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How Media Informs And Educates The Citizenry
On The Constitution And Electoral Processes

By

Paulynn P Sicam
A paper on how media informs and educates the citizenry on the constitution and electoral processes.
Prepared by Paulynn P. Sicam for a seminar on "Constitutional Law, the Media and the Electoral Process in Asean", Singapore, April 18 to 20, 1990
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FROM the aims of the seminar as enumerated in the letter of agreement that made my participation in this seminar possible, it seems that media is the key element in this tripartite meeting among constitutional lawyers, electoral officials and members of media in the Asean region. For this seminar aims to provide an opportunity for the participants to discuss how mass media in the region informs and educates citizens about the Constitution and encourages popular participation in the electoral process; to identify the factors that help media promote information and education of the rule of law and electoral processes; and build knowledge and generate insights on innovative and effective use of media for political communication and decision-making.

In the Philippines, the mass media is made up of the government and commercial sectors. Both government and private business run radio and TV stations, and publish newspapers, magazines and comic books, that carry most of the news and information that are provided the Filipino people.

The diversity and impressive scope of the media in the Philippines, coupled with the 83% literacy rate, however, do not reflect the country's state of economic development, or level of sophistication. For we remain a poor and ignorant Third World country who trails the rest of the members of Asean in terms of social and economic advancement. Although the Philippines boasts of a literacy rate of 83%, and the media make up a very large and active industry, out of 10,773,500 households all over the islands, only 5% buy magazines, 11% buy newspapers, 51% have television sets. Fully 82%, however, own radio sets.

Truly, radio is the most popular medium of news, information and entertainment in the country where 20 million people, scattered over 7,000 islands, many of which are unreached by neither roads nor government services. Only the ever popular transistor radios connect the Filipinos living in these far-flung areas to the towns and cities.

There are 351 commercial and non-commercial radio stations all over the country. Of these, 107 are FM, and 242 are AM. Eight out of ten listeners tune in to radio everyday, with the upper income and females registering the highest average. However, average listenership is only 54.5%, with the Greater Manila area registering the highest at 78.2%, and Mindanao the lowest at 57.3%.
There are five television networks in the country, running some 70 TV stations nationwide. Average viewership is 68.7%. With the highest in Metro Manila and the lowest in Mindanao. Six out of every ten viewers watch television everyday, with the higher income groups and females accounting for the higher averages. One of these networks is owned and operated by the Government while two others, which were owned by a famous crony of the late Ferdinand Marcos, have been sequestered by the Presidential Commission on Good Government.

I do not have a count of all the newspapers, national and provincial that are published daily in the Philippines. But if Metro Manila is any indication, there are at least 32 newspapers that hit the streets daily in Metro Manila alone.

Of these, 10 are general interest broadsheet newspapers (at least two of which are sequestered firms), two are business dailies, five are Chinese language dailies, and 14 are tabloids. Together, they have a claimed daily circulation of 3.9 million copies. The incidence of newspaper reading is placed at 43% in urban areas nationwide with, of course, Metro Manila having the most readers, while the Visayas has the lowest. The tabloids, with their penchant for sensational stories of crime and entertainment, have a much broader appeal than the broadsheets which are patronized mostly by the upscale market.

The weekly magazines are either Sunday supplements of the leading dailies, the so-called "female oriented" publications, or general interest magazines. These are mostly read in the urban centers, and mostly by women. And then, of course, there are other media: the outdoor advertising, through billboards, information via cinema, or through incidental media like advertising in public vehicles and the like.

I have taken the time to give an overview of the more accessible forms of media in the Philippines to be able to discuss the realities and untapped possibilities of each medium, especially insofar as information dissemination on developmental issues such as the constitutional and electoral processes in my country, are concerned.

The Filipino audience today is far more politically sophisticated than the people who lived for 20 years under the one-man rule of Ferdinand Marcos. The four-day revolution we helped bring about in 1986 has seen to that. The Filipinos are a people who have seen the seemingly impossible happen. Marcos was unseated and he fled to inglorious exile abroad. Today, Marcos' wife is facing trial in a federal court in New York for illegally using money stolen from the Filipino people for her own selfish ends. When you talk of the Filipino people, therefore, you are talking about a people who have surprised even themselves in what they have been able to accomplish.
After the Edsa revolution, our new government tried to get a new political machinery going. The drafting of a new constitution and the plebiscite for its ratification, and two elections of national and local officials, have all been part of this rebuilding of our political structures which were destroyed by the Marcos dictatorship.

