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Training Journalists: A PFA Commitment

By

Manolo B Jara
Country Paper: Training Journalists: A PPA Commitment

By Mr. Manolo B. Jara
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Manila, Philippines

In our profession, we often hear that: "Writers are born, not made." That is perhaps true, especially in the not so distant past when—as in the case of the Philippines—all an aspiring journalist had to be equipped with was the facility to write good and grammatical Spanish or English. Of course, such requirement is on top of qualities like the nose for news or journalistic enterprise, the ability to get along with people and so forth.

But that is all over now. In this age of fast changing technologies in communications, the innate ability to communicate in a simple, direct and easy to understand style of reporting is no longer the easiest way to enter the profession. And this is particularly true in Asia where the need to instill in journalists a new value system and a sense of mission relevant and appropriate to today's social milieu in the region becomes urgent.

More important, perhaps, is that this urgent need should be viewed against disturbing trends that threaten the practice of our profession in this part of the world. In most of Asia today, governments have imposed constraints on the media; in other instances, some governments have clamped down on the media, relegating them to virtual mouthpieces of the powers that be.

In this light, a new breed of journalists, dedicated to the profession and able to face challenges, becomes necessary. But in another way, Asia today needs journalists who are socially relevant. And by this, I mean journalists who are not contented with just reporting news on the traditional standard fare of newspapers like crime, politics and scandal.

Toward this end, the Press Foundation of Asia (PPA) is helping develop this new breed of journalists. PPA does this through its training program which it has pursued since the foundation was established in 1967. The ultimate aim is to make
the Asian Press "live, perform and prosper in a growing and troubled region while staying honourable."

The training of journalists under the PFA program is conducted mainly through seminars and workshops. Since its founding, PFA has already conducted more than 90 such seminars and workshops covering a wide variety of topics like development, business and economics, agriculture, environment and population.

PFA hopes to accomplish this mission of professional journalism training in other ways. For instance, we offer internships to Filipino journalism students. The internship program is, however, limited simply because of our limited resources and personnel.

It works this way: every year two to four journalism students in their junior year are assigned to Depthnews, the news and feature agency of PFA. Their stay with Depthnews lasts for one to two months, usually during the summer vacation. While there, they learn the ropes, so to speak, in feature writing, desk work and news coverage.

This internship is now a requirement for graduating journalism students in the Philippines. The Metro-Manila dailies, both in the Pilipino and English languages, also offer this internship to journalism students.

Likewise, PFA has an on-going arrangement with the East-West Center in Honolulu whereby we send a young journalist to the Center for three months. The purpose here is for the journalist to write development-oriented stories from Honolulu for Depthnews. In short, the journalist is Depthnews' man on the beat at the East-West Center, enabling the journalist to gain a wider perspective.

At the same time, PFA accepts interns from outside the region, mostly young Americans. Their stay with us is funded by the Luce Foundation through The Asia Foundation. Known as the Luce Foundation Fellows, they are seconded to Depthnews where they work for a year, doing development-oriented news features and assisting editors at the desk.

These, then, are PFA's small contributions toward professional journalism training in the region. We recognize that such training is essential. But at the same time, there are problems which tend to limit the scope of training in the region. I'll cite a few.

One is the indifference of journalists to further training. This is especially true of the so-called veteran journalists who believe they don't need further training because experience has provided them all the skills that they need.
Another problem is the low priority that some media groups give on training. To them, training is more of an expense than an investment in human resources. Thus, they allot very limited time and budget, if at all, to training.

There is also the lack of trainers for these programs. Not many competent journalists have the time or are willing to teach part-time in journalism schools which are criticised by some quarters as too academic. Or if a competent journalist does have the time and is willing to teach, he may not necessarily be a good trainer.

But despite these problems, we at PFA feel that training is essential to produce that breed of journalists who are dedicated, able to face challenges and attuned to the growing needs of the Asian media.