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SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS AS DETERMINANTS OF PRESS FREEDOM: THE PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE *

by Ramon R. Tuazon **

INTRODUCTION

Despite universal consensus that press freedom is one of the basic human rights, the debate continues as to whether a common standard and criteria should be adopted to determine whether such freedom does exist or not in a particular society.

This issue is very real among us Asians who have since realized the need to reassert our own unique politico-cultural ideology vis-a-vis the traditional western yardsticks promoted by our erstwhile colonizers. The economic resurgence many East Asian countries are now experiencing seems to have generated interest and even credibility among non-Asian countries on what we have to say on such issues as human rights and press freedom.

Among East Asian leaders, Singapore senior minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysian prime minister Datuk Seri Mahatir Mohamed are the most vocal advocates of an Asian perspective of freedom and human rights. Prime minister Mahatir argues that the media model a country should adopt must depend on the objective conditions of a society, its aspirations and stage of development.

In examining the appropriate media model, there has been too much emphasis on the political and economic considerations and little regard for sociocultural factors such as a nation's history, values and beliefs system, tradition, social structures and relationships, among others. The inclusion of the topic, **Social and Cultural Factors Affecting Press Freedom** in this seminar is a welcome development and will surely lead to a more holistic view of press freedom.

Any case study of the Philippine press would be of interest to most of our Asian neighbors because of its unique nature. Moulded from the western tradition, the Philippine press is described as enjoying unbridled freedom (it was once dubbed as the freest in Asia).

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It is often argued by some Asian governments, especially the so- called tiger economies that (western-style) democracy is alien to our Asian culture. It has also been asserted that economic development often conflicts with political development and that the latter should therefore, give way at least until growth is achieved.

The Philippines again presents a unique case in that while it aims to duplicate the economic miracle of its neighbors, it has also chosen to remain faithful to the democratic tradition. Economic indicators over the past three years show that indeed the country is poised to join the ranks of newly industrializing countries of East Asia.

Press Freedom as a Tradition and a Value

In two years, the Philippines will celebrate the centennial of its independence. The Philippines became the first constitutional republic of Asia in 1898.

In our quest for freedom and independence, the Philippine press played a very critical role. In fact, the history of free press in the Philippines has its roots in nationalistic papers whose aim was to raise the level of consciousness of the people with respect to oppressive conditions. *La Solidaridad*, which first appeared in 1889 and lasted up to 1895, was recognized as the mouthpiece of the Philippine Revolution. Its editorial policy was "to work peacefully for social and economic reforms, to expose the real plight of the Philippines and to champion liberalism and democracy." Because of strict censorship, *La Solidaridad* itself was published in Spain and smuggled only into the country. It also became the rallying point of Filipino intellectual expatriates in Europe most of whom became our national heroes -- Jose Rizal, Marcelo H. del Pilar, Mariano Ponce, Graciano Lopez Jaena, to name a few.

There were many other newspapers which advocated for political reforms and independence and were published within the country. *Kalayaan* (Liberty) was first published in 1898 and served as the official organ of the revolutionary movement. *La Independencia* (1898) was the most widely read newspaper of the revolution. Others were *La Libertad* (June 1898) and *El Heraldo de Iloilo* (January 1898), a provincial newspaper.

The lessons of *La Solidaridad* and *Kalayaan* have remained throughout the history of our country. Always, the Philippine press (media) comes at the forefront in our struggle to restore or sustain freedom and independence.

During World War II, Filipinos opted for the underground papers. Mostly typewritten or mimeographed, these "publications" provided the people with information to counter Japanese propaganda.

The spirit of press freedom was never totally repressed even during the authoritarian Marcos years. In those days of living dangerously, journalists became innovative and creative in their writing style to avoid direct confrontation with the establishment and enable them to remain in circulation.

It was also known as the period of the "alternative press" which refers to either "xeroxed" anti-establishment articles originally published in foreign publications or clandestine local publications which found their way into the mainstream or the regular newspapers (with low circulation) allowed to publish but used by the Marcos government as exhibits to the outside world that there exists press freedom in the country.

During the historic 1986 EDSA Revolution, also known as the peaceful People Power Revolution, the church-owned Radio Veritas and the clandestine Radyo Bandido were credited for mobilizing millions of Filipinos who eventually constituted the "people power" to support the rebel soldiers against Marcos' military power.

