

The Community Press In The Philippines

By

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A paper delivered by Manuel P. Meajorada, editor-in-chief of the (Western Visayas) Daily Times, before the Workshop on the Rural Press in Asia, June 19-21, 1990, Singapore.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

This paper on the status, problems, and prospects of the regional/community press in the Philippines is based on interviews, informal surveys and published material. The interviews were made over the last two years when the author had several occasions to sit down with the editors and publishers of community newspapers, particularly from the Visayas and Mindanao regions. The notes taken down during those casual interviews proved valuable in shaping the views and perceptions about the community press which this author presents in this paper.

A PROFILE.

The typical community newspaper in the Philippines is generally still a one-family venture, in most cases an offshoot of a printing business. Except in major cities, regional/community newspapers usually come out weekly, and survive mainly on income generated from government advertisements and legal notices. These small newspapers constitute nearly 90 per cent of the rural press, and could be described as poor, ill-trained and ill-equipped organizations. There are many small newspapers which still use outmoded letter-press machines which require slow handsetting of types.

A number of small weekly newspapers exist to promote the interests of politicians in their communities. It serves as their mouthpiece, whether to project their image or attack their political enemies. Such newspapers survive on subsidies given by politicians, or through government advertisements obtained at their behest. Hence, it is not surprising that few small newspapers could really become truly free and independent. It's either these newspapers are not financially stable enough to resist pressures in the small communities or allowed only to publish approved material by their sponsors.

The more viable newspapers exist in the big cities, where rapid business growth and competition provide the life-sustaining advertising income. A study conducted in 1979 supports this view when it reported that "almost all the community newspapers which existed in the Southern

Tagalog region in 1975-1978 served urban communities."¹ The high literacy rate and higher income structure in the big cities give the newspapers a wide readership base to generate good circulation. This explains why daily newspapers thrive in Cebu, Davao, Cagayan de Oro, Zamboanga, Bacolod and Iloilo cities in the Southern Philippines, and not in slow-growth cities like Tacloban, Dumaguete and Tagbilaran in the Visayas region. The introduction of desktop publishing technology has given newspapers, especially the dailies, a cheaper alternative to computerized typesetting which would require millions of pesos in capital.

Almost all regional/community newspapers are published in English. An earlier study on fifty-seven newspapers in the provinces showed that nineteen newspapers (33.33 per cent) were published in English while the rest used a combination of English, Pilipino and other dialects.²

Circulation.

Based on independent surveys and published data, the Cebu newspapers (Sun-Star, Newstime Daily, Freeman) are considered the biggest in circulation among rural newspapers at 10,000-12,000 daily, followed by Davao (San Pedro Express, Peryodikong Dabao) and Iloilo (Western Visayas Daily Times) at 4,000-5,000. The two Bacolod dailies, Daily Star and News Today, come out with an average of 1,500 copies daily. No data was immediately available on the Cagayan de Oro and Zamboanga newspapers. It is interesting to note that many newspapers exaggerate their circulation figures in an effort to attract more commercial advertisers. The lack of a reliable auditing process in the regional communities make it difficult for advertisers to really place the exact circulation figure. The figures indicated in this paper are based on frank admissions of the editors of these papers.

Most of these daily newspapers reach readers around the regions they serve, being based in the regional centers. About 70 per cent of circulation of the dailies are concentrated in the metropolitan centers, where the pace of life is faster and people have to depend on newspapers for a quick glance at the news. Subscription is still the number one distribution strategy adopted. Deliveries are made by company newsboys or sales agents who are given a certain percentage of the price. At present, daily newspapers in the Visayas and Mindanao regions sell at P2.75 to P3.00 per copy (approx. \$0.15). News stand sales also contribute substantially to circulation income.

1 "Factors influencing the survival or discontinuance of community newspapers: A backgrounder on the Southern Tagalog region," Violet B. Valdez, Media Asia 1979, page 214.

2 "A broad profile of the Philippines Provincial Press," Rebecca Maceda, Media Asia 1979, page 209.

The daily newspapers are able to attract more commercial advertising because of (1) the bigger readership (2) higher income structure of its readers and (3) effectiveness in "delivering the message across." The advertising space bought by commercial and business firms depends on the pace of progress in the community. The Cebu newspapers, for instance, enjoy much higher sales than its counterparts in Iloilo, Bacolod and Zamboanga cities. An average edition of a Cebu daily like Sun-Star consists of 36 pages with about 70 per cent going to advertising space. The (Western Visayas) Daily Times comes out with 10-12 pages on the average with about the same ratio. Government advertising is another major source of income for daily newspapers.

On the other hand, the weekly newspapers have circulation between 1,000 to 1,500. In the case of The Capiz Times (Roxas City) and Negros Bulletin (Bacolod City), subscriptions make up for about 20 per cent of total circulation, with the rest being distributed for free among government agencies and business firms. The Negros Chronicle (Dumaguete City), in existence of the past 17 years, has managed to reach 80 per cent subscription level for its 1,200 circulation. A study conducted on the provincial press indicated that some small newspapers may not even have been reaching half of the readers they claimed to have.³ The main source of income for weekly newspapers is government advertising and notices. The Negros Chronicle has a remarkable 50:50 ratio between commercial and government advertising.

