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## The Role of Media in Conflict Reporting

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Once again, the latest coup attempt by reformist elements of the Armed Forces of the Philippines demonstrated the pivotal role of media in a crisis of such magnitude and proportion. Over 113 people died and 500 were wounded, mostly civilians, as a result of the adventurism of a disgruntled few.

For the sixth time in three years, another coup attempt was mounted, this time with more ferocity and organization, and, as has been the case in every coup attempt, the seizure of media facilities along with Camps Aguinaldo and Crame and Malacañang itself, were high on the list of objectives of the rebels. For a while, it seemed the future of constitutional Government in this country hung in the balance, until the tide was turned in the Government's favor.

Media played an important role in this reversal. It is no coincidence that the beginning of the end for the rebels became evident when they withdrew from their strategic positions, foremost of which included the two major television network stations that they occupied.

Just as the rebels were losing the shooting war against the Government, they were also losing the battle for the hearts and minds of the people being waged in the airplanes. Unable to operate the television stations that they took over and denied access to other stations, the rebels lost out in the "propaganda" war, which proved as fatal to their cause as the much-ballyhoed American intervention.

The Government, however, will have to bear the criticisms as a consequence of its actions during the coup. Media organizations led by the National Press Club and the People's Movement for Press Freedom have assailed the Government's closure of two radio stations at the height of the coup for purportedly lending themselves as tools for rebel propaganda. In

a joint statement signed by seven prominent media organizations, they questioned the broad powers of the National Telecommunications Commission which has acted as "legislator-prosecutor-judge-executioner," according to the statement, on matters affecting national security.

The controversy over the closure of stations DZEC in Manila and DYLA in Cebu recalls to mind the debate on national security and press freedom. Where does freedom of the press end and national security begin? Evidently the thin borderline between the two has yet to be established among the parties concerned. The Government still has to come out with an acceptable definition of national security and spell out clearly in what situations it can be invoked.

In the case of the closure of the two radio stations during the last coup, critics assail the fact that the Government's closure order came before a state of emergency was declared by the President. There is a need, therefore, to review all existing laws and regulations governing the exercise of press freedom to ascertain their consistency with the constitutional provision that no law shall be passed abridging the freedom of the press. To begin with, legislators could start with hold-over Marcos laws and decrees which continue to take effect.

On the other hand, the recent coup likewise revived the issue of objectivity and balanced reporting. Certain questions were brought to the fore: Where does one draw the line between a reporter's duty as a citizen, which is to uphold the Constitution, and his journalistic duty, which is to report the truth?

### **Radio's Potent Role**

Aside from reemphasizing media's strategic value, the coup also brought into focus a new and more potent role of media, particularly radio, as a "revolutionary medium," as one columnist put it.

Orson Welles's broadcast of "War of the Worlds" in the '30s is a grim illustration of the broadcast medium's "hypodermic needle effect" and its power to influence people's behavior. The broadcast was so realistic it led people to evacuate their homes (some even got married in a rush) in fear of the green-skinned invaders from Mars. A more positive illustration was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats which galvanized and lifted a whole nation from the hopelessness of the Great Depression.

These two contrasting cases define the extremes of radio's uses and serve as examples of how radio can perform — or not — its social responsibility to its audience. The radio coverage of the recent coup attempt raises the issue of social responsibility. DZRH and DZMM are generally regaled as heroes for fearless broadcasting under a storm of bullets and bombs. On the other hand, DZEC and DYLA, after receiving a few telephone calls from

government officials (in effect, to tell them that Big Brother is Watching) were closed down Dec. 3. The stations were closed based on guidelines created by the KBP — of which the two stations were members — and furnished to the National Telecommunications Commission.

With all schools and offices closed, the majority of the city's population stayed in the safety of their homes glued to their radio sets listening to the latest news. With the television stations off the air, the people had only the radio to rely on not only for information but also for hope and inspiration in those dark moments when the nation stood still as its fate was being decided by opposing forces of the Philippine military.

Radio proved equal to the task. News and information were delivered instantaneously and objectively. In such crisis situations where speed of delivery of accurate information could spell the difference between life and death, radio was the ideal medium. Radio also provided an instant feedback mechanism through which people could call in their views or provide vital information. Callers came from Filipinos in the Middle East worried about their relatives' fate, from ordinary citizens airing their views freely, as well as from opinion leaders.

The courage and objectivity of broadcast journalists deserve the accolade given to them by a grateful nation. Young dedicated media people risked life and limb to bring up-to-date news to an information-starved public. In a tension-filled situation, radio had a sobering effect on the population which prevented panic and pandemonium from breaking out.

There were, of course, some exceptions. One radio station was closed down after continuously airing rebel pronouncements and finally causing widespread panic and fear when they announced the unconfirmed information of an imminent attack on Malacañang and enjoining people to evacuate their homes.

