

Karib goes with the Flow

by **PAT HOYOS**

AT THE TIME OF COLUMBUS' LAUNCH in Barbados were negotiations already under way with Karib Kable?

My silly, inquiring mind wanted to know. Not for any particular reason. I just like to think about such things rather than find myself playing stupid games on **Facebook** with "friends" I have never met.

From the time it officially announced its arrival in Barbados last year through the purchase of TeleBarbados, it seemed like a whole lot of nothing was happening on the street level as far as Columbus was concerned.

Meanwhile, almost everywhere you turned along certain highways and byways, you were in danger of bumping into a Karib Kable van parked under an electricity pole, its linesmen busily "building out its network". But then, when you stopped at its sales kiosks and asked a question, you were told that the service would only be available in certain parts of the island.

So TeleBarbados' existing set-up remained more or less untouched (it seemed) by its new owners, while Karib Kable was busy as beavers.

The scene around the Caribbean also encouraged the question to form in my mind. At the time of its announced takeover of Karib Kable, Flow's all-fibre network was "almost completely built out in Trinidad" and "at 70 per cent in Curaçao, 80 per cent in Grenada and just past 50 per cent in Jamaica", according to Rhea Yaw Ching, Columbus' Miami-based media spokesperson.

With no "physical presence" in any of the other islands, Karib Kable's operations in St Vincent, St Lucia and Antigua – as well as its fast-emerging network in Barbados – "becomes the platform on which we can build and enhance our operations in those markets," according to Ms Yaw Ching.

So, with the exception of the two getting ready to compete in Barbados (while, it seems, not messing with each other's turf very much) they were islands apart in the wider Caribbean.

But when I asked Ms Yaw Ching about whether the take-over negotiations had begun some time before Columbus announced its arrival here, she said: "I'm not at liberty to discuss any part of the transaction."

She did say that Karib Kable has a security service not offered by Flow but otherwise the core services are the same. Of course, a tech and operational review is currently going on in each country, so she couldn't say if that service would continue to be offered "post-purchase". The main thing that will be happening post-purchase, which one assumes is now the present time, is that "we will be integrating the Karib Kable operation into the Columbus operation".

Anxious to stop playing defence and get to the company's talking points, Ms Yaw Ching, a Trinidadian with an engaging personality and a burgeoning American accent, added that Columbus' Barbados launch next month "will have a very interesting exposition" featuring all of the products and services it will be offering, and will be open to the public. This event will give Barbadians a chance to "live and breathe the Columbus way," she promised.

Anticipation therefore grows for the April roll-out of Columbus/Flow's products and services, enhanced by Karib Kable, to give customers a "larger footprint" both here and regionally.

At its launch Columbus had said its first cable customers would receive service at the end of the first quarter and, therefore, things remain on plan. Both services were going to be rolled out over three years, said Ms Yaw Ching, "so essentially, any customer who is in the Karib Kable footprint would be offered a Flow service on that network, once all of the requirements

have been fulfilled and we are 'go' for launch".

In terms of subscription TV, Barbados already has **MCTV**, **DirectTV** and more recently **LIME TV**, with which Columbus will compete.

"Barbados is one of the few countries where it is so highly competitive in each space that we operate in – in video, in broadband and voice," said Ms Yaw Ching.

But Columbus will not be offering any mobile services. Apart from subscription television, it will offer fibre-to-the-home for Internet access and landline voice.

The latter service will be accessible from anywhere there is a wireless or 4G connection. "It's a new look on landline voice, it's portable landline voice [service], if you will," explained Ms Yaw Ching.

So, are there exciting times ahead for Barbados consumers?

Barbados is "one of the most sophisticated and broadband-adopted markets in the Caribbean and you should be proud of that," she said.

What is Columbus' value added for consumers? Bandwidth. "Without a proper bandwidth access to the country you don't have the economies of scale to provide lower-cost broadband service. That is essentially what Columbus brings to the market."

So I can download movies faster, but are there any benefits to the economy as a whole? Says Ms Yaw Ching: "The country becomes connected with the level of bandwidth that allows enterprises to spawn and industries to take off, allows e-commerce to just blow up in a real and significant way, and from a consumer standpoint it absolutely allows customers to take advantage of first-world speed at affordable prices where you wouldn't ordinarily have been able to before."

I hope she is not overselling the proposition. But Ms Yaw Ching maintained that "the entire customer base will feel the effects of better service and products".

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