

The future:

Bleak for newspapers, bright for journalism

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At a forum organized by the Philippine Association of Communication Education just before this year's elections, I asked the packed audience, mostly students of journalism and mass communication, how many of them were registered to vote. Almost everybody raised their hands. Then, I asked how many of those registered intended to vote. Again, a lot of hands shot up. But when I asked how many during the past week watched or listened to a news program, or read a newspaper, I could actually count the number of hands in the air.

Somehow, I did not find it surprising that future journalists in the nation's capital were not regular news consumers. Almost every year, I ask the students in my Introduction to the Print Media class, similar questions and the results were almost the same as at that forum. My students say they regularly read books, have newspapers in their homes, have broadband Internet access both at home and in school, spend a lot of time online or watching television. News, however, seems to be off their radars. TV viewing is anything but news. Web activity is largely Facebook. Some of them turn to radio news, but only check whether classes have been called off during bad weather. What could be disturbing is that they, along with their colleagues in other schools, want to pursue careers in mass communication. Further, they are citizens who already make important choices for their future but without the aid of an informed decision.

This article examines some of the economic, political, and technological factors that

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threaten the future of the world's first medium of mass communication. At the same time, it points to a silver lining in the sky. The very technology that is spelling bad news for newspaper publishers, presents many opportunities for the gathering, processing, and distribution of a prime commodity of this era: information. The words data gathering, processing, and distribution correspond to terms publishers understand – reporting, editing, and publishing. The practice and standards of good journalism do not have to change, only the manner in which information is presented.

Newspapers in distress

Much has been said and written about newspapers dying in a few years. Worldwide, publishers have been worrying about the rising costs of production and distribution of a product whose main feature – timely information – is seriously threatened by other media. Newspapers are shutting down for good (Bad news for newspapers, 2009). Advertising continues to be a big industry, but in the Philippines, newspapers get only five percent of the pie, with TV grabbing almost three-quarters (Salvosa, 2010). Newspapers that persist are forced to scale down. Manila's "broadsheets" are now physically narrower. Some have fewer pages and done away with weekend editions.

According to the 2009 Yahoo-Nielsen net index, newspaper readership went down from 20 percent in 2006 to 15 percent in 2008, compared with TV's 92 percent in 2008. Young people also identified less with newspapers (22 percent) than TV (92 percent). Philippine data in the Asian Barometer study (2005) showed that people relied on TV for news more than twice they did on newspapers. TV also enjoyed more trust than newspapers.

In the 14th Philippine Congress, both chambers debated on bills that could be seen as

threats to a most valued item for the press – its freedom. Notable were those on the right of the reply (HB 162, 2007; HB 1001, 2007; SB 2150, 2008), “professional accreditation” of journalists (SB 515, 2007), and the decriminalization of libel (SB 5, 2007; SB 110, 2007; SB 918, 2007).

In recent years also, the threats have become physical. In 2009, the Philippines supplanted Iraq as the most dangerous place for journalists (IFJ, 2009; NUJP, 2009), with the Maguindanao massacre earning the dubious distinction as the “deadliest event for the press” (CPJ, 2009). The steady decline in Philippine press freedom has been noted in at least two databases (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2009; Freedom House, 2010).

These developments seem to point newspapers toward extinction.

Rising production costs

An examination of the financial statements of a leading newspaper showed decreasing gross revenues over a three-year period (Table 1). While revenues were upward of P3 billion a year, the figure for 2009 was almost P80 million less than that for 2008. The trend was downward for both advertising (at P1.6B, about P84 million less in 2009) and circulation (P1.3B, or P2.4M less). Advertising diminished in proportion to gross revenues, from 58 percent in 2007 to 54 percent in 2009, while circulation rose from 41 percent in 2007 to 43 percent in 2009. But production costs have been taking away more than half (51% in 2007, 54% in 2009) of the gross. Plus, there were other operating expenses like freight which cost more than P100 million in 2009. In addition the newspaper paid almost P74 million in income tax. Their 2009 net income, exceeding P170 million, was less than 6 percent of the gross.

