

Post-shutdown: Working as a Regional Correspondent in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Working in the regions is an unseen facet of Philippine journalism. This also holds true for journalists who continue to report for one of the country's leading media networks, ABS-CBN. When the network lost its bid to a fresh franchise in 2020, it sought ways to continue receiving stories from different areas of the country by setting up its stringer network. These were former full-time reporters who now work as correspondents paid per story. With an autoethnographic approach, this essay explains the new production process after the non-renewal of the network's franchise. It seeks to shed light on its reportage through Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model. It also peers into some media policies and practices that affect news presentation as it continues to operate as a network on its remaining platforms. The labor policies are also discussed due to an affectation of the country's leaders. It examines the concept of public service as embedded in being part of the fourth estate. This journalistic practice and business model serve as a guiding post for those who wish to expand their operations to the regions.

Keywords: *Philippine journalism, autoethnographic, news production, Hierarchy of Influences Model*

Introduction

The dream of working for a national broadcast network is typical for any journalist from the region. These networks include prominent household names such as ABS-CBN, GMA, TV5, and others. I was fortunate to work for Lopez' ABS-CBN, whose logo features circular red, green, and blue colors—a seemingly privileged stamp. The journey started with an open internship program, eventually launching a six-year career. It was cut short due to unforeseen circumstances led by the Philippine government.

It felt like employment with ABS-CBN placed one on a high pedestal. The employment with ABS-CBN is likened to a societal spectacle as an instrument of unification (Debord, 1970). However, like many others, it is bound to become a false sense of consciousness. On May 5, 2020, The National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) issued a cease and desist order to a media giant, ABS-CBN, for failure to secure a franchise, which would have allowed the network to remain on air for the coming decades. This order was issued despite an NTC ruling recommending granting the network at least a six-month grace period to appeal to Congress to expedite the matter—the network shut all its on-air assets, leaving the television screens across the country pitch black. On July 10, 2020, the Congress made their decision on the franchise of the network. Seventy representatives declined to tackle renewing the network's franchise (Mayol, 2020).

According to the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines (IFJ, 2023), the situation was described as “democracy under siege” and an “attack to basic rights and freedom,” pertaining to how then-President Rodrigo Duterte made snide remarks versus the network. The shutdown has forced other network assets to stop operating, including ABS-CBN's publishing house, annexed channels, and its 21 stations nationwide, known as the Regional Network Group.

The International Federation of Journalists (par. 2) described the regional group as an “essential role in serving Filipinos in remote areas not serviced by other television signals”. It had been broadcasting local newscasts and morning shows for nearly three decades and was also the first responder in reporting natural disasters and mobilization of aid distribution, among others (par. 3). Almost all the employees were retrenched, except for a few people in charge of running their online radio platform. This writer, who signs off as Annie Perez, also delivered her final words on-air and bade goodbye to the Cebuano audience.

The work on the ground did not stop. The network's main office asked some of their former workers to remain as correspondents; this is where the new journalistic production process starts. For one, this arrangement meant that correspondents would no longer be regular employees but rather be

Figure 1

In tears as my final report aired on TV Patrol Central Visayas (Banaynal, 2020).



service providers paid on a per-story basis. We are to gather the news on our means except for some rare occasions when the network flies in a crew of two cameramen to assist the journalist. Not all gathered stories are assured of space, let alone be used on the different platforms that the network still has, such as a few cable channels and online websites.

This news production process and the selection of regional news stories can be viewed through Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) Hierarchical Influence Model. The model is a framework to look into the different factors that affect one's work as a regional correspondent vis-à-vis editorial judgment in the newsroom. The various levels shows a practical approach to cause and effect both in and outside the newsroom as it produces its news. Ladrigo (2017) noted that the news, especially television news, reflects the nation but could be interpreted through the different realities of life. This essay anchors itself on the various levels of the hierarchy of influence in relation to the writer's personal experience after the shutdown as it seeks to pry the reality of news production.

The Correspondent at the Individual level

The first level of influence is the individual, which refers to the being of the individual's social actor (Reese, 2019). In this case, it pertains to a Cebu-based correspondent who used to work full-time for six years. The length of service is enough to have a network of sources in the vicinity. The correspondent anchors that ABS-CBN is one of the few television networks in the country that has organized the production and consumption of images, commodities, and even staged events (Kellner, 2003). Its biggest station is in Cebu, where it has produced

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Figure 2.

