

Using ICT to Increase Participation and Strengthen Democracy



The Fourth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open and Distance Learning (PCF4)

*Ocho Rios, Jamaica
1st November 2006*

Asa Briggs Lecture 2006

*Presented By
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Board of the Commonwealth of Learning,
Mr. President and the staff of the Commonwealth of Learning,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Introduction

It is an honour and a privilege for me to deliver a lecture bearing the name of Lord Asa Briggs of Lewes, a distinguished scholar, educator, broadcaster and administrator. It is fitting that we should honour him in this way, for it is upon his shoulders as the first Chairman of the Commonwealth of Learning, that we have built the impressive achievements of this institution. I am humbled by the company to which you have exalted me when you asked me to give this year's lecture. My distinguished predecessors include: Sir Sridath Ramphal, former Commonwealth Secretary General, Prof. Wang Gungwu, Director of the East Asian Institute at the University of Singapore, and Prof. David Dilkes, Vice Chancellor of the University of Hull.

In this lecture I wish to build on the "Foundations" in your theme - Achieving Development Goals: Innovation, Learning, Collaboration, and Foundations - focus on how information and communication technology can be harnessed to promote the political values that support and strengthen democracy.

The Values

The first order of business is to decide on a set of values as our foundation. Every community has relied on a system of values to regulate how an individual or the community itself organizes ethical or ideological beliefs and the actions that flow from these beliefs. Individuals in society usually have simultaneously personal and communal values that in ideal circumstances are externally consistent, meaning that there are no contradictions or situational exceptions between them. These values should also be internally consistent, that is they do not contradict each other and any exceptions are abstract enough to be used in all situations and are consistently applied. Unfortunately, over the course of human history there have been too many examples of internal and external inconsistency in the application of communal and personal value systems. The persistence of slavery in the United States after the American Revolution and racial discrimination after emancipation were not consistent with the claim in the Declaration of Independence " ... that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

There are times too when we have moved backwards: witness the rise of Nazism in Germany and the entrenchment and legalisation of Apartheid in South Africa. Dominant groups have always been able to use the coercive power of the state and the innovations of technology to reinforce and maintain these inconsistencies. Hitler and his colleagues were the first to fully exploit radio and television to promote an abhorrent set of values.

The values I hold dear, and which I hope you will be persuaded to accept, are also those that the Commonwealth has proclaimed and enshrined through a series of declarations and statements ever since the 1971 Declaration of Commonwealth Principles [1]. The cornerstone statement of these values is the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration and I am sure the irony in that name is not lost on such a knowledgeable audience. When the Heads of Government met in Zimbabwe in 1991, they thought the time had come to build on the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles issued at their 1971 meeting in Singapore. The purpose of the Heads of Government was to apply those principles to the contemporary situation and to the challenges that the Commonwealth and the rest of the world would face in the 1990s and beyond.

My former colleague Colin Ball, who served as the director of the Commonwealth Foundation, adequately summarised these values as " principles that bind Commonwealth member countries together". "These values", he wrote, "include: respect for diversity, human dignity and opposition to all forms of discrimination; adherence to democracy, rule of law, good governance, freedom of expression and the protection of human rights; elimination of poverty and the promotion of people-centred development; and international peace and security, the rule of international law and opposition to terrorism." [2]

Adherence to these values leaves no room for demeaning individuals either through denial of their human or economic rights. These values provide no shelter for religious, political, racial or economic bigotry of neither the left nor the right; nor are they to be promoted by coercion. To do so would be to deny them. These are values to be embraced out of deep-seated belief in our common humanity. These are the values that Prof. Amartya Sen had in mind when, after arguing that development can be seen as a process of

expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy, he wrote: "... freedoms depend also on other determinants (other than income levels), such as social and economic arrangements (for example, facilities for education and health care) as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny)." [3]

These are the values that promote brotherhood and freedom and that lead to the kind of world that Garth Brooks [4] sings about:

