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The Concept Of Pluralism

By

Juan Jamias
AMIC CONCEPT PAPER

THE CONCEPT OF PLURALISM

As a technical concept, pluralism appears in the current literature under a number of terminologies with different meanings and emphases. The varied wordings, however, converge to the broad meaning of the root word - plural - that is, more than one (in number). Monopoly therefore contradicts pluralism. On the other hand, diversity complements it. This conceptual relatedness of the spin-off sub-concepts to the basic word makes pluralism faster to comprehend.

The keywords in the AMIC data base reveal the varying thrusts of pluralism as a concept. These include cultural pluralism, pluralist society, pluralistic world, pluralism issues, plurality and diversity, media pluralism, pluralistic press (or media), plurality of sources and outlets.

The word's usage in the AMIC holdings charts a tripartite schema composed of (a) meaning or signification (b) discipline or issues involved, and (c) operational significance for media. The three broad topics are social pluralism, societal pluralism and media pluralism. The first differs from the second in that it pertains to human beings qua human beings while the second pertains to human groups or collectiveness.

1. Social pluralism refers to organic diversity such as that of cultures, races, ethnic groups, functional specialisation (livelihood) as found, for example, in the ASEAN region. (De Jesus 1971)

   The disciplines involved are sociology, social psychology, cultural anthropology and history. The mass media can generate insights on how to strengthen the role of the mass media in promoting cultural pluralism. They can also provide avenues for conflict resolution in pluralistic societies. (AMIC 1992)

2. Societal pluralism refers to differing beliefs, ideologies, philosophies or other behavioural expressions on matters of politics, religion, economics and lifestyles. (AMIC 1992)

   The disciplines involved are the social science fields relevant to the issue of interest. While the disciplines listed in No. 1 may also be relevant here, the more "applied" social sciences like political science and economies take centre stage in the study of societal pluralism.

   The media can create understanding (thus leading to peace and harmony) by disseminating information, knowledge and analysis. For example, the effect(s) of economic variables on communal tensions.
3. Media pluralism refers to the process of creating or promoting "many voices". A specific meaning: "the end of monopolies of any kind and the existence of the greatest possible number of newspapers, magazines and periodicals reflecting the widest possible range of opinion within the community. (Declaration of Windhoek 1991)

Issues not disciplines are involved in the studies or practice of media pluralism. These include media ownership (e.g., monopoly or public ownership), economics of publishing or broadcasting, sources, (e.g., transnational satellite broadcasting) and outlets, characteristics of media practitioners, and practice. (Abel 1979; George 1986)

The operational significance for media. The media can prompt and follow up relevant media laws, regulations and policies. To illustrate, the Philippine NGO's efforts waged to foster the enactment of laws to break up media monopolies.

In summary, the mass media may play a role in conflict resolution, in ensuring peace and harmony in diversity (ethnic, economic, political, religious).

On another plane, media pluralism, an environment for media has to be constructed encouraging plurality or openness of ownership, sources and outlets, gender opportunities in journalism, etc.

Media pluralism has been espoused since 1946 by the UNESCO. Documents, resolutions and publications have emerged from UNESCO or related organisations under the United Nations; conferences and seminars on the topic have been conducted. A case in point was the 1978 General Conference of UNESCO. This conference adopted the Declaration on Fundamental Principles Concerning the Contribution of the Mass Media to Strengthening Peace and Understanding. Article II of that declaration underscored these points: (Abel 1979)

- The exercise of freedom of opinion, expression and information is a "vital factor in the strengthening of peace and understanding".

- Public access to reliable information depends upon the availability of a diversity of sources, so that each individual can "check the accuracy of facts" and "appraise events objectively".

- Journalists, accordingly, must be allowed to report freely and be assured of the "fullest possible" access to sources of information.

- Whether they are working in their own countries or abroad, journalists should be assured of protection in carrying out their legitimate professional responsibilities.

In sum, the goal is a free, independent and pluralistic media.