

An Overview of the Mass Media Situation in the Philippines

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uploaded 22/03/2015

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/overview-mass-media-situation-philippines-rene-guioguo> (24/08/16)

The Philippines boasts a rowdy and vibrant press that likes to think of itself as the freest in Asia. With the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986, a 14-year-old system of media controls collapsed overnight. Into that vacuum rushed dozens of new newspapers and radio and television stations as old Marcos-controlled media outlets folded or were taken over by the new government. A pluralistic, but somewhat anarchic, media industry came into being. There is strong popular support for a free media among Filipinos. In part, this is because of a tradition of a fighting, anti-colonial press. Successive waves of coloniser: the Spaniards, the Americans, and the Japanese during World War II, used the press in pursuit of the colonial agenda and imposed stringent censorship. However, a series of anti-colonial movements also employed clandestine newspapers in their fight against the colonial masters. To this day, the samizdat tradition remains strong, with anti-government groups continuing to publish underground papers or, since the Internet, putting up guerrilla Websites. The Philippine media are the products of a turbulent history, reflecting the upheavals and changes that have shaken the country since the advent of colonialism in the 16th century. They have been shaped by a succession of colonial regimes, which implanted in the Philippines a press system much like those in the United States. The aspirations and ambitions of the Filipino elites also moulded the media.

The following general patterns can be observed in the evolution of the Philippine mass media. First, newspapers, radio and television have long been privately owned, and have developed into very market-oriented media. Most of the time, they are devoted to tabloid and sensational reporting, and they are mostly closely connected with large and diversified corporations and these have at times put limits on what got reported. Second, in the face of attempts by powerful groups including politicians to control the media, particularly through bribery of media practitioners and/or threatening the businesses of media owners there is always the counter balance of middle-class and "intelligent" audiences that demand better mainstream coverage. In short, the media, in order to compete and become economically viable have been forced by their audiences to adopt a much more critical stance, and this opened the way for independent journalism to emerge and for journalists and media practitioners to be sensitive to public opinion.

Radio and Television

In the Philippines, radio has the biggest audience among all the mass media (85 per cent), followed by television (74 per cent) and print (32 per cent). Philippine radio today has become a huge, thriving industry. There are as of 2006 at least 971 radio stations --- 375 AM and 596 FM. This is an increase of 276 radio stations within the span of eight years from 1998 to 2006 (last available figures from the National Telecommunications Commission). Of these, 51 radio stations or less than 10 percent fall within the categories of educational, government, military and religious. Radio ownership nationwide is estimated at 86%; in Metro Manila, 9 out of 10 households own a radio set.

Noteworthy is the fact that there are fifty radio stations in the Metro Manila area, indicating overcrowding and fierce competition for the limited advertising pie. No other metropolitan area in Asia is likely to have this many radio stations. The biggest concentration of radio stations is in Luzon with 40 percent, followed by Mindanao with 35 percent and Visayas with 25 percent. Another characteristic of Philippine radio is that majority of the stations belong to a single corporation or broadcast network, indicating media power concentration in the hands of a few corporations. The biggest is Radio Mindanao Network with thirty nine radio stations today, an increase from thirty four since 1998. The second and third largest networks are the government-operated Philippine Broadcasting Service with thirty three stations and GMA Network with thirty two stations

For television, there are 100 stations throughout the country, 12 are in Metro Manila. Among the biggest national stations are the ABS-CBN Broadcasting Company Channel 2 with 26 affiliates nationwide and GMA Network Channel 7 with 42 affiliates nationwide (as of 2009). Satellite and cable technologies have virtually made universal access to broadcast media possible. For example, ABS-CBN television reaches approximately 90 percent of the population. The network is linked with the Pan American Satellite (PANAMSAT), which provides its program to all cable operators and direct-to-home markets within the satellite's footprint. Through a cable television system, it can reach Filipino communities in

the San Francisco Bay Area of the United States. Similarly, GMA Radio Television Arts Network reaches the entire country through its thirty stations nationwide. Filipinos in Southeast Asia, Hawaii, Guam, Saipan, Canada, and the United States can tune in to GMA-7, either through Mabuhay satellite or cable television systems.