*"When the last child dies for a crust of bread
When the last man dies for just words that he said
When there is shelter over the poorest head ...
We shall be free..."*

*"When the last thing we notice is the colour of skin
And the first thing we look at is the beauty within
When the skies and the oceans are clean again
We shall be free..."*

How do we Promote Values

The challenge we face in promoting these values is not unlike the one we face in the fight against terrorism: how do we protect our freedoms without resorting to the tactics of the terrorists; how do we promote our values with out resort to methods that destroy them? We are living in danger of forgetting the lesson of history to which that distinguished American Jurist Thurgood Marshall so eloquently drew our attention in 1989. He reminded us that "... grave threats to liberty often come in times of urgency, when constitutional rights seem too extravagant to endure." [5] How ironic it is that governments, in order to protect our freedoms and civil rights, seem to think that a necessary first step is to curtail them. It would be a similarly perverse outcome if, in order to promote and defend our values we were first to dilute and then to abandon them. I believe that through education and information we have the means to avert this threat and the means to safeguard and promote our values.

On education, let me remind you of what John Stuart Mill, Rector of the University of St. Andrew's, had to say in his 1867 inaugural address: "Not only does education include whatever we do for ourselves and whatever is done for us by others for the express purpose of bringing us nearer to the perfection of our nature; it does more: in its largest acceptation it comprehends even the indirect effects produced on character, and on the human faculties, by things of which the direct purposes are quite different; by laws, by forms of government, by the industrial arts, by modes of social life, nay, even by physical facts not dependent on human will" [6] For Mill the core of education is "... the culture which each generation purposely gives to those who are to be its successors, in order to qualify them for at least keeping up, and if possible for raising, the level of improvement which has been attained." [7]

As an educational institution I am sure that the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) is conscious of its role to bring "us nearer to the perfection of our nature" by promoting commonly shared values and by fostering the "culture which each generation purposely gives to its successors". Your institution is well placed to promote those values that should not and indeed cannot be imposed by coercion, but can only be

accepted and embraced from deep-seated conviction. Initiatives in citizenship education are welcome and necessary but are not sufficient to promote and preserve our values. These values must also be at the centre of the ways an institution such as yours delivers its programmes to its various audiences. In the jargon, these values must be mainstreamed and cross-cutting.

As a distance learning institution CoL is designed to not only employ, but also to participate in the evolution of the new and important role that information and communication technology (ICT) will play in "bringing us nearer to the perfection of our nature". Prof. Douglas Robertson [8] argues that: "Civilization is information. Most of the factors that characterize a civilization - its ethics and laws, its technology, its philosophy and religion, its literature and art - are forms of information." From this premises he concluded that: "...civilizations are generally limited more by lack of information than by lack of physical resources. Classical civilizations ... possessed the resources needed to create Morse's telegraph and Edison's phonograph. Ramses and Pericles failed to build telegraphs and phonographs only because they lacked the necessary information."

Every multi-lateral or bi-lateral development agency has a major programme of assistance to improve access of developing countries to ICT. Many agencies also have on their websites a statement similar to that of the Asian Development Bank that recognises ICT as "a powerful force in shaping social and economic development ... potentially helping developing countries leapfrog stages of economic development".... and that commits the institution to "... a strategic approach to assist its developing member countries seize the opportunities created by ICT". [9]The Commonwealth's own Commonwealth Connects, spearheaded by the Secretariat, CoL, and other Commonwealth organisations, is an example of this strategic approach to help bridge the deepening Digital Divide across the 53 countries of the Commonwealth.

