Journalism values in the Philippine media

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The Philippine media thrive on conflict. Headlines of national broadsheets stoke the flames of cynicism, resentment and anger toward the Arroyo administration which has been judged by “militant” media to have lost credibility and legitimacy to rule. At the same time, opposition leaders who are no more credible than administration officials are equally criticized if not on the front pages, in the opinion pages. The possible consequences of carrying stories that could undermine investor confidence or encourage political destabilization efforts are among the least of concerns of the local media.
The Philippines has, for the longest time, been considered the odd man out in Southeast Asia. Even with Indonesia and Thailand – recent additions to the list of countries supposedly democratizing their media within the last few years – the Philippines is still regarded as the country with the most liberal media environment in the region.

Ever since martial law was lifted in 1981 and Ferdinand Marcos was ousted as president in 1986, freedom of expression and freedom of the press have become among the most prized possessions of Filipino journalists and activists who fought for the restoration of democracy. Two of the nation’s leading newspapers, the Philippine Daily Inquirer and the Philippine Star, were born in the midst of a huge democratization wave sparked by the assassination of then opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr in August 1983. “Never again” was a battle cry that resounded in the streets, a promise to reject any attempt by present and future leaders to stay in power through the imposition of Marcos-style martial law.

Protesters took to the streets from July to September 2005 to demand the resignation of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo after a recorded conversation she had with an election official indicated she may have cheated in the 2004 presidential elections. The front pages of Philippine newspapers were splashed with photos of protesters being hosed with water canons even as stories extremely critical of the administration were given prominent play.

After surviving what was perceived by many as perhaps the most serious threat to her presidency sometime in early July 2005, Arroyo and other administration officials still could not clamp down on the media. It would have been unthinkable for the media in other Asean countries, for example, to be allowed to play up stories and photos as threatening to a government trying to remain in firm control. But not in the Philippines.

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During times like these, truth-telling, along with the check-and-balance role of the media, emerge as dominant values that supercede communitarian values, presumably more common in other Asian countries. Harmony and stability, perhaps among the more obvious communitarian values, are relegated to the backburner. The importance of individual rights, including the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly, are heightened as seen in the recent exchanges reported in the media over the right of protesters to rally close to the presidential palace. One of those rallies, intended to test the administration’s calibrated pre-emptive response (CPR) policy, included no less than former Vice President Teofisto Guingona, himself a lawyer. Protesters intended to get as close as possible to Malacañang, the seat of power, via historic Mendiola, site of protests against Marcos and other presidents who came
after him, including Joseph Estrada. They were dispersed by anti-riot police with the help of water canons and the former Vice President was not spared.

As explained, CPR is the means by which the government’s “no permit, no rally” policy is being implemented in the face of the rising frequency of demonstrations. The Philippine Constitution, drafted and approved post-Marcos, gives freedom of assembly equal importance as freedom of speech and freedom of the press. “No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances,” says the Bill of Rights.¹

At the same time, the government has been arguing for the strong regulation of these rallies supposedly because of the heightened terror threat, disturbance to the peace and the business climate. At a time when the Philippines continues to rank low in development in the region even after moving past authoritarianism for two decades now, these arguments find resonance especially with some members of the business community.

A recognition of the importance of rights specified in the Bill of Rights was mirrored in the news reports that saw print the day after the Mendiola rally, and the Philippine Star (www.philstar.com), which did not publish a story about the incident, became the subject of SMS messages that called for a boycott of the paper. Activists who sent out the SMS messages got the intended effect: the Star ran subsequent stories on succeeding rallies and gave them prominent play. The paper was all too aware of the power of SMS messaging which managed just a few years back to mobilize people to push for the ouster of Estrada.

The media are being blamed for too much negativity in their reportage, highlighting the bad and the ugly and contributing to the feeling of hopelessness and pessimism not only among the poor but even among the middle class. In a November 10, 2005 address to the top level management of the association of national broadcasters, President Arroyo said, “We must take heed of the media becoming part of the national malaise and a hindrance to development rather than an important solution to our problems...some segments of the media are pushing the negative angle of stories too far and too often.” ²

As a result of feedback and complaints about how the seeming obsession with the bad news – corruption, inefficiencies in government, cheating, crime, and just about anything else that does not work in a democracy – might be affecting the national psyche, a publisher of a national broadsheet made a pact with her editors that they would, as a matter of policy, carry at least one positive news story on the paper’s front page every Sunday.

This is very much the opposite in other Asean countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, for instance, where the press work under extremely controlled environments. There, journalists are used to practising self-censorship, already anticipating problems that negative stories would bring. So-called “Asian values” are given primacy in these countries where press freedom is subordinate to the “national interest,” the latter defined often in terms of what the party in power deems to be in the national interest.
Journalists in Indonesia, which is making the difficult transition to democracy, find themselves treading on unfamiliar and uncertain ground as officials in power have resorted to defamation suits and other criminal charges as a means of getting back at journalists who have written negative stories about them. In 2003, for example, there were at least 14 libel suits filed against Indonesian journalists. The suits, based on outdated laws that are remnants of the Suharto era, have certainly intimidated Indonesian journalists who have had to spend time going to and from courts to defend themselves. Among these laws are articles 134 and 137 of the Indonesian Criminal Code which make the intentional insulting of the Indonesian president and vice president a criminal offense. Violating these more than once can result in the permanent prohibition of the practice of journalism.

