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Broadcasting Development And Distance Education

By

D Geoffrey
"BROADCASTING DEVELOPMENT AND DISTANCE EDUCATION"

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Presented at:
CIDA-AMIC Seminar on:
"Training Needs in the Use of Media
for Distance Education in Asia"
Singapore, June 8-11, 1987
BROADCASTING DEVELOPMENT AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

I. INTRODUCTION

Radio has been described as a "newspaper without paper which cannot be suppressed or confiscated". We are all quite familiar with some of radio's inherent potential. We are also aware of how this potential has been developed in the furtherance of Distance Education. However we are gathered here to examine collectively how broadcasting can be utilized as a more effective tool in Distance Education in the Asia-Pacific region. To be able to do that we also need to understand the present status of Distance Education in the region and the trends that are likely to emerge in the future. We would then be able to extrapolate this information with possible future trends with a view to working out a scenario that is likely to emerge by the year 2000.

II. BROADCASTING DEVELOPMENTS

One of the greatest inventions of this century, radio has become practically an indispensible amenity in everyday life. Radio as a broadcasting medium plays an extremely vital role in the communication process which is a prerequisite for development. It is concerned with the dissemination of information, the acquisition of certain skills and the use of knowledge, at the same time bringing large numbers of people into the mainstream of national life. When radio made its appearance some 70 years ago it was viewed with great delight as a mysterious source of entertainment. Since then it has become, along with other tools of communication such as television, the newspaper, videotape, audio cassettes and the cinema, an invaluable asset to social processes because it brings issues and matters of public interest to broader forums than they can be reached by public meetings or through parliaments. Because broadcast waves do not stop at national or international boundaries radio has in some way or other affected or influenced the behaviour and lifestyle of almost every individual.

About 30 years ago it is estimated that there were 230 million radio sets in the world. However the invention of the transistor brought about a revolutionary change in set-ownership. The advent of the transistor radio gave an enormous boost to the impact of radio broadcasts. Its greatest boon is its unfettered mobility that permits it to be used with such evident ease in almost any situation. Today it is estimated that the total number of radio sets in the world has reached the 1500 million mark. In the bi-polar and multi-polar context of world politics radio's vast potential has been used for good as well as evil as has been evidenced by the haste with which those who seize power by unconstitutional means attempt to
occupy radio stations. By and large however radio over the last 70 years has been used more for the good of the people by those entrusted with the management of this medium. Other then being a source of information and entertainment radio has been put to very good use in the field of education as can be witnessed in many parts of the world.

Developing countries which have been primarily concerned with providing a more meaningful life for disadvantaged groups, have launched massive programmes through radio to improve literacy, upgrade skills and prepare them to anticipate the future and to participate in making that future. Given the experience gained over the last 70 years it may well be expected that radio will, with more realistic and innovative approaches, continue to be an important medium that can interact with other media forms committed to the common objective of providing education which is neither time-bound or place-bound - a form of education which is not equated with formal schooling.

III. RADIO - SOME CHARACTERISTICS

Be that as it may it is rather disturbing to note from studies made of the performance of radio that there is a degree of over expectation amongst some uninitiated to the characteristics of the sound-only medium. They expect too much of radio. Much as radio is no respector of national and international boundaries, thereby having almost unlimited scope of coverage, it does have what some have described as weaknesses. I would prefer to call them limitations because with prudent strategies, limitations can be converted to strengths, as many of us have experienced in several instances, in our own lives. We are concerned with the management of Distance Education programmes and those of us who are familiar with management may be aware of instances where apparent threats to an institution have been judiciously converted to advantages. It is imperative therefore that all personnel, from scriptwriters and producers of supplementaty material, to others such as supervisors and evaluators are thoroughly familiar with what radio, as a sound only medium, can and cannot do. Broadcasters who have been associated with radio productions over a reasonable period of time are well aware of radio's strengths and limitations and an exposure of other personnel as well to this important aspect of broadcasting will ensure that they understand why radio programmes are produced in the manner in which they are, and ultimately help to guarantee, at least to some measure, the success of Distance Education programmes.
The absence of colour, light and pictures is indeed a serious limitation and unless this is borne in mind especially by writers for radio who ultimately will have to develop writing as a craft, there is every possibility that the intended results are likely to be well off the mark in the minds of the learners. Despite these handicaps a skilfull writer can create desired responses such as excitement, dramatic emotion and nostalgia which are feelings basically human in nature. Various types of sounds such as voices, music, sound effects - and for that matter even silence - when used skilfully can help to create these responses.

