

The Relationship between Media and Parliament in the Promotion of Ethics

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The media has evolved in its function from simply being the reporter of events and news, to one which articulates and shapes public opinion. Whether this shift in roles is borne out of a real demand from the public for more competent coverage and comprehensive content, or merely out of competition, the media has assumed a pivotal position which we must maximize if we are to effectively communicate our various political agenda and the inner workings of our parliaments to the general public.

Media Freedom, Filipino-Style

The Philippines nurtures one of, if not the most democratic media in the Asian region. Democratic in the sense that generally one need not fear reprisal or repression obtaining from the expression of one's opinion and views. This is not to say that such a right is free of any threat, just at least not on a systematic basis.

The Philippine media is democratic as well in the sense that there are no sacred cows beholden to the truth. The media might not be able to get a complete picture, but this is not a picture obscured by any state apparatus designed specifically to tailor news and views in favor of those in power.

The democratic tradition of the Philippines is perhaps the decisive factor in allowing such freedom of the press in the country. Despite, or perhaps even more so because of, the imposition of Martial Law, the Philippine media retained its ability to dig for the truth, bring it out, and be critical. At the time of the Marcos dictatorship, legitimized by a rubber stamp parliament, the critical, subversive media was known as the "mosquito press", shattering the placid myth that was being propagated by reactionary media outlets that were only too willing to kowtow to the dictator's wishes.

Against the supposed picture of development and progress under the one-man rule of an authoritarian regime, the mosquito press brought out the stories of massive human rights violations: displacement of communities, summary executions, extra-judicial killings, and the terror that raged in the countryside.

The ouster of that dictatorship; and the ratification of the 1987 Constitution recognized the invaluable role of the media in keeping the powers of government in check as the institution in a position that could best inform and educate people. This owes to the very nature of media that makes it able to reach the broadest number of people most efficiently. It is thus enshrined as a principle in the Constitution that no law would be passed abridging the right to expression. It is a freedom vigorously defended by

practitioners and one which government, including parliament is bound to respect and promote.

Under this environment the media thus takes on three primary roles: as an instrument of information, an agent of change through its investigation of stories that require substantial exposition, and as an implicit regulator over government's actions in its disposal of authority and functions.

Media Exposes Corrupt Parliamentary and Government Ethics

The power of the media to expose and increase awareness was best exemplified not only by the mosquito press under the Marcos regime, but far into the administrations that subsequently took power. In 2001, a string of news reports, detailed and exact in their account, helped bring to light the shady deals, unethical behavior and the graft that underlined the Estrada administration. For years, various groups had been opposing the Estrada administration on the level of policy-making, with the vague notion that behind the decision-making processes within government was a line of corrupt acts that betrayed the public interest.

But it was the series of articles produced by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism which provided the public with the specifics of such acts. In its coverage of the former President's unexplained and/or undeclared assets and business interests, the public became aware that they were being taken for a ride. This created a pressure so strong that parliament had to take stock of loyalties and political alignments, which consequently resulted in the House of Representatives, led by a Presidential ally, impeaching the President for culpable violations of the Constitution, graft and corruption, among others.

Media's Shortcomings

But in an era in which the media continues to be driven by consumption demands, whether real or imposed, sound-bites inevitably take precedence over substance. Against the daily rush to beat deadlines, the pressure of economic sustainability and the vested interests of media owners, media performance is wanting not only in style but more importantly in substance.

As correctly pointed out by the Manila-based Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility:

One of the failings of the transition from (the Marcos) dictatorship is the prevailing lack of a truly informative media system. The press may be free in the Philippines but the media do not focus on their role of public information and education. The press promotes its role as watchdog and has taken up investigative reporting to expose wrongdoing. But the daily news agenda also generally leaves out relevant information that the public needs to know about, favoring exciting or more colorful news instead. Unfortunately, the public has not acted as a vigilant and critical consumer of news, either.

