortation is that there be a campaign to promote the concept that information management is no longer the secretive and mysterious domain of self-interested records managers and librarians, and techno-geeks; but that it is everybody's business.

Time Magazine signaled this when it declared that the TIME Person of the year in 2006 was “YOU”, the ordinary person. The rationale is that it is the ordinary person who controls the Information Age. As TIME reported, “we’re looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it’s just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy.

It is therefore an imperative, I submit, that we focus on personal information literacy or personal knowledge management- ensuring that through advocacy, training and awareness we enhance the ordinary person’s ability to manage information in a

manner which optimizes decision making, problem solving, knowledge acquisition and knowledge dissemination.

In essence, I am calling for the calibration of efforts to re-conceptualise the specialization of information management, not merely in terms of individual professional advancement, but as a constructionist medium through which those who are trained in information management become a rising tide that lifts all ships, and the antithesis of the powerful, yet unhelpful lighthouse, which averted no disaster.