



The Honourable Symon De Nobriga, MP

Minister of Communications – Office of the Prime Minister

Budget Contribution 2022

Madam Speaker, I am honoured once again to stand in this House as the duly elected Member of Parliament for the constituency of Diego Martin Central to add my voice to the chorus of congratulations that has been heaped on the Minister of Finance and Economy for his Budget presentation. Madam Speaker, when the voices of the major business groups and civil society organizations are unanimous in their praise of the 2023 Budget Statement, some admittedly more effusive than others, then the Minister must have gotten something right.

But Madam Speaker, as I listened to the Opposition Leader's rambling and vacuous response, I could not help but recall the words of our party's founder, Dr. Eric Williams, when he said "the alternative to the PNM is chaos."

But Madam Speaker, I am certain no one in this House was either surprised or expected better, for the Opposition Leader and her team has fed this country in general, and her supporters in particular, a consistent diet of misinformation. So consistent are they that not even if truth is gift wrapped and presented to them, will they know it, recognize it, or have a clue as to what it is. Such strangers to truth they have become, that they have come to believe their own misinformation.

Having learnt the lessons of Cambridge Analytica well, they have become the purveyors of mischief, marinated in a semblance of truth, and served on a platter of deceit. Madam Speaker, the challenge of disinformation and misinformation, particularly in this digital age, has increasingly come into focus in recent years, and is certainly at the fore now. This is the phenomenon of "fake news" which, by means of definition, refers to the intentional spread of false or inaccurate information. Madam Speaker, despite having greater access to information than ever before, the members opposite appear to be

suffering from an information paradox; that is, as access to information increases, the ability to parse and interpret that information for truth wanes.

Madam Speaker, we have had instances where photographs of catastrophes or untoward events, occurring in other countries, are doctored by agents of the Opposition and circulated as though these events occurred in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, we have had incidents where deliberate falsehoods are spread by the agents of the Opposition without a murmur from the Opposition Leader, invoking the phrase “The upholder is worse than the thief.” But Madam Speaker, what this amounts to is a threat to our democracy by the Opposition.

Madam Speaker, high quality information is critical for the functioning of democracy. Yet, in the era of growing prominence of social media and a high choice of media environment, it is increasingly difficult for citizens to judge the quality of the information being spewed by the Opposition on a daily basis.

Moreover, social and digital media have been found to amplify and accelerate the diffusion of misinformation, providing the Opposition with tools for propaganda at an unprecedented scale. Madam Speaker, misinformation is a threat to our democracy, since it can lead citizens to confidently defend factually incorrect beliefs, and that is why I make bold the claim today, that the Opposition is a threat to the democracy of Trinidad and Tobago.

Recognizing this, Madam Speaker, and ever mindful of our sworn duty to uphold the law and to do good for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the Office of the Prime Minister, Communications, has conscientiously set about its task, through the various agencies under its ambit, to keep the country informed, educated, and entertained.

TTT Limited

Madam Speaker, leading the charge in this respect has been the renewed, revitalised and resurging TTT Limited which continued to reposition itself on the media landscape during fiscal 2021-2022. During the past year, Madam Speaker, TTTL remained the premier source of credible and reliable news which it successfully disseminated to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago in a timely and accurate manner.

The bold steps taken during 2020/2021 fiscal are beginning to bear fruit as the public is responding favourably to the revamped news products, the introduction of new talent and the reformatting of various television and radio segments. Madam Speaker, the response to the reintroduction of TTT's iconic Twelve and Under talent show which birthed such local talents as Lisa Wickham and Wendell Constantine, has been nothing short of fantastic. The choice of local jazz icon Vaughnette Bigford to host the programme has been met with much acclaim and the programme is off to a flying start.

Madam Speaker, I would have gladly invited the Leader of the Opposition to host the programme, but after hearing her caterwauling of Bob Marley's "No Woman No Cry," I am sure I would have been drawn and quartered for such a decision.