Media are often quite content to follow the political agenda set by the candidates. And reporting follows the colorful celebrities in the political field, exploiting personality and image. There are several factors that explain such media conduct. Among these are the lack of skills and competence of working journalists, the news values that dominate the selection and treatment of stories, and the corruption that has tainted journalistic practice.¹

Such factors make their impact known sometimes when media finds itself unable to sustain issues to their rightful resolution. It won't be long before another story makes the front page, then another story and so on. The overwhelming flurry of issues seems too much, that there is not enough time available to concentrate on one before "consumer demand" shifts to other concerns.

It thus becomes even more important that the media develops itself into not only a vibrant counter-balance to the excess of government, but an efficient Fourth Estate that can live up to the highest demands of professionalism and relevance.

Coming from a Third World country it becomes even more important for the media to go beyond the agenda laid out by the government in order to serve news that can contribute to critical thinking among the general public.

As an example, the Philippines ranked a shameful high in the list of countries prone to corruption according to Transparency International. Corruption is an endemic feature of its political life, almost inseparable from its cultural life. The demand for ethical conduct is thus understandably high for government officials. In its particular context, ethical standards should mean that legislators are the very first to abide by the rules which they themselves set out to promulgate.

It means that legislators conduct themselves in a fashion that would foster an environment in which the electorate, the governed, can feel secure that those who are vested with the mandate to carry out their will have their interests at the top of their priorities and that they receive the primary consideration in these decision-makers' actions and decisions.

Ethics does not only refer to the way parliamentarians comport themselves in public. It covers the entire set of values expected of decision-makers. Ethical standards dovetail perfectly with the universal values of accountability and transparency, and this is where the media comes in, in the performance of its functions as watchdog, educator and investigator all rolled into one. The ethical standards of parliament as it relates to norms of behavior can best be emphasized by parliament's ability to impose the rule of law in an environment that actively promotes and defends the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of the governed.

¹ Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, Report on Monitoring of 2004 Elections, April 26, 2004, taken from www.cmfr.org

Thus in its failure to demonstrate consistency and coherence in governance, parliament and generally those in government will find themselves under the probing eye of the media, which will in turn dispose of its natural obligation to report this to the public. After all, in the purest sense of democracy, it should be the public who will be the ultimate judge of its own government's actions through the ballot or through the streets.

Blurring the Line between Government and Media

Despite and perhaps in spite of all its flaws, the media is in an indispensable position to expose and propose, to deconstruct and demystify, articulate and expound. Not a few individuals have seen and harnessed this potential, which is why crossing over between the two realms – government and media has become common place in the Philippines. Politicians write columns for newspapers or appear as television talk show hosts, while some journalists have gone on to assume elective positions in government.

Such phenomenon has blurred ethical boundaries and further complicates the interplay between vested economic and political interests and the media. Against a backdrop in which the media is often merely viable as economic forces allow them to be, the economic interests of media owners and how this affects their story treatments are also put into question.

As a classic example, the Philippines' biggest television network is eerily silent, if not blatantly slanted in its stories about the privatization of the concessionaire that delivers water to households and commercial establishments in the capital city, and is generally lenient on stories revolving around electricity rates especially concerning a particular distribution utility which, like the water concessionaire is owned by the same family that also owns the said television network.

To some extent this also extends to other media outfits whose owners are also involved in other businesses. Not much has been done on the problem, thanks in no small part to the recognition among politicians that the media has the potential to unmake political careers.

What this all leads to, is the conclusion that media is not entirely beholden to anyone. There are interests that limit and define the information we are treated to, and media is not a value-neutral institution that merely presents facts, but in fact often misses some of the more important details and trades sensationalism in lieu of analyses.

Accuracy, fairness and balance are all ideals that are often subjected to the realities of newsroom politics, personal biases and source constraints. Even media is cognizant of this, but it bears noting that if the watchdog of government is itself laden with inaccuracies and imbalance, can we blame the public for becoming cynical and jaded?

The Party-List Experience and the Role of the Media

This is not to say that the media has been totally remiss in its duties. Actually, nothing could be farther from the truth. For party-list representatives representing the

underrepresented and the marginalized, the media proves to be an invaluable ally in some of the issues that have been championed within AKBAYAN, and in the work we do as Chairperson of the House Committee on Civil, Political and Human Rights.

