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Audience Research In The Philippines

By

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Audience Research in the Philippines

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To the distinguished sponsors of the workshop, my colleagues in the discipline and in the industry, my warmest greetings from Manila, under the new government of President Corazon Aquino. Last night during the reception, I was asked by at least five people from the group how things were in the Philippines right now and I remarked that for the most part, "they are better and starting to normalize." In fact, my being here is the best proof of that statement. Our domestic flights resumed one day after the revolution, schools and banks and offices opened shortly thereafter. The mass media operated with a relatively very short interruption and only because of the transition that was effected by the opposition's take over of what were then to be described as pro-establishment media. I am sure by now the developments in the Philippines are familiar to you. Depending on what source of information you are referring to, I would say your views and mine may be similar or totally different. And these variations, by and large, we can say are results of media influence.

Allow me to admit that my country paper will sound quite different from most others. The simple reason is that, I did not come prepared with a paper. I was a last minute replacement for a supposedly another Philippine delegate to this workshop. At any rate, from last night until this noon, I have tried to come up with what I may call a participant observer's view of audience research in the Philippines. The insights I am about to share are mine and do not necessarily reflect any official stand in the matter.

At this point, it may not be appropriate to describe a communication structure that is pretty much still in a state of transition. The February 7 snap elections and the consequent people's revolution that ensued thereafter commencing in the triumph of people's power that eventually forced President Marcos out of Malacanang on February 25, have left much work to be done and also much more to be desired.
Prior to these major political events, our communication structure was such that an office of media affairs, a huge industry by itself directly under the office of the President controlled practically all information that get disseminated to the public via the formal channels of communication - the mass media. Then, we had about five major newspapers emanating from Metro Manila, of which three were clearly described as crony presses because they were owned either by relatives or close associates of the First Family. We had five television networks that were also monopolistic by way of ownership by the government. Hence, they were perceived more as propaganda instruments rather than as vehicles of information and education.

Over at the Institute of Mass Communication where I am Associate Professor, we boast of a full-blown undergraduate degree programme that trains students in practically all aspects of communication research, notably we have specific courses on broadcast research and audience research. For the past 6-7 years, we have graduated at least one hundred communication researchers who are now well placed in government ministries if not in private companies. Within our disciplinary boundaries, the Institute has pioneered in studies that deal with how media affects knowledge, attitude and behaviour. By and large, these researchers have been geared towards the determination of media habits, media preferences and communication patterns, and how these affect the acquisition of development-oriented values. Of late, we have also tried to look more towards communication as a process, rather than as simple component part of human interaction, the emphasis being heavy on the receiver end of the famous SMCRE (Source-Message Channel-Receiver-Effects) model of communication. Thus we have also looked at how people in turn affect the mass media, rather than just the other way around. Outside of the Institute, audience research in the Philippines has been carried out separately or in collaboration between some of these instrumentalities:

1. Research departments of various government ministries
2. research diversions of major newspapers and broadcast stations
3. Commercial and private research companies/ institutions
   (i.e., marketing and advertising firms)

Now that the government is in place, the most relevant issues in media appear to be those that pertain to deregulation, and rationalization of ownership. The KMP (Kapisanan ng mga broadkasters sa Pilipinas), a private organization of broadcasters in the Philippines can now exercise utmost police powers as a self-regulatory body. But the concern of both industry and academe is how to make quality programs that are not only relevant, appealing and effective but are pervasive given the nature and the context of our socio-political system.

As you know, the Philippines is an archipelago of 7,100 islands in which a total of 186 dialects are reported to be in use. The challenge to most programmers is how to conduct audience research that would capture all the nuances and peculiarities of this diverse culture. Fortunately, with a literacy rate of 84%, there would be less of a problem in our country. But then again, when we think of how diverse still our audiences are with the economic classes ranging from class A to class F or even G, we begin to reassess the programming position.

The recent political developments in the Philippines I would say have unified us in a way. The triumph of people's power when looked at from the research angle can be a very rich and potent source of material for broadcast documentaries. It is in fact, a classic case of mass-based, bottom-to-top kind of communication worthy of in-depth study and analysis. We have proven to the world and to ourselves that we can be of one mind and body under extreme political and social pressure. This should serve as a cue to media planners and programmers.

But from out of all these socio-political events, a number of potential areas for audience research seem to have emerged. Briefly, these can be described as:
One, the sprouting of the so-called coffeshop talks were many policy-makers and decision-makers air their views on a number of current political, economic and social issues often seen or heard over the mass media of actual political circles.

Two, the so-called proliferation of feedback mails to newspapers and magazines and callers to talk shows, public affairs programs and the like, which can be the subject of serious and systematic research;

Three, the development of radio and TV forum, where listeners are deliberately invited for a discussion after a program is viewed or listened to;

Four, the study of other village communication centres as channels of information and sources of feedback.

These four areas represent to me potential sources of broadcast material if covered adequately and appropriately. As far as methodology is concerned, there seems to be a need to make pretesting of programs a regular activity. This can prove to be more cost efficient than the standard practice of evaluating programs after they have been aired. Systematic surveys should be done periodically but in the event that resources do not allow for such, audience researchers should encourage the development of more low-cost and innovative research methodologies such as the use of research fora small talks, focused group interviews and the like. It may also be worthwhile to explore more qualitative rather than purely quantitative approach to doing audience research.

Even as I was writing this paper there were many issues that keep up cropping in my mind, including those that have to deal with media ethics (i.e. use of grossly exaggerated estimates of viewership and listenership, the massaging of ratings figures in order to attract advertisement, etc.).

It is my hope that in this workshop we can have ample opportunity to
share, interact and verify our views on this very interesting and challenging topic of audience research.

I thank you.