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THE ETHICAL FAILINGS OF A DEMOCRATIC PRESS
The Philippine Case

By Chay Florentino-Hofileña

Towards the end of the second semester last year, a student of mine at the Ateneo de Manila University who was taking my Issues in Journalism class told me she was no longer sure she wanted to be a journalist because the course shattered a lot of myths about journalists. She said she had gotten a glimpse of perhaps the darkest side of the media and was not sure she wanted to be a part of it.

A good student, I felt sorry to have discouraged her by discussing in class the ugly realities of doing journalism in the Philippines. I asked myself whether I was too frank and too honest or perhaps too cynical to have drowned out the romance of journalism. But then again, I thought that it was better for aspiring journalists to see fair and square what lies ahead of them.

The country with perhaps the freest press in Southeast Asia has been criticized for encouraging and nurturing irresponsible journalists who flirt with sensationalism, biased reporting, intrusions into individual privacy, and the big C: corruption. Jubilant about the restoration of democracy and other freedoms previously denied under martial law, some Filipinos as early as 1986 became unsure whether unbridled press freedom was good for a country still recovering from its economic woes.

At a time when the West was looking to the Philippines as a possible antidote to authoritarian regimes in the region (it could have been a showcase of democracy and development), the formula did not produce the desired results. Those who study democratic transitions say that the transition takes a long time and is often marked by backsliding tendencies. This is hardly a source of comfort for a country long mired in poverty and extreme income inequality. Today, the Philippines is democratic, it has a free press, but remains trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of poverty and corruption. What good is freedom if close to one-third of Filipino families continue to live below the poverty line, the disenchanted ask.

Critics of the local press have said that democracy has fostered abuses of this freedom and has only rearmed a new power center that competes with and rivals government, has little respect for personal reputation, and has no qualms about being intrusive. They have complained about the unrelenting arrogance of the press, its inaccuracy in reportage, its obsession with negative news, its unwillingness to concede mistakes, and the oversized egos of journalists — all obstacles to the media’s fulfilling its public service function and all of which erode public sympathy for it. Truly, the media, print in particular, has ceased to become the hero of citizens tired of hearing the bad news. It is starting to feel the pinch and the growing disaffection of the public.

A December 1999 survey lends credence to this perception.\(^1\) It says that nationwide,

\(^1\) Pulse Asia, December 1999.
newspapers are regarded as least credible of the three media that include radio and television. Nationwide too, television enjoys the highest credibility at 53 percent, yet a considerable percentage, 28 percent, also believe that television is “just as often credible as not credible.”

In Metro Manila, however, the center of most political and business life, 89 percent of the survey respondents say they find radio “more often credible” compared to 59 percent who feel similarly about television. The cynicism about newspapers is most palpable in the metropolis where only 21 percent find newspapers “more often credible.”

Newspaper readership has either declined, if not remained stagnant at 25 percent since 1995, according to statistics from the Asia Research Organization (ARO). Newspaper and magazine readership has been dropping too over the last three years. This is no improvement over 1990 ARO statistics which show that only three percent of the Philippine population actually “buy” newspapers. Most others prefer to share their copies or perhaps simply think it unwise to part with precious few pesos for information they could gobble up in a few minutes or obtain elsewhere — be it radio, TV, the Internet or even their mobile phones.

In most markets, circulation is less than 50 percent of all households. Moreover, findings show, most people selectively read newspaper sections.

On top of this, many of the youth in the country, or those under 35 years of age, according to other researches, have stopped reading newspapers altogether. The declining reach of newspapers and magazines is a clear indicator, at the very least, of growing disaffection by readers for the print media.

The disaffection is exacerbated by reports not only about unprofessional practices, but also by rampant corruption, which understandably eats away at the credibility of the media. What right do practitioners — who themselves engage in corrupt acts — have to expose or write about corruption or the inadequacies of government? Obviously they lose the moral high ground.

