The Practice of Online Journalism in the Philippines: Personal Observations

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Gone are the days when journalism is synonymous to the print medium. At present, journalism education in the Philippines and abroad highlights the multi-media character of the profession and the need for a journalist to straddle print, broadcast (television and radio) and new media to more effectively reach out to a broader audience.

For journalists, the new media, particularly the Internet, has provided both opportunities and problems. On one hand, it is welcome news to know that information on just about anything has become more readily available. On the other hand, the problem is exactly that: the deluge of information.

Journalists, just like other researchers, are currently facing not a dearth of information but an overload of it. In the course of their data gathering using the Internet, there are two basic challenges that must be overcome: (1) how to filter the information one can use; (2) how to establish the reliability of the information gathered.

There is, of course, another dimension to the use of the new media in the practice of one's profession: How can a journalist maximize the opportunities provided by the new media without being too dependent on them to the point of compromising journalistic principles and standards?

Journalists in print, broadcast and new media face these dilemmas as they gather data for their required outputs. On the surface, online journalists seem to be more dependent on new media, particularly the Internet, as they are expected to provide, say, the necessary hyperlinks to websites so that online users can be directed to their online sources for validation and more information. However, the convenience of having information just a click away, so to speak, prompts journalists – be they print, broadcast or online – to just simply cite the available information that can be retrieved from the Internet.

Without filtering and establishing the reliability of information, it is obvious that journalists do a disservice to the media audiences by either misleading them or bombarding them with information both necessary and unnecessary. We must keep in mind that the basic task of journalism is the shaping of public opinion by giving media audiences information that, in our best judgment, is important.

Unlike in a restaurant where an owner can serve food in abundance and be appreciated for the gesture, journalistic outputs must be kept "short and sweet." In other words, media audiences would not appreciate the overload of both significant and insignificant information since social reality must be explained to them in a manner that is digestible.

The imperative for journalists to be true to their calling becomes all the more important in a maldeveloped society like the Philippines where various interest groups try to win over the hearts and minds of the people and claim to provide solutions to age-old problems. In much the same way there exist cultures of conformity and resistance in a maldeveloped society, there are mainstream and alternative traditions in journalism. The first seeks to protect the *status quo* while the second seeks to replace it.

In the context of online journalism, the Internet has also become a venue for interest groups to relay their messages, putting up websites and e-groups, among others, to reach out to online users. They all have something in common: They claim to know the truth and they try their best to be as convincing as possible.

Online journalism, in particular, faces the arduous task of helping shape public opinion for people who retrieve information from cyberspace, a venue where there are many distractions and where content is not given much attention. Media audiences, particularly the youth, are more enamored with network gaming and virtual communities like Friendster. Websites are also often designed in such a way that content gives way to form, as software programs like Flash are maximized not for content management but for the three-dimensional graphics and special effects it can provide.

Problem of a Dime a Dozen Websites and Webmasters

Even if the Web was introduced to Filipinos only in 1995, websites have grown in number mainly as a result of three factors: (1) introduction of what-you-see-is-what-you-get (WYSIWYG) web authoring programs; (2) better and more varied Internet access; and (3) ubiquity of blogging.

In an article I wrote three years ago, I argued:

> "The introduction and subsequent upgrading of (WYSIWYG) web authoring programs like FrontPage, PageMill and Dreamweaver made it much easier for interested people to learn the trade.
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> "Web authoring skill does not require formal education, only patience and diligence. A 2001 survey by the monthly magazine *The Web Philippines* showed that 82.3% (or 65 out of 80 web developers surveyed, with one respondent skipping the question) learned their skills through self-study." (Modern Technology and Online Journalism in the Philippines, *Philippine Journalism Review*, August-September 2003)

At present, there are several ways to access the Internet. There are now prepaid cards to access the Internet via dial-up connection, and one can also opt for the more relatively expensive cable, DSL and wireless connections. Those without Internet connection at home could just opt to visit the nearest internet rental shop. In 2001, the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) claimed that there are 3,000 internet rental shops in the country.

The popularity of web logs or "blogs" has also made it even much easier for online users to come up with posts that are normally packaged as online diaries or journals that can present text, graphics, audio and video files. Through software programs like Wordpress and Movable Type, online users do not need to know hypertext markup language (HTML). They only need to follow the directions in uploading content.

These developments can be seen as empowering for people who want to use the Internet to get their message across to global online users. On the other hand, this situation implies that just about anybody can upload Internet content.

This then has given rise to the billions of web pages that are now available on the Internet and the consequent need to filter information coming from websites. The deluge of information on the Internet is not necessarily welcome news, as online users are exposed not only to false and misleading data, hoaxes and even fluff.

That webmasters have also become a dime a dozen means that the quality of web design is not maintained, as knowing how to operate web authoring programs is greatly different from learning the principles of design and layout. Form therefore tends to overshadow the content, thus compromising the saying in web design that "Content is King."