Madam Speaker, I can say without fear of contradiction today that TTTL now leads the way on social media amongst all other local media houses. The "firsts" are racking up, Madam Speaker, and we are extremely proud of the Board, Management and Staff at TTT Limited. It is the first media house in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean to reach over 100K YouTube subscribers, as well as the first local media house to garner over 1 million views on a single video.

Madam Speaker, in the first year of rejoining the Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU), TTTL received two awards for the series PENNY ON POINT in the categories of Best Entertainment Programme and Best Magazine Programme at the Caribbean Media Awards 2021. Moreover, since the launch of TTT on Toober, persons across Canada can now access via their local cable providers. These initiatives have resulted in the viewership on TTT's Live Channel to grow to over 150,000 online in one month, via the Tego App, and over 100,000 views via the ttt.live website. Madam Speaker, the numbers are in, and the data has shown an incremental growth in TTT's television ranking from the Top 20 in May 2022 to the Top Ten in August 2022.

Madam Speaker, TTT Limited, like all agencies under the remit of the Ministry of Communications, has been charged with the responsibility of reducing its reliance on its annual Government subvention. I am happy to report that TTT Limited has embraced this drive to self-sufficiency, and to this end, has developed partnerships with regional media entity SportsMax and the Realtime International Film Festival in Nigeria, through a collaboration with FilmTT.

Already, increased revenues have been realized from the production of local content, like the Best Village series, the PanAm Aquatic and Davis Cup Championships, as well as the groundbreaking "Delving Deeper" series.

The Way Forward

In the ensuing year, TTTL will continue to deepen its commitment to bringing relevant content to its audiences as a deliberate strategy to improve its market position. There will be a continued focus on supporting Government's communication and the promotion of its services to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, in support of the development of the orange economy, TTTL would be involved in the co-production, with FilmTT, and distribution of MIXED UP, the local sitcom series.

NALIS

Madam Speaker, I turn now to the National Library and Information Systems Authority (NALIS). Just as with TTT Limited, Madam Speaker, throughout this pandemic, NALIS has been in the forefront of producing and disseminating truthful information on all its social media platforms, ensuring that citizens are kept abreast of all the latest developments. Madam Speaker, throughout this pandemic, NALIS was able to use its geographic spread of public and school libraries to ensure that no child went without the requisite learning material, thus exemplifying Government's declared intention that no child will be left behind.

Madam Speaker, through its partnerships with the various diplomatic missions, the National Library Building located just a stone's throw away from here, has become a beehive of cultural activity and another centre for the performing arts. Indeed, a casual walk down Abercromby Street will allow persons Madam Speaker to feast their eyes on one of the most beautiful murals to grace the library walls. Done by a Colombian artist together with two local artists, this mural depicts the coming together of the Caribbean region and Latin America, linked together by the Caribbean Sea, and proudly proclaiming that there is more that unites than divides us.

Madam Speaker, in Fiscal 2021-2022, the decline in allocations to the various Ministries prevented NALIS from continuing its very innovative programme of co-locating libraries in Community Centres managed by the Ministry of Sport and Community Development, as well as other locations managed by the Ministries of Public Administration, Digital Transformation, and Youth Development and National Service.

Co-Location allows for more flexible library hours to accommodate programmes, community activities and literacy development. These locations are also providing assistance with access to Government services for adults and home-work support for children. Already co-located libraries can be found in the Mt.Hope/Mt. Lambert, Beetham Gardens and Barataria Community Centres, as well as in St. Helena, as a joint programme with the Kiwanis Club in that area.

I am extremely happy that we have received an allocation of \$2 million in fiscal 2023 for the continuation of this programme, and MPs can look forward to similar facilities being provided in their communities.

Madam Speaker, the completion of the Mayaro Public Library is imminent. In fact, the base building was supposed to be handed over to NALIS on September 30th, 2022, leaving just the fit out with furniture and equipment to be done. Madam Speaker, one of the striking features of the Mayaro Public Library, and one that will be replicated in the Diego Martin and La Horquetta Public Libraries, is the provision of commercial space within the confines of the building.