**EVILS OF CORRUPTION**

In 1998, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) published *News for Sale*, a monograph that documents various forms of media corruption in the Philippines. Among the highlights of the research are as follows:

- payoffs to reporters are made through direct deposits to automated teller machines
- environmental journalism and attack-collect-defend-collect (AC-DC) practices remain pervasive
- media shepherds and point men are used to facilitate the building of networks within media circles

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2 From a speech delivered by Patricia Arches, president of McCann Erickson (Phils.) on May 16, 2000 during the Fourth National Press Forum on “The Philippine Press in the 21st Century.”

• during the 1998 election campaign season, presidential candidates were offered P20 million packages by some radio stations in exchange for positive coverage — a clever way of circumventing the political ad ban which remains in place to this day
• special operations that involved black propaganda against some candidates were resorted to with the right incentive for editors to use the high-impact stories
• some editors of tabloids or mass-circulation papers demanded a flat rate per story or press release published
• other tabloid editors asked candidates to buy from 30,000 to 50,000 copies of their tabloids which used the candidates’ stories or press releases

A survey of 100 journalists conducted by PCIJ from September 1997 to March 1998 reveals that 71 had been offered money by their sources in the course of their coverage. Of those offered, one-third openly admitted to taking it. Only 11 turned the money over to their editors, while twice as many pocketed it.

Some reporters justified accepting the money, saying they didn’t ask for it and that their sources demanded nothing in exchange anyway. A few said they accepted the money because they were afraid their access to sources would be imperiled or that they didn’t want the person giving the money to lose face. Others said they needed the money, used it to have a good time, or kept it because everybody else took it anyway.

What is striking in the survey results is the seeming openness of a number of journalists to accepting bribe money and their willingness to compromise their profession in exchange for material gain or a quick buck. Eight of every 10 reporters who accepted money from their sources felt that taking it “did not in any way affect the way they wrote their stories.” The appearance of impropriety seemed almost secondary, if not immaterial.

How was the documentation, reportage/exposé of widespread corruption in the media received? Very quietly. Journalists know about the corrupt practices, they talk about it in whispers and over bottles of beer, they know who the takers are, but will hesitate to discuss these publicly or even directly wrestle with it.

Belonging to a small community, journalists after all, belong to one profession and are bound by fraternal bonds. For instance, we know of limited resources that most newspapers and other media organizations especially outside Metro Manila have to work with. We are aware of, and sympathize with, the financial problems and inadequacies that drive colleagues to corruption. We know, we understand, we are afraid to rock the boat.

It was easier for a government official, a senator, to react to the report and propose a bill on the code of conduct and ethical standards for public officials and employees. The proposed bill also seeks to set professional standards for the practice of political public relations and specifies that a practitioner “shall not engage in any practice which has the purpose of corrupting the integrity of channels of communications or the processes of government.” The bill did not gain any momentum because, for a media community that has had rough brushes with government control, any shadow of it should be extinguished early on.

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4 Ibid, 94.
When talking about curbing corruption, the discussion inevitably drifts to low pay and inadequate compensation. But is low pay a sufficient excuse for unethical or unprofessional conduct?

1997 figures used by the *Philippine Journalism Review* show that senior print reporters earned an average of P12,000 a month or the equivalent of US$407 at the time. In comparison, neophytes earned as low as $153 or about P4,500 monthly, excluding other benefits, while reporters with some working experience got $237 or about P7,000 a month. The salaries of entry-level reporters in 1997 were already lower than the $164 (P4,840) a month estimated official poverty line for a family of five.

Two years later, in 1999, senior reporters from the bigger papers received a high of $436-$462 a month (P17,000-P18,000) excluding allowances and other benefits, and a low of $205-$256 (P8,000-P10,000). Those in television were better off with salaries ranging from a high of $513-$641 (P20,000-P25,000) monthly for senior reporters and a low of $256-$308 (P10,000-P12,000) monthly.

Compared to other countries in the region, the average salary of a news reporter in the Philippines is dismally low. Averaging $294 a month, a news reporter’s salary is higher than that of a chauffeur ($231) and lower than that of a secretary ($309), according to March 2000 figures from Asiaweek.

Filipino reporters are only better off than Indonesians who earn an average of $112 a month, but worse off than most everyone else. On average, Thai reporters earn $357; Malaysians, $1,125; and Singaporeans, $2,047. Reporters in Hongkong are paid $3,856, while those in Japan get $6,524 on the average.

