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Problems Of News Gathering
And News Dissemination In The Philippines

By

Raul T Panares
POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REALITIES almost always combine to influence the flow of information from the source, to the media, and eventually, to the public. Not all the channels of information cater to the same public. Print and electronic media generally complement each other, but they differ largely in their target readers, listeners or viewers, in much the same way that the public has its own idea of which medium to patronize.

It is difficult to clearly establish whether or not the needs of the public are being adequately served in terms of news media efforts. There is the public that banners indifference in their media habits. For this type of public, news is a mere transition to other more pressing or pleasant pursuits. There is the public whose mind has been preconditioned to hear about developments according to their own perception or according to the perception of those around them. This is the type that merely wants confirmation of what they believe they have known all along because they prefer to think they are always ahead of the news. Then, of course, there is the public that craves sensationalism, whose flesh crawls at the sight of the gory of the extraordinary but whose day is made by just learning about something sensational. Finally, there is the public that is forever curious, who makes it their business to find out what is happening around them. This is the type that deserves to be served.
The political environment affects the output of any news organization, either directly or indirectly, negatively or positively. Under this heading may be incorporated the media policies, if any, of the political leadership of a given country and this becomes even more pronounced in third world countries.

In a martial law regime like that of Bangladesh, the news media practically walks on a tightrope. In progressive Singapore, there is the official secrets act. In Japan, where there is a great wealth of both technology and resources, there is the tradition that protects the privacy of royalty. In Malaysia, news appointments with government officials require clearance from the Information Ministry. Thailand is a kingdom, just like Japan, but it is one Asian country where sensationalism continues to flourish in tabloids.

Here in the Philippines, tabloids reappeared on the streets with the so-called lifting of the effects of martial law that seemed to signal the return of press freedom to a certain degree. The more enterprising publishers and editors bravely put up daily broadsheets and weeklies to herald the birth of the alternative press. It is to the credit of those who defied the dictates or xerox media manipulators that a semblance of press freedom has returned, followed by the emergence of a new dispensation.

But press freedom does not necessarily produce enterprise journalism. And enterprise journalism is what some news publications and some news broadcasts appear handicapped to develop.
An enterprise story comes close to what we call a scoop, something the competition doesn't have. But unlike a scoop that may just skim the surface of a story, an enterprise item digs deep into the news.

It is the general perception among media practitioners in this country that enterprise reporting died a natural death during the Marcos years. Prior to martial law, I belonged to a broadcast network whose motto was "News where it happens; when it happens." Immediately after its declaration, we were told that this could no longer be. Today, journalists who not only had a Marcos experience but also covered beats during the years preceding the last 20 necessarily had to readjust their style to savor the fresh wind blowing across a "liberated" terrain. Unfortunately for those whose journalistic spirit was stymied during the Marcos years without any previous reporting experience to speak of, that adjustment may be heard to come by. While we may have gained that precious "freedom space" for journalistic endeavors, there are still some of us who find it difficult to break away from the habit of being spoonfed with the news.

This lack of enterprising spirit can hamper a news journalist's quest for truth. Truth has many faces, as we all know. A journalist whose only business is to take down and relay to the public what he gathers from a press conference may be doing the public a great disservice if he takes the statement of his source as gospel truth.
In the Philippine media today, there is unfortunately a preponderance of such shallow news reporting. It is not unusual to hear of a government official or a private individual complaining about "unfair or unbalanced" treatment from newsmen and broadcast commentators. To a degree, this freedom space that we have won, can and do, carry pitfalls which may have fallen into. Lately, there has been a rash of both spirit and broadcast commentaries that have bordered on libel, irresponsibility and in general a lack of proper journalistic ethics. Some quarters hold that his sad situation is brought about by the sheer competition for readers, viewers and listeners. It is axiomatic in our business that the more readers, viewers or listeners a media outlet has, the more revenues are derived which can in turn be used to meet operational costs and register profits.

This is where the second factor affecting news gathering comes in: Economics.

While the more dedicated reporters may operate above expectations within a tight and lean news organization, others may feel cramped and ill-equipped to flesh out a story that needs following up. In many instances, only the journalist's dedication to their profession sustains their interest to whip up stories and keep up with the level of satisfaction their editors demand.

This challenge to professionalism becomes even more acute in broadcast journalism. While pen and paper and, maybe, a still camera, are all a print reporter requires
to produce his story, broadcast (television) news reporters require the presence of a backpack cameraman and a lightman. Teamwork is essential in producing a good story for television news.

Some local networks have managed by sending a reporter-cameraman combine, to cover legitimate news stories. In this set-up, the reporter or the cameraman may double as the driver or the lightman of the team. In some instances, rather than lose out on video, a TV newsdesk would just send out a cameraman-lightman team and later try to gather the story by checking the wires or comparing the skeleton team's input with what a friendly competitor already has. It has become a common practice among producers or editors to swap video or stories, provided such video takes or stories are not labelled exclusive by the network that has them.

