

THE PRESS

Catalyst for social change

Seven months after the government clamped down on a wayward press, several publishing houses have been reopened to fill the demand for more reading materials, especially hard news. A number of daily newspapers, the traditional backbone of the Philippine press, are now in circulation with practically the same hands that wrote and edited them in pre-martial law days.

The concept of the social responsibility of mass media, however, has been recast, and they are now a partner of government in evolving desirable social changes, inculcating new attitudes, and helping spur economic development.

Behind this new orientation was the government's decisive action in September 1972 to arrest the general deterioration and the extremist drift of a large segment of media. Today, while policing mass media for possible lapses, the government is also busy working out programs for the upgrading of the press and its strengthening as a social institution.

Dailies based in the Greater Manila area have built up a combined circulation of almost 900,000, which is more or less the same aggregate circulation of the major dailies before martial law. This tends to indicate that the information void left by the closure of mass media late last year has been substantially filled by existing publications.

While the circulation of newspapers seems to have levelled off, public information analysts feel that less than a million newspaper copies, augmented by other mass-oriented publications, are not enough to meet the information needs of 40 million Filipinos whose literacy rate is 84 percent.

Before martial law, there were 21 newspapers, 17 of them publishing out of Greater Manila. Their total circulation of almost 900,000 was supplemented by 16 weekly magazines whose circulation reached almost one million.

The community newspapers numbered 35, with an average circulation of 3,000 copies each.

The bulk of the income of the major newspapers came from advertising, a factor that, in pre-martial law days, heavily influenced their editorial policies. Advertising in 1971 cost P215 million, and 37 percent of this went to the print media. Ten years earlier, the print media got 50 percent of the total annual advertising expenditure.

Latest figures show that the 15-centavo Daily Express tops the field for dailies with its circulation of 330,000.



The defunct Manila Times, in its day, had to content itself with only 270,000 for its big Sunday edition.

There was a time, some days and weeks after the proclamation of martial law late last year, when the Express was selling 576,000 copies daily, an indication of a staggering demand for hard news. The Express presses were running 20 hours every day, but still the tabloid could not cope with the demand.

The demand was partly met with the appearance of a new daily, the Times Journal, on October 21, 1972. The Journal these days has a circulation of 80,000.

The Bulletin Today came out a month later, on November 22. Starting with 80,000 copies, its circulation has leaped to 150,000. To supplement the output of its presses, the Bulletin has leased the printing plant of the Philippines Herald, two blocks away on Muralla Street.

The Express has shifted to high gear with the putting out of its evening edition (an additional 65,000 copies daily), and its sister publications, Express Sports (35,000), Expressweek (80,000), and Pilipino Express (100,000). The Express plant's capacity has been augmented with the leasing of the offset presses of the defunct Daily Star in Port Area.

The Times Journal, the only major daily without its own printing plant, is using the web-fed offset presses of the defunct Manila Chronicle in Pasig, Rizal.

Among the English-language magazines, Panorama, which serves as a weekly supplement of the Bulletin, is No. 1, with 150,000 copies. Expressweek, sold separately from the other Express publications, comes second with 80,000. Focus Philippines runs 75,300 weekly, Woman's Home Companion, aiming at a special market, has a gross paid circulation of 75,000. Last April 2, another weekly, the Women's Journal, joined the women's magazine field. One of its circulation officials said it had an initial run of 90,000 copies. Another English-language weekly, the Sunday Observer which came out early March, has a circulation of 10,000.

The vernacular publications have improved on their pre-martial law circulation. The latest figures are: Liwayway, 180,000; Bisaya, 80,000; Bannawag, 60,000; Hiligaynon, 53,000. Balita, a daily tabloid in Pilipino, prints 85,000.

Except for a few who chose to try their hand in other fields, most of the displaced newspapermen had found employment in the reopened media, the government service, and other areas allied to newspapering.

News coverage has been simplified, with the channeling of government news through the Department of Public Information (DPI). Most news outfits today have at least two men assigned to the DPI offices in Malacañang, which has become the main source of important news reports.

Appearance-wise, most of the newspapers before and during martial law generally look the same. The Express and the Bulletin have not undergone any major change as far as front-page makeup is concerned. The Times Journal somehow looks like a cross between the Manila Times and the Chronicle.

As for content, however, there has been a noticeable "cleansing" of the pages of all newspapers. The screaming headlines on crime and scandals blown to hysteria proportions are gone. There is now more emphasis on using the mass media as a catalyst for social change.

Applications for the reopening of mass media are passed upon by the Mass Media Council, created by President Marcos through Presidential Decree 36 to oversee the resumption of the operations of qualified media. Permits to operate are renewable every six months.

Secretary of Public Information Francisco S. Tatad and Secretary of National Defense Juan Ponce Enrile are the chairman and co-chairman, respectively, of the MMC. The council is run by a six-man executive committee, and serviced by a secretariat and five action committees that process applications and monitor the media, among other functions.

The cabinet office having powers of direct regulation over the mass media is the DPI. One function of this department is to "formulate standards and guidelines, including measures of supervision and control, for the production and dissemination of information about the government and its activities."

One of the agencies under the DPI is the Bureau of Standards for Mass Media (BSMM), which "shall be responsible for setting standards, guidelines, and criteria for the operations and activities of publicly and privately owned media; adopting measures of supervision and control to ensure that their operations conform with set standards and guidelines; and establishing a system of liaison and cooperation between the two sectors in the dissemination of information to the public."

The BSMM is headed by Acting Director Andres Cristobal Cruz, a writer-painter, a TOYM (The Outstanding Young Men) awardee, and former assistant director of national libraries. His deputy director is Amante E. Bigornia, former editor of the Evening News and one-time president of the National Press Club. The Bureau has separate divisions for specific sectors of the mass media: radio-television, advertising and promotions, press and publications, and films. Each is headed by a division chief who is a media specialist.

The BSMM has formed citizens' councils composed of recognized authorities in the various media of information to help set standards for professionalism, content, and economic viability of mass media.

Discussions in these panels and the position papers submitted by the members point to a consensus that mass media should upgrade further their standards and their activities be regulated in the higher interest of the public. The panels have also recognized the key role that media play in bringing about desirable changes in society and spurring economic development.

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