Despite their pathetic pay scales, two-thirds of those surveyed by PCIJ said they refused money given to them for various reasons, foremost of which was the “conviction that accepting the money was unethical and immoral.” Others rejected the money because acceptance would have violated their principles, while others simply believed it would damage their dignity, reputation or integrity, or that they didn’t need it. Despite the seemingly bleak future of a press coopted by people with the means to buy off journalists, there are signs that all is not lost.

Unethical conduct on the part of the media has done considerable damage to journalistic integrity. It has diluted the right of the media to exact accountability and demand the highest of standards from government officials. With credibility gone, what good would journalism be?

**PROFESSIONAL LAPSES: FOCUS ON THE MINDANAO COVERAGE**

As if corruption were not enough of a plague to the profession, there have been other equally

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6 Based on the prevailing exchange rate in 1997, P29.5 to US$1.


8 Collated from Asiaweek salary statistics, March 17, 2000.

9 *News for Sale*, 93.
serious complaints lodged against the press. Critics have pointed out glaring professional lapses, if not irresponsibility on the part of journalists who covered the Mindanao crisis — for months now, the longest running story on the front page of most newspapers, thanks to the hostage-taking incident in Sipadan in Malaysia which gave the story an international dimension.

The war in Mindanao has called attention to the inadequacies and failings of the press, which during times of turmoil, assumes a critical role in informing public opinion and debate, and formulating government policy. As recent Philippine experience shows, much is to be desired.

For instance, in the early stages of the hostage situation, some reporters, both foreign and local, were reported to have paid their way into the lair of the Abu Sayyaf rebels just to get their interviews and their stories. During one forum on the media coverage of Mindanao, reporter Fe Zamora who covered the Abu Sayyaf kidnappings in Jolo and Basilan said that the interest the hostage-taking incidents had generated in the international scene raised the demand for stories.

Some journalists, she said, “donated” personal belongings which the Abu Sayyaf asked of them — watches, rubber shoes, cash and other valuables — just so they could get access to them. Was this ethical or did it only encourage hostage-takers?

The Philippine media seemed to find excitement in covering the war, its mini-Bosnia after years of peace. Journalists wanted to capture on camera the drama of war footage — the gunfire, danger and death. The competition between the major television networks intensified along with the war, so much so that some resorted to staging shootouts.

According to one account of a reporter from Central Mindanao, the crew of a major network who arrived late, requested soldiers to shoot aimlessly while the camera was rolling. “Such footage was shown on TV in the early phase of the war, when the offensive was being carried out in the Lanao provinces...This ‘shooting’ explains why much of the supposed war footage shown on TV was not jerky, as real war footage tends to be, and the soldiers shown brandishing their guns looked like Rambo mowing down an unseen enemy,” said a report published online by Cyberdyaryo.11

Is reenactment responsible journalism?

In another incident, the reporter of the same network asked soldiers to “stage in advance” the raising of the flag in one captured camp “because he wanted to make sure he scooped the rival network,” according to the same report.12 So much for the medium regarded as most credible by viewers nationwide.

Does stiff competition justify staged coverage?

An assessment by the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) of the media coverage of the Mindanao crisis said that news reports emphasized “violence and other issues

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10 Conducted by the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, July 24, 2000 at Club Filipino in Greenhills, San Juan.
12 Ibid.
that lend themselves to sensational treatment.” The assessment was based on the coverage of the three most widely-circulated English broadsheets and one Filipino broadsheet.\(^\text{13}\)

Indeed, a raging war that is claiming the lives of soldiers and rebels provides a gripping story that neither the evening news nor the broadsheets can resist on a day to day basis. The body count and the updates keep viewers glued to their TV sets and obviously raise the evening news ratings. Unfortunately, the coverage left out context and perspective.