I am happy to add, Madam Speaker, that the current MP for Mayaro, my good friend, and I, have toured the building and have both expressed satisfaction with what we have seen and with the plans for commercialization. Indeed, the goodly MP, perhaps the only sane one on that side, has consented to work with us, to secure possible tenants for the building.

Madam Speaker, the proposed building for the Mayaro Public Library was more than 10 times the size of the original building, and was clearly intended to ensure that someone benefitted handsomely from the award of the contract. Instead, Madam Speaker, the library has now been confined to the first floor, without any loss of services, while the entire ground floor will be offered as commercial space.

Like TTT Limited, Madam Speaker, NALIS is already sold on the idea of reducing its reliance on its annual subvention from Government, and through initiatives, such as these, is moving in the right direction.

In this same vein, Madam Speaker, NALIS is moving speedily ahead with the implementation of the provisions of the Marrakesh Treaty. The Marrakesh Treaty was developed to “Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled”. The GORTT Act No. 14 of 2020 identified NALIS as the “authorised entity” within Trinidad and Tobago that according to section 12 A. (2) “may- reproduce, distribute, communicate to the public by any means, or lend, an accessible format copy or supply the accessible format copy to another authorised entity or a beneficiary person”.

Madam Speaker, implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty would mean that blind, visually impaired and print disabled persons can increase their ability to become productive members of society and not have to limit their aspirations because of a lack of information.

Over time, Madam Speaker, I anticipate that because of this, there would be a decrease in demand for government assistance from some of these persons who would have become more independent. NALIS will be also be able to enhance Trinidad and Tobago's standing on the international stage as a leader in equal opportunities for the blind, visually impaired and print disabled.

Madam Speaker, in fiscal 2022-2023, in addition to its co-location drive, NALIS intends to commence construction of public libraries in the underserved areas of Diego Martin, La Horquetta and Toco. The Toco Public Library, in particular, will focus on cultural, learning and recreational opportunities, with quiet spaces for study and information-seeking, places to collaborate and multifunction spaces for events and programs, accessible and highly visible collections, displays, travelling exhibitions, lectures, lifelong learning opportunities and digital literacy. It will provide a new venue for a range of community activities and appeal to people of all ages, occupations and lifestyles.

Madam Speaker, a critical plank of NALIS' outreach has been in the area of digital literacy. To this end, numerous programmes are being executed in public libraries throughout Trinidad and Tobago, geared towards bridging the digital divide that exists. NALIS, therefore, is partnering with the Ministry of Digital Transformation to provide access through its locations for the advancement of the Government's digital transformation agenda. Equally important, NALIS has signed MOUs with YTEPP and the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service to ensure that all students and lecturers are exposed to the vast array of resources available at our 22 public libraries.

Freedom of Information Unit

Madam Speaker, I turn now to the Freedom of Information Unit which is also located within the ambit of the Ministry of Communications.

Madam Speaker, like TTT Limited and NALIS, the Freedom of Information Unit is part of the information architecture of the Ministry of Communications, ensuring accessibility and availability of information to the national community. But even before I elucidate any more on the work of this very important unit, Madam Speaker, I want to state categorically that it never has, it never was, and it will never be the position of this Government to deliberately withhold information from the public that ought properly to be in the public domain.

While there are those who harp about restrictions on information, and make a song and dance about its accessibility, Trinidad and Tobago is ranked number 25 on the World Press Freedom Index for 2022. Madam Speaker, that is a phenomenal achievement when considering that this is a placing out of 180 countries in the world. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago ranks above first world countries like the USA and the United Kingdom in this international index.

Madam Speaker, in Fiscal 2021-2022, the FOIA Unit facilitated the training of over 400 persons, drawn from the Public Service Academy, Heritage Petroleum Limited and the Ministry of National Security. This training guided public authorities in understanding their obligations to the public under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. This training also resulted in increased compliance from public authorities to the FOI Act and will reduce litigation due to breaches of the Act, accelerate transparency in governance and promote open government and accountability.