It has often been said that how sound works in an human being or the listener is a phenomenon. We have had experiences of these in our own lives. A creaking door on a windy night has been mistaken for a burglar trying to gain entry into the house. And a bull in the bush has been mistaken for a ghost! By understanding and appreciating this phenomenon skilled writers and producers can exploit it to unimaginable proportions to ensure the effectiveness of Distance Education programmes.

Radio can transcend borders and break the barriers of illiteracy. A person does not have to live close to a town or city - he could very well be in the remotes part of the country - to enjoy the benefits of radio programmes, not only from his own station but from others as well, including international broadcast, if he is able to afford a reasonably good receiver. It is not necessary for a listener to be able to read to understand what comes out of a receiver. We do enjoy listening to music without having to understand the language of the lyrics. Radio has an immediacy which other media do not have to the same degree. Within limits radio can persuade and effectively influence large audiences and can contribute to national thinking in terms of positive values. In many developing countries radio has played a significant role in national development projects, implementation of extensive education schemes, including literacy programmes, extension of rural health programmes and the development of cottage industries.

If the sounds heard by a listener prove to be pleasant, interesting or thought provoking then they can excite curiosity and stimulate the imagination. Viewed in this context radio has much in its favour as it can tailor the sounds or messages to be in empathy with the listeners' imagination within his own environment. Radio enables a person to follow the programmes with greater physical detachment while permitting him to do other things. If the fare offered has sufficient appeal to the listener
then radio lends itself to what is known as habit-listening - that is tuning in to a specific programme every time it is on air, thereby enabling the listener to have access to material that forms the mainspring of popularity amongst peers having identical values, hopes, aspirations and aesthetics. However much may be said about radio as a medium of communication the fact still remains that is a sound-only medium and has to be utilised as such.

IV. RECENT TRENDS

The emergence of other media forms such as television and videotapes added the visual dimension to interact with sound thereby enhancing the audio-visual impact on those who had hitherto been accustomed to the sound-only medium. Large sectors of society who were exposed to this glamour and glitter were delightfully shocked at the invasion of the privacy of their homes by this media form. The general belief amongst most people was that radio was fast losing its impact as an agent of change in the development process. Television soon came to be accepted as the most ideal form of communication. However those of us who have been involved in the use of communication technologies know only too well that large numbers of people, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, are not that fortunately placed to be able to gain access to this medium in terms of cost and infrastructure and national priorities. To that extent radio still remains and will continue to be as the most effective and affordable medium to bring about the desired changes in the development process for disadvantaged groups. Having observed some aspects of broadcasting developments over the last 70 years and examining some basic characteristics of radio as an agent of communication, I think it is time that we moved over to the next part of my paper.

V. DISTANCE EDUCATION

Scholars and experts from various institutions concerned with Distance Education in different parts of the world have come out with several definitions to describe precisely what Distance Education is all about. When delved in detail there appear to be some differences of a minor nature in these definitions but by and large there is universal consensus that the objectives are the same. For the purposes of this paper and the deliberations that are likely to emanate from it subsequently, my view of Distance Education is that it is a non-traditional form of education - that is it is a more functional concept of education which relates education with learning, regardless of when, where, and how the learning takes place. Though the subjects covered in Distance Education may be conventional, in that they deal with areas relevant and of importance to human beings, they would, unlike in the formal school situation, be approached, treated and
presented in a manner such that they would place emphasis on the acquisition of skills for enhanced performance of activities of everyday life, develop some interest for the aesthetic appreciation of the form and substance of one's environment, help to inculcate attitudes, values and aspiration and stimulate the assimilation of knowledge and information relevant to one's own needs in the environment of his community.