To be sure, media reporting during the coup still left much to be desired. Reporters have yet to grasp the basic canons of crisis reporting, which prohibits the disclosure of troop positions and movements. Most reporters could not even properly recognize weapons and ordinances, which could have saved a lot of confusion, especially in the case of the US Phantom jets. But this is not to discount their exemplary performance, which has done the profession proud. If anything, the recent coup has proven that Philippine media has come of age. It proved itself in a time of grave national crisis, when they were needed most.

### **Emergency Powers and Media**

With the President's assumption of emergency powers, media, broadcast media, in particular, perceived itself to be threatened. This "veiled threat," as some commentators put it, has not been felt since February 1986 when

Government forcibly closed or destroyed stations not echoing the government line.

Naturally, this perceived threat has drawn comments, pro and con. Coming out strongly for the pro side, Loreta Medina, a literature teacher, says, "In a critical moment like a coup d'etat, a journalist should defend the State; he has to subordinate his being a journalist to that of his being a citizen. A coup. . . is an assault on his freedom to express ideas peacefully."

It is in the area of broadcasting that the issue of emergency powers is particularly highlighted. Here we must differentiate between radio and TV. Television, unlike radio, still requires the presence of an OB (outside broadcasting) facility to bring pictures into the home. With its powerful and portable technology, radio broadcasts can be done by one person on the run. TV admittedly has the more compelling element of visuals. One can recall the family of Col. Rafael Galvez, leader of the rebels holed up in Makati's high rises, pleading for him to surrender. Or the tears that Brigadier General Rodolfo Biazon tried to hold back. All these, while powerful and poignant, do not have the immediacy that radio possesses.

With the radio reporters' ability to go "on the spot" without lugging cumbersome camera, radio is able to portray a reality that goes just beyond mere reportage. It magnifies, as it were, the events being described. When DZRH's Eloi Aquino suffered cuts from glass shards of their mobile radio van, one empathized and suffered with her as she described how she could not move for fear that she would be cut worse. When a DZMM reporter described airplanes swooping down on Crame, one could feel the impending peril. With this kind of power, radio could create collective anxiety or collective sobriety.

At issue here is the constitutional provision which says that "In times of national emergency, when the public interest so requires, the State may, during the emergency and under reasonable terms prescribed by it, temporarily take over or direct the operation of any privately owned public utility or business affected with public interest." This is further supported by the provision that "The State may, in the interest of national welfare or defense, establish and operate vital industries, and upon payment of just compensation, transfer to public ownership utilities and other private enterprises to be operated by the Government."

Understandably, mediemen are worried about how the Government will exercise this new-found power. They say that even before the Government acquired these powers, it was able to padlock DZEC and, thus, "the parameters for media repression after the passage of such an emergency-powers bill are staggering." Having gone through the Marcos years when self-censorship was the norm, they oppose this likewise.

### Need for Guidelines

It must be said that these worries of mediemen are not new. They have been discussed and mulled over in several conferences and policy meetings participated in by mediemen themselves, academe and government policy-makers. In a way, the KBP guidelines (subsequently adopted by the National Telecommunications Commission) for broadcast studio personnel were a result of such a similar policy meeting. What the coup has done is to provide a test case on how much objectivity a reporter can exercise in the heat of battle.

This gray area has suddenly come into sharp focus. All at once, it appears that the ability of reporters to respond to such a crisis situation requires the tempering of education and training. How objective, for instance, can a reporter be when reporting on the whereabouts of rebel-held or government-held positions? If he sticks to the factual and objective truth he is in danger of being shot by either side.

While it is true that balanced reporting is always his goal, the concept that one's citizenship duties must prevail over one's journalistic duties puts the journalist's code of ethics on the spot. How much respect does media owe the needs of national security? Where does one draw the line between protecting sensitive information and gagging the free flow of information?

To go back to the earlier example of stations being closed down at the height of the coup. Before the coup, these stations had already aired highly inflammatory materials but they never were in danger of being closed. Were the heightened passions generated by the coup sufficient justification for closing them down? Another example: Vice-President Laurel, whether he was misquoted or not, was criticized for his statements at the height of the coup; however, he had made similar statements long before the coup.

From all these, it is clear that a consensus on some form of policy guidelines for media must evolve. The consensus must take into account the new lessons learned by journalists, both broadcast and print, from the coup. And if the lessons are sufficiently absorbed, they must form part of a training curriculum; perhaps retraining is a better word, for journalists.

If media is afraid that Government may misuse its emergency powers, the Government likewise must fear media's use of its latent powers. Government, at least, has the excuse of having been installed by people. But who installed media in its seat of power? While it is true that media have the feel of the people's pulse, this feel must be a true feel, not one desensitized by the need for profit and the taste for power. And this taste for power is what has led to the creeping monopolization of mass media. ●