In Fiscal 2022-2023 OPM-C will upgrade the capacity of the Freedom of Information Unit to allow for increased training of public authorities, education of the public and improved policies and procedures for the administration of the FOI Act. The continuation of training for public authorities will lead to increased compliance from public authorities and greater transparency in governance. Furthermore, improved understanding of the Act by the public will empower citizens, as there will be greater public participation in government affairs and the citizenry will be more informed about the plans, policies, and projects of the Government.

National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago

By now, Madam Speaker, I am certain you will see the tremendous role this Ministry of Communications plays in ensuring that our national population is educated, informed and entertained.

The National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago is the custodian of our history, the custodian of the story of Trinidad and Tobago, the custodian of the artefacts and journals that tell the story of us as a transplanted people. A visit to the archives, Madam Speaker, might not only reveal the origins of our “slave names” but also tell the story of the resilience of our people, all our people who have now made Mother Trinidad their home.

During Fiscal 2020-2022, the management of the NATT completed a Draft National Records, Information and Archives Management Policy, along with the legislative drafting guidelines for the development of legislation for records and information management. When implemented, Madam Speaker, this Policy and legislation will establish a regulatory framework and guidelines for the governance of all records, information, and archives in the public sector, from creation to final disposition, regardless of form or media.

It is envisaged that the Freedom of Information Act, the Data Protection Act and the Electronic Transaction Act (some of which are currently under amendment) and any other records related legislation would be harmonized by this policy and legislation which will serve as the overarching legislation for all records in the public service. This policy and legislation will also assist in Government’s initiative of digital transformation of the economy as it will ensure standardization of records management in the public service which will facilitate interoperability in the electronic environment.

Madam Speaker, as the custodian of our history, it is important that the NATT is in possession of, as far as is humanly possible, all the historical data that speaks to our evolution as a nation. To this end, the National Archives is actively pursuing all available avenues to retrieve or gain access to Trinidad and Tobago's archival records which are held overseas, mainly by former Colonial powers (e. g. UK, Spain, etc.).

This includes purchase of digital copies, collaboration with related embassies and high commissions and participation in international fora on this topic of shared archival heritage. The citizens of Trinidad and Tobago have a right to be able to access all relevant records locally for research, education and an understanding of their identity and sense of self.

Additionally Madam Speaker, in Fiscal 2022-2023, the NATT will develop an online searchable catalogue (MemoryTT) with access to already digitized and digital records. The digitization of government media assets project is also poised for expansion in fiscal 2023, where government media archives (video, audio, photography) spanning several decades, belonging to various agencies under the Office of the Prime Minister - Communications, will have their audio-visual media collections digitized and eventually made available for preview, through dedicated online portals.

To support this thrust, the NATT will establish a Trusted Digital Repository through the introduction of digital preservation software to protect, secure and monitor digital records in the long term, based on the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) ISO standard.

Government Printery

Madam Speaker, the Government Printery is one of the hardest working divisions in the public service. Their quiet efficiency often goes unnoticed, but were it not for them, Madam Speaker, and their levels of professionalism, the budget documents which are printed annually, and to the best of my knowledge, have never been leaked, would not be available to us in the manner and timeliness that they do.

Like all divisions within the ambit of the Ministry of Communications, the Government Printery is undergoing its own share of modernization through digitalization. One of the more telling impacts of this modernization, Madam Speaker, will be the imminent launch of the Government Printery's own dedicated website www.printery.gov.tt

When launched, ministries, departments and divisions will be able to download the general forms used throughout the Public Service such as Forwarding Forms - Gen.86, Minute Sheet - Gen.84, Other Charges Voucher - Gen.03 and 08, Departmental Voucher - Gen.92, Deposit Voucher - Gen.05, etc. Citizens of Trinidad and Tobago will also be able to make online payments via the new website for Gazette Notices, Publications, etc. The purchase of documents sold by the Sales Department will be paid for online, and downloaded or collected at the Government Printery. All of this, Madam Speaker, resulting in expedited processes in accessing forms and documents from the Government Printery, which will lead to increased access to forms for ministries, departments, and divisions, as well as citizens.