Unfortunately, along with these cathartic democratic exercises returned the ugliness of traditional politics, and the garrognousness of an unfettered media. This perhaps due to the fact that the changes in my country have been largely on the surface. Although the personalities at the top have changed, the system has not, the social and political structures remain intact.

The government did not take advantage of the revolutionary situation that prevailed in my country after the Edsa uprising to make the necessary changes that would redirect the energies and vision of the the Filipino nation to more constructive and productive pursuits. Perhaps this is one reason why the post-Marcos media have developed the way they have. They are merely a reflection of the passions that were let loose in our society after the departure of the dictator, passions and energies that should have been directed by the revolutionary government towards progress and development.

The media in the Philippines are underutilized as a tool for education and development. This is because media in my country is almost totally commercial. Even the government television station, which is not supposed to be competing with the commercial stations, has been carrying the most commercially successful show on TV -- the professional basketball games.

Profit being a strong motive in Philippine media, radio and TV producers, and newspaper editors and publishers have opted to challenge the competition by going totally commercial. The headlines must attract and arrest the reader, and sell the newspaper to them. And so they settle for the least common denominator -- blood and gore, sex and violence, graft and corruption.

This is one end of the spectrum. The other is a seeming disinterest in making money, or of even breaking even on publishing. Some industrialists with money to burn simply want to have the prestige, or convenience of having their own media outlet to reflect their political views and carry their press releases.

As for radio, producers and owners seem to have taken the easy route to making money by playing mostly music, and foreign music at that.

Television in the Philippines, is like in any other country where Western values have taken root, a wasteland of inanity, from the sophisticated foreign produced shows we like to watch, to the local dramas and musicals which are invariably copies of foreign material.

So in Philippine media is a lot of untapped potential for reaching a broad audience and informing them of their
rights, and the processes of a democracy, as well as livelihood trends and opportunities. Radio, for example, because of its reach, would be the perfect vehicle for development. But dramas and skits promoting values must be written and produced, and these cost money. But talk and music are cheap.

The Filipino media are more concerned with the promotion or unmasking of personalities than of issues, with politics and entertainment than development. Carried to the extreme, some would rather be confrontational and adversarial in the Western tradition, than be seen as an ally of Government in any undertaking, even in the defense of our democracy against Rightwing coup plotters.

Information, culture, education generally take a back seat. Many newspapers that are passed off as national dailies are nothing more than expanded tabloids with little depth and analysis in reporting and opinion columns. If they perform any educational function at all, it is only incidental to the reporting of the news.

Government media, however, has its developmental campaigns. But these are conducted only when the perceived need arises, like before an election or a plebiscite, during a water and power shortage, like we're having, or when Government is trying to fight off the propaganda coming from its enemies.

For example, recently, the government's media machinery was geared up to inform the people of the two proposed autonomous regions in Mindanao and the Cordillera and the organic act that would give a certain amount of self-rule to the provinces and cities in those areas that opted for it. Using radio, television, local newspapers and magazines, the Government Information Agency brought its campaign to the hinterlands of Northern Luzon and Muslim Mindanao. The large turnouts in these exercises can probably be attributed to the PIA's efforts.

More recently, as a result of the December 1 coup attempt, Government went out in a big way to celebrate Constitution Day in February. Not even during the campaign to ratify the Constitution in 1937 was this document promoted by Government with such zeal and determination. But this is because the Constitution became the rallying point for those who remained loyal to the Government.

Then there are, of course, campaigns mounted to promote certain values like love of country, discipline, cleanliness, honesty, peace. But again, these are not sustained.

Clearly, Philippine media remains largely untapped as a tool for development, to promote the values that can unite the nation, to explain the processes and dynamics occurring here and in the world, to make the public participate actively in the shaping of the developments that affect them and their future.