The work of the PEW Internet and American Life Project provides some invaluable insights into the evolving uses of ICT. A growing number of individuals now turn to the internet for information before making major decisions about health care, education, investments or major purchases. In a survey on the social, political and economic impact of the internet the majority of the respondents believed that by 2020:

- there will be a thriving global low-cost network (56% vs. 43%);
- English will not displace other languages (57% vs. 42%);
- autonomous technology (i.e. machines doing the thinking instead of humans) will not be a problem (54% vs. 42%);
- transparency will build a better world at the expense of privacy (49% vs. 46%);
- virtual reality will be a drain for some people who will be lost to alternate realities (56% vs. 39%);
- the internet will open worldwide access to success (52% vs. 44%);
- some Luddites (Refusniks) will commit acts of terror (58% vs. 35%). [10]

The emergence of Web 2.0, [11] a term coined to refer to the "exciting new applications and sites popping up with surprising regularity" after the collapse of the dot-com revolution, has facilitated the rise of blogging. A blog, shorthand for a web log, is basically a personal home page or journal and at the latest count (July) the number of blogs was estimated at 70 million worldwide [12]. With the rise of blogging individuals now have a much greater opportunity to promote personal and communal values, and therefore must exercise much greater responsibility when they do so. Blogs have been identified as an increasingly popular online source, especially for political information, opinions and alternative news coverage [13].

Personal home pages have been around since the early days of the web, and the personal diary and daily opinion column were around even longer. But blogging has led, in Nicholas Lemann's phrase, to "journalism without journalists". [14] Lemann, a bit tongue in cheek, continues: "Citizen journalists are supposedly inspired amateurs who find out what's going on in the places where they live and work, and who bring us a fuller, richer picture of the world than we get from familiar news organizations, while sparing us the pomposity and preening that journalists often display". In the US alone, there are an estimated twelve million [15] bloggers and thirty-four percent, or around 4 million of them, consider blogging to be a form of journalism. YouTube, recently sold for US\$1.2 billion, is perhaps the best known blog site. But the pioneer citizen-journalism site is *OhmyNews* [16], founded in 2000 and based in South Korea (Seoul) with a staff of 55 editors managing about forty thousand volunteer contributors. In May this year *OhmyNews* and the International Herald Tribune signed a partnership agreement which the Editor in Chief of *OhmyNews* described as an endorsement [17]. This development may yet bring blogging into the mainstream as a news source and lead to bloggers becoming mainstream journalists.

But blogging is not the only new phenomenon. Electronic games are now being harnessed as tools for disseminating information. The Serious Games Initiative (SGI) [18] is committed to forging productive links between the electronic game industry and projects involving the use of games in education, training, health, and public policy. Since 2002 it has published several papers and articles and hosted workshops that have resulted in the development of several serious games for a variety of institutions. The focus of the SGI is on the use of games to explore management and leadership challenges of the public sector. The number of non-entertainment games under development is rapidly increasing and the appreciation for the ideas, skills, technologies, and techniques used in commercial entertainment games is rising. Many commercial games like *SimCity*, *Civilization* and *Hidden Agenda*, are already beyond entertainment and are learning tools.

The SGI attempts to answer four questions:

- What public policy and management issues or challenges are most amenable to computer-based gaming techniques?
- What existing and emerging game technologies (such as multi-user, virtual environments) might be particularly useful when applied to policy or management issues?
- How can we quickly expand the application of computer-based games to a much wider range of key challenges facing government and other public or private organizations?

- How do we identify and proactively deal with any social, ethical, and/or legal issues that might arise through the application of game-based tools to public policy and management issues?

Successful answers to these questions will lead not only to the creation of better tools for policymakers, but also to the chance to "game our way" to a better world.

Two examples of serious games are worth mentioning. *Darfur is Dying* merited the recent attention of the BBC and the World Bank. *Global Conflict: Palestine*, will soon be an addition to the politically-conscious games. I think we could, with some justification, feel that making a game out a conflict situation trivializes the situation. But, as Sheila Moorcroft has pointed out, "... young people are not engaged with traditional politics, and do not rely on traditional media for their information about the world. Since we have to find new ways to reach them this actually makes games a good platform for exploring the complexity of an issue"[19].