A party-list representative is elected not as an individual but as a nominee of a party, which is a radical departure from the dominant practice in Philippine politics in which Representatives are elected through geographically-defined districts. The party-list system sets aside 20% of all available seats in parliament to party-list representatives to come from the underrepresented and marginalized sectors of society. As representatives elected through their parties and not as individuals, party-list representatives are therefore serving their mandate on a mantle of programs and platforms, in contrast to the patronage politics exercised by majority of district representatives who run as individuals under paper political parties. It is thus ideally the party-list representatives' goal that their incumbency in the legislature contributes to the attainment of programmatic politics.

Against this context, not only in a few instances did party-list groups – find themselves relying on the media to disseminate and communicate their stand on various issues to the public.

For one, the media was relentless in its coverage of the bribery attempt which AKBAYAN exposed in 2001 related to the passage of the then-proposed Energy and Power Industry reform bill, which this party-list opposed. When its representative was given a brown envelope containing half a million pesos at a time when there was no quorum which was required to deliberate and act on the measure, we took the issue to the media, believing as we still do that the money was a bribery attempt.

That incident allowed us wide latitude to expound on the various issues surrounding the energy sector reform we were pursuing, which was not faithfully embodied in the EPIRA bill at that time.

That episode was a prime example of how media can effectively intervene in promoting ethics in government as the story brought to light a dubious practice that was perhaps tolerated within the institution but never brought out until AKBAYAN's representative spoke up about it.

Through that incident, the media was able to exact accountability from the government, as the House of Representatives took pains to explain why it did not follow on with an investigation on the incident.

In recent times, the media also proved an invaluable ally in other issues, such as AKBAYAN's ongoing campaign on the criminalization of extortion activities among armed non-state actors, including the communist-led New People's Army. We had filed a bill criminalizing their "permit-to-campaign" fees imposed on candidates running during elections and we successfully brought the issue to the attention of the media and not before long, it was a huge issue that drew support from various social actors. The media was also relentless in condemning the practice; and various stories of failed

collections, harassments and intimidation and even kidnappings soon followed which helped bring across our point over the unacceptability of the practice.

Resolutions

It is safe to say that at the very least, the media has not been remiss. It has just been falling short of expectations. In its role as an educational arena, as a probing investigator beyond the obvious and the blasé, as an articulator of social concerns, the media has a lot of catching up to do.

How then, with inherent weaknesses in both of them, can we strike a delicate balance between the roles played by government and the media as independent institutions keeping each other in check? How can media effectively promote ethics in government when its own ethical standards are often put into question by the forces that influence it as well? How can government and specifically parliament contribute to the unfolding of a more democratic media which is able to perform its role as watchdog without fear of reprisal?

The answer lies in reforming both institutions from within. The media should be continuously aware of its own shortcomings and take positive steps to uphold the integrity of the profession even as we recognize the pressures imposed by economic feasibility and the need for instituting professionalism.

At the same time, government, specifically its parliament must put in place the necessary protection needed to ensure freedom of the press. Intimidation, harassment and physical harm are just some of the most serious threats that limit press freedom. The environment of fear which is even more pronounced in less democratic societies must be eliminated. Perhaps in other countries the issue of expression as a political right takes itself on as a central issue, but this is no less true in the Philippines where between 1991 to the present an average of a dozen killings and other crimes against journalists occur each year.

Upgrading the professionalism in media is also a key to ensuring that it is insulated from the same unethical practices that pervade government. Continuous skills training should equip journalists with the necessary handles that would enable them to question what is apparent, and dissect the truth for the intricate story that it usually is.

In aid of such a goal, AKBAYAN served as the principal author of a measure, House Bill 6671, otherwise known as the Access to Information Act which stipulates that the public, and in effect, the media, must be assured of access to relevant information necessary in ascertaining government decisions, policies and actions.

It must be kept in mind that the ultimate goal of having a vibrant media keeping government in check is to help government face itself to reassess its ethical conduct and institute the necessary reforms in aid of the common good.

The highest principle against which the media will be ultimately judged is in its ability for telling the truth even if it hurts, with no favor for nor fear of anybody. The government must respect and promote this ideal. Otherwise good governance which is essentially tantamount to an ethical government remains a futile goal for which we will merely endlessly aspire.

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