ABS-CBN Cebu with its employees during their last days of duty (Banaynal, 2020).



a daily 45-minute newscast called “TV Patrol Central Visayas” for 33 years. The network also broadcasted a morning show titled “Maayong Buntag Kapamilya,” featuring segments on lifestyle, interviews with key experts, and the like (DYCB-TV, n.d.). The network also aired game and magazine shows throughout its stint on air. Its local programming reflected the current moral issues of its audience in the vicinity by presenting various genres (Krijnen & Verboord, 2016)

The duration of these programs contributed to how my journalistic work was developed, both as a spectator and production worker. The network sought to embody society’s values, especially as it was obligated to serve even its regional audience. They dramatized the local conversation, everyday experience, life, and struggles. Conflict and resolutions have also been achieved, being part of meaningful events, unlike any other Kellner. In ABS-CBN, we identify ourselves as a *Kapamilya* or “family.” This forms part of the concentric circles at the individual level of this Hierarchy (Zamith, 2022). The traits projected are deeply personal. Back when the work was still full-time before the shutdown, I learned to slowly adapt to the Filipino values of being in family without withstanding my ethical judgment on how I write my stories.

New News Production Process at Routine Level

The second level of influence is the routine level, where one experiences repeated practices, forms, and patterns (Zamith, 2022). The transition from full-time to the post-shut-down production process set a new routine for this

correspondent. The retrenchment cut off all employer-employee relationships with the company. We were now called the “contractors”, “ defined as persons who shall “provide content consisting of news reports, articles, documentary, photographs, videos and/or other content for the use of the network and its affiliates.” However, there was a caveat: content given to the network will only be paid for if used. When platforms do not use them, there is no compensation.

I learned the ropes of this new set-up as it slowly became my routine. The news production process is now different. From a crew of three members, it is now a one-man team. I would grab my mobile journalism kit and shove it into my gigantic bag. The kit comprises a sturdy tripod, two wireless lavaliers, power banks, and cables. My bag had a type-c cable, lightning cable, micro-USB. Just name it. However, that routine changed the way I produced the stories. The focus shifted to a digital-first approach, requiring basic skills in sending short text advisories to the newsroom or my social media pages.

If Al Jazeera (2017) said that Mobile Journalism is present-day journalism, we are finding ourselves more than a groundbreaking way of telling stories. We forgo the daily story conference, pick up a smartphone, and start shooting. We confer with our colleagues on the beat on what to write about and where to go. We, as a local reporter, set the news agendas. We now pitch or lobby stories directly to the desk editor. This may be in different forms - (1) Text only in the form of a news bit or a whole article, (2) Text accompanied with photos, and (3) text accompanied with video. The desks prefer those with attached photos or videos so the platforms will present something visually. When it is sent, there is usually no acknowledgment. Constant monitoring of the platforms will tell us that they were utilized. Unless the story wants to be presented through a voice-over package for the evening newscast, a phone call demands such a format. A script is sent in for editing before recording. As routinary as it may seem, on most occasions, local stories are not appreciated at all. Thus, wasted effort, time gone, and resources lost. Worse, there is no equivalent compensation for the effort to gather it. Some local stories do not appeal to the national audience because they are not of immediate interest (Galtung and Ruge (1965).

Serving at the organizational level

The third influence is the organizational level, which refers to company policies, unwritten rules, ethical guidelines, and economic imperatives. This is seen in the correspondents' passion as it fuels one's will to work. However, it must be understood that everything comes with a price. According to Ryfe (2021), journalism is still anchored on basic economic principles, mainly when producing multimedia where content comes in different forms. Looking at the side of the network, every story from us comes with an equivalent operational cost.

The Lopez family, owner of ABS-CBN, suffered a huge financial loss from the turn of events. Business World reported that the network has cut its net loss for 2021 by closing some assets a year after the shutdown. It grew to P5.67 billion from P13.53 billion (Balinbin, 2021). Despite the number improvement, management must weigh carefully on money to be disbursed, including payment for correspondents.