Learning has never been a process alien to the human being. The learning process had been in existence long before schools emerged as institutions of formal learning. Farming communities in rural areas sustained themselves for centuries without formal education. Urban societies had master-builders to design and construct their dwellings and master-craftsman to produce their implements. In terms of inputs of time and energy and the non-availability of technical sophistry as we know it today, their final products were termed as primitive and not cost-effective. But the fact remains that what they did produce was functional and satisfied a need. It is this functional element that should form the core of all Distance Education ventures for whatever target they are designed. We have ample evidence where active consideration has been given to this paramount factor by some developed countries. Distance Education programmes with mid-career studies designed for the upliftment of standards for nurses, food technologists, businessmen and social workers whose present needs are no longer catered for by a formal school system, because of several reasons, are examples which fulfill a functional need. Elsewhere there are examples of less developed and developing countries which have launched massive programmes that address themselves to basic issues that are related to the needs of different groups of people. Topics include health, nutrition, farming, unemployment, youth clubs and family welfare.

In India for instance distance teaching began in the form of correspondence education in Delhi University in 1962 on the recommendation of an expert committee. Three years later it was extended to school level. By the end of 1984 there were more than 25 universities and 4 Boards of Secondary Education offering Distance Education. Basically the mode of instruction in these distance teaching institutions is printed material though some centres also use other media like radio broadcasts. Personal contact programmes to supplement correspondence education are also used. Regional Colleges of Education of the National Council of Educational Research and Training conduct in-service training of teachers of secondary level through correspondence. Radio broadcasts for schools which commenced in the early 1950's played a supportive role and continue to do. One particular programme that has been playing a significant role is language broadcasts.
Television was first used in Delhi in 1962 to support classroom teaching in some selected subjects. Just as in the case of radio broadcasts television programmes are syllabus-oriented and supportive in nature. The Satellite Instructional Television Experiment in India was launched in 1975-76. Considered as one of the largest "techno-social" experiments ever conducted in human history it was the first exercise of its kind to design and develop infrastructure and to undertake experiments in communication and education. Under this scheme educational programmes are telecast to selected primary schools in 2400 villages in six states in the morning. Adult education and community development programmes are telecast in the evening. The satellite coverage is being expanded. Presently 68 radio broadcasting stations are providing educational broadcasts. Inspite of these efforts the needs of disadvantaged groups have still not been met. Realising that the formal education system for some students interferes with their income generating activities a massive non-formal education programme has been launched. At the end of 1984 there were about 100,000 centres with 3,000,000 children in the 9-14 age range throughout the country following this programme. The programmes are non-formal to the extent that they remove the rigidities relating to time, place and duration. At present it is estimated that the number of children in the 9-14 age range is many times more than the 1984 figure of 3,000,000. To ensure that distance learning has a meaningful role massive efforts are being undertaken to train teachers for the effective use of communication technologies by the National Council of Educational Research and Training. I myself had the experience of conducting a course for teachers from different parts of India in November/December 1986. The response was overwhelming and the experience was extremely rewarding.

It is indeed very heartening to note that many of these programmes have met with considerable success in some countries. The nomenclature used for these programmes under the umbrella of Distance Education differ in so far there are countries and in as much as their individual problems and needs are different. Some of these are eradication of illiteracy, special programmes for neo literates, continuing education, non formal education programmes for disadvantaged groups, development programmes for women, special programmes for dropouts, adult education programmes and so on. Whatever may be the nomenclature used the ultimate intention of all these programmes is to make life more meaningful for the target audience using the best possible means. At this stage I would like to take you to the next segment of my paper which will deal with some crucial issues that will highlight the enormity of the task ahead of us.
VI. LITERACY SCENARIO OF THE 80's

An estimated 75% of the world's illiterate live in the Asia-Pacific region. A survey of Literacy Development Patterns in the Asia-Pacific region reveals three definite categories.

