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**News In the Service of A Developing Nation :
What Is To Happen In the Philippines?**

By

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NEWS IN THE SERVICE OF A DEVELOPING NATION:

WHAT IS TO HAPPEN IN THE PHILIPPINES?

Cecilia L. Lazaro

The world today has become a "global village" - what Marshall McLuhan envisioned, Ted Turner's CNN has made possible. The impact of a ready, twenty-four hour video newsource is being felt globally - making information flow nearly instantaneous. The Gulf War spotlighted media's ability to become an intermediary: George Bush would get answers from other world leaders via television.

Although information flow has accelerated between developed countries with access to satellite sources (such as CNN), it only highlights the information gap in developing countries. A news bureau in Manila can actually get faster information through western sources about events in Manila! So the world may have become a "global village," but access to that village is still selective - depending on the government's political will, economy and technology.

The Filipino journalist faces many problems in gathering and preparing the news. However, after that, he isn't guaranteed that what he prepares will actually be seen by all his countrymen. Today, the information flow is still limited. That information flow must also be two-ways. In the Philippine setting, news media are centralized and are geographically based in or around Manila. Provinces and out of the way towns not only have a hard time getting the information, but often the

information they receive lacks a local perspective.

POST MARTIAL LAW PHILIPPINES

For a long time, news in the Philippines was considered a second-class citizen. In the sixties, it was relegated to the late-night time slots and received the minimum advertising budget.

When Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law, news became a valuable ally: by restructuring the news, he could effectively restructure reality. Marcos maintained a subliminal control over the media; it was when the gap between the picture he portrayed and reality became too large that his control slipped. The funeral march of Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino was the first major example: hundreds of thousands turned out on the streets: not one picture appeared on television. The people couldn't help but notice the gap.

Nearly twenty years of this type of control over the news has left its mark: it was not unusual for government to "coordinate" with the editorial desks of the print and broadcast media on news dissemination. This was news management and handling by the government. Government press agencies like the Presidential Press Staff and the Office of Media Affairs would call up the editorial desks or the owners of the news media and "suggest" top stories or treatment of particular stories. It wasn't direct censorship, but in many ways, it was worse.

It created unwritten guidelines and taboo subjects; it was self-censorship. Violation meant direct personal repercussions. It also created "envelopmental journalism" - money for stories.

Newsmen on coverage would be given white envelopes which would contain "gifts" of cash - supposedly given with no obligations. But cultural values dictate the newsman toe the line - in the most genteel and cultured manner.

What it created was "press release journalism." Today, it means a lack of trained manpower. It means a lack of ethics and a clear idea of what journalism means in a developing third world country. In many ways, Filipino journalists are faced with creating that definition today. The journalist is caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, the developing countries' views versus the western concepts. Most developing or third world countries consider the news media part of the overall thrust towards modernization and national development. Government expects news to be supportive of government policies rather than being critical or obstructive. Western media function to criticize and question. Filipino journalists are forced to make the choice ... based on the habits of the past and the nearly suffocating influence of the western press.

THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING IN SHAPING THE NEWS

The Philippines has a population of 64 million people spread over 7,100 islands. Today, there are about 26 newspapers, over 300 commercial radio stations, and five television stations. These all compete for a slice of the advertising pie. Consequently, advertisers in this setting have gained control - whether direct or indirect - over the news media.

Large corporations fund contentious programs: their goal often being to mask or silence. One major company which is a monopoly uses a substantial advertising budget to create and

maintain good public relations. For example, Nestle Philippines is one of the largest advertisers for television. When a boycott against Nestle products was staged in Manila, little news of it and no video made it on nationwide television.

There are also companies which use their advertising pesos for a common societal good. Companies like the Development Bank of the Philippines and Philippine Long Distance Telephone have created advertising campaigns which encourage values formation and pride in the Filipino.

But good or bad, advertisers have gained some measure of editorial control over our news media.

LIMITED INFORMATION FLOW AND ACCESS

So far, I've discussed some of the problems the Filipino journalist faces in trying to prepare his story. However, getting that story out is just as important as preparing it.

There are two main problems which limit access to information: 1) technology; and, 2) centralized information sources.

The Philippines is an archipelago; it is a country of nearly countless, isolated islands. One of media's goals should be to link these islands ... and this is only just beginning today. Television stations are starting to use satellite technology, but again, costs are prohibitive.

The second barrier to a two-way flow of information is geographic. Nearly all the news media have their bases in Manila. Consequently, news is Manila-centered. There is just now an effort to decentralize news gathering teams.

CONCLUSION

News has become a powerful influence in the Philippines today. Recent events show journalists have tremendous influence in a developing country. Just last week, the Philippine Senate rejected a treaty prolonging the US presence in the country. In my eyes, media had a major hand in preparing and encouraging an anti-bases perspective.

There are many problems Filipino journalists face. Some of them are offshoots of nearly twenty years of Marcos' dictatorship: "envelopmental journalism," self-censorship, etc. Others are problems of definition: just what exactly is the role of a journalist in a country that's deceptively western, espouses western values ... but is saddled with third world problems of economics and political stability?

Finally, how do we get that news out? How can we make sure we get the news from far-flung provinces - to make them part of the "global village?" Ironically, some out of the way cities receive western media before it gets any local sources of information.

The answers to these questions will determine the role of the news media in helping create Philippine society.