UHF television broadcasting is also fairly strong with such channels as Southern Broadcasting Network (SBN Channel 21) and Molave Broadcasting Network (Channel 23) which were the first commercial stations to broadcast on the UHF band in 1992. SBN 21 features "global-oriented" program from the World TV a local VHF channel, while Channel 23 carries MTV programming as received via satellite from Hong Kong's Star TV. Others followed after the initial success of these stations: Byers Communications Channel 68 became the first Pay-TV channel; Rajah Broadcasting TV 29 the first home shopping channel; and Radio Mindanao Network Channel 31 the first all-movie channel. There are also two UHF stations in Baguio City and Cebu City.

The most phenomenal growth, however, has been in cable television. The growth of early cable television, introduced in 1969, was stunted during the Marcos regime, because of a decree granting exclusive franchise to a business ally of the former president to install and operate cable TV nationwide. This decree was abolished by President Aquino in 1987. The introduction of satellite programming by TV networks ABS-CBN and GMA in 1991 spurred interest in cable television. Provincial community antenna TV (CA TV) systems have been set up to receive broadcast signals from stations originating in Manila. Metro Manila based on 2009 data is one of the most advanced urban centers in Asia with respect to cable TV where two major cable systems, Skycable and Home Cable, offer sixty channels or more. There is no public broadcasting service in the Philippines. Instead, the country has the Philippine Broadcasting Service - a State-owned radio with 31 radio stations nationwide—and the National Broadcasting Network Channel 4, a State-owned television network. Both operate under the Office of Press Secretary. Government broadcasts however, are perceived as the propaganda arm of the state and suffer in terms of viewership, having the lowest audience share in the market.

The two biggest media networks are owned by companies of wealthy families. ABS-CBN is owned by the Lopez family and the GMA network by the Gozon-Duavit-Jimenez family. ABS-CBN is a multimedia company that has aside from owning TV stations all over the country, also has 20 FM and nine AM radio stations, and subsidiaries and affiliates in video/audio postproduction, film production and distribution, and audio recording and distribution. It runs a cable TV network and is a cable TV and Internet provider. Furthermore, it owns a number of magazines and printing press. The GMA Television Network is also a multimedia company, and has subsidiaries and affiliates in film production and distribution, music and video production, FM and AM radio stations and Internet-based distribution sites.

In recent years, radio has also been one arena where media power has been rigorously exercised. The "public service programme" which allows listeners to call in to complain about a problem in their neighbourhood has become deeply rooted in the Philippine media. These programmes provide airtime for public criticism of government officials, even debating with them when the latter call to defend themselves, and demanding explanations and quick action. They serve to persuade government agencies, mired in bureaucratic inaction, into doing their jobs. In this sense these programmes, like much of the Philippine media, are monitoring the government to ensure that the system somehow works.

Another public service station, ANC Cable Channel 21 which belongs to the ABS-CBN media group, because of its 24-hour news format, has also made its mark in its extensive coverage of public hearings of Congress and other live news events and thus establishing an immediate and proximate link between events and Filipino audiences nation-wide. The role of ANC in the exposure of corruption and malfeasance by members of the Arroyo government in Congressional hearings have been instrumental in bringing down the weight of public opinion against President Arroyo and making her one of the most unpopular presidents since the establishment of the Philippine Republic in 1946.

2.2. Print

Philippine print media might be categorized into two: the metropolitan press, printed and circulated mainly in Metro Manila, and the community press, based and disseminated largely in the provinces. Sometimes newspapers in the provinces are referred to as the provincial press, or local press, but the term more commonly accepted and used by Filipino journalists is community press. The term rural press is generally eschewed in the Philippines because strictly speaking there is no rural press here. There is a metropolitan press, composed of thirty dailies (twelve broadsheets and eighteen tabloids), four weekly

newspapers, and forty-one magazines, at least two-thirds of whose circulation is in Metro Manila. The 30 daily newspapers have a claimed circulation of approximately 7,286,274, and only about 30 percent of this circulation goes to the province. Then there is the community press, 552 local publications circulated mainly in the small cities and big towns (as of 2005). In the provinces, there are 55 dailies, 44 weeklies and the rest coming out less often than once a week. Beyond these big towns, usually the provincial capitals, there are practically no print media in circulation.