Category I: Countries which have attained 80% literacy or very near it. Past evidence suggests that once literacy is achieved to that level for both men and women, such illiteracy as remains is vestigial. (Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand)

Category II: Countries that have attained 50 to 79 percent literacy rate. Literacy up to this level is self sustaining provided that the differential between the literacy rates for men and that for women is reduced substantially. (Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey)

Category III: Countries that have less than 50 percent literacy rate. A wide difference between the literacy rates for men and women is distinctly evident. (Iran, Laos, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, PNG India)

It is quite obvious that major efforts will be required to reduce illiteracy in Category III countries. Two distinct sub groups are identifiable here. The first sub group comprises women. They account for the majority of the region's illiterates. The situation is almost tragic when one considers that society is depriving itself of the positive influence of female literacy on family life, children's education and health. The rate of women's literacy determines quite decisively the overall literacy in a country. From available data it is more than amply evident that when there is almost parity in the literacy rates between men and women they correlate positively with health and education indicators.

The second sub-group of illiterate consists of those living in rural areas. Almost all countries acknowledge the disparity in literacy rates between urban and rural areas. Some important correlates with the illiteracy rate from among some of the social and economic indicators should also be noted in this content.

(i) the total fertility rate in 'illiterate' countries is almost double the rate of the other 'literate' countries

(ii) the average female life expectancy in 'illiterate' countries is 46.5 years whereas it is 68.3 years in the 'literate' countries
(iii) infant mortality is three times higher in the 'illiterate' countries

(iv) the crude death rate in the 'illiterate' countries is very much higher than it is in the 'literate' countries

From the overview of the present situation of illiteracy in the region, it can be concluded that unless drastic measures are taken by the countries involved, the Asia-Pacific region will enter the next century with quite a large percentage of illiterates amongst its population.

VII. ROLE AND USE OF MASS MEDIA

Mass media is an indispensable instrument that has to be incorporated in strategies designed for Distance Education as it has the potential to help extend the coverage and outreach of programmes often at a comparatively lower cost than any other approach. Well designed programmes catering to the needs of the listeners have found success to an unprecedented degree by creating an awareness, mobilizing support, motivating learners, reinforcing the learning process and in general providing a more conducive environment for Distance Education. Radio which is essentially associated with the spoken word, coping with a wide range of subjects has evoked widespread, positive and enthusiastic responses from learners in many countries. The intimate and personal nature of radio has given style and substance to Distance Education which at one time was viewed as a remote and largely abstract concept.

Because in terms of cost radio productions have an advantage over other forms of media it has been greatly favoured by many countries with limited budgetary appropriations to spread Distance Education programmes far and wide in a relatively short time. But not all countries have been blessedly free of problems. Despite their best of intentions many have hit potholes either because they were overtly optimistic and assumed that the very use of communication technology of some form or another would tilt the balance in their favour or they were hamstrung in the distressingly familiar situation of not being able to sustain their efforts with adequate and the impressively high standards perceived at the outset.

Communication technologies by their very dynamic nature and increasing technical sophistry offer exciting scope and extensive dimensions for the furtherance of Distance Education programmes. A wide range of communication technologies is currently in popular usage in the Asia-Pacific region. It is apparent that some countries that have succeeded in indentifying their problems quite
precisely, have also been able to select from the range of communication technologies available, that which they deem would be the most suitable for them. In the case of others there is evidence of uncertainty, under utilization or inadequate diversification of media forms for maximising the effectiveness of Distance Education programmes in terms of the differing audiences.

It must be accepted however that such variations or differences as exist underscore the presence of peculiar or unique situations, the non-availability of basic communication infrastructure and the existence of more vexing problems in terms of national priorities. These no doubt have to be accepted as realities. Recently AIBD undertook a study on the use of communication technologies in Distance Education on behalf of the Unesco Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific. This study reveals that despite its vast potential mass media has not been fully and effectively used as one may have expected. Several reasons have been cited. These include, amongst others, commercial control of mass media, lack of concern and interest among people responsible for mass media and inadequate information on the impact of mass media on Distance Education programmes.