Madam Speaker, the Employee Self Service Module project mandated by the Ministry of Finance was completed on time. This means, that all government staff members now have access to their personal information. This included easy access to pay slips, personal information, and the ability to update personal information remotely.

Madam Speaker, the modernization and digitalization of the Government Printery's equipment continued to the end of fiscal 2022 with the purchase of a digital duplicator to increase the output of print-on-demand requests.

This new equipment will significantly reduce the wait time for print-on-demand products such as small amounts of specialized forms, programs, or documents. The newly bought digital duplicator machine will be able to produce these types of documents within a significantly shorter timeframe without having to go through the older printing processes. This will lead to increased efficiency of the Government Printery and decreased wait time by citizens to receive their requests.

I anticipate that in Fiscal 2022-2023, the Government Printery will purchase a High-Speed Digital Web Press, capable of printing various documents which will include receipt books for the Comptroller of Accounts, Ballot Papers, and books such as Draft Estimates. This purchase will result in less printing errors, the elimination of pre-press, the option to fully computerize operations, a reduction in printing time, and greater customer satisfaction. This will also allow for the personalization of documents such as bar codes, personal or ministry/department information.

Government Communications

Madam Speaker, I have deliberately left the work of the Information Division and Government Communications for last, not because they are undeserving of mention, but precisely because they are the two units that bring everything together.

Madam Speaker, the mission of the Ministry of Communications is simply to promote open Government through centralized, timely and accurate communication to engage and empower citizens. Our vision is to be the leader in credible, government and public information.

To this end, Madam Speaker, the Information Division has in its possession state-of-the-art audio visual equipment which can now provide real time information to our multiple stakeholders and effectively meet the challenges brought on by the explosion of social media usage. The OPM-C can now broadcast information in real time to other ministries, media outlets, and the ministry's social media sites thereby offering a more comprehensive service to other ministries – allowing them to quickly distribute much-needed information to their respective audiences.

Madam Speaker, the success of Government's 60th Anniversary celebrations is owed in no small part to the roles played by the multiple agencies of the Ministry of Communications. Indeed, only on Wednesday of this past week, NALIS launched its production of the musical play "Forged from the Love of Liberty" written and directed by renowned thespian Pearl Eintou Springer. Spearheading the management of the various activities, Madam Speaker, was the Director of Government Communications, who was appointed Chairman of the Cabinet-appointed Working Committee.

Madam Speaker, in furtherance of its mandate to be the leader in providing credible government and public information, in Fiscal 2022-2023, the Government Communications Division will launch its Week In Review television series. The pilot for this series has already been created, and once approved this new format is expected to increase public engagement with information about the work the government is doing through all its ministries for the citizens of this blessed Republic. This new format will now include an on camera host in an effort to make the segment more interactive and conversational.

Additionally, in Fiscal 2023, the Government Communications Division will establish the resources and processes to allow increased responsiveness to both positive and negative public feedback. This will enable us to improve service levels, and enhance public communication and experience with the respective arms of Government. This initiative will be supported through inputs from all public media platforms, newspapers, television, radio, social media, digital broadcasts, and websites/blogs.

Conclusion

Madam Speaker, I am certain you would glean from my presentation, that the work of the Ministry of Communications, executed through its various agencies, is multi-faceted and far-reaching.

This work, Madam Speaker, has not been made any easier by an Opposition who religiously on a Sunday, wantonly on a Monday, and brazenly on every other day of the week, to insert into the national consciousness a diatribe of misinformation, deliberate half-truths and innuendoes.

We understand their strategy very well, Madam Speaker, and that is to bombard the national population with as much misinformation as possible, while shielding the Opposition Leader from any real and discerning journalists, prepared to ask of her the very hard questions about her multiple roles in many scandals which continue to bedevil this country.

My job at the Ministry of Communications is not to chase after the smokes and mirrors of the Opposition's mission to destroy the democracy of this country, but rather to preserve it by ensuring that the national population is kept informed and educated on what this Government, of which I am a proud member, is doing and will continue to do for them.

Madam Speaker, I thank you indulging me in this opportunity.