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**The Role Of Media In Disability Prevention, Rehabilitation
And Equalization Of Opportunities
For Disabled Persons (Philippine Experience)**

By

Arturo Borjal

"THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN DISABILITY PREVENTION,
REHABILITATION AND EQUALIZATION OF OPPORTUNITIES
FOR DISABLED PERSONS (PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE)"*

The existence of an extensive media network in the Philippines makes media a potent tool to prevent disability and help the disabled persons.

In its Profile of Media Penetration, the government's Philippine Information Agency (PIA) reported that in 1987 there were about 396 print media outlets dishing out publications in English, Pilipino, and various dialects; 329 radio stations, and 60 television stations. These media facilities are scattered all over the country's three main islands: Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao.

The same report showed that of the Philippines 9.8 million households, 70 percent own radio sets, and 30 percent have television sets. Although the study did not quantify the extent of print penetration, there is no doubt that it is also substantive.

Mass media's role in the Philippine setting is unique in the sense that it serves both as a source of information and as a link among the people in the country's more than 7,000 islands.

Aware of this, the National Council for the Welfare of Disabled Persons (NCWDP) has adopted a strategy designed to fully utilize media resources for the benefit of the disabled Filipinos. This strategy includes:

1. Establishment of information networks in all 13 regions

of the country.

Each network serves as the NCWDP's direct link with the existing media facilities within the region. Information from the NCWDP's main office in Manila for dissemination in the regional and provincial levels are channeled through its regional information network.

Gathering the feedback on information being disseminated is also one of the responsibilities of the regional network.

In effect, the regional information network serves as a two-way channel of communication.

2. A second strategy is the preparation and distribution of technical reports, brochures, magazines, fact sheets and other informative materials.

NCWDP Manila regularly comes up with informative materials for distribution to various media practitioners, social workers, rehabilitation centers, civic groups working for the disabled, coordinating government agencies, legislators and policymakers.

These materials serve as reference materials for media practitioners on topics concerning disability prevention, rehabilitation, and other disability related issues.

3. Close linkages with media in Manila

Since all national dailies and the main offices of the various media facilities are based in Manila, NCWDP has maintain close linkages with them. Up-to-date information, in the form of press releases, concerning disability are regularly distributed among the various media outlets. Disability-related stories carried by the national media networks are usually picked up by other networks in the cities and provinces.

So far, the results have been encouraging. Effort to generate nationwide concern for the disabled persons through the use of media are paying off. Our people have begun to realize the urgency of helping the disabled people become productive and self-reliant members of the community.

Yet so much remains to be done

Right now, there is need to further educate and inform the people of the issues about disability. This is where the continued use of media as a channel of information comes in. This is a major strategy in making the people understand and help resolve the problems of the disabled.

Some people think that information concerning disability and the disabled population do not make good copy. Only crime, violence, business, politics do, they say. I disagree. As a practicing journalist, I know that there are a lot of stories concerning the disabled persons that media could use. The rehabilitation centers, for one, are teeming with interesting stories. Success stories of the disabled are also good copy.

The blind who make earthenwares; the orthopedically-handicapped who craft furniture; the armless or blind who paint portraits and beautiful works of art; the suffering of a one-year old baby with severe burns all over his body; the young doctor who devotes his time to take care of the medical needs of the disabled; the nun or the social worker who selflessly attends to the routine needs of the handicapped - these are all very interesting stories. And they must be told so that others would know, understand, and inspired to help.

Media could not simply ignore stories of anguish, sacrifice, hope, courage and success.

This brings me to a point I want to stress. It is not enough to provide media with technical information. We have to come up with well-crafted items that reflect the day-to-day struggle of the disabled people.

Also, we must take into consideration the fact the media's primary objective is to sell. In order to sell, they need to come up with stories that are not only relevant but also interesting to the readers as well. To make media a partner in our mission, we need to meet certain standards in dishing out information for media to disseminate. The initiative should come from us, and not from media.

To be able to come up with a publicity program designed to effectively attain our objectives, research and extensive planning are necessary. Priority areas, target readership or listenership, the extent of exposure, and budgetary requirement must be clearly defined. Likewise, the feedback mechanism should

be set to determine the results of the campaign and to see where improvements could be made. In short, every component that makes up for a successful publicity campaign should be taken care of.

Building up good relations with media is another part of the agenda. Public relations projects designed to give media practitioners or institutions appropriate recognition of their efforts in helping the disabled must be formulated. Recognition could be in the form of awards and citations.

To enable media practitioners to gain first-hand knowledge of the world of the disabled people, it is advisable that they be invited from time to time to visit the rehabilitation centers, attend conferences, or better still join volunteer groups serving the disabled people.

Through this, a closer and more lasting relationship could be established.

In a society that has become dependent on information, media plays a crucial role. It helps shape public opinion that in turn influences government policy.

This is of paramount consideration specially in the Philippines where several laws have yet to be passed to alleviate the plight of the disabled people. Policy makers and legislators must act to promote the rights of the disabled: Their right to education, employment, and mobility; their right to fully develop their potentials as human beings, to enjoy the constitutional rights enjoyed by able-bodied citizens; their right to integrate themselves into the mainstream of society, to play meaningful roles in their communities, and to seek their own self-

and

fulfillment, happiness.

The freedom that Philippine media now enjoys enables it to objectively assess controversial issues. It has the ~~clat~~^{clout} to criticize government policies, prod government leadership to act on important measures, and even initiate crusades for worthy causes.

Filipino media practitioners, although known for their incisive and hard hitting commentaries, have often been involved in social causes. The newspapers are replete with instances where a columnist appeals for help for disabled individuals who are in dire need of help. Oftentimes, these appeals get enthusiastic response from the readers. This only proves that media and most Filipino have a soft spot for the underdog or the struggling disabled.

From this, one could see that the Philippine media is not only free, it has also a soft spot for the underdog - for the less privileged.

This is another welcome development for us who are working for the disabled people. We know that in our country, we have a willing ally in media. What we try to do now is to further strengthen that partnership so that we could pool our resources for the benefit of the disabled people.

* Paper presented by Atty. Arturo A. Borjal, Executive Director of the Philippine National Council for the Welfare of Disabled Persons, during the Meeting on Health and Media Specialists last 20-22 February 1989 in Singapore.