The study also reveals a very significant difference in the extent of usage of the electronic media. Two groups are readily identifiable - one with a higher 'saturation' and the other with a lower 'saturation' of the electronic media. 'Saturation' in the context of the electronic media here is indicative of the degree or extent to which a society has had exposure to the effects and has had the benefits of that particular form of media. A higher or lower level of 'saturation' in terms of the electronic media is governed and determined by a number of factors, some major ones being geographical, economic, social and cultural. It follows therefore that countries favourably disposed vis-a-vis the above factors are more positively inclined to have a higher level of 'saturation'. A favourable geographical terrain provides a better reach for radio by virtue of less or minimum interference to signal strength and the absence of blind spots.

The study indicates that there are countries in the Asia-Pacific region where the foregoing factors have mitigated against the effective use of the electronic media depriving sizeable proportions of the populace of the benefits that could have been accrued from it had the situation been otherwise. On the other hand where these factors have been favourably inclined they have served as an impetus for the development and utilization of the electronic media, enabling large segments of people to share the benefits from it.
At this stage of our deliberations I would deem it prudent for us to take cognizance of the fact that the electronic media is but one element, though an important one at that, of the multifaceted inputs that go into the making of Distance Education programmes. To be able to maximise the effectiveness of the electronic media and to garner the benefits that accrue from it certain other crucial issues need to be given serious consideration so that there is a close and healthy interaction between them for positive results. The electronic media by itself does not offer a solution to Distance Education problems as is assumed and even believed by many who are not acquainted with it.

It must always be remembered that Distance Education is a public form of teaching that needs public acceptance. Definite steps to win that acceptance must be initiated amongst those who matter and such acceptance must be seen to be forthcoming. From the outset a strong political will supported by appropriate action, overrides to a great extent, all other issues. It is this political commitment and determination that has generated popular mobilization as well as total participation in the countries that have successful on-going Distance Education programmes. Radio and Television producers, teachers, newspaper reporters, folk artists, agricultural, health and co-operative extension workers, PTA's, youth clubs, women's organizations, village and district councils and religious leaders have significant roles to play in this public form of teaching.

The clientele of Distance Education programmes are mostly adults. These adults have developed certain ideas about themselves and how they as adults should be treated by others. They may very well have some painful, unpleasant and traumatic experiences of school which may be in conflict with the ideas of those involved in Distance Education programmes. But the fact remains they have returned to study for practical purposes. Therefore if Distance Education programmes are to achieve the desired ends then they must be able to offer them something functionally useful, which they may be able to apply in order to enhance the quality of life. In the use of the electronic media which is often viewed as something that has an air of sophistry and mystery about it, planners must ensure that programmes provide for sufficient disaggregation to relate to the realities of the local situation which in the main are the needs and motivations of the learners themselves. It would appear to be rather incongruous for a broadcaster to talk to the learner about success when in his life success has been immaterial because he has seen no success to strive for - a context alien to him!
When the electronic media penetrates societies which hold steadfastly to traditional beliefs and values it rocks the equilibrium of such societies creating conflicting emotional and cultural cross currents. Failure to grasp this extremely sensitive factor has been attributed to the poor performance of Distance Education programmes in many situations. Hence it is imperative that programmes that appeal for change are designed and presented in a manner such that they key in to the aspirations, values and motivations of the learner. In many cases radio programmes launched with great pomp and promise have turned out to be of limited utility after a period of time because of the monotony created by a predictably definite sequence resulting in boredom amongst listeners. Programme formats therefore have to be reviewed frequently to ensure that there are adequate in-built strategies to resuscitate flagging responses.

The study has also brought to the surface yet another major problem - one that should be a matter of simmering concern. It is related to utilization, evaluation and feedback. There appears to be a dismal lack of information flow regarding the effectiveness of programmes because the feedback process has progressively deteriorated to an extent where programme originators hardly know how their programmes are being utilized. In the light of what we have been able observe hitherto we can say that Distance Education programmes have to be durable and they can be made durable by flexibility and a willingness to change our approaches when necessary. Those changes tailored to the needs of the learner can be effected only with an efficient feedback system.

Our objective is to help the listener to help himself. But we need to organise ourselves first to be able to help others.
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