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Opening Remarks

By

Sean Brady
GOOD MORNING. I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE SECRETARY GENERAL, MR VĲAY MENON, FOR HIS KIND INVITATION TO OPEN THIS SEMINAR. ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES SUGGESTED TO ME THAT I ADOPT ONE OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATIONAL TECHNIQUES — NAMELY TO PRE-RECORD MY MESSAGE ON VIDEO TAPE SO THAT IT COULD BE PLAYED IN MY ABSENCE — BUT I POINTED OUT TO HIM THAT 9:00 AM IS NOT EARLY FOR ME, SO I COULD MAKE IT HERE WITHOUT UNDUE EFFORT.

MORE SERIOUSLY, DISTANCE EDUCATION IS AN AREA THAT HAS BEEN OF INTEREST TO ME FOR SOME TIME, AS IT COMBINES THE TECHNIQUES OF LEARNING WITH THE ART OF COMMUNICATION IN ORDER TO BE MATERIALLY EFFECTIVE. MY INTEREST STEMMS FROM THE COMMUNICATIONS SIDE OF THE EQUATION AS MY RECENT BACKGROUND GAVE ME SOME INSIGHT INTO THE CHALLENGES THAT COMMUNICATING THROUGH VARIOUS MEDIA PRESENT. UNTIL MY APPOINTMENT TO SINGAPORE, I WAS THE OFFICIAL SPOKESMAN FOR OUR FOREIGN MINISTER IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS IN OTTAWA. IN THAT CAPACITY I SAW HOW VITAL IT WAS TO HAVE COMPETENT TRAINING IN AND FAMILIARITY WITH THE MEDIA IF A MESSAGE WAS TO BE EFFECTIVELY CONVEYED. I WAS EXPOSED, FOR EXAMPLE, TO THE SPECIAL DEMANDS THAT THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA
make in comparison with the print and the differences between radio and television. I saw how the well-meaning could fail while the less deserving succeed because of the special demands of the media or because the individuals concerned did not understand the medium. Now the substance is more related to policy and politics than to education but the lessons are similar. If educational objectives are to be attained, then the techniques and the technology of the media must be well understood. This is presumably the case with distance education where the effectiveness of the learning depends on the clear understanding of the vicissitudes of the medium, whether the mode be print, audio or visual. This is why your work is so important. The skills are not innate but learned and therefore must be acquired through efficient training programs.

In addition to the special demands placed on distant educationalists by the nature of their craft, experts have also had to face social and systemic prejudices. The importance of education was identified early as crucial for the development of the individual and the nation. Virtually every system, every policy maker and every educationalist stressed it as a cornerstone to development. However, the corollary to make that education accessible was not. This gap between recognition of the fundamental importance of education and the need to make it accessible remained long after the technical barriers had begun to come down.

Educational authorities, so often innovative in their attitudes,
remained extraordinarily orthodox in being wedded to the concept that learning can only occur if the teacher and pupil were located in the same spot. Unless this relationship was present, so the argument went, the value of the education or the learning experience was open to question.

The barriers have slowly been breached. The first factor, of course, was technology. It was only with the introduction in recent the past of radio, television and the introduction of telecommunication satellites that the concept of distance education could be fully realized beyond the rather limited methods of education by correspondence. However, despite the technological revolution that made the concept feasible, the view that the individual and the teacher had to be in the same place or indeed that a teacher was necessary in order to create a learning experience persisted. The concept of distance learning, if anything, was still viewed as a step-child: useful but only second best method of teaching and training. Fortunately these barriers of discrimination have now been more aggressively broken down so that distance education is recognized as valuable in its own right. I believe it is the activities of seminars like this one organized by the Asian Mass Communications Research and Information Centre that we have to thank for a good deal of this achievement. Technical excellence plus probing and innovative concepts developed by experts have now established distance education as an important tool for development in the future.
The caterpiller of earlier times has now emerged as a fully mature butterfly. No longer is it viewed as an adjunct to the educational process. It has moved beyond the limitations that have governed the traditional education system to exploit new opportunities, that if anything, demonstrate that distance education can answer needs that the orthodox education system cannot. This has been quite a change. The uses to which distance learning can be applied are multitudinous. Techniques are now applied to primary education, to auxiliary programming, to retraining of adults, to the elimination illiteracy, to the enhancement of special skills, or to greater enjoyment for the individual in his own self-development. The list is virtually endless and it only seems limited by imagination of the individuals concerned.

It is the complexity and diversity of the opportunities that makes the field so challenging and exciting in the years ahead, not only for developing countries but for the developed as well. We in Canada have discerned the benefits of distance education both in areas of remote settlement or in highly urbanized centres; whether as part of the main stream of the education system or in the development of individual enhancement programs; whether it be primary or university; or whether it be development of new skills or the retraining for new jobs. I will not venture further down this road as we have with us today Canadian experts who are far better placed to bring you up-to-date on recent Canadian trends.
It was nevertheless the particular experience of Canada, gained in past because of its need to educate isolated population groupings over vast distances, together with the perceived interest displayed by a wide cross section of ASEAN and Asian countries that led the Government of Canada to fund this seminar. In reviewing the program and glancing through some of the papers that will be presented, it is clear that we have been correct in our assessment that it is an area that has a dynamic and stimulating future. You are exploring a vital facet of distance learning, namely the recent trends in training in the use of the media. As I indicated at the outset of my comments, unless the demands of the particular communications systems are well understood through the development of comprehensive and up-to-date training programs, then the objectives of a distance education system will only, at best, be partially achieved. It is your discussions that will set the course and determine the standards that will come to be applied in the next phase of the development of distance education. I wish you, the participants, well in your deliberations and discussions over the next few days and look forward to your results.

On the basis of my experience, however, I have to warn you that it is far easier to bridge great distances than to persuade skeptical media representatives about the merits of your case.
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Phatravadi SRITRAIRATANA (4 children)

Education:
B.A. (Honours), University of Toronto (Victoria College), 1964
M.A. Government (Chinese Studies), Cornell University, 1969

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Joined the Canadian Government, June 1970
Served in Ottawa, Hong Kong, Bangkok and New York with Canada's Department of External Affairs
Official Spokesman for the Department of External Affairs, September 1984 - August 1986
High Commissioner for Canada to Singapore, August 1986

Recreation:
Reading and Tennis