There are thirty dailies in Metro Manila as of 2005, a decline from fifty in 1998. Of this total, twelve are broadsheets and eighteen are tabloids. There was a brief period in the decade of the 1990s, after the press had just regained its freedom after fourteen years of Martial Law, when dailies proliferated. It was a period of a free, licentious and rambunctious press. But it looks like the press has settled down and the number of dailies has stabilized into less than half of that number. Perhaps the laws of economics are beginning to catch up. Media scholars have always argued that Manila, like most big cities in the world, can support only so many newspapers profitably; perhaps not more than six.

Of the thirty dailies in the Greater Manila Area today, nine broadsheets are published in English and three in Chinese, while seventeen tabloids are in Filipino and two in English. This indicates that the broadsheets are the quality papers that cater to the English-educated elites and middle class of Philippine society, while the tabloids cater to the blue collar, less-educated readers. Total claimed circulation of the 30 Metro Manila dailies and 1 weekly was at 7,453,272 in 2005, not much more than the 7,011,056 circulation of the 50 dailies in 1998 (Philippine Media Factbook, 2005 and 1998). So while the average circulation of the dailies has increased from 140,221 in 1998 to 240,428 in 2005, according to the newspaper claims, the total circulation of daily newspapers has not increased that much. There are about half a million more Filipino newspaper readers today, a decade later, while the population has increased by more than ten million for the same period.

Of the total Metro Manila broadsheet and tabloid daily circulation of 7,453,272, about two-thirds, according to industry estimates, remains in Metro Manila, and one-third goes to the provinces. This would be about 4,919,158 copies for about 10 million people in the Greater Manila Area, or a diffusion rate of about one newspaper copy for every two persons. This is a high diffusion rate, comparable to that in Japan, the highest in the world. But the newspaper readership in the provinces is very much lower. Although the print media is positioned at the third place among the mass media (after radio and TV), it has an 82 per cent reach in Metropolitan Manila, which has a population of some 10 million and is the country's business, political and cultural centre. Print media may thus be surmised to be as influential in the capital as television, which has a reach of 96 per cent among residents.

English is the predominant language in both the national and community press, although some community newspapers were being published in two (English and Filipino, the national language) or even three (English, Filipino and a local language) languages. The national newspapers print between only 10,000 and 400,000 copies daily, while the print run of the community newspapers ranges from a low of 50 copies to a high of 45,000. The Philippine Daily Inquirer or The Inquirer, is the most widely read broadsheet newspaper in the Philippines, with a daily circulation of 260,000 copies—a 52-per cent share of total circulation of broadsheets in the country. Other big newspapers are the Manila Bulletin, the Philippine Star, Manila Times and Business World. A problem for the reach of the growth of print media is the country's functional literacy rate. According to the results of the last Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey, about 48.4 million or 84 per cent of the population aged 10-64 years old are functionally literate which means that a substantial number of Filipinos (about 16 percent) cannot access newspapers.

Electronic media: Internet

The Philippines was linked to the Internet only in March 1994, when the term Internet was already a byword in Europe and the United States. Much of the credit for this goes to the Philippine Network Foundation (PHNET), a group created with the support of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST). The original members of PHNET were the University of the Philippines Diliman, University of the Philippines Los Baños, Ateneo de Manila University and De La Salle University (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia>, 2007). PHNET set up the countrywide computer network in two phases. Phase 1 began in July 1993 and linked DOST, UP Diliman, UP Los Baños, Ateneo de Manila and De La Salle University. Phase 2 expanded the network to twenty members, including the University of Santo Tomas, University of San Carlos, St. Louis University, Xavier University, and

Industrial Research Foundation (<http://www.ph.net/about.htm>. 2007).