As we look for new ways to get the message out let us not forget the humble cell phone. Indeed, a Barbadian friend of mine when asked about the digital divide brandishes her cell phone and responds: "What digital divide?" A recent article in the *Washington Post* which described how Filipino protesters used text messages to organize their protest against the government of President Arroyo, ably illustrates the power of this instrument [20]. The "text brigade" in the Philippines did not rely on posters to call a demonstration against the president; they did it by mass texting. As Mary Jordan, the author of the article notes: "Cell phones and text messaging are changing the way political mobilizations are conducted around the world.... protests once publicized on coffeehouse bulletin boards are now organized entirely through text-messaging networks that can reach vast numbers of people in a matter of minutes." Indeed, when President Estrada, Arroyo's predecessor, was forced from office in 2001 he called the popular uprising against him a "coup de text".

Voting on Line

We know how to use ICT to get information to consumers and attention is now turning to its application to voting, that other important aspect of democracy. Electronic voting (e-voting) is a logical step up from the polling station in much the same way that e-mail is a logical step up from the post office. Concern with low voter turn out in many countries and the events surrounding the count of the vote in Florida in the 2000 US presidential election has stimulated interest in better voting methods that aim to increase participation, lower costs of voting and improve accuracy of results. The California Internet Voting Task Force in its January 2000 *Report on the Feasibility of Internet Voting* [21] concluded that, while the implementation of Internet voting would allow increased access to the voting by millions of potential voters who do not regularly participate in elections, technological threats to the security, integrity and secrecy of Internet ballots are significant. But, these challenges notwithstanding, the Task Force concluded that "... it is technologically possible to develop an additional method of voting that would be at least as secure from vote tampering as the current absentee ballot process."

In May 2001 the UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology also examined this issue and concluded, like the California Task Force, that any introduction of online voting would need to be gradual, with demonstration projects to determine the best technical solution, familiarise the public with these new methods and insure that such innovations would be secure against legal challenge [22]. In

many countries, as a result of the advances in e-government, it is possible for voters to register online, but, before e-voting becomes widely accepted, all of the other steps in voting, from authentication to recounting votes in a disputed election, would also have to be capable of being done electronically.

A great deal of research and technical development has taken place since 2000 and some advances have been made [23]. But, in spite of these advances there are still major concerns with security. Indeed in February 2004 the Pentagon changed its mind and announced that it would not be going ahead with its plan to allow military personnel to vote on line in the 2004 presidential election "... in view of the inability to ensure the legitimacy of votes that would be cast using this program" but it would reconsider the decision "... only if the integrity of the election results can be ensured." [24]

There is also the issue of exclusion and the fear that, because access to the internet is weighted in favour of the better-off, online voting could disenfranchise certain groups in society who are already at a disadvantage in the traditional voting system. Since elections are political events, any proposed changes to the system of voting must be evaluated on democratic and administrative, rather than technical, criteria [25]. Until home access to the internet becomes almost universal, it would be undemocratic to use online voting to provide a favoured minority with more convenient access to voting. Online voting would also need to be available to those with little or no knowledge of computers, the less literate and the disabled; it would not be acceptable if it were only available to the technically proficient and the computer literate members of society.

But there has been some success, though not yet at the national level in any country. The town of Markham in Ontario, Canada, in partnership with Election Systems and Software was able to use online voting in its 2003 municipal elections [26]. As municipal elections approach in 2006 a Market Wire survey has revealed that "69% of Greater Toronto Area voters would prefer voting on line to voting in line in the November 13th municipal elections" [27]. (I wonder if the weather is a consideration in this preference!) Not surprisingly, the survey found that the ability to vote on line would increase voter turnout, especially among the 18-34 age group, who are also the least likely to vote through traditional polling stations.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, I have tried to put before you a set of values which I hope we can all embrace and which will allow us, at both the individual and the societal level, to behave in ways that are both internally and externally consistent. I believe that the Commonwealth values fit that role and I am confident that as they evolve they will stand the test of time. I have also shared with you some of the latest ways in which people are using ICT to give the individual a much greater role in access to and control over the dissemination of information. With greater control comes greater responsibility. I believe that education and access to information can provide us with the firm foundation of a set of values that will help us discharge that responsibility. If we successfully discharge that responsibility we will be lending our support to the important cause of protecting the civil and economic rights of the individual, of strengthening democracy and supporting participation in public discussion and scrutiny.