In contrast, the figures for two broadcasting companies showed rising revenues over the same three-year period. Airtime revenues grew by almost a billion pesos in 2009. On the other

hand, production costs (average P5B a year) showed a downward trend, either in terms of actual pesos or as a percentage of revenues.

For the broadcasters, production costs represented just around 30% of their revenues, as against 50% for the newspaper. Also, the net income of one broadcast company was almost four that of the newspaper in relation to their gross revenues.

A profit of P170 million is nothing to laugh at. But that figure belongs to one of the three leading newspapers in the Philippines. The other broadsheets in Metro Manila have lower circulation rates than those of the leaders, and hence lower revenues and profits. The provincial newspapers, also known as the “Community press,” make even much less given their shorter circulation reach.

Variable v. fixed costs

The economics of print, one would suppose, are wired to doom its profitability. As the example showed, the revenues of a newspaper depended on advertising and circulation. The easy part in the equation is that with higher circulation figures, the newspaper would more advertising, and hence more income. But since the newspaper is a physical product, higher circulation would mean more readers, hence more copies to produce, transport, and pay for. In the United States, some newspapers have resorted to cutting circulation to stem the bleeding (Meyer, 2004, p. 16).

On the other hand, the electronic media do not encounter this paradox. Their production and transmission costs do not go up if the audience grows because consumers buy their own receivers and pay for the cost of operating those devices. More or less these costs are fixed for TV, radio and the Internet.

One must be careful not to create the impression that a publisher has to make tons of money. It is possible for an outfit of modest means and earnings to produce excellent journalism. But an organization that enjoys a healthy balance sheet will have more resources to devote to creating a quality product. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a bankruptcy and excellence hand in hand.

A growing readership?

Circulation refers to a publication's reach, an indicator of how many people are exposed to the product. Assuming copies are sold and not given away free, circulation is a source of revenue for a newspaper. Sponsors also prefer to place their advertisements in publications with huge circulation. These ads generate more income. Most of all, circulation is a reflection of how relevant the newspaper is to its intended market.

There has been no independent industry-wide circulation audit of Philippine newspapers. Circulation can be measured by the number of copies printed, the number of copies sold or copies returned by dealers. These are not exact and constant measures. For example, some of the copies printed may not reach the market because of production defects. And because they are often based on claims by the newspapers themselves, they can be self-serving and misleading.

A generally used standard is that adopted by the 4As (the Association of Accreditation Advertising Agencies of the Philippines) which regularly publishes a *Media Factbook* although its figures are by no means the result of a scientific or systematic method. However, it is the closest thing there is to a circulation audit and many ad agencies refer to the 4A's *Factbook*.

Dwindling press freedom

As of 2010, the Philippines ranked as ASEAN's freest press, a distinction that must

be viewed very carefully. One must remember that our neighbors are not exemplars of democracy. Myanmar is one of the world's worst violators of press freedom. In fact, no ASEAN country was classified as free in the 2010 Freedom House survey. The Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand rated only partly free. The rest were not free.

Data from Freedom House and Reporters Sans Frontières over the past eight years – 2002 being the earliest year of available data from both Web sites – show a slight, but steady, decline from freedom (Table 4). For 2010, the Philippines rating dropped by three points, meriting a special mention for “worrying declines” along with Mexico and Senegal (Freedom House, 2010).

These rankings at the moment reflect only non-State threats to press freedom which Freedom House defines as “the opportunity to act spontaneously in a variety of fields outside the control of the government and other centers of potential domination.” As such it does not necessarily include official policies such as statutes that may be inimical to the press.

Before the Philippine Congress went into recess in May 2010, it was deliberating proposals to criminalize right-of-reply by the press violations on the one hand, and decriminalize libel on the other. Another bill sought to provide professional accreditation to qualified journalists.