For instance, any detail from the correspondent in any story must be paid for. The cost is triple when we are asked to produce it for the newscast. This affects the way stories are treated, putting into consideration the financial constraints that the network is facing. For example, they would prefer using minute details as reader stories where only the anchor reads the details with correspondent video support. This saves the network on cost and time. That explains why stories are rarely accepted, except for a few that stand out. Their themes are usually odd, have big numbers, and are concerned with the national agenda. Other stories favor a particular advertiser or those that could forge partnerships in the future. Some stories are also barred or watered down.

Citizen Journalism at the Social-Institutional Level

There are also norms, individuals, and organizations that operate outside the company which could also influence the news production process. This is the Social-Institutional level.

In this context, one highlight is the citizen journalists. They are defined as ordinary persons who record, document, and write about new stories, thereby contributing to the pluralism of our news process (Licitar, 2018). They democratize it, legitimizing the concept of Press Freedom through social media platforms.

On most occasions, they are the first to respond to the area where an incident can take place. With our limitations, such as not having our vehicle and crew, we mostly rely on them, especially during calamities, crime, and even democratic activities such as selections. They are an institution that can dictate the agenda by the way they do their coverage with their mobile devices. However, their content limits the journalists and the news producers, in general. For instance, the camera angles are different from the standard, and so is how the story is told. Questions are not asked to those in the vicinity. The story is not explored in an in-depth manner, as it is supposed to be. An element of news production is to relate to the emotions of its audience, as it is a factor to viewership (Guo, 2022).

Looking for citizen journalists is not a walk in the park, as some ask for payment in return for their content. Obtaining photos and videos in exchange for monetary value is rare. Their contributions are treated as part of participatory journalism and are often always voluntary despite risks (Singer et al., 2011).

Figure 4.

Interview with a citizen journalist (screengrab from TV Patrol, April 28, 2022).



The Populist Leader at the Social Systems Level

All the other factors influencing news production could be attributed to the more prominent person behind it all. The social systems level refers to the symbolic frameworks of norms, values, and beliefs. The macro-level influencer is no less than Former President Rodrigo Duterte. He is always portrayed as the villain in this network's story who lost his bid to a fresh franchise (Gutierrez, 2020). He created a framework for how the public should portray real journalists as if they were the enemy. His formula contributed to poor news production techniques that pushed correspondents to their limits. Duterte's power and charisma dictated how the audience consumes and reacts to specific media texts. Regarding production, our self-esteem dwindles when we face discrimination influenced by Duterte (Famatigan, 2022). He framed workers in the media as biased and unpatriotic for allegedly failing to pay taxes. This populist syndrome led people to make snide remarks such as "*Naa pa diay ABS-CBN? (Is ABS-CBN still around?)*" or "*Di ba gipasira naman mo? (Were you not ordered to close?)*". My replies are routinary, explaining the scope of the franchise issue and that we can still utilize the internet. It is draining and often frustrating. At this point, there is no sense in arguing about the freedom of the press. The worst remark would have been, "*Mamatay na mo tanang taga ABS-CBN kay wala monibayad og tax (All of you from ABS-CBN will die because you did not pay your taxes)*". Hamelers and Macaraig (2022) noted that with a populist leader, audiences are already leaning toward journalism with lesser objectivity, accuracy, balance, and ethics.

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Ideal influence: The beat system

Fortunately, in Cebu, the media operates in a way that makes them become their influence. They set their standards in place; they uphold self-regulation. I learned to overcome the chilling effect of the populist by embedding myself with fellow journalists. This is through the Cebu Federation of Beat Journalists. We tell stories moving as one and safeguard information given to us to protect our sources and gain their trust. This group has positioned itself as a pool of beat journalists that bank on legitimacy, accuracy, and others.

They continue to deliver their duty to the citizenry despite the so-called chilling effect in the media. This could be an offshoot of ABS-CBN's fate, where they wish it would also not happen to them. Other mechanisms involved in the Cebu Media Landscape include the Cebu Citizen's Press Journalists. They are a group of current media practitioners and members of the academe. The group keeps an eye out for media workers and protects them if they run into legal programs. Newsrooms also are mindful of the way news is presented. It is a good model for self-regulation.