Convergence and Online Publications

Unlike most personal websites, online publications are theoretically more content-based – and, for that matter, more professionally maintained – since their main objective is providing data and analyses. They are also periodically updated to fulfill the online users' information needs.

An online editor once stressed that online news has "the authority of print with the speed and immediacy of broadcast media."

Indeed, online journalism uses mainly the printed word to relay messages to online users. Unlike the print medium, however, online publications do not have specific deadlines that must be met since updates can be uploaded anytime. Headline news, for example, can change several times in one day, depending on the fluidity of the situation.

The uploading of files has also become much simpler due to developments in file transfer protocol (FTP) software programs and the inclusion of "Publish Web" commands in the most commonly used WYSIWYG web authoring programs. In fact, the updates are

reflected instantaneously, unlike in print and broadcast media where media audiences have to wait until the next issue or episode.

This then makes it easy for online publications to issue corrections to their posts. In an article I wrote in 2003, I noted that this can pose a problem for online journalists who do not adhere to the highest standards of journalism ethics: "(There is a) tendency (for) online writers to provide only sketchy (even unverified details) with the hope that their articles will be updated anyway. Wary of being 'scooped' by the competition, overzealous online editors may also end up posting advisories and stories despite their questionable provenance."

Clearly, such unethical practices are a disservice to online users who expect information that is not only up-to-date but also accurate.

Blogging and Online Journalism

The blogosphere has given rise to what is sometimes referred to as "citizen journalism" where a blogger can assume the role of a journalist by giving his or her views on issues and concerns. It must be stressed that not all blogs can be considered journalistic outputs, in the same way that not all bloggers are journalists.

Even blogs that are exceptional in terms of writing and depth of analysis cannot be automatically classified as journalistic outputs though they can be used as sources of information of journalistic outputs. We need to analyze first if the blogger's style of writing caters to a broad audience, popularizing issues and concerns with the end-goal of informing.

The topics discussed must also be scrutinized, since journalistic outputs regardless of form (print, broadcast or new media) are essentially social commentaries. While personal experiences can be reported, these must be related to the overall social context so that relevance can be firmly established.

Despite the opportunities offered by the new media, we must keep in mind that journalistic outputs are mainly used to reach out to audiences. It is imperative therefore for a blogger to know the principles and standards of journalism before calling himself or herself a journalist.

Limited Reach

In the Philippines, there still remains a limited reach of the Internet. In 2000, the penetration rate of personal computers (PCs) was at a small 1.5 percent. We can attribute this to the generally high cost of desktop and laptop computers.

The telecommunications infrastructure in the Philippines is also wanting. According to the National Electrification Agency (NEA), only 77 percent of barangays were energized

as of December 2000. The NTC, meanwhile, admitted that telephone density was nine telephone lines for every 100 persons in 2000.

In another article I wrote in June 2003, I noted,

> "Online journalism therefore cannot be expected to flourish if people were hampered by astronomical prices related to Internet access and low purchasing power. The poor state of IT infrastructure must also be considered since the Internet cannot be effectively maximized and appreciated by a broad audience.
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> "At this point, it is very important to break the myth that Filipinos are generally intimidated by new technology and that this is the drawback in online journalism. The issues, after all, are very basic and the problems confronting IT and online journalism in particular are fundamental. In a Third World country like the Philippines, the so-called digital divide should not be defined in terms of the - 'techno-probes versus the techno-savvy,' but between the financially capable and the financially challenged." (The Limited Reach of Online Journalism, *Philippine Journalism Review*, June 2003)

For a Filipino journalist, therefore, to be more effective in reaching out to the marginalized sectors of society, he or she cannot rely on online publications given their limited reach. This situation then presents a strong case for journalists straddling the different forms of media to broaden the reach of their outputs.

Mainstream and Alternative Online Journalism

Just like newspapers and magazines, there are mainstream and alternative online publications. Their orientation is mainly determined by the content and interest they espouse.

Online journalists must remember that their analysis matters to the audience and that their work must not only be confined to chronicling data and presenting the different sides of the story. A maldeveloped society like the Philippines requires a kind of journalism that upholds the tradition of *La Solidaridad* and *Kalayaan* in terms of depth of analysis and clear calls to action.

In the context of online journalism, the intended message can be either in support or critical of the *status quo*. Given that there are various interest groups in the country that seek the attention of online users, it is not surprising that there are online publications that are either mainstream or alternative in orientation.

The challenge therefore lies for the online users to discern the reliability of the information provided by online publications they visit as they seek analyses that can guide them in making sense of the national situation.

Conclusion

Compared to print and broadcast, online journalism is relatively new since Filipinos were introduced to the Web only in 1995.

There are problems besetting the design and layout of websites as form tends to overshadow the content. This situation can be rooted in the lack or even absence of knowledge in the principles of design and layout. In the same way, blogging has given rise to what is called "citizen journalism," which must not be taken to mean that all bloggers are now automatically classified as online journalists.

Despite the advances in modern technology, particularly in telecommunications, there is still a need to go back to the fundamentals of journalism and the journalists' basic task of shaping public opinion by giving the people information that they need.

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