In 1996, two years after the introduction of the Internet, the Philippines had an estimated 40,000 Filipinos using it. The number grew to 2,000,000 in 2000, and to 7,820,000 in 2007. About half of the Internet users are in Metro Manila where only 13 percent of the population lives. The fast increase in the number of Internet users could be attributed to the increase in the number of commercial Internet Service Providers, the rise in telephone penetration, the lowering cost of personal computers, increase in computer literacy, and greater affordability of Internet access. Although telephone penetration was low for a long time because of the monopoly by the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co., Internet Service Providers (ISP) together with other entrepreneurs put up shared facilities and networked computers typically hooked up via dial phone lines to ISPs, commonly referred to as Internet cafes. Most of the slow dial phone Internet connections were eventually replaced with broadband connections in a few years.

Today there are as many as 5,000 Internet cafes in the Philippines, according to industry estimates. They are patronized mainly by students and most of them are located outside Manila. Through these Internet cafes, Internet access is made more affordable for students and young people. As of 2006, the Philippines had more than thirty known online news publications, although some had been inactive for some time. This figure includes only those that provide news as their main service, ranging from online versions of print newspapers to online daily newspapers, online weekly newspapers, online news magazines, and online newspaper-television joint ventures. Many of them are based in Metro Manila; the others are in the provinces. INQ7.net, a joint venture of a television network (GMA 7) and a major national daily (Philippine Daily Inquirer), claims the biggest readership.

News Coverage

After the 1986 People Power Revolution, there has been significant growth in the coverage of environmental and women's issues, science and technology, civil society and many areas that had previously either been ignored or only marginally covered. Before the declaration of martial law in 1972, there was at best minimal reporting on the environment, virtually nothing on human rights, and no mention at all of women's and gender issues.

The attention given to underreported and unreported subjects resulted from an increased awareness amongst journalists after 1986 that these previously neglected areas were crucial to an understanding of events in the country. As a result of this neglect, Filipinos had a distorted sense of what was going on concerning such issues. The media attention that they now receive is one of the major achievements in the history of the Philippine media over the last 15 years. This focus has encouraged a new mind-set, now concerned with what is current and relevant. It has led to some exceptional reporting on issues including information technology and government performance, areas critical to Philippine life in the 21st century.

A statement from Lin Neuman of the Center to Protect Journalists (CPJ) perhaps best describes the current situation of the media in the Philippines: "The best of the contemporary Philippine media are very good and remain a bastion of muckraking courage. Public issues are widely discussed in print and broadcast media, and there is almost no official control. Unlike most Asian countries, it is unheard of for the Philippine government to successfully keep embarrassments and flaws out of the media. But the damage done by Marcos' martial law remains. By dismantling the structure of the press built up over previous decades, Marcos weakened the professionalism and ultimately politicized the media to a staggering degree. Sadly, corruption in the media is common. Salaries are low and businesses and politicians often buy favorable coverage. Some radio commentators use their microphones to peddle influence, and the military has also used radio journalists to foment unrest against communist and Muslim insurgents."

Despite the progress achieved by media, there are still many areas where it has not been able to provide a fair and balanced coverage, including economic, ethnic and regional issues. The lack of professionalism of some journalists, the politicisation of the media, lack of pluralism, and hate speech are amongst the challenges faced by the media in the Philippines. These are in effect linked with other problems such as attacks against and murder of journalists.

A content analysis by the Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) revealed the imbalance in news coverage of the country: only three of the 11 newspapers examined—the Manila Bulletin, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and the Star—have a special section for provincial news. Among them, only the Bulletin has a special page devoted to the three major islands—Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. The

other two papers alternate the regions in one provincial section. Sheila Coronel in her article “Philippine media: Free but not Diverse” stated that regions where the poorest Filipinos reside are rarely covered in the news, nor are they represented in much of television programming. News about the most impoverished provinces in the country is rare, except when chaos or calamity strikes...” News about minority groups is also lacking.