To a great extent, the politicization of the masses, the discontentment with the discredited regime and the call for social reform which culminated in the 1986 EDSA Revolution were fired up by the press (mass media).

Press freedom therefore has evolved as a tradition and value not only among journalists but the entire people who have recognized its importance in promoting, protecting and sustaining democracy. Because of our recent history, our people have now become extra vigilant and sensitive to efforts which may compromise the exercise of this freedom.

Values and Media Coverage

A study conducted by the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC) in 1984 revealed that the Filipino value system affects the manner by which journalists gather, write and package their news stories. While no similar study has been conducted recently, it may be safe to assume that many of these findings remain valid.

It is not uncommon for beat reporters to share information or news stories out of *pakikisama* (camaraderie). This favor is expected to be reciprocated in the future because of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). Because of this practice, news stories published in different dailies appear identical.

It has been reported that since 1986, 40 journalists (mostly provincial journalists), have been killed in line of duty. Many of these cases allegedly involved exposes against powerful individuals in the local communities. Again, it is perhaps safe to assume that the perpetrators committed these crimes because they felt they had lost their *dangal* (dignity) and *amor propio*.

Filipinos' extreme personalism makes it difficult to distinguish between an objective task and an emotional involvement. Thus, criticisms in media are taken by individuals as personal affronts or insults.

PUBLIC ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION AS FRAMEWORK FOR A FREE PRESS

Press freedom as generally understood today places emphasis on the creation of a climate where journalists are able to function with relative freedom and with minimum restrictions. We must admit that this is a narrow definition as it is primarily concerned with protection of the rights of the members of the fourth estate. Conscious of this limitation, the United Nations preferred the use of the term "freedom of information and of the press" to give equal emphasis on the right of the people to be informed and to participate in the process of generating public opinion.

Public access and participation should therefore be recognized as important indicators as to the degree of press freedom prevailing in a society. How accessible is the Philippine press?

Manila Media's Imperialism

When Manila sneezes, the rest of the country catches pneumonia. This is an oft-repeated expression to dramatize the dominance of Metro Manila in Philippine affairs. This setup has led to serious urban-rural gap and imbalances manifested in all fronts -- economic, social and political structures.

Let us examine the patterns of media imbalances which perpetuate the so-called Manila imperialism.

Mass media ownership remains under the control of a few vested interest groups which exert considerable influence in the nation's political and economic affairs. This set-up, of course, is expected due to the capital intensive nature of mass media.

It is therefore difficult to expect mass media to be socially representative to all interest groups particularly the marginalized sectors. There have been cases in the past where newspaper owners used their publications to protect or promote their business interests.

Ownership trends indicate a return to the pre-martial law set-up where big business gain control of large media enterprises. Ownership is also characterized by chain ownership where an individual or corporation owns and operates several channels or outlets of a single medium. To illustrate, in the radio industry, some corporations own as many as 30 radio stations nationwide!

A recent positive development is that the government does not allow cross-ownership in response to the Philippine Constitution's vision of democratized media ownership. Thus, a newspaper company cannot own a broadcast station or vice versa. In 1991, **ABS-CBN**, a major TV network pioneered in opening ownership to the public through the stock market. **Manila Bulletin**, a major national daily is also listed in the market. Several media organizations are now considering following this scheme not only to "democratize" media but also to provide them a source of funds for expansion.

Growth and distribution of mass media infrastructure follows the nuclear pattern with Manila and other key cities and urbanized towns as the center. Media enterprises are concentrated in areas where profit or fair return on investment is ensured.

The latest mass media survey conducted by the National Statistics Office (FLEMMS, 1994) reveal some interesting data. The percentage of household population 10 years old and over exposed to newspaper nationwide is only 29.83%. This is highest in Metro Manila at 69.12% while the exposure of the other regions range from a high of 38.29 percent (Southern Tagalog) to a low of 9.96 % (ARMM). TV exposure nationwide is 56.68%. Metro Manila has 91.11% TV exposure, next is Central Luzon with 80.60% while the lowest is Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao at 13.97 %.