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- [1] See: [Commonwealth Declaration](#), for the full list of Commonwealth declarations.
- [2] Colin Ball: 2003 Commonwealth 'values': Backgrounder
(www.commonwealthfoundation.com/uploads/documents/Backgrounder_on_Commonwealth_values.pdf)
; see also: [Commonwealth Declaration](#)
- [3] Amartya Sen: *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1999 (p.3)
- [4] Garth Brooks: "We Shall Be Free", *The Chase*, Liberty Records
- [5] Doris K. Goodwin: *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2005 (p 355)
- [6] J. S. Mill: *Inaugural Address to delivered to St. Andrew's University* , Longmans, Green and Reader and Dyer, London 1867 (p. 4)
- [7] J. S. Mill: op. cit. (p.5)
- [8] Douglas Robertson: *The New Renaissance: Computers and the Next Level of Civilization*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998 (p. 9-10)
- [9] Asian Development Bank: Toward E-Development; Christiani Avgerou et. al, *The Role of Information and Communication Technology in Building Trust in Governance: Towards Effectiveness and Results*, Inter-American Development Bank, Washington DC, 2005
(www.adb.org/Documents/Policies/ICT/default.asp)
- [10] See: Janna Quitney Anderson and Lee Rainie: *The Future of Internet II*, PEW/INTERNET; The Future of the Internet II:www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Future_of_Internet_2006.pdf
- [11] Tim O'Reilly: *What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software*, [What is Web 2.0](#) (p4); see also Mary Madden and Susannah Fox: *Riding the Waves of "Web 2.0": More than a buzzword, but still not easily defined*, Pew Internet Project, [Reports: Internet Evolution](#)
- [12] The Blog Herald, *Blog Count for July: 70 Million Blogs* by Duncan Riley, at [The Blog Count for July](#)
- [13] Parliament of Victoria: *Inquiry into Electronic Democracy: Final Report*, May 2005, (p229), www.parliament.vic.gov.au/sarc/E-Democracy/FinalReport/Glossary.htm
- [14] Nicholas Lemann, *Journalism without journalists*, The New Yorker, Issue of 2006-08-07
- [15] Blogging Data: Data Memo:www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf
- [16] [OhmyNews](#)
- [17] Digital Universe Foundation *International Herald Tribune partners with OhmyNews* Wednesday, May 31st, 2006 [Digital Universe Blog](#)
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[18] Serious Games (www.seriousgames.org)

[19] See Clark Boyd *Darfur activism meets video gaming*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/5153694.stm>; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6059026.stm> and *Darfur is dying*

[20] Mary Jordan: *Going Mobile: Text Messages Guide Filipino Protesters*, Washington Post, August 25, 2006 (p.1)

[21] The California Internet Voting Task Force, *A Report on the Feasibility of Internet Voting, January 2000*

[22] Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, *Postnote*, May 2001, Issue Number 155, UK, (p4)

[23] Lorrie Cranor, *Electronic voting hotlists* and IST Results, *Voting for online democracy* 6th May 2005, at IST Results (<http://istresults.cordis.lu/index.cfm/section/news/tpl/article/BrowsingType/Features/ID/75526>)

[24] *Pentagon Scraps online voting*, Daily Briefing February 5, 2004 ; See also *Defense plans to expand online voting in 2004 election*, Daily Briefing June 20th 2003

[25] Postnote, op.cit (p4)

[26] Government Technology, *Canadian Town Invites the Youth Vote Through Online Voting*, October 16, 2006 (www.govtech.net/news/news.php?id=101688)

[27] Market Wire *Seven in Ten Greater Toronto Area Voters Would Prefer Voting Online to Voting in Line, e-democracy Survey Reveals* (www.marketwire.com/mw/release_html_b1?release_id=172780)