The sensationalism, inaccuracies and other unprofessional practices of the Philippine media have become so pronounced that they have encouraged calls for the regulation of the press, sometimes by journalists themselves, despite the protection of the 1987 Constitution’s Article III. So far these calls have not prevailed because the media and its civil society allies, as well as liberal politicians, have resisted efforts to institute government regulation of the media.

Like their counterparts in most other countries, the Philippine mass media are first of all commercial enterprises controlled by political and economic interest groups. As commercial enterprises, they are focused on profitability, or at least the minimisation of losses, which at the outset creates a conflict between the private interests of the mass media and their public service function. Among other consequences, the commercial imperative has driven the mass media to sensationalism, emphasising what will sell newspapers or boost ratings, and into the suppression or slanting of news unfavourable to the interests that control the media.

In the aftermath of the 1986 People Power uprising which ousted President Ferdinand Marcos a restoration of press freedom took place, restrictive laws governing the media, including those that required a government permit to publish newspapers, and which allowed, on national security grounds, the arrest of media practitioners critical of government, were repealed. This relaxation was followed by the arrival of poor ethical and professional standards of the media. Key problems included the corruption of practitioners by government and business interests; inaccuracy; and biased, unbalanced reporting; sensationalism and dumbing-down—usually in the form of reports that exaggerated the importance of events, or that focused predominantly on sex and violence.

But then concerned media practitioners in both the academe and in practice, have also realised the need to examine themselves as institutions vital to democratisation and development. The media became news subjects themselves, as they grew more pervasive and influential. The founding of media advocacy groups, among them the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, indicates a growing realisation within the profession of the need for self-evaluation and self-regulation in a democratising society. The issues of ethics and responsible reporting are also of concern to such groups as the Philippine Press Institute (PPI).

The most significant gain of Philippine journalism after 1986, has been the growth of investigative journalism in an environment still burdened from the martial-law period by the legacy of secrecy. The establishment of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) in 1989 was crucial to the monitoring of governance, and has brought the watchdog function of journalism to a new level of professional commitment. It was rejuvenation for print as well as broadcast.

What is clear is that for all its problems, there are individual journalists in the Philippine media, even in the most timid and most acquiescent of Philippine newspapers, who succeed in reporting the news accurately. For them, the task of gathering information and reporting is a day-to-day struggle with editors and even with owners, an on-going struggle that is extremely complex, characterised by small victories, narrow escapes and many defeats.

Provincial media

The principal media markets in Mindanao are in the cities of Zamboanga, Davao, General Santos, and Cagayan de Oro. There exist local newspapers in these areas that are published on a daily or weekly basis. Local radio stations are the predominant means of mass communication but television is also making a strong presence with the prevalence of cable TV providers that draw in national and international programs to the average homes in the provinces. With the growth of commerce and businesses in Mindanao, national broadcast networks and Manila based newspapers have also established their local connections. Then again, that has been often been the case with stories on Mindanao, which, like the other regions, always runs a very poor second to Metro Manila. In fact, it has only been in the past decade or so that many broadcast and print institutions in Manila thought of setting up news bureaus in key cities in Mindanao, to cover the daily occurrences that make news in the smaller communities of the country. The bureaus, of course, also act as a guarantee that the parent company is not scooped by the competition in the event something big breaks out.

In broadcast, ABS-CBN leads the pack with the number of bureaus in Mindanao; it has major bureaus

in Zamboanga, Davao, General Santos, and Cagayan de Oro, capable of going live anytime. It also has satellite bureaus, which have more limited newsgathering and editing capabilities. GMA, for its part, relies primarily on its sole Mindanao bureau in Davao.

Print media have generally had it better, not in the least because most print correspondents are hired as stringers, feeding stories as needed by Manila, with the minimum of capital outlay (read: ballpen, paper, and perhaps a camera). The Philippine Daily Inquirer is one of the exceptions; the paper has a fully staffed Mindanao bureau, with smaller offices in Cotabato and other key cities.

The system of local bureaus is generally efficient. More than anyone else, local reporters obviously know their areas of responsibilities and their news sources. Their familiarity with local culture, history, and even language and geography, gives the local reporters the added edge.