According to CMFR, of the 1,633 articles published from March to June this year, only 20 contributed to a broader understanding of the crisis. Only a few dwelt on the ramifications of the military offensives against the camps of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), on the historical roots of the conflict, government policy, the devastating effects of the war on civilians, or even the economic costs of it. Some media outfits even polled listeners, asking them whether they favored a government offensive on the MILF camps. Little thinking went into how this could over-simplify the issue and how it could only deepen existing prejudices.

That the war gained wide acceptance and even boosted the popularity of the President is an indication that the media may have become an unwitting instrument or mouthpiece of government. As the same CMFR study pointed out, 74 percent of the articles and opinion pieces published were based on government sources, providing little space for the voices of peace advocates, nongovernment organizations, academe, business and religious groups, and other members of civil society as a whole.

Inordinate emphasis on a horse-race type of coverage also led some newspapers to exacerbate brewing tensions between Christians and Muslims, as reporters and editors alike depicted Muslim sources and personalities negatively, failing to differentiate the Abu Sayyaf, the MILF, and Moro National Liberation Front from each other, lumping them all together instead.

The pejorative use of the word “Muslim” in some cases also mirrored prejudices on the part of journalists.

Were journalists sufficiently informed and did they exert special effort to fulfill the responsibilities of an ethical press? Perhaps not. Reflecting the macho tendencies of the President as Armed Forces commander-in-chief, the media, by and large, may have fanned, instead, the flames of war, if not sown the seeds of division in Mindanao.

**INDIVIDUAL COMPLAINTS**

Unfortunately, the complaints against these professional lapses are not the end of it. Individuals who felt aggrieved by reportage in two national dailies have stepped forward to complain about alleged excesses on the part of some journalists. They addressed their complaints to the Philippine Press Institute (PPI), the national organization of newspapers in the country.

One complaint was lodged against a columnist of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for biased

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reporting on a feud involving a wealthy family. The columnist, who has personal ties with one side of the feuding family, was accused of repeatedly writing malicious and defamatory articles against the other side.

The Philippine Press Council, mandated by the PPI to deal with right-of-reply complaints from news sources and subjects, was to have dealt with this complaint. But because the complainants decided to file a libel case, the Council withdrew jurisdiction over the case. The Press Council investigates only cases that have not reached the courts.

In July this year, the chief of the Philippine National Police also complained about the slanted coverage of a reporter of the Manila Standard that allegedly cast aspersions on his office and his person. When the Council in August asked for specific details — in particular, what he deemed as unfair treatment in the stories he furnished the Council, the police chief never got back, leaving the Council no other choice but to suspend its investigation.

Other individuals have not bothered to approach the Council, content with writing letters to the editor to express their disgust, disappointment or rage. A cursory review of previously published or aired reports reveals reactions against controversial and defamatory articles, among the recent ones, an exclusive Inquirer story alleging links between Tourism Secretary Gemma Cruz Araneta and terrorist groups. The Tourism Secretary was given equal space but critics of the story say the reporter gave more weight to the allegations of an unnamed source who supposedly used to be with the Abu Sayyaf than a public document that indicated the contrary. Araneta insisted it was a case of mistaken identity but the newspaper stood by its story.

Some television public affairs shows have begun to use hidden cameras as well, undoubtedly adding a new dimension to story-telling. One segment involved a sex-in-the-malls story that had a member of the production staff pose as a potential client of young males who hang out in the malls. To capture the actual transaction, the “client” had on a hidden camera which the youth was obviously unaware of. They tried hard to hide the identities of the youth they approached but were not successful all the time — the voices were a giveaway at the very least. It was an arresting story no doubt, but to what extent can the media go in using these devices without violating the right of individual persons to privacy?

Just this September, ABS-CBN broadcast journalist Korina Sanchez reacted violently against a radio showbiz commentator who alleged that Sanchez arrived late for a news event and had the said event restaged for the camera. Sanchez was supposed to cover Pearl Farm scuba divers in Davao removing trash trapped underwater but allegedly missed the action by hours. Her crew allegedly asked the scuba divers to throw trash into the sea again, the reports said, so they could capture it on tape.

Sanchez objected to the airing of the alleged unverified information and had called the attention of the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP) or the National Association of Broadcasters of the Philippines, the regulatory arm of the broadcast industry, to her colleague’s broadcasts. Sanchez said the allegations cast doubt on the integrity of her show and the network.

