

"THE MEDIATISATION OF POLITICS OR POLITIZATION OF MEDIA?"

Presented by Ermin Garcia Jr., publisher of Sunday Punch, Philippines, October 31, 2003)

When I was in Germany about a decade ago for a media familiarization trip, I was advised that politicians and journalists in this country have been ranked equally in terms of approval and respect. Since politics didn't rank very high in the daily menu of German life, then it followed that journalists were not equally highly regarded either. My other colleagues from Asia chuckled at this information but I didn't. This was and still is the situation obtaining in the Philippines. The only difference is, politics in the Philippines is considered a national sport, while Germany's national sport is soccer.

Politics, therefore, being a national sport in the Philippines, has several regular players as mainstays. These include the traditional politicians, the church, the military, the so-called civil society, and the media. All five comprise the main players of this national sport.

In this regard, talks of a politicized church and religious sects, politicized military and politicized media have become common references when political situations and events are reported or discussed in public forums.

Perhaps another forum on the politization of the church and the military will be useful so I will confine myself presently to the topic at hand – the media and politics.

The Philippine media is regarded as one of the freest and most vibrant institution in the country. It's so free that politicians have freely plunged into the affairs of the media in all context possible.

In this regard, I say that it is not case of the mediatisation of politics OR politization of media in the Philippines because it is both.

Suffice it to say, the common denominators for both are power and corruption. Allow me to illustrate.

THE "MEDIATISATION" OF POLITICS.

When martial law was declared in 1972, the Marcos regime wasted no time in transforming the communication facilities under the government's control into a propaganda machine. The national television and crony-controlled newspapers, TV and radio stations were utilized primarily to help keep the Marcoses in power for over 2 decades.

Overnight, the media became the new and most effective tool tool for sustaining political might and power since the nation is geographically divided into island regions. Only media offered the convenient facility to keep political messages flowing from a central source.

Ironically, it was an unshackled adversarial media that was partly responsible for the ouster of the Marcoses from the corridors of power in 1986, at least temporarily. President Marcos, confident of the total supremacy of his propaganda arm, made that fateful mistake of allowing “the mosquito press” - several small publications with limited circulation opposed to the Marcos regime – in early 80s as a concession to the free world to demonstrate that there was “freedom of the press” in the country. Collectively, those publications helped galvanize the opposition to the Marcos power propelled by the martyrdom of a former senator, Benigno Aquino.

Since then, the power of media was never lost to the old and budding politicians in the country. With the full restoration of libertarian principles following the successful People Power, the Philippine media flexed its muscles to regain its stature in the region as the home of the freest press in Asia. The unsheathed power of a licentious press, however, made the new brand of politicians who took over the reins of government suspicious and wary.

The first and blatant political attempt to control the power of media was the introduction of the ban on political advertising during election periods. The unprecedented legislation was ostensibly intended to level the playing field between the affluent and the poor candidates vying for public offices. But like water that seeks its own level and seeps through the smallest hole, the ban on political advertising led to the creation of another monstrous type of media power in politics - the power of media personalities as the new stronger contenders for elective government posts.

Popular personalities of both TV, radio news and entertainment media took the political advertising ban as an opportunity and as an advantage in entering politics, considered a traditional political contest devoid of any discussion of public issues. The learned yet lesser known candidates suddenly did not stand a chance against these media personalities who have become household names. In a matter of one decade, not a few of the more popular media personalities and movie actors/actresses have taken over electoral posts traditionally reserved for lawyers, businessmen and economists.

The most classic case was the meteoric rise of movie actor Joseph Estrada from a small town mayor, to senator, to vice president and finally as president of the republic. But as fate would have it, the adversarial media went on a frenzy exposing details of illegal (and immoral) activities of Mr. Estrada, and resulted in his ouster.

The unexpected yet successful entry of media personalities into politics in so short a time was a trend that again led to another aberration in Philippine media practice, further muddling the functions of politics and media. It's what we now refer to perhaps as the “mediatisation of politics.”

Traditional politicians who were threatened by the invasion of media and entertainment personalities, have since learned that the only way to survive the onslaught by media personalities is to make one's name or face a regular fixture in media as well. Today, it is not uncommon to see senators, congressmen, mayors, governors and local legislators

writing their own newspaper columns or hosting their own radio or TV public affairs programs.

In this regard, the Philippine Press Institute publicly raised ethical issues involving the fence-sitting of politicians, more specifically, government officials doubling as media practitioners. The organization decried the unwanted fusion and the hypocrisy of the situation – the role of media as the watchdog of those who govern, has been bastardized. With the watched assuming the role of a watchdog, how can the public continue to trust the media?