For the most part, this kind of set-up runs itself -- at least until the next crisis gets Manila's eye. Then Mindanao suddenly finds itself playing host to a thundering horde from Manila. Despite their having local stringers or correspondents at the scene, Manila newsrooms have traditionally insisted on sending troops from the central office to cover a major conflict or crisis in Mindanao.

Media laws and regulation

Unlike many other countries, there is no body of laws in the Philippines that may be called Media Laws. Instead, certain laws apply to the mass media as well as to other groups and persons. There is also a substantial body of jurisprudence, part of the law of the land, which upholds, limits, modifies and otherwise interprets the constitutional provisions related to freedom of speech and press (Article III) or otherwise affecting the media and freedom of expression (such as Article IX on the Commission on Elections, and Article XVI prohibiting foreign media ownership). The press tends to be regulated by extra-legal forces—the power of government over the business enterprises of media owners, the power of the advertisers, and the ideological shackles that unknown to many media practitioners often shape their responses to public issues, thus hindering flow of information during a crisis.

There are no licensing, registration or membership requirements in any media organisation for media practitioners in the Philippines. For media organisations themselves, the powers of the National Telecommunications Commission are limited to the allocation of frequencies to TV and radio stations, and do not extend to supervision over content. Print publications need only to register as business enterprises.

Philippine media in perspective

Philippine mass media are shaped by various factors, not least of them the preferences of media consumers and the attempts of the media industry to cater to them. These preferences, however, are not written in stone. They shift over time, responding to changes in for example, culture and demography. The media industry itself exerts a profound influence on consumer tastes by producing content that it thinks the public wants and which the public consumes simply because it is there. Consumer preferences in one market are also prone to the contagion of foreign influence. A volatile political situation may alter consumer preferences overnight and turn upside down the media industry's most careful calculations about what consumers want. The history of the media in the Philippines is replete with examples of how political movements and popular mobilisation can raise market demand for independent and critical reporting, thereby forcing changes in the editorial policies of existing news organisations and creating openings for the entry of new media products catering to the needs of a politicised market.

In part this is because the Philippine media have mostly been privately and run mainly as profit-oriented enterprises with far less intervention from the state (except during the Martial Law period) than in most other countries in Asia. By nature, commercially oriented media companies are sensitive to market demand. They therefore weigh the benefits of siding with unpopular governments with the potential loss of market share if they are seen as too uncritical or too partisan in favour of these governments. They also have to include in their calculations possible retribution from successor regimes if they are too identified with the current, increasingly ostracised government. The threat of market retribution is real, as was seen in the demise of the pro-Marcos press in the period that followed the 1986 "people power" uprising. The activism of citizens groups, kept alive even in periods of relative quiescence through email discussion groups and other networks linked by new technologies (such as mobile phones) provide alternative and ready-made channels of information and mobilisation that can be tapped during periods of crisis. These channels are much more democratic than those provided by big media because information is passed on without the benefit of media gatekeepers and free from intervention from either media proprietors or the state.

There is therefore great potential for alternative social media to challenge corporate media's hold not only on the market but also on the news agenda and public opinion. In fact, it is this potential that keeps corporate media on their toes and compels them to be more responsive to the market. In truth corporate media knows that it is not just market that is at stake, but power over public opinion, the crafting of public policy and the future of regimes. In the end, big media companies stand to lose not just advertising revenue and audience share but also the power and the prestige that come with owning a newspaper or a TV network. The fighting tradition of the Philippine press, a legacy from anti-colonial movements dating back to the 19th century, has also created a risk-taking journalistic culture that is different from the compliance and risk-aversion that dominates journalism in neighbouring countries.

As a media commentator Luis Teodoro (2001) wrote: "Despite themselves and the environment which, after the election of Estrada in 1998, had been forced upon them, the Philippine media played a positive role in providing the information crucial to the ouster of Estrada and in the installation of a new government which could preside over the renewal of a country battered by the incredible corruption and incompetence the Estrada government. Media freedom and transparency and the demands of professional performance were what made this possible despite the manifold problems and inadequacies that afflict the Philippine media."