The Right of Reply bills wanted to require the media to publish the reply from a person “accused directly or indirectly of committing, having committed or of intending to commit any crime or offense defined by law or ... criticized by innuendo, suggestion or rumor for any lapse in behavior in public or private life ... for free, or [for] criticisms aired or broadcast over radio, television, websites, or through any electronic device.” Media would have one day to comply, or incur penalties that range from penalties, to imprisonment or top media executives.

The right of reply is a good thing. But it becomes questionable when it becomes automatic, statutory, compulsory and court-enforceable. Some countries have such right of reply laws, like Cambodia, Indonesia and Indonesia in ASEAN.

In 1974, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed an existing Right of Reply statutes as unconstitutional because “the choice of material to go into a newspaper, and the decisions made as to limitations on the size and content of the paper, and treatment of public issues and public officials – whether fair or unfair – constitute the exercise of editorial control and judgment” and “the press cannot be forced to print an answer to a personal attack made by it” (*Miami Herald v. Tornillo*, 1974).

In 2005, the British parliament rejected a right of reply bill (Watkins, 2005).

In the 14th Congress, there were eight bills seeking to amend Philippine libel laws as contained in the Revised Penal Code.

Five bills in the Senate called a complete repeal (SB 1403, 2007) of Article 355, which defines libel as “a public and malicious imputation of a crime, or of a vice or defect, real or imaginary, or any act, omission, condition, status or circumstance tending to cause the dishonor, discredit, or contempt of a natural or juridical person, or to blacken the memory of one who is dead”; to selective amendments, such as:

- removal of prison terms;
- raising of criminal fines;
- reduction of the criminal prescription period;
- limiting the persons responsible;
- venue for trial of civil libel suits;
- making malice an explicit requirement, and
- conditions for invoking truth as proof.

Some of the bills called for the decriminalization of libel. However, I found this a bit

misleading. While they called for the removal of prison terms, libel itself would remain punishable under the Revised Penal Code, subject to a prescription period albeit reduced. Hence, libel would remain covered by criminal procedure, which requires the arrest of defendants and the posting of bail. And, once convicted, the journalists would have a criminal record.

In fairness, it must be stated that these bills would either make it harder to punish journalists for good-faith reporting, or make the penalties lighter. These bills should, therefore, be seen as beneficial to the press, except for one bill, which sought penalties of up to P300,000. Every journalist would be heaving a sigh of relief at the news that they no longer have to go to jail for libel. Community journalists facing libel suits – filed by out-of-town complainants – could now defend themselves in courts closer to home.

It must be stated that, except for SB 1403, the aforesaid bills would not be decriminalizing libel.

My objection is that decriminalization will no longer require proof beyond reasonable doubt, making it easier for complainants to secure convictions -- and huge civil damages. As the Cebu press council declared, this standard of proof beyond reasonable doubt serves as a journalist's safeguard (Cebu Citizens Press Council, 2008).

Another bill, the “Magna Carta for Journalism,” sought to professionalize journalism, but in so doing (SB 515, 2007) led to the issue of accreditation. Accreditation is a form of licensing, which is foremost among prior restraints, from which journalists are protected.

While none of these was enacted in the 14th Philippine Congress, they could still be refiled in the next one. In fact, a Right of Reply bill (HB 117, 2010) has already been refiled.

In 1980, Smith hailed technology, particularly the computer, for its ability to reduce the costs of newspaper production. Innovations in ink and paper technology led to less expensive materials. The computer and its ability to capture the original keystrokes of reporters and editors minimized, if not eliminated, the need for skilled (therefore highly paid) and strike-prone unionized typesetters, and their necessary counterpart – the proofreaders.

By the early 1990s, most newspapers in Metro Manila had switched from typewriters to computers and desktop publishing. In so doing, they got rid not only of typesetters and proofreaders, but also of the so-called paste-up artists. Eventual developments led to computer-to-plate technology, which further eliminated the need for the erstwhile staples of camera and film stripping. Printing plates could be produced straight from the computer on which the page layout was created.