The showbiz broadcaster apologized but stood by her story. The case is still the subject of investigations and has the makings of a controversial showbiz tale involving no less than
broadcasters themselves.

**LEGISLATIVE REMEDIES**

The public, under existing laws, can actually seek redress of their grievances against the media.

Lawyer and University of the Philippines professor Victor Avecilla, who wrote a paper late last year on statutory remedies to address corruption and other unethical acts on the part of the media, identified criminal, civil, judicial and private sanctions available.¹² The Revised Penal Code of 1930, he pointed out, contains sanctions that include imprisonment and fines for libel, blackmail, estafa or swindling convictions. The fines are, however, ridiculously low as Congress has yet to pass an amendment that would increase the penalties.

A libel conviction, for instance, carries with it a minimum P200 to a maximum P6,000 fine ($4-$133), excluding civil action. Anyone who commits libel can be jailed too for a minimum of six months and one year to a maximum of six years.

A blackmail conviction carries an even lighter fine of not more than P2,000 and possible imprisonment of at least one month and one day to at most six months. Estafa convictions are possible when someone pretends to be a media person and tries to extort money; the crime is punishable by a maximum of 20 years imprisonment.

The Civil Code of the Philippines also contains provisions that can check abuses in the media as various provisions allow a disadvantaged party to seek damages. An individual can seek redress if a member of the media, for instance, pries into the privacy of his/her residence, meddles or disturbs his/her private life, causes alienation from friends or humiliation on account of religious beliefs or some other personal condition such as physical defects. A catch-all provision allows an offended party to file for damages against anyone who causes him or her harm.

Judicial sanctions, according to Avecilla, also exist for contemptuous behavior by the press when it engages in trial by publicity or comments on a case still pending in court. And when it criticizes the courts unfairly, it could be punished for contempt of court. These limitations on the freedom of the press, Avecilla pointed out, “have not been successfully challenged on constitutional grounds before the Supreme Court.”

When all else fails, any individual who is disgusted with the media always has the freedom to boycott whichever newspaper, radio or TV station is deemed to be deserving of it. “The boycott may mean actual refusal to patronize the mass medium in question or a refusal to advertise in it,” Avecilla wrote. The latter mode may even include the right of that individual to persuade his friends and allies to do the same — reminiscent of what President Estrada did to the *Inquirer*.

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when movie ads were withdrawn from it last year. Whether or not the latter is a press freedom issue, especially if it involves the highest official of the land, was, in fact, the subject of extensive discussions in the Philippine media. Avecilla was of the opinion that since no law provides that the mass media are entitled to financial support from government or the private sector, boycotts for whatever reason are not unlawful.

The existence of these statutory remedies has not obliterated the stigma of corruption or unethical practices on the part of the media. These have persisted through the years, in large part because there have been few libel convictions, for instance. As a whole, the press in the Philippines is given tremendous latitude and enjoys unparalleled freedom, with any abridgement of that freedom presumed to be unconstitutional unless proven otherwise. Yet as critics point out, freedom carries with it the burden of responsibility.

Cognizant of this and well aware that credibility is a priceless possession, enlightened members of the press have sought to create internal mechanisms and structures to rein in wayward members and protect industry standards. The more press laws there are, the more chances there will be for government to intervene. The media is better off regulating itself and warding off government, common thinking goes.

REGULATING OURSELVES

To date, the industry has two major regulatory bodies: the Philippine Press Institute and its newly-reorganized Philippine Press Council, and the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) is a non-stock, non-profit organization that monitors the performance of the media “as a pillar of democratic society” and publishes the quarterly Philippine Journalism Review. The publication keeps a tab on media issues and points out lapses in reportage. The CMFR however is not empowered to bring erring journalists to task; at the most, all it can do is provide a forum to discuss relevant media issues or provide a venue for peer review.

The reorganization of the Press Council in 1998 was a welcome development because it indicated renewed energy and momentum on the part of the media to police itself. A working press council is envisioned to give citizens who feel violated or aggrieved by a news story, or even the conduct of a journalist, some recourse other than the courts. If it works, the abuses of the media can be checked and even the court dockets could be spared from libel suits against journalists.