The Reporters san Frontiers measures press freedom in countries around the world, ranking them from most to least free. The World Press Freedom Index shows that compared to 2002 when Indonesia placed 57th out of 139 countries, in 2003 it ranked 111th out of 166. Indonesia dropped further to 117th place out of 167 countries in 2004 and improved slightly in 2005 (based on surveys done in 2004) with its 105th ranking. If the media situation does not improve this year, this ranking will certainly drop by next year.

Thailand, for its part, despite earlier democratization trends in the media, ranked 107th in 2005, slightly worse than Indonesia, but certainly worse than its own performance in 2004 when it ranked 59th out of 167.

Compared to 2004, the Philippines in 2005 slipped to 139, worse than Indonesia and even Thailand, primarily because of the killings of journalists recorded in the past few years. In 2002, it ranked 90th; in 2003, 119th and in 2004 it ranked 111th. Though mainly indicative and not necessarily definitive, the rankings show at the very least, a deterioration in perceptions of press freedom in these three countries. If the Philippines is being viewed as a possible model for democratic media in the region, it is doing a very poor job.

Abuses of Freedom?

With great freedom comes great responsibility is a paraphrase of a popular movie line. The freedom that the Philippine press have enjoyed since the 1986 EDSA uprising has not been used responsibly, going by credibility ratings. In a Pulse Asia survey conducted in March and April 2004 (the year presidential elections were held), 67 percent of Filipino registered voters said television was most credible, followed by radio with 20 percent. Newspapers were the least credible, getting only a five percent credibility rating.

The low credibility rating of newspapers has gotten publishers and editors worried and perplexed. Why has the credibility of newspapers sunk as much? Will newspapers survive the competition posed by pervasive television?

In response to the “why,” ordinary newspaper readers often say that TV is more credible for them because they actually see the faces of people being cited in news reports and get to hear for themselves what these interviewees are saying. In newspapers, they can only go by what is reported by journalists, some of the
quotes even reported out of context. The denials of sources do not help any and only exacerbate the perception of newspapers being unreliable sources of information.

Yet television itself, the most influential medium, has not been spared from criticism. Lapses of broadcast reporters include intrusions into private homes and private grief all in the name of competition and exclusives. For instance, when a Filipino overseas worker was taken hostage by terrorists in the Middle East in 2004, the networks invaded his village and camped outside his home before moving into the family bedroom. When he was released, a mad race for an exclusive interview ended with a network reporter escorting him from the plane headed home. He was wearing a T-shirt provided by the media company. The network war approached absurd proportions and critics thought it could not become any more worse. They were wrong.

A recent rape case involving American soldiers got the major networks competing once again to get an exclusive interview with the victim’s relatives. One reporter boldly told the lawyer of the rape victim the network would come out with a photo of her if they were not granted an interview previously promised exclusively to a rival network. The mother of the victim ended up having to accommodate both.

Surely all these incidents point to a vibrant and aggressive press in the Philippines – among the surest signs of a working democracy where press freedom and independence, the pursuit of truth, a free market, and the watchdog functions of the media are dominant values. But the unfettered and irresponsible exercise of freedom has resulted in unethical practices as well. Among some TV journalists, for example, celebrity status is something they aspire for, forgetful that the primary loyalty of journalists is not to themselves but to the public they are supposed to serve.

Indonesia and the Philippines mirror similar experiences, with journalists engaging in crude “envelopmental journalism” or the more high-tech “ATM journalism” which entails payments being deposited directly in automated teller machines. Corruption is said to afflict many developing nations and those emerging from authoritarian regimes struggle with it for decades. It has been two decades since the Philippines returned to democracy but an economy that has not made a dramatic lift-off has made corruption, even in the media, difficult to control. These point to undeveloped media standards or stunted growth, something that still needs working on because it has undermined the credibility of a democratic Philippine media.

President Arroyo went on the offensive in her address to broadcasters, declaring, “A press that loses credibility as the watchdog of government and society becomes a drag to democracy rather than a force of freedom.” As expected, sectors of the media reacted negatively, saying that what she wanted was “praise journalism” reminiscent of the Marcos years. Opposition politicians jumped into the fray for the counter-attack and received front-page treatment.

It becomes worrisome when the media’s importance in a democracy is diminished with good reason. This has led many Filipino journalists to push for greater professionalism, ethical practice, and higher standards. They are all too aware that public distrust of the media as an institution could threaten the very freedom that was regained in 1986. The outcome of these efforts, along with the preservation of values of a free press, will surely be watched closely by other countries in the region.
Endnotes

1. 1987 Philippine Constitution, Article III, Section 4.
7. National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (www.nujp.org)

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