Age does matter.

Almost all the daily newspapers in the Southern Philippines are under 10 years old. The Sun-Star of Cebu started operations on November 25, 1982, but managed to overtake the much older Freeman in circulation and advertising sales in less than three years. The Cebu Newstime-Daily hit the streets in the middle of 1989 only, but is already a strong contender in the Cebu market. The Iloilo-based (Western Visayas) Daily Times started operations as a six-day daily newspaper on July 25, 1988. The growth of business in the major cities is clearly a major factor in the operation of daily newspapers in those communities.

It has also been noted that the younger newspapers are far more aggressive than the older, more established ones. The Visayan Tribune of Iloilo had been operating for almost 20 years before it collapsed in 1987 due to the old age of its publisher-editor. The Bag-ong Kasanag, also in Iloilo, is 37 years old, but is nothing more than a bulletin board

3 "A broad profile of the Philippines Provincial Press", Rebecca Maceda, Media Asia 1979, Page 209.

for government notices. On the other hand, the (Western Visayas) Daily Times started as a weekly in 1985, then expanded into a daily three years later. The Visayas Monitor (Iloilo) began operations as a weekly in November 1989; it quickly expanded into a bi-weekly in less than five months. Another fairly young newspaper, the Panay News (Iloilo), went bi-weekly in 1989 after being published as a weekly since 1981.

The martial law years (1972-1981) had discouraged talented journalists from pursuing their careers in newspapering. Many went into early retirement or took jobs in private business or government, resulting in a shortage of experienced journalists. A "Media Asia 1979" study noted that the "shortage of journalists appeared most acute in Bacolod City," where three newspapers were sharing what amounted to an "editorial staff pool."⁴ That observation remains valid in Bacolod City until today. Because of this, a new generation of young, aggressive, and often reckless journalists have taken over important and responsible positions in the community press. Few have formal training in journalism. A study conducted by Theresa V. Hembrador revealed that among seven editor respondents, "not one took up a formal course in journalism" but only had journalistic experience before assuming editorship of the paper.⁵ In Iloilo, the emerging crop of editors and reporters are under-35 years old. Almost everywhere else in the country, reporters of community newspapers are mostly fresh from college. This is both healthy and disconcerting for the rural press: on the one hand, the aggressiveness and idealism of these reporters will help shape a more independent community press; on the other hand, the recklessness of youth might spell trouble and jeopardize the credibility of the press.

Ownership:

As stated earlier, community newspapers are usually owned by families who already run a printing business. This is origin of newspapers like the Aklan Reporter (Kalibo, Aklan), The Capiz Times (Roxas City), News Express (Iloilo), (Western Visayas) Daily Times, and many others. The Daily Star (Bacolod City) is owned by a corporation with the editors and reporters as stockholders themselves. The Sun-Star of Cebu, The Freeman (Cebu), Peryodikong Dabao (Davao City) are owned and managed by closed family corporations.

Because of their rag-tag army organizational structures, it is next to impossible to determine just how profitable most community newspapers are. But the fact that many weekly newspapers that have existed for more than 10

⁴ *ibid.* Page 212.

⁵ "Factors influencing the survival of community newspapers: A backgrounder on the Visayas and Mindanao regions," Theresa V. Hembrador, *Media Asia 1979*, page 217.

years without making overt moves towards improving quality is an indication that profits are barely enough to sustain their week-to-week operations. Accounting systems for small newspapers were found crude, if not totally non-existent. The daily newspapers maintain good accounting systems and records. However, access to income statements is almost impossible, as these are tightly guarded by the owners who don't want employees to really know how things are going.

PROBLEMS:

Two things stand out as the most serious threats to the survival of the community press in the Philippines. The first is the financial aspect in its operations, which is internal pressure. The second is the threat against the lives and property of people working in the community press, which is external.

FINANCIAL ASPECT:

It is safe to assume that nine out of 10 community newspapers, especially the weeklies, barely earn enough to survive, much less introduce improvements to their organization, facilities and equipment. One study reported that "three editors claimed their papers were earning a reasonable profit; three said theirs were earning a small profit; only one modestly claimed his paper was breaking even."⁶ In the City of Iloilo, there are no less than five weekly newspapers which contain almost nothing but government notices, yet don't hire their own staffs to report the news. The government requirement for certain documents and proceedings to be published in local newspapers is the lifeblood of these newspapers. These newspapers don't bother to improve anymore, as the income they generate barely gives them enough profit to pay for salaries.

Based on interviews with the publishers of Bag-ong Kasanag, Times Herald, Visayas Progress Recorder in Iloilo, it costs no less than P3,500 (\$175) to print the 1,000 copies (8 pages) they put out in the streets every Monday. The overhead costs for salaries and office expenses are not yet included. These newspaper organizations don't own printing equipment, hence, have to utilize commercial printing presses to run the paper for them. (Almost all weekly newspapers use photo-offset printing.) This increases the costs substantially, as the (Western Visayas) Daily Times is printed at an average cost of only P2.50 (\$0.125) per 12-page copy. Advertising income from businesses is out of the question for the weekly newspapers mentioned here, as few people really buy them for the news.

