

PUBLIC JOURNALISM: A NEW APPROACH TO SETTING THE NEWS AGENDA

By RED BATARIO

As the social, political, and economic environment in many local areas throughout the Philippines is dramatically changed by the decentralization of governance as articulated by the Local Government Code of 1991, communities will be facing new burdens and challenges: that of making informed decisions in the face of scarce resources.

The devolution of powers and responsibilities from the national to the local governments also marks a shift in how communities can begin to manage their own affairs, adding to the complexity of interwoven relationships and dynamics. For better or worse, good or bad, decentralized localities assuming greater powers and responsibilities are here to stay.

For the news media, the question is how to address these challenges and how to determine the track of the news that will lead to a better understanding by citizens of community issues. The demands will be great, as it is happening now, for media to clarify the stupefying range of issues and decisions that communities will face and should make. Will media begin to reexamine their roles in this kind of environment? Will journalists remain in their "comfort zone" and stand at a distance as communities slowly fragment and disconnect from public life? Will they continue to watch along the sidelines as measures of citizenship such as voting and participating in governance are corrupted by political expediency? Or will they catalyze community discussions, dialogues on how citizens can identify and begin to solve their own problems?

These are very hard questions to answer given that the media, in the words of journalist Malou Mangahas, "suffer from a poverty of purpose."

Public journalism provides just that purpose because it reconnects the media with the public that the institution avowedly serves. Public journalism is a concept, an experiment, which says that journalism should not be cynical at all. It debunks the idea of many journalists that the purpose of the story is the story itself. Rather, public journalism invites a new approach to setting the news agenda and covering the news: by offering opportunities for public discussion and debate over what community issues should be top priority and how these can be solved or addressed.

It is a kind of journalism that encourages citizen participation in public life by providing them information that would help them make decisions in a democratic, self-governing social structure. It is a kind of journalism that helps readers, listeners and viewers understand the impact of the news on their lives and how they can actively participate in developing or building the news agenda.

As in any other form of change, public journalism is being debated not only by academics and intellectuals but by journalists themselves. Some see it as a surefire method to losing "journalistic enterprise," that quality among reporters sought by many editors. But, says Ervin S. Duggan, president of the Public Broadcasting Service in the US, "What seems to me the besetting sin of (journalism) today is a know-it-all cynicism that gets in the way of the story. The very accusation that the cynics make against the experiment of public journalism (sometimes referred to as civic journalism) seems to boil down to the fact that you may not be quite cynical enough."

Public journalism was introduced in the Philippines in 1995 when the author developed a media program for the Evelio B. Javier Foundation, Inc., a non-government organization working in the arena of local governance. The Center for Community Journalism and Development was born out of that program and redefined public journalism in the context of enhanced citizen participation in governance and the role of journalists in this kind of environment.

It came at a time when local communities were only beginning to grapple with the demands and complexities of decentralization. This posed a big challenge to journalists, especially those belonging to the community press, who had to understand and make understandable the nuances of local governance. But the kind of news and the manner of coverage gave people little room to make sense of what is happening around them, much less what they can do to help solve local problems.

The needs of the community press actually reflected the needs of the community itself, how to have stories that could help people make informed decisions. The first was mainly concerned with conflict, limiting itself to the coverage of winners and losers, and allowing itself to be boxed in the narrow frame of Who, What, Where, When, Why, How but never asking the crucial So what? What could be the outcome of the story; where it will lead to. The second was beginning to get disconnected from public life because it could no longer make sense of events based on stories that get published and aired.

Jay Rosen, associate professor of journalism at New York University and director of the Project on Public Life and the Press, puts it in another perspective. Says he: "Public journalism tries to place the journalist within the political community as a responsible member with a full stake in public life. But it does not deny the important differences between journalists and other actors, including political leaders, interest groups, and citizens themselves. What is denied is any essential difference between the standard and practices that make for responsible journalism and the habits and expectations that make for a well-functioning public realm, a productive dialogue, a politics we can all respect. In a word, public journalists want public life to work. In order to make it work they are willing to declare an end to their neutrality on certain questions – for example: whether people participate, whether a genuine debate takes place when needed, whether a community comes to grips with its problems, whether politics earns the attention it claims."

In the Philippine setting, many community journalists have shown that the concept is worth trying out in real time despite inherent challenges. One of these is how to tell stories differently, how to focus on the different layers of public life, how people are beginning to explore areas of participation, how they engaged both the media and other community stakeholders to arrive at common solutions to common problems.

Two cases:

The Visayas Examiner in Iloilo

The Visayas Examiner first heard of an ongoing community-based project in Banate Bay (Iloilo) that focuses on ways where people can help address environment problems. The paper felt this was the kind of story that should be printed in its pages over time as a running document of people helping themselves. TVE got in touch with the Kahublagan Panimalay, a local NGO working with the Banate Bay communities and discussed ways of partnering on a public journalism project.

The result was an agreement to work out an arrangement with two radio stations airing the Banate Bay project through their school-on-the-air program "Ugat ang Tubig" for TVE to devote sections of the paper for community discourse on the environment and its effects on the lives of citizens.

The Bandillo ng Palawan

To encourage more people to involve themselves in public life, the Bandillo ng Palawan initiated a Candidates' Forum during the last elections wherein local concerns were presented to the candidates by the different sectors.

The newspaper worked with the Jaycees, the Palawan Network of NGOs, a local cable station, several radio stations, and an internet service provider in holding the forum. This was later followed up by the Ulat ng Bayan/Ulat sa Bayan, a citizens' monitoring and local government reporting mechanism that Bandillor and its partners are planning to sustain as a public journalism project in Palawan.

Of course, the more difficult challenge is how to integrate this new thinking and perspective into the everyday grind of the news making process, into the writing and reporting of the news. It is too early to gauge public journalism's impact on the work of journalists and on the communities that they serve. The concept is still evolving, but it has also provided a roadmap for journalists who are serious about their craft and are looking beyond the writing of the story, the airing of a program...to how their stories can help transform communities into self-determining ones.

As in any other kind of journalism, public journalism demands that the practitioner hold on to the basics: fairness, balance, accuracy, timeliness, objectivity plus, stewardship and humanity. It also demands of him a commitment over the long term because public journalism involves a continuing engagement with the community. It is not easy and it is something that journalists must want to do.

Ultimately, public journalism will be judged not on how it will influence the Philippine media landscape but on how it will impact on communities and on people's lives.

This article was published in the July 14, 2002 issue of *The Manila Times*. Red Batario is a Manila-based freelance journalist. He is also the *Executive Director* of the Center for Community Journalism and Development (CCJD), the proponent of public journalism in the Philippines. He conceptualized and wrote the foreword to the book, *Connecting with Communities: A Sourcebook on Public Journalism* and is also the author of the latest CCJD publication, *Breaking the Norms: Philippine Experiences in Public Journalism*