Radio remains the most accessible medium, 80.78% nationwide. It is only in radio where regions outside Metro Manila have higher access. Metro Manila has only 83.34% compared with Cagayan Valley , 86.81%; Western Visayas, 85.75% and Central Visayas, 85.13%.

At this age of information superhighway, it is lamentable that 7.30% of our households are still not exposed to any of the most common forms of mass media.

Physical limitations such as distance, lack of transportation facilities, poor roads, and other constraints, prevent the rural populace from gaining access to media, particularly newspapers. Total newspaper circulation is estimated to be only 6.2 million (including pass-on readership) in a country of 68 million Filipinos.

Manila-published dailies had to be airlifted to the provinces. Freight charges mean additional cost for the readers, not to mention delays in the delivery. While empirical data may not be available, it is safe to assume that low newspaper readership is due primarily to economic and cultural reasons.

The low per capita income of people in the countryside makes newspaper reading almost a luxury. With a meager family income, chances are the family head would rather spend the money on basic necessities such as food, clothing and shelter. A recent study shows that 39.2 percent (27 million Filipinos) of all Filipino families live below the poverty line.

Culturally, Filipinos seem to prefer to listen to the radio or watch TV than read newspapers and other publications -- books, magazines, etc. The Kapisanan ng mga Brodkasters sa Pilipinas (KBP) estimates that at least four out of five Filipinos aged 15 and above listen to radio for about three hours a day, five to six days a week.

In general, literacy is not a problem. Our basic literacy is one of the highest in Asia at 95.02 % (95.46 for female and 94.60% for male) while functional literacy stands at 83.79% (85.89% for female and 81.73 for male) (FLEMMS, 1994).

Media's Free Market Orientation

Historically, the mass media has developed within the economic philosophy of free enterprise. Thus, except for the martial law years, media has enjoyed freedom which has brought about positive outcomes like countervailing force to abuses, watchdog against graft and corruption and negative results such as the present excesses -- urban bias, violence, sex and commercialism. This policy of "let the marketplace determine the kind of media" or "let the media sort itself out" which amounts to a hands-off policy has perhaps been the single factor that has contributed to the elite orientation of media, the control of media by those who have economic and political power, and the predominance of entertainment and trivia.

The commercial orientation of television is seen in its content where over half of total programming consists of musical variety shows, soap operas, and situation comedies. Although there is a larger percentage of domestic over imported programs, many local programs utilize western programs as models in theme and format.

TV programming is oriented to urban interests and most provincial stations function merely as replay or relay stations. A few produce their own local programs but this is constrained by prohibitive production costs. Even the strengthening of TV signals has not reduced the one-way traffic of images from the urban to the rural areas. The consequences in terms of homogenization of urban values and lifestyles and the erosion of traditional values in the countryside are bewailed by social critics.

National newspapers are also being criticized for their urban and elite bias. The common complaint is that provincial stories land only on the front pages if they deal with the usual negative events -- crime, violence, natural disasters, etc.

The prevailing emphasis on trivia and entertainment takes away airtime and newspace that could be allocated to development issues. Equally serious is the little support given to the concerns of marginalized sectors - women, youth, cultural communities, rural and urban poor, peasants, etc. These sectors are given prime time treatment if they are subjects of sensational reports focusing on them as victims of violence and calamities. Otherwise, their voices on critical national and local issues are seldom heard.

In response to real or imagined threats posed by excessive sex and violence in media, national legislators have introduced various bills in Congress providing for the regulation of TV programming for children. Regulations take the form of outright ban on programs featuring sex and violence, introduction of a ratings system, and creation of a Council for Children's Television.

THE LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY

Language is a basic requirement for gaining access to media. This becomes even more important in a country where there are 87 languages and dialects. English and Filipino serve as the *lingua franca* in the country today.

English-language newspapers circulate widely among the elite and college educated. Tabloids, with an average cost of P2.50 and enjoying a slightly higher pass-on readership, circulate among the DE income brackets and are written in Taglish -- a combination of Tagalog and English.