The Philippine Press Council traces its beginnings all the way back to 1965, its existence interrupted only by the declaration of martial law in 1972. It was resurrected in 1988, then became inactive, then was revived again in 1993. Every time it was in operation, it received a complaint or two.

It was in 1997 that the Council decided in favor of a complainant, recommending that the newspaper involved, the Philippine Star, correct itself. The case involved the use of a photo of Asian chess champions in Singapore that cropped out the complainant, Florencio Campomanes, then secretary-general of the International Chess Federation. Campomanes and a Star columnist,
Art Borjal, were then competing for the coveted chess post. Campomanes had written the newspaper to complain about the photo treatment but was not given any attention. He consequently brought the matter up with the Council.

The Council eventually decided that the Star was guilty of a professional violation by altering reality “for no acceptable reason.” It even went as far as threatening sanction, but nothing came out of it, prompting the complainant to file a case before the courts.

The Philippine Press Institute had also tasked the Council in 1998 to disseminate and promote throughout the industry a new “Code of Professional and Ethical Conduct” that had just been drawn up. Among others, the Code commits a journalist to “resort only to fair and honest methods” to obtain news, photographs and documents; and refrain from writing reports which will “adversely affect a private reputation unless the public interest justifies it.”

It also commits a journalist not to let personal motives or interests influence him or her in the performance of duties and not to accept or offer “any present, gift or other consideration of a nature which may cast doubt” on professional integrity.

“I shall accept only such tasks as are compatible with the integrity and dignity of my profession, invoking the ‘conscience clause’ when duties imposed on me conflict with the voice of my conscience,” the Code says. “I shall conduct myself in public or while performing my duties as journalist in such manner as to maintain the dignity of my profession. When in doubt, decency should be my watchword.” The spirit and intent of the Code is clear: integrity, professionalism, decency.

Consisting of newspaper editors and publishers, neither the PPI nor the Press Council could sanction erring members. As in the Campomanes case, it was helpless when the Star chose to ignore its admonitions. The most it could do is exert some moral suasion, if not expose the offender to a degree of public censure.

Intended to guarantee every news subject’s right of reply, the Council decides by consensus on specific cases and can require a newspaper to publish “the disregarded side to a story or an issue.” Learning from the experiences of the past, the Council today can cause other newspapers, besides the PPI’s own publication, to publish the Council’s findings on the case.

BROADCAST REGULATION

The broadcast industry has its counterpart regulatory arm in the KBP. Organized in April 1973, the association of broadcasters seeks, among others, to elevate broadcast media standards; promote and uphold constitutional freedoms, rights and responsibilities; and create a competitive environment conducive to growth and development.

Unlike print, the broadcast industry is regulated by government, represented by three agencies — the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC), the Movie and Television

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15 Philippine Press Institute case records.
Review and Classification Board (MTRCB), and the Videogram Regulatory Board (VRB).

The NTC issues licenses and permits, allocates frequencies, and oversees technical standards. The VRB, useful in protecting intellectual property rights, regulates, among others, the production, sale and distribution of videograms, discs and cassettes.

The MTRCB classifies film and TV programs, and disallows the broadcast of material that is “immoral, indecent, contrary to law and customs.” More powerful than the PPI, the MTRCB, also “prohibits materials which tend to incite subversion, insurrection, rebellion or sedition against the state.” Like the PPI, the KBP has its own Radio and TV Code which specifies that care must be exercised so that coverage is not sensationalized and does not incite or alarm the public. In recent memory, the latter prerogative has not been exercised and it is likely that an unreasonable attempt to do so would generate protests, if not stir up some controversy.

For news reporting, the Code, among others, says that it should be “factual, fair and as objective as possible.” It also prescribes “good taste” in the selection and handling of news. “Morbid, sensational, or alarming details not essential to factual reporting should be avoided,” the Code says, but the proliferation of tabloid-type of newscasts indicates that the standards of morbidity or sensationalism are subjective and therefore difficult to fully control.