The Capiz Times in Roxas City, also in Panay island, is able to publish at a lower cost since its publisher owns his own printing press. The same is true with the News Express

6 *ibid.* page 218.

in Iloilo, which is perhaps the only weekly newspaper with a permanent editorial staff and an aggressive sales force.

Based on these figures, the publisher of a small weekly newspaper would need about P200,000 for the first year of operations. Philippine laws require weekly newspapers to be published for one year before it could be qualified to publish government notices. Hence, the most crucial period --- the make or break part --- of a small newspaper's existence is the first year of operations.

To put up a daily newspaper, it is estimated that a minimum capital of P1-million would be needed for the venture. This assumes that printing facilities are already in place. If not, another P2-million would be required.

The average Filipino relies more on radio to get the information he needs, especially the news on current events. Only the middle class regularly reads newspapers, and in most instances in the provinces, prefer to buy national or Manila-based newspapers. That most small newspapers come out weekly make them less attractive, as most of the news have long become stale when the papers hit the streets. This is one reason why few community newspapers are able to reach circulation levels beyond 1,000 or 1,500. Experience has shown that it's only the dailies which are able to break that invisible barrier, and enjoy the advantages of economy of scale. The low circulation levels of most community newspapers contribute to their poor financial viability.

Another internal problem many community newspapers have experienced relative to the financial aspect is the low salaries they could offer to journalists. Informal surveys conducted among daily newspapers in Iloilo, Bacolod and Cebu show that the average salary of a new reporter is P1,500. Provincial editors tend to be an overburdened, underpaid lot.⁷ Since journalists possess the writing skills which many business firms and government agencies demand, newspapers stand little chance of attracting good reporters and editors. In the case of weekly newspapers, the publisher oftens serves as editor, reporter, lay-out artist and, in a few instances, even as delivery man, to cut on operational costs. This makes it difficult for many small community newspaper publishers to really get the respect and credibility they need to be effective.

Other problems frequently cited in the provincial press are:⁸

1. The high costs and shortages of printing supplies, particularly newsprint;
2. The lack of printing equipment or more modern printing equipment coupled with the difficulty in getting financing to obtain same;

7 "A broad profile of the Philippines Provincial Press", Rebecca Maceda, Media Asia 1979, Page 211.

8 *ibid.*

3. The scarcity of commercial advertising that has given rise to dependence on legal notices, actually a form of government subsidy; and

4. Frequent power interruptions that result in costly production delays.

EXTERNAL THREATS:

Filipino journalists could be classified as an endangered species because of the many unsolved murders of editors, reporters and broadcasters. Despite the financial pressures, there are many community journalists who stand bravely and expose anomalies committed by government officials in their areas. Because these communities are often small and tightly knit, the crusading journalists come in frequent contact with the objects of their attacks. This exposes journalists to constant threats of physical violence or even death. No less than President Corazon Aquino expressed concern over the unsolved killings of 16 journalists in the country over the past five years.

Even journalists in the bigger cities are not spared such threats of violence, despite the fact that law enforcement is more strict than in smaller communities. Just last week, the provincial governor of Iloilo made a veiled threat against this writer because the former didn't like the series of stinging criticism in his columns against his administration. However, it is encouraging to note that harassment from local military personnel⁹ whose abuses are exposed in newspaper articles, a serious threat in the past, have greatly reduced. But journalists still feel uncomfortable with the threats that abound in their midst. This affects the ability of many journalists to perform their work as effectively as they should. Unless the government is able to protect journalists against this form of threat, the rural press might just be forced to be tame.

An indirect form of coercion which is financially-related comes from politicians and influential persons in the community who could pressure businesses to stop advertising in newspapers which earn their ire. Of course, the perennial threat of a costly and time-consuming libel suit is another form of coercion which hampers editorial work greatly. This makes many editors and publishers cautious about publishing sensitive stories even if these clearly affect the public interest. The press can easily be muzzled this way.

PROSPECTS.

The finding made in a study 11 years ago that "the Philippine provincial press is alive and doing as well as can be expected in the face of the many problems that

9 *ibid.*

handicap its operations" still holds true today. In fact, many better-run newspapers have emerged in the bigger urban communities like Iloilo, Cebu, Bacolod and Davao. This is an indication that rural communities are making a gradual shift from radio to newspapers as their main source of information.

Perhaps the biggest prospect for community newspapers lie in the thrust of the Philippine government to encourage the establishment and growth of industrial estates in key cities outside Manila. The business boom that is expected to follow this move will also fuel the growth of newspapers, as this would mean more advertising income and wider readership base.

The availability of cheaper word processing and desktop publishing technology will also encourage more newspapers to abandon antiquated printing processes and improve its quality. Journalism or mass communication is gaining popularity among talented students and the lack of trained reporters would no longer bother editors and publishers in the next three to five years.

The concern shown by no less than President Aquino about the unsolved media murders might just prod police and military authorities to be more vigilant in guarding the safety of the working press, particularly in the rural communities.