Tagalog and Taglish newspapers are often tabloid-sized, only 16 pages, and are crammed with advertisements of the most unusual kind -- from faith healers to sex therapists -- thus, limiting the news and editorial material to a few pages. Tabloids are very popular for their strong entertainment-gossip section. The biggest selling tabloid, **The People's Journal** has a claimed circulation nationwide of 380,000 counting readers from Class A to E. The lowest circulated tabloid has a circulation double or even triple the circulation of some "respectable" broadsheets.

There is the pervasive feeling that the Filipino language is fit only for shallow and immaterial topics. Columnists who use Filipino to discuss important issues do not get as wide a readership as their English-writing peers.

On television, until recently, Filipino is used exclusively in entertainment programs -- soap opera, drama, slapstick comedy -- while English is equated with serious, important and intellectually stimulating programs. The mass media is seen as the most important factor in popularizing Filipino. However, media has not portrayed Filipino as the language of intellectual discourse.

WOMEN EMPOWERING MEDIA

Over a decade ago, women in media were confined to either the so-called "lipstick beat" -- coverage of home and society, fashion, food and lifestyle, etc. or the soft-issues stories (i.e., education, health, science). Positions of power and influence remained male-dominated. The highest position women journalists could aspire for was the editorship of lifestyle or society pages.

Today, this picture has substantially changed. Women in media have become more prominent, influential and credible. Many now occupy policymaking positions while women reporters now "man" even the so-called hard beats -- police, politics, business, etc.

This growing influence in media has an impact on the nature, quality and content of media coverage. For example, the ability to delve into latent issues, greater attention to details, patience and perseverance in following through stories that otherwise would be relegated to the dustbin are some of the outstanding qualities of women journalists which augur well in our effort to achieve journalistic excellence.

As proven during the Marcos regime, women journalists, more than their male counterparts, proved to be more daring and independent. They continued to write exposés on injustices, human rights abuses, graft and corruption, crime and violence, etc. The emergence of the alternative press was essentially through the efforts of women journalists.

With the growing role of women in media, stereotyped images (and messages) of women - as sex objects, the weaker sex, etc. are also being erased. Furthermore, media language has recently become more gender-sensitive. Guidelines on how to cover women and children who were victims of crime and violence have been developed.

NGOs AND PEOPLE EMPOWERMENT

Nongovernment organizations (NGOs), now more popularly known as civil society are emerging as powerful political forces in Philippine society. Many view NGOs as credible organizations which can articulate the views of the silent majority on issues ranging from family planning, environment, value added tax, foreign debt to global concerns such as the GATT, nuclear testing, among others.

NGOs find in media an important mechanism by which they are able to articulate alternative development agenda, policies and programs on various areas of concern. NGO leaders themselves have become important news sources in addition to the traditional government spokesmen, business public relations, etc.

The increase in media coverage of such issues as environment, human rights, children's rights, women's issues, among others can be attributed to sustained media advocacy being undertaken by various NGOs and sectoral groups.

But many NGOs still believe that media continue to ignore many of their issues. According to a prominent Manila columnist and former editor of a Manila daily, media, especially newspapers with a thin resource base, are likely to avoid addressing social issues that may scare investors or which are threats to business stability. The themes that are therefore highlighted reflect conservative and orthodox views that do not upset the status quo.

Oftentimes, the perceived parochial concerns of NGOs discourage media from taking up their cases. Media's penchant for the big, controversial and sensational stories attracts them to NGOs that espouse "ban the gun" or "cap the debt payment" causes but not to less controversial and sensational issues.

Many NGOs also serve as media watchdogs. During the Marcos years, many NGOs initiated various protest actions against so-called crony media (pro-Marcos media establishments) including boycotting them. Recently, the Concerned Women of the Philippines (CWP) initiated a letter writing campaign called "We are outraged" addressed to media executives protesting the proliferation of sex and violence in media.

While NGOs can effectively serve as pressure groups, they are still not powerful enough to influence long-term editorial policies. At best, they play an effective countervailing force.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

Religious influence on mass media can be traced back to the Spanish colonial period where the state and the church occupied almost equal rights and power in press censorship and control. Media historian and journalist Armando Malay noted that censorship on religious matters during the Spanish era was even more strict than on political issues.

Church influence in mass media began to decline with the coming of the Americans. Church interest then was limited to ownership of a few media enterprises.