Let me just digress a bit and venture into some pertinent statistics just how much it costs for any television station to form an electronic news gathering team. In order to establish a new ENG team, the basic technical hardware you would need would be the following: a 3-gun camera with a video tape recorder costing at least $21,000, lighting accessories costing at least $6,000 and a vehicle costing $190,000. All in all, we are talking about a P1.2 million peso investment that does not include the tapes (P500 per if you are lucky to find them), used to record the news and the staff complement of at least three (3) people.
Another predicament that sets in among news broadcasters is that of mobility. There are news stories that cannot wait for a reportorial team to arrive at the scene. In this classification fall such stories like fires, suicides, hostage-taking, airport or seaport arrivals and departures and press briefings where the briefer has his own deadline and cannot be bothered by post-mortems.

A broadcast newsman does not customarily rush to the scene without his usual teammates. Unless properly motivated, a complete news team has a hard time getting its act together on time. Here, logistics or the lack of it becomes the culprit.

Processing the news materials and putting the finished product on the air again puts a strain on the economic factor of news dissemination. The 2 30-minute editions of our news costs the network ₱303,000 every month in production costs alone. Putting this costs in perspective, this amount would be enough to pay for the total operating cost of an above average provincial radio station for a period of six (6) months.

The situations discussed so far are found in the urban setting. The problem is worse when you try to disseminate news to the countryside.

In the history of Philippine television, RPN Channel 9 holds the distinction of having covered strategic areas reached by the small screen nationwide through
the facilities of domestic satellite or domsat. From January, 1981 to December, 1984, RPN 9 had this wide-reach link-up that transmitted news stories simultaneously to the provinces as they were viewed in Metro Manila. But the sheer cost of domsat transmissions at P1,230 per minute made it economically untenable. However, last August, RPN 9 inaugurated the use of what is called the terrestrial microwave that links Manila to Cebu and Bacolod. In turn, telecasts from the two southern points are received off-air and translated simultaneously to around 20 broadcast areas throughout the country.

Mentioning this transmission capability is important when the issue turns to news dissemination. It is a fact in the Philippines that many points separated by long distances from Manila do not receive vital news information on time but mostly on a delayed basis.

At RPN, we recognized this reality and deliberately programmed a 30-minute daily television report via the domestic terrestrial microwave for the duration of President Aquino's U.S. visit. That public service cost the network P80,000 in transmission costs alone for the 11 days that we went on the air. But at least a significant portion of our provincial televiewers had the opportunity to view the coverage simultaneously with the Metro Manila audiences.

When we speak of news, we speak of today or of what happened the day before as in the case of national dailies which also serve as reference on radio news programs catering to the information needs of local communities.
There is a sense of urgency in relaying to the public significant developments that are in their interest, or in the national interest, to know.

The prohibitive cost of transporting broadsheets to the provinces by private aircraft has turned the only domestic airline in the country into a monopolistic carrier of national newspaper to the countryside. The haste or the delay that attends the distribution of newspapers to the provinces depends largely on the flight schedule of the domestic carrier.

While readers in the South may get their newspaper deliveries the same time readers in Manila get their city edition, other readers in Luzon have to wait until high noon or afternoon to get their copies of the day's news.

Radio, by far, remains the most effective channel of news dissemination in the Philippine countryside with the immediacy that attends its broadcasts. However, it is saddled with the problem of manpower to put up its own network of reporters for local stories. Very few radio stations, even in Metro Manila, can afford to put reporters on the payroll. And for those that can, their coverage is usually limited to Metro Manila.

This situation can be frustrating for regular radio listeners who have the advantage of reading newspapers every day. More often than not, radio stations that rely mainly on newspaper reports come out with stale information on the air.
Of the very few radio networks that maintain its own news departments, I only know of Radio Mindanao Network that does twice-a-day feed to its 5 major provincial stations from Manila using direct-dial telephone lines. This service costs the network ₱30,000 in telephone bills every month.

It is my belief that the broadcast companies are unable to properly disseminate the news to the rural areas not out of a lack of the spirit of public service but rather because of the sheer economic costs involved to maintain the kind of service for up-to-date news.

In conclusion, news coverage and dissemination in the Philippines and other parts of Asia whose political and economic situations run along parallel lines, still leaves much to be desired especially in the rural areas.

In our country more specifically, I am, on the whole, optimistic that these two basic problems will find their respective solutions in time. Of these two problems, it is my opinion that the economic dimension may take a longer time to find a solution. There are hopeful indicators though which will crash the problem-solution time horizon. These are: 1. a perceived need for news by the people; and 2. a perceived optimism in economic growth. These two indicators could and can combine to bring about the situation which the poet calls "...... nearer to the hearts desire".

Thank you.