Yet the end product was still paper. Printing more copies meant more newsprint – the price of which keeps going up – and more electricity to power the presses. It also meant more trucks or more air cargo space to get those papers to distant readers.

In this sense, the Internet comes almost as a *deus ex machina*, the same phrase Smith (1980, p. xii) used to describe the computers of 30 years ago. It enables journalists to deliver information in real time and to tell a story in a much richer way, without the crippling costs of printing and shipping.

Web documents are relatively easier to produce. Best of all, there is no printing. Once uploaded to a server, files can be downloaded at electronic speeds regardless of the reader's geographical location. Unlike print, full-color digital images do not involve additional costs.

Journalists can tell their stories without worrying about space constraints. More text is

simply more information, which is weightless. It might require additional memory, the cost of which is diminishing while storage capacity increasing. Because the Internet is multimedia, journalists can use videos and sound to complement text and static images.

In the early years of the Internet in the Philippines, I decided to learn HTML and teach students how to make news Web sites. At one point we offered newspaper editors to create their Web sites for them. We got interesting responses from the big players. One rejected our offer, saying one couldn't take the computer to the bathroom. Another retorted that you couldn't kill flies with a PC. Amazing how they were caught up in the paper aspect of the newspaper.

However, two newspapers did accept. In 2000, two undergraduate theses groups produced the first Web sites for *Malaya* (Lee & Ty, 2000) and the *Daily Tribune* (Ng *et al.*, 2000). Today, it is still possible to see traces of the original design in one of them.

Since then, all the broadsheets and a number of tabloids in Metro Manila are online. Likewise, many of the so-called community newspapers outside of the city have their Internet editions. Some of them employ more interactive features than the others but the majority remain at the "shovelware" level. That is, their contents are more or less mirrors of their print version, limited to text and occasional photos. A more detailed discussion of how they used the Web is available in another manuscript (Mariano, 2010).

McLuhan (1965) argued that each medium has its unique "grammar" and how critical it was to master that grammar. If McLuhan talked of a grammar of print and typology, today there is definitely also a Web grammar. News publishers need to learn this grammar if they are to succeed with digital, a transition Fidler (1991) called mediamorphosis.

Online journalism goes beyond just HTML. Sometime in this millennium, journalists

explored blogging (Lasica, 2003; Lowrey, 2006; Lowrey & Mackay, 2008). More recently, conventional journalists have turned to Facebook and Twitter (Farhi, 2009; O'Connor, 2009; Uskali, 2009; Ahmad, 2010; Hermida, 2010). What this trend tells us is that the field of news publishing is now open to everybody, practically erasing the gatekeeping function of old media.

The Internet is for everybody. Traditional newspaper publishers know that they can no longer ignore the Web. Soon, they might even have to move the back-up Internet edition to a more prominent status than the paper version. Another type of journalism will be exclusively online. An excellent example is *bulatlat.com* which has gained recognition for their professional reporting. The online-only news product can develop the credibility and trust so necessary for business success (Murdoch, 2009), without the bulky costs of printing and shipping.

Conclusion

The physical newspaper is a threatened species. Even if costs could be reduced and justified, the environmental cost that comes with producing the product presents another argument as to why the time of the newspaper has passed.

Yet, according to Murdoch, “readers want news as much as they ever did” and there is “a growing global demand for business news and for accurate news” (2009). After all, it is the Information Age and news is information. Because journalists have long been in the business of “scooping” one another, they are not strange to the idea of urgency. And urgency is an issue that the Internet has long resolved, along with other advantages it has displayed over its paper counterpart.

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) wrote that the “central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society.” If

journalists can also learn how to exploit this technology to tell stories in a much richer manner, perhaps they can engage more people, including the youth, in taking a greater interest in the news. And because the youth are more comfortable with the new media, perhaps it is they who can help show us how to best use the technology to tell the news in ways that will appeal to their generation.