Figure 5.

Me and members of the Defense PNP Press Corp (Semilla, 2022).



Conclusion

Amidst the hierarchy of influence, there are means and ways to deliver news to the identified audience. Since the shutdown, the network has covered significant events in the country and Cebu. This includes the COVID-19 pandemic, Presidential visits, disasters, calamities, etc. Their online analytics prove that with the limitation in manpower and facility in general, there is still a perceived audience.

A more concrete incident was the strongest typhoon that hit the country in 2021, Typhoon Odette. Despite being a victim, no less, I scoured Metro Cebu for its aftermath. I gave the whole nation a picture of the situation, aided by citizen journalists and other factors that could make up my reports. I was also sent to Bohol for an interesting business story where a certain island overcharged tourists with food. It was a calculated risk, with no insurance for every trip I made. I took it anyway.

Figure 6.

Capturing the viral 'overpriced' Bohol seafood with mobile journalism (own photo)



At the end of the day, it is still a form of service to the people, such as public service. In the words of Kapitan, “In The Service for Every Filipino Worldwide,” even if we are doing a disservice (Chanco, 2022).

Looking at the levels of hierarchy that influence news production, it is evident that there is no hard and fast rule on how correspondents should work. Even how they are compensated for the work they pour into their craft is not written explicitly in any public document. The time spent, resources used, and energy drawn should be adequately compensated to put out a good story. However, it is

also seen that the scrutiny network uses its liberty to use the content and present it to the audience.

The same is not the case for foreign correspondents. Lewis (2010) holds on to the “Global Journalism” concept, which states that everyone is interconnected, with no boundaries. For them, there is limitless mobility. Thus, they are given the means to practice this principle. This relieves the issue of financial burdens passed on to the correspondent, allowing them to retain their craft. Newsrooms abroad ensure that their correspondents have access to resources such as equipment, contingency funds, and travel grants for fieldwork. These are on demand and readily available.

To their side of the world, there is a need and demand for stories from the localities or other areas in their region (Par. III). It gives them a sense of representation based on their locale and gender, ethnicity, and the like. Global journalism supports the idea that traditional bureaus are now extinct, welcoming diversity in storytelling. Correspondents give color to the news agenda - they are nearer to these areas, so they can get it first and be accurate.

Waymer (2009) also draws the same conclusion in his autoethnography of reporting crime in the city. There is a wide difference between a journalist being immediate at the scene and retelling the story as it is. This gives a certain affinity to those correspondents working in the regions like me and many others.

There must be a diverse and cost-effective way to support journalists in the regions without affecting their reportage. News outlets and broadcast networks which operate with a stringer network must take care in “selecting, monitoring and, importantly, protecting local national journalists, as well as finding alternative pathways” (Bunce, 2011, p.30). However, it is if they choose those who are highly skillful and adept with the nearby languages. The best yardstick would be credentials and a record of one’s work.

Figure 8.

Covering Typhoon Odette’s aftermath with limited gear (own photo).



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Stahl (2009) also tries to resolve these perennial issues in the industry. The same win-win concept is given to creators, producers, and those on the corporate ladder. Those with the largest stake in the process get more if everyone's work is paid for its value. Those on top of the chain must also consider working conditions by considering the right equipment, protective gear, and insurance.

It is undoubtedly a roller coaster ride to be part of this disenfranchised network and continue the work that was started. The levels of influence have pros and cons. However, there is an urge to function as the fourth estate in the end. There is also the influence of being a “Kapamilya,” ergo, being there for the “service of the Filipino” worldwide.

Figure 9.

Coverage on the solemn foot procession of Sr. Sto. Niño De Cebu (own photo)



This new production process may have affected the heartbreaking events, but it is not a point for seeking sympathy. Instead, it is a way to further improve news operations amid the threat of press freedom. The network used to build the concept of “bridges on the air.” Now, we must strengthen that foundation by staying abreast of the craft.

Philippine networks should investigate their correspondent's struggles and how they influence their reportage. Stories from the regions contribute to their daily bank of content. While challenges continue to arise for regional correspondents, they make do and shift their influences to create enterprising stories. We adjust and become innovative.

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