



EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE: THE PRESS AND THE PUBLIC

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Every case of democratic transition is different; each experience has its own peculiar dynamic. In the Philippines, democratic restoration looked back to its past history as a republic, an extended experience in the holding of elections, in press freedom and in constitutional government. This history led foreign observers and Filipinos as well to think that recovery would be simple enough, forgetting other issues embedded deep in the country's culture and politics which has made democratic nation-building quite difficult, such as a feudal land system and traditional patronage politics, among others.

Our democracy work must now move beyond the form and look beyond the holding of free and fair elections and the promotion of free market enterprise. Unfortunately, even with elections, representative government can continue to fail to be representative of public interest. Even with constitutionally protected freedoms, there can be continuing repression and violation of basic rights. Even with a free market, there are many left out or cut off from the flow of goods and capital. Even with free speech and free press, the public forum can be manipulated, resulting in confusion, in a lack of national dialogue and the failure of national consensus.

Too often, Filipinos say that the confusion in the public forum and the inefficiency of governance is part of the democracy. But the problem also lies in the lack of understanding about what democracy is about and what citizens must do to make democracy work. Meaning, every democracy has to graduate from the disorderly clash and turmoil of competing elite forces in society, the groups which hold a disproportionate amount of the country's wealth and who are ruthless in dominating electoral or parliamentary contests.

Democracy requires a common vision that binds a people together, shared by both rich and poor, held by the different groups who may be speaking different languages or of different faiths. Even opposing partisan groups must be able to look to the same goals and agree more or less in how to achieve these goals. Such consensus requires certain mechanisms that allow society to hold sustained and constructive dialogue among its participants, a conversation that can lead to compromise among conflicting parties, leading to unity.

It will help to look at democracy issues from another prism – by examining the public sphere or public life, through which democratic society conducts a continuing dialogue and discussion among citizens as equals, in other words, democratic communication.

Role of the Press

Promotion of good governance and market reform involves the participation of the press. All effective governance requires communication. In democratic or un-democratic systems, journalistic media allow a society to communicate about political issues, posing questions and providing answers about the use or application of economic and political power. In the case of democratic government, the press must involve the people, not just public officials. The press must be, first and above all things, free of government control. But freedom from government is only the first step. Making freedom meaningful to those who are poor and powerless is more difficult to do but it remains a most urgent issue for democratic societies, which is why press freedom requires responsibility in practice.

When People Power brought down the Marcos dictatorship and liberated the media from government control, the press got back to business quickly. But it became obvious that the simple application of journalistic conventions did not provide as a matter of course the kind of news and public information that is useful to the public as citizens with responsibilities. The conventional criteria for news draws the press away from issues that are difficult and complex. The conventional criteria for news seek out the newsmakers, the celebrities, the public figures and the public forum often leaves out the greater majority of the people from the exchange. Ironically, the press panders to the masses through the tabloid newspapers that trade mostly on stories of sex, scandal and crime. The commercial market for news does not always insist on disseminating what is relevant and significant. And journalists in such a culture may not have the skills and aptitude to make what is relevant interesting to the public.

Press Responsibility

It was in this context that in 1989, the Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility (CMFR) worked not only to strengthen and protect press freedom but also to establish a framework of responsibility and ethics in the practice of the press.

Unfortunately, responsibility has become a coded word among press freedom advocate circles. Thus, most media programs have concentrated on professional skills training, on investigative reporting, information access and protection against threats and attacks. These are all important. But responsibility and self-regulatory mechanisms are necessary aspects of the institutional growth. In developing countries, a free press without a sense of responsibility becomes quickly a creature of the competing powers, interested primarily on the commercial growth of its member media organization.

CMFR has broadened the scope of responsibility programs to provide training opportunities so journalists can learn about social and political issues that are the context of news events. It also builds up seminars addressing broad concerns for electoral reform, gender and

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women issues, the marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities, and peace and conflict resolution. Because governments do not always place the issues of the poor and powerless on the front burner, the press must keep the discussion of their concerns alive and urgent in the public forum.

Press reform is best undertaken from within the press community. The fact that journalists themselves are involved has been significant to the relative success of our efforts. CMFR establishes the journalistic rationale and the editorial values in our strategies, but we work with academics and with other civil society stakeholders so that the press can understand the broad perspective of issues and the news they report.

Our continuing programs include building up self-regulatory mechanisms, which promote transparency and press accountability. These include media monitors or journalism reviews, and citizen press councils.

To insure continuing education for journalists, we conduct seminars and training on issues as these arise in the news. These have included seminars/roundtable meetings or workshops on economic and business issues, on political questions such as the impeachment of President Estrada, on women and gender, the conflict in Mindanao, criminal justice system, among others.

Awards for Best Practice

CMFR has established an awards system whose selection process has become a model for other journalism awards. It conducts one of the most prestigious awards programs in the country. The Jaime V. Ongpin Awards for Excellence in Journalism has promoted the practice of investigative journalism and more recently, explanatory reporting. This category promotes the kind of articles that help the public understand the issues and how government works, what policies are about, and how or why certain programs or policies fail.

This way the public becomes aware of the context of bad policies, corruption or wrongdoing. That way, the public is alerted about what can go wrong in government and its impact on the market.

Conclusion

In the end, the role of the press as watchdog is not as important as the role of the public as watchdog. The pressure for media correction must come from the people themselves. Thus, after 12 years of experience, CMFR hopes to be able to develop a long-term program for developing media literacy, opening up seminars and workshops to the public about press freedom and responsibility and about their own responsibilities as citizens in a democratic republic. Traditionally, such learning has been given to the school system to accomplish; but

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the strain under which the education systems work in many developing countries compel us to our part in increasing opportunities for public learning about the press as a critical issue in public life. The press and the public must both work to improve the effective communication vital to effective democratic governance.

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