

August 22, 2008 - My views on journalism and advocacy



If you like this post, please **subscribe to the RSS feed**. *N.B. ? A graduate student of Journalism from a reputable private school who says that he was motivated by a soon-to-be-published analysis I wrote on journalism ethics requested me to answer a few emailed questions which I think is worth sharing with all of you.* **When you joined demonstrations against killing of journalists and cases to protest press freedom from repressive government policies, do you think you have compromised ethical principles of the profession? Why or why not?**

Crispin Maslog, as early as the 1990s, described the killing of journalists as the "highest form of censorship." It does not have to be stated in the various journalism codes of ethics that journalists should fight for press freedom, as it is the logical thing to do in a situation of unabated killings and other forms of harassment and intimidation of the media. There is nothing unethical about promoting and upholding press freedom and in fighting for it in cases where it is compromised.

Can journalists who join such demonstrations and lawsuits still "objectively" cover the subjects of these acts? Why or why not?

Objectivity simply requires journalists to present all sides. A journalist who is against media repression and who is required to write about it should get the side of all parties, including the individuals and institutions he or she may be taking to task for repressing the media. It may be awkward for him or her to approach sources being sued, for example, but he or she should be professional enough to do so.

If a journalist decides to be an active participant in the fight against media repression, can he or she still be considered a "disinterested" or "impartial" observer? Can he or she still claim that his or her "fairness" and "balance" are not compromised by being an active participant? Why or why not?

In peculiar cases where the journalist becomes a major player, he or she unwittingly becomes part of the news. He or she is not anymore a disinterested party. Fairness and balance, however, can still be observed by providing adequate space in his or her coverage to all possible sides of an issue, highlighting the major arguments of all protagonists. It would also help to disclose the nature of the participation of the journalist or the media organization he or she belongs to with regard to the issue

being reported.

When journalists take certain advocacies, can they still be considered "neutral"? Why or why not?

They are obviously not neutral, and this is expected of them. Journalists are also "social animals" who have beliefs and convictions. The challenge for them is not to be subjective in their analysis of issues and concerns.

It must be kept in mind that neutrality is not synonymous with objectivity. The first is a myth and the second is a necessity in the practice of the journalism profession. Neutrality works on the assumption that journalistic outputs are value-free, but it is clear that they are not. Even mere factual presentation in straight news articles have slants, intended or not, based on the selection of the facts that are highlighted and the order in which they were presented.

Journalists are only advised to use neutral words in reporting (e.g., "said" instead of "claimed") to avoid any misinterpretation in the presentation of the "literal truth." In content analysis of journalistic outputs, the so-called "neutral" articles are actually objective since they are mainly assessed in terms of how exhaustive the report is in getting all possible sides and angles.

Is it just "natural" for journalists to take up certain advocacies such as press freedom or right to information? Why or why not? Cannot the journalist remain in the sidelines and act as "impartial observer" if press freedom is attacked?

It is not just natural, it is also expected. The struggle for press freedom is very important for journalists and it should not be delegated to human rights groups and other organizations. Journalists are in the best position to uphold and promote press freedom because they know the workings of the press and the professional and ethical standards of the profession.

While there is nothing wrong with non-journalists fighting for press freedom, there is a distinct possibility that they could end up demanding a kind of media that is actually not conducive to the practice of the journalism profession. The misguided demands of some sectors for journalists to only report the "good news" and the "positive side" are good examples.

Do you think that the Philippine press, in the context of its response to press freedom attacks and threats, has become especially antagonistic towards the

government, at the expense of public interest? Why or why not?

The Macapagal-Arroyo administration has proven to be hostile to press freedom, based on its policies and programs, not to mention its inability to bring to justice those responsible for the murder of journalists. The concerned journalists' antagonism is expected. They take legal and extra-legal actions against the government to assuage the "chilling effect" created by the repression that is happening.

For the record, such actions are not being done at the expense of public interest. Public opinion is actually shaped by making them aware of the situation of basic freedoms of which press freedom is a vital part.