

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Media and Freedom

Despite globalization, the fate of most Filipinos depends on what social class they belong to, and/or whether or not they have access to the landed upper class and the merchant elite. As a rule the wealthy become wealthier while the poor remain poor. Elite origins are the surest way to riches and even power.

The members of the Filipino elite today are the modern-day versions of the *caciques* who expanded their wealth and power through diversification into trade — export-import, wholesale commerce, banking, real-estate, and assembly-manufacturing — thus adding to their wealth not merely through inheritance but through their aptitude and skills in manipulating the market and through rent-seeking.

Since colonial times, individuals and families from the poor and middle classes have developed asymmetrical ties of social exchange and mutual obligations with individuals and families from the upper classes.

On the one hand, the poor become dependent on the rich and powerful for credit, access to jobs, farm and residential landholdings, and personal security and protection. In exchange, they give their patron, their political loyalty, and provide unpaid services in the manner of serfs serving their lords.

Landed political clans dominate local and national politics. Inheritance and connections determine the selection of political candidates, who either belong to or serve as protégés of, these landed and business clans. As a result, generation after generation of the same political families remain in power.

More than ever, Philippine politics and electoral exercises are assuming a merchant character. Local ward leaders buy votes and sell patronage in return for political allegiance. It is common knowledge that half of the necessary funds for elections are spent in vote-buying. Vote-buying does not appear to the electorate as unethical. It is regarded as a positive sign that if elected the candidate will continue to dispense patronage through dole-outs. In return, the politician obtains a franchise to conduct public office and to pillage the treasury.

Those who bankroll candidates later collect by securing political favors for their business and other interests. It is an open secret that Congresspeople and their cronies overprice pork barrel projects by 50-80 percent. Bribery is often viewed by politicians as commissions in their

role as political brokers or as traders between business and government and between government and the citizenry.

While in modern societies the middle class as advocates and articulators of a political agenda and interest groups exert a significant influence on, and play a pivotal role in the conduct of party politics and electoral contests, the middle class in the Philippines plays a subordinate role in a politics dominated by patronage. The major political parties serve only as convenient electoral alliances espousing programs that present no real choices for middle-class as well as poor voters. Aside from patronage in the form of vote-buying, the typical selling point of a politician is his image, cultivated through mass communication and by public relations practitioners. At the national level, the ability to project a popular image has become an essential element of victory in Philippine politics.

The country's premodern, pre-democratic and pre-national culture and social fabric constitutes the context of today's media. It is this culture that shapes the three paradoxes in Philippine media and freedom. These are:

1. Philippine media is free but not free;
2. They allow for freedom, but stifle freedom; and
3. They are powerful but powerless.

Two forces stood out as pivotal in the ouster of ex-presidents Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada in 1986 and 2001, respectively – the mass media and civil society. Despite efforts to muzzle the press, dissent found its voice in these two occasions to compel changes in government.

Media forces and institutions have also asserted their rights in various ways. Some of these ways are documented by Victor Avecilla in this issue of *Plaridel*. It is in this legal sense that media in the Philippines are free.

Many factors, however, serve as deterrents to this freedom. One is government power. There is an interconnection between freedom and power in media firms. A franchise has to be obtained from Congress to own and operate a radio and/or television station, for instance. Permits and licenses to operate a media firm must be secured with proper documentation that the applicant possesses the financial and technical capacities to operate the enterprise. Numerous permits also have to be obtained for related business transactions, such as the importation of

equipment and the construction of facilities. Government therefore plays an instrumental role both as a regulator and as a key factor in the financial health and technical competitiveness of media institutions, especially television.

On the other hand, a media firm with unlimited financing can wield not only superior power in the short term but also greater freedom to operate in general and in the long term. But that freedom is premised on government non-interference in the content and discourse of Philippine media.

The relative absence of effective financial, technical and legal power in the hands of the Philippine middle-class has disabled civil society and limited its access to the media.

A culture of subservience among the middle class, who constitute the majority of the workforce of the press, and limited critical political discourse confine the issues discussed in print, in the airwaves and in the Internet to trivial issues like personal squabbles among politicians and movie stars, or to fragmented accounts on what is happening in the country and in the world.

This leads us to the second paradox — that while the Philippine media may serve as sites for the free exercise of expression, they nevertheless serve to stifle the same freedom.

Radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet serve as venues for the expression of various opinions. Cable TV was among the media used by the people of the Cordilleras to source alternative information unavailable during Martial Law. E-Lagda showed us how media can serve as organizers for political purposes. Taboo topics, independent video and underground music have found space in the Internet. Community radio gave a voice to otherwise unheard sectors in small far-flung communities in the country, and Leticia Tojos discusses in this issue the role of participatory video in empowering communities.

Despite these inroads, however, Philippine media in general hardly contribute to grassroots participation and democratic culture. Middle class organizations virtually have no political influence. The powerlessness of the middle class proceeds from its relatively small size, its subordinate status to the elite, and its financial weakness and inability to generate funds for patronage and public relations. The poor suffers from even more disadvantages than the middle class in terms of their role in business and financial power. Hence, they are imagined in media only as victims, martyrs, subjects of local variety show patronage, and

helpless beggars for donations from rich and upper-middle-class benefactors.

Instead of empowering the poor with reflexive analyses of their vulnerability and marginalization, most media materials, especially in television, only exploit their poverty. The content of media addressed to them promote a culture of patronage and hopelessness.

Lastly, while media greatly manifest their power through representation — discourse and videostyle — it is still powerless. Media's powerlessness proceeds from structures within the media that prevent them from presenting a more holistic picture of Philippine society. Electoral choices are in fact further delimited and set by politicians who are able to control media spaces through advertisements and other media vehicles.

The media's powerlessness also stems from the institutionalization of media processes and products like news. Delimited by geographic space, time, the search for factual information, the legitimation of sources, and the need for dramatic video in the case of television, the discourse of news is the discourse of the elite. And most of all, the powerlessness of media emanates from a pre-modern, pre-democratic and pre-national Philippine society and culture.

This issue presents a kaleidoscope of the many variations of open, latent and hidden manifestations of the interplay of media, freedom, power and influence that touches on different aspects of pre-modernity and pre-democracy in Philippine society. I hope that going through these materials may inspire the reader to delve beyond surface democracy and modern consumption to uncover what lies beneath.

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