Table 1. Highlights from financial statements of three media companies

Amounts in thousands pesos

		2007	2008	2009	2008-09
ABS-CBN	Gross Revenues	19,940,444	22,306,859	24,849,382	2,542,523
	Airtime	13,604,591	13,510,986	14,462,958	951,972
	Percentage of Gross	68.2%	60.6%	58.2%	-2.4%
	Production Costs	6,492,806	6,153,746	6,286,782	133,036
	Percentage of Gross	32.6%	27.6%	25.3%	-2.3%
	Net Income	1,270,765	1,389,701	1,759,386	369,685
	Percentage of Gross	6.4%	6.2%	7.1%	0.9%
GMA Network	Gross Revenues	12,056,924	12,446,702	13,770,877	1,324,175
	Airtime	11,367,275	11,653,529	12,691,613	1,038,084
	Percentage of Gross	94.3%	93.6%	92.2%	-1.5%
	Production Costs	3,944,507	4,102,875	4,389,548	286,673
	Percentage of Gross	32.7%	33.0%	31.9%	-1.1%
	Net Income	2,397,231	2,368,928	2,818,251	449,323
	Percentage of Gross	19.9%	19.0%	20.5%	1.4%
Manila Bulletin	Gross Revenues	3,164,144	3,086,357	3,006,859	-79,498
	Advertising	1,825,851	1,701,430	1,617,793	-83,637
	Percentage of Gross	57.7%	55.1%	53.8%	-1.3%
	Circulation	1,283,540	1,284,414	1,281,981	-2,433
	Percentage of Gross	40.6%	41.6%	42.6%	1.0%
	Production Costs	1,614,936	1,669,493	1,614,585	-54,908
	Percentage of Gross	51.0%	54.1%	53.7%	-0.4%
	Net Income	251,816	181,729	172,117	-9,612
Percentage of Gross	8.0%	5.9%	5.7%	-0.2%	

Source: Philippine Stock Exchange (www.pse.gov.ph)

Table 2. Metro Manila broadsheet circulation

Broadsheet	1997	2002	2004		2007	
			Weekday	Sunday	Weekday	Sunday
Manila Bulletin	240,000	250,000	280,000	300,000	280,000	300,000
Philippine Daily Inquirer	228,000	270,000	257,416	268,575	270,000	250,370
Philippine Star	275,000	251,000	271,687	251,680	255,000	156,714
Manila Times	194,000	152,050	180,446			
Today	106,000	52,268	152,268		152,264 *	
Malaya	175,000		150,000			
Manila Standard	180,000	134,583	134,583			
Daily Tribune			130,000			
BusinessWorld	50,000	65,000	65,000		64,000	

*Manila Standard Today

Source: 4A's Media Factbook

Table 3. Metro Manila tabloid circulation

Tabloid	1997	2002	2004	2007	
				Weekday	Sunday
People's Journal	219,000	82,200	469,464	469,464	
Pilipino Star Ngayon	150,000		287,791	418,282	
Abante	350,000	417,600	417,600	417,600	
People's Tonight	365,000	365,800	365,811	365,811	
Remate			310,000		
Taliba	229,000	170,000	226,635	336,635	
Abante Tonight	250,000		277,875	277,875	
Bandera			253,523	250,000	
Balita	151,000		170,000	34,720	39,200
Tempo	230,000		200,000	34,720	39,200
People's Balita	120,000	77,875			
Remate Tonight			90,000		

Source: 4A's Media Factbook

Table 4. Press Freedom in the Philippines

Year	I*	II*
2002	30	29.00
2003	30	35.25
2004	34	36.63
2005	35	50.00
2006	40	51.00
2007	46	44.75
2008	45	45.00
2009	45	38.25
2010	48	n.a.
<i>Mean</i>	<i>39.22</i>	<i>41.24</i>

*I. Freedom of the Press scores: 0-30=free 31-60=partly free 61-100=not free. Source: Freedom House (www.freedomhouse.org)

**II. Press Freedom Index scores. Higher values mean less freedom. Source: Reporters Sans Frontières (www.rsf.org).

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