Controversy broke recently — not over the latter provision — but over the suspension by the MTRCB of noontime male show hosts who were the subject of complaints of viewers offended by their off-colored jokes and commentary which bordered on the vulgar. Female beauty contestants who were clad in skimpy swimsuits were the object of the offensive comments by the TV hosts and were practically at their mercy. The KBP Radio and TV Code declares, among others, that “vulgar jokes which may offend the sensibilities of the audience and the viewers shall be taboo.”

Though they probably deserved the suspension, the KBP reasoned that public affairs programs, like news, should be exempt from review and classification because these are an extension of the news, and therefore covered by the constitutional guarantee of press freedom. The issue has been attended by prolonged discussion.

To help ensure compliance with the codes, the KBP early this year said it was setting up volunteer monitoring teams that will report offensive programs. The teams, according to the KBP, will be composed of citizens properly selected and accredited by them. Their reports of violations will then be the basis of complaints to be filed with the KBP’s enforcement arm, the KBP Standards Authority. Violators can be fined, suspended, and even expelled from the KBP. Whether or not this will work remains to be seen.

As KBP president Joselito Yabut put it, self-regulation is the better alternative to censorship which could threaten freedom of speech in the broadcast media. The PPI articulates the point and importance of self-regulation well: “Credibility is what others thinks of us. Ethics is what kind of people we are.”

NOTHING WORKS WELL ENOUGH SO?
Notwithstanding the elaborate efforts to police their ranks, the Philippine media is still beset by serious problems in the arena of ethics. Nothing seems to work well enough, although considerable gains have also been made in upholding journalistic principles and standards. The legal remedies are laughable and they are not desirable, but self-regulation has a long way to go.

It was been suggested that the membership of the Press Council be expanded. The premise here is that journalists are already too encumbered, they need help from other stakeholders in the media to help them help themselves. Because the Philippines has a vibrant civil society, it should be easy to tap non-journalists who understand and have an appreciation of the workings of the press to participate in the regulation of the media.

As previously suggested, sights must be set beyond the newsrooms and into the boardrooms to draw in "not only big business, but also newspaper dealers, political parties, public relations practitioners, political scientists, academe, (other professions) and nongovernment organizations. The more diverse the stakeholders are, the more dynamic the process could be. At the same time, involving more stakeholders could provide renewed impetus and fresh perspective to already jaded media practitioners."

Over-simplifications are dangerous though, and it is worthwhile remembering that a more diverse Press Council is not the be-all and end-all solution to problems of ethics. Nor is the mere existence of a press council a guarantee of a more ethical press. As American Robert Shaw, founding member of the Minnesota News Council, put it, "A council can never be inflicted on the news media, nor should it be. The news media must want it."

Already, it is easy to anticipate problems ahead. Journalists, for instance, will likely raise the following points or arguments against regulation of whatever kind:

1. Journalists and media practitioners as a whole tend to be anti-establishment and detest structured exercises. We thrive in anarchy and chaos which stimulate creative juices and strangely bring out the best story ideas. We loathe to be reined in like cattle. We defy classification, are proud of it, and consider ourselves one of a kind.

2. We are suspicious of government and wary of most forms of partnership that have the potential to stifle our independence and get in the way of our daily task of chronicling history and truth-telling.

3. We are natural skeptics. We are more comfortable with criticism and the bad news. We are empiricists, not doctors paid to give either prescriptions or solutions to the world's problems.

4. We are stubborn, we value our so-called objectivity, and are afraid that we could lose it through associations that go beyond journalist-source relations.

Indeed, the cynicism of the media is perhaps among the biggest obstacles to self-regulation. So intense is this cynicism that drawing up and effectively enforcing a national code of ethics would already be difficult. Going regional, even universal, would be a much more excruciating

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exercise.

Yet, faced with the reality of diminished credibility and the prospect of increasing alienation from its public, however, it would appear that the media has not much choice but to seriously search for options. Otherwise, what good would looking for and telling stories be if no one cares to listen?

It would be the height of irony for the anti-establishment media to opt for the status quo.

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Sept. 12, 2000
Kuala Lumpur