During the Marcos regime, the church provided the people with alternative media channels. For example, it was a widely known fact that only the Catholic-church owned Radio Veritas rendered a faithful coverage of events related to the assassination of opposition leader Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. And as mentioned earlier, Jaime Cardinal Sin's call for people power in 1986 was made through the same radio station.

Today, church's influence can be seen in terms of the chain of radio stations nationwide owned by various religious denominations -- Catholic, Protestant, Iglesia ni Kristo; an annual Catholic media awards; and regular exhortations by church leaders on what media should be (or should not be). Recently, Jaime Cardinal Sin sent a pastoral statement to national media organizations. He urged the print and broadcast media to deliver the news without killing the "human spirit."

"There are more talk shows now than ever before, exposing the private lives of actors and actresses, topics that should only be discussed in the privacy of the bedroom," Sin said.

"Enlarged photographs of grisly crimes and victims of domestic violence are even bannered in the front pages of broadsheet newspapers, making them look like, 'big tabloids,'" he said.

According to Sin, the media "have a natural affinity with the bizarre, the abnormal and strange." He said the media have gone vulgar in reporting the news and issues in order to attract more readers and, as a consequence, a big income.

The Catholic Church, he said, recognizes the media's power "not only to inform but also to form individuals and society."

That the church still exerts its power and influence in mass media can be best illustrated in the limited showing early this year of the movie, **The Priest**. It was alleged that a high church official has "requested" Metro Manila mayors to limit the showing of the movie in only a few cinema houses.

Reacting to this controversy, the Philippine Association of Communication Educators (PACE) issued a statement which expressed "alarm on the use of unofficial and informal censorship schemes, which as our recent history has shown, can be very insidious and debilitating."

MEDIA RESHAPING NATIONAL CULTURE

The globalization of media primarily through satellite technology, has perceived ill-effects on national culture and identity. Critics warn of homogenization of tastes, needs, wants and lifestyles with western images as prime models. Among our children and the young, the symbols of global culture include the fastfood landscape: McDonalds, Shakeys, Pizza Hut; and pop and movie idols as role models.

As early as 1980, the UNESCO-sponsored McBride Commission Report already warned that "the rapid increase in the volume of information and entertainment has brought about homogenization of different societies.. and people become more cut off from the society in which they live." At the extreme, the Report added, "modern media have trampled on traditions and distorted centuries-old socioeconomic patterns.

Similarly, the draft World Report on Culture and Development (1994) noted that "individual identity is increasingly determined by worldwide fads and fashions and transient material possessions of great diversity rather than cultural heritage." The Report added that "products are designed for the world market, with cultural differences largely dealt with through marketing." Social scientists have raised the issue of whatever the global media could effectively sustain the notion of a global village and promote a global culture. Their initial analysis shows that while the images may have a global currency, the meanings may not necessarily be shared globally as (news) events are shaped and reshaped by (local) media in ways that make them comprehensible and palatable for domestic audience (Tomunson 1994, 69).

Still, many governments are in search of the most feasible way to prevent the so-called total invasion of "culturally inappropriate" programs. Banning the setting up of satellite dish in one's backyard is not only politically incorrect but also technologically impractical because of the advent of small and portable dish.

One suggestion being seriously considered is to encrypt or scramble satellite signals so that culturally incorrect programs do not reach our homes. Encryption could be done totally or in a selective manner.

Indeed, information technology has rendered old instruments and mechanisms of control and censorship almost inutile.

CONCLUDING NOTES

No less than Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim noted that "the press in the Philippines stands out among those in Southeast Asia as the most vigorous and tenacious in protecting its integrity and freedom."

If we tend to be self-critical of our mass media system, it is because we realize that much can still be done to make the system work better for the common good. It should be pointed out that in spite of the limitations presented, it is still the same media which played a significant role in toppling a dictator, mobilizing people power, forcing government officials to resign (due to corruption and abuses), encouraging business to be more socially-oriented, and empowering NGOs. Being able to criticize oneself may be one of the best indicators of a free press.

Recently, an informal survey was conducted among young and ambitious Filipino journalists on whether they will consider working in some neighboring countries where their per capita income will definitely double or even triple. Many claimed that they still prefer to work in the Philippines. They have also identified press freedom as one of the main reasons why they still prefer to work in our country.

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