In the Philippine senate today, Filipinos see a galore of TV news, sports and movie personalities are now tackling legislation chores. Two former TV newscasters kept their jobs as hosts of popular public affairs program and also write opinion columns in nationally circulated newspapers; another is a former TV comedian who continues to appear in cameo roles in TV sit-com programs; one is a movie star who makes it a point to star in his own “Robin Hood-type” produced movies before he seeks reelection. One senator is a former TV public affairs host married to a very popular movie star who hosts a weekly TV entertainment program while another is the scion of a political family married to an equally popular movie star who has since been elected as town mayor. One senator was a popular basketball player and projects himself as the country’s sports icon. Not to be outdone, four other non-media and entertainment senators now host weekly radio programs ostensibly to help keep a strong name recall in their favor when election comes. Two lady senators who bear family names of national figures with strong name recall have made it to the roster

The list of media personalities who have become public servants and vice versa, grows kilometrically if one includes the congressmen, governors, mayors, councilors and members of the presidential cabinet now dabbling in radio, TV and newspaper columns.

Notably, a presidential candidate today has been in the airwaves for the past 3 years hosting a weekly radio public affairs program since he lost in the presidential race five years ago. Three senators today are regular faces in TV advertisements endorsing brands of soap detergents, liquor and medicines even as the country is being bombarded with advertising on the “vision and accomplishments” of aspiring candidates in 2004 senatorial elections.

After the election of Mr. Estrada (and more recently the election of Mr. Arnold Schwarzenegger in the US gubernatorial race), a popular movie actor is being lured today to duplicate the two gentlemen’s feat by vying for the highest post in the land, the presidency. His strongest opponent is not the incumbent president but the popular senator who continues to host his own public affairs program today.

Given the above political trends, one’s successful entry into national and local politics is now practically assured if one has a regular media exposure as a practitioner or as an entertainment talent.

In brief, only politicians who are media savvy can safely stay ensconced in their political posts until a more popular media personality comes around.

THE POLITIZATION OF MEDIA

With the evident “mediatisation” of politics in the country, the politization of media was inevitable.

As a national sport, Filipinos are always up to date with political developments, thanks to the national dailies whose front page stories dwell mostly on national political events and governance, with the TV and broadcast news media generally following the lead of the print media.

The politization of the news media stems largely from the politicians’ penchant for making media their regular combat arena, incessantly making statements to the media and their willingness to be interviewed as they react to media reports and opinion columns.

As a consequence, not a few political leaders are constantly chastised or glorified by media with such intensity that many political careers have been ruined or enhanced by media reports and commentaries. Such is the influence of the news media in the Philippines that the ultimate control of it became an obsession for many.

Paradoxically, it is this enormous influence wielded by media on politics that made practitioners very vulnerable to politicians. While this posturing has emboldened the news media to be pro-active in shaping the national government’s agenda, many politicians have seen this as an opportunity to exploit and direct the agenda-setting of media.

As the self-importance of news media appear ordained to be a force to reckon with, politicians are constantly seeking creative means to cull public support through media. And in most instances, politicians have succeeded by thoroughly exploiting the media practitioners’ economic lot, a practice that has spawned widespread corruption in the ranks of the news media industry.

With eager politicians willing to pay media practitioners for “positive news coverage/commentaries”, the media industry has coined the derogative phrase to describe media’s functional role under such arrangements: AC/DC which in electronic parlance means alternate current/direct current, has been made to read as: “Attack and Collect”/ “Defend and Collect”.

AC is a tact used by a media practitioner to compel a vulnerable politician to pay up if the latter wants the practitioner “to cease and desist” with his critical articles or commentaries. In plain words, it is extortion.

DC, on the other hand, is a tact used by practitioners to compel politicians to show their appreciation for positive articles or commentaries. In plain words, it is a fee “for services rendered”

The ban on political advertising during elections exacerbated the situation for both the media establishments and the practitioners. The organizations lost all advertising revenues while pressure was on the practitioners to resort to AC/DC to provide the communication facility that was effectively removed by the ban. Corruption of practitioners by politicians reached pitch level with each passing election. Fortunately, the ban was recently lifted but the practice continues to be peddled and solicited.

While plurality of voices makes for a democracy in action, the politization of media obscured the public’s voice and projected only shrill voices of politicians who believe that what they have to say to the media are the single most important things for the public to know.

For all intents and purposes, the Philippine media as an industry has undergone a transformation that practitioners are already beginning to regret. The politicians, on the other hand, are beginning to find their relationship with media quite stressful if not expensive.

The fervent prayer today of the Filipino media practitioner and politician, therefore, is to see a de-mediatised politics and a de-politicized media with the full restoration of ethics in the practice of politics and media.