

Pressures On The Philippine Press

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Freedom in our present day is on the tip of every tongue.

Whether it is individual freedom, national freedom, or universal freedom, it is a force, most important in shaping the world's destiny.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the Philippines is a signatory, proclaims that . . . "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." . . . The United Nations set this goal for the peoples of the world because it foresaw the necessity of freedom of information in molding each man's individual character. The press is known as the guardian of this freedom. The press makes it possible for all men to know the

whole truth so they can, in turn, form intelligent and responsible opinions. But when this personal freedom is suppressed, national freedom is also in danger. After the suppression of national liberties takes place, the gate is then thrown wide open for complete totalitarianism to enter. Man must be allowed to see all sides of any question so he can choose the truth for himself and decide which beliefs or theories he wants to follow. How can man use his in-born reasoning powers if dogma are thrust upon him?

Since 1811 when the first Philippine paper was printed, this nation has primarily depended on the printed page to inform its people. The Philippine press has been called the freest press in the world, but how true is this assertion?

It is true that unlike some other countries, the Philip-

pires does not have direct governmental censorship; papers cannot be seized and editors can not be jailed for their criticism or exposures of corruption in the government.

However, though the Philippines does not have any statutory laws that force the press to print government policies and religious dogma, this does not mean that the Filipino people are really enjoying freedom. There are concealed and insidious pressures that can do tremendous damage to free expression. To be sure, there are many uncontrollable factors that make it difficult for the Philippine press to expose the absolute truth.

For example, the low economic standards of the papers, brought about by the high cost of production, force them to depend on *second hand* international news. Since the two most reliable information services from which Philippine papers get their international news originate in the United States, there is the possibility that the information is influenced with a Western view-point. This could mean that the Filipinos must settle for only one side of the picture. However, due to the lack of personal funds, the newspapermen do not have the opportunity to be at, or

travel to the news spots of the world. Because of this deficiency, the Philippines is without qualified men who can write the 'why' to many questions of international importance.

Although the two above-mentioned factors do have a small part in diluting press freedom, there are other more serious influences that make the printed truth less than what it should be. To begin with, the government can wield a lot of power over the newspapers because of various economic and other controls. How many people are aware that the government is responsible for issuing import licenses to the various newspaper companies? The government is therefore indirectly responsible for the newsprint, ink and metal supplied to each organization. So with the possibility of the government's cutting its quota and therefore curtailing publication, how can a paper be too critical of the government?

Secondly, another influence which must be considered is that of the big advertisers who are, in fact, the supplier of the life blood of the newspapers. Without the advertisers' support, a paper cannot afford to carry on production. All too often, willingly

or not, the publisher, editor and reporters must submit to the views of big advertisers.

About one year ago the Manila Chronicle, in several of its editorials, had the courage to criticize the safety of the Philippine Air Lines planes. Courage was required because PAL was one of the Chronicle's largest advertising accounts. No sooner had the paper protested than PAL and various other enterprises owned by the management of PAL dropped the Manila Chronicle from their advertising budgets, thus costing the newspaper hundreds of thousands of pesos in revenue each year. This newspaper luckily was able to survive the loss, but how many other papers could survive under similar conditions?

Although these influences are unfair to the people and deprive them of the truth, there is one final factor which is responsible above all for the printing of biased, slanted or incomplete information. This factor is the journalist himself because of his proximity to the events he reports. Does the newspaperman realize the importance of his duty to the people, or is he all too ready to accept bribes, favors and planted stories to please his own selfish ends?

Since every newspaperman's livelihood depends on the underpaid profession of reporting, many journalists find it hard to refuse favors and even bribery. It is not uncommon to find newspapermen on the payrolls of various self-interested organizations. Many reporters become so dependent on favors that they are afraid telling the truth might jeopardize these favors. For example, when the President of the Philippines goes on a trip, he finances the whole trip for the newspapermen. Receiving such favors, how can the reporters be expected to bite the hand that feeds them?

Press relations officials constitute another hazard to the reporters. Because it is the job of these officials to further the interests of their own particular firms, they will go to great expense to obligate the newsmen to them. After accomplishing this, it is not difficult for these PRO's to plant stories, pass off half-truths and sometimes lies without inviting questions from the reporters.

Obviously, many things tempt the journalist but it is only his personal weakness of character that permits him to succumb to corruption. The newspaperman's own moral

strength is the key to his journalistic freedom. A man who is dictated to by self-interest, therefore, is not competent enough to inform others of the truth.

Anyone with human passions can understand the journalist's submittance to bribery, acceptance of favors and willingness to be coerced when he considers the normal human desire for an easier and more comfortable life. What then could be a more logical solution to this problem than insuring the journalist a comfortable living wage? This would reduce the need for underhanded dealings and, more important, it would point out the responsibility that goes hand in hand with the reporter's job.

A second and likewise important step would be for the editors and publishers to make a careful selection of their writers before employing them. This action would find men of strong character who are truly interested in their jobs and in the long run it would keep a few bad apples from spoiling the whole barrel. Strengthening the character of the newspapermen would automatically eliminate the seriousness of the pre-

viously mentioned insidious pressures.

If these conditions could be corrected it would be a good beginning of the cure, but we can only have true freedom of the press if editors, publishers, reporters, PRO's, advertisers and government officials will see the true value of freedom; if they will only realize that freedom of information for the sake of their own families, friends, and country is far more important than the gaining of a few dishonest pesos.

Although I have drawn a rather dismal picture of the Philippine press, the picture is far from complete. In only 15 short years of independence, the Phiippine press has accomplished more than most papers accomplish in their first 50 years. They have come a long way in fighting the battle for freedom of information.

If the Philippine government, colleges, and newspapers will join forces to protect and promote the freedom of their press, they will not only enhance liberty within their own country but also, by example, will encourage freedom of the press in other countries of the world.

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