

Your Attention, Please: Social Media as an Inciter of Awareness, Discourse and Action in Journalism and Everyday Life

In the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the feminist movement popularized the idea that “the personal is political;” that is, seemingly insignificant issues can have political implications. Today, journalists’ acknowledgment of the complementary role of social media to journalism is a testament to this idea. When journalistic blogs and citizen reports began emerging in the early- to mid-2000s¹ and microblogging websites like Twitter followed suit, much debate ensued as to whether such were considered journalism because these were dismissed as subjective and lacking veracity. Eventually, it was established that social media have made journalism more participatory and have shown the public’s need for not only “raw data” but also “a discussion of contextualized, significant information.”² However, the impact of social media on journalism and politics is inversely proportional to a country’s degree of freedom of expression³ and quality of journalism, for alternative information sources are less likely to have a competitive advantage when there is a “free marketplace of ideas.”⁴

This paper will illustrate that, in the Philippines, where democracy prevails yet corruption and other societal cancers plague the nation, social media have complemented traditional journalism chiefly by raising awareness on overlooked issues, emphasizing the role of journalism as a stimulator of discourse and action, and showing that the average citizen can initiate change.

Social media provide an avenue for discourse that traditional journalism cannot provide

¹ Carla Montemayor and Ricardo Azagra, "Journalist-bloggers and the public sphere in the Philippines: Some exploratory questions," *Cuadernos de Informacion* 25 (2011): 63, Web, 16 Sept. 2011 <http://www.accionaudiovisual.uc.cl/prontus_fcom/site/artic/20091216/imag/FOTO_0320091216152156.pdf>.

² Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," *Journalism Practice* 4.3 July (2010): 304, Web, 16 Sept. 2011 <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID1732598_code1100326.pdf?abstractid=1732598&mirid=4>.

³ James E. Katz, "Social Structure, New Communication Technology and Citizen Journalism," N.p., 1 Sept. 2008., Web, 16 Sept. 2011. <http://www.socialscience.t-mobile.hu/2008/Katz_abstract_with_photo.pdf>, 2.

⁴ Ibid.

adequately. Local press freedom is occasionally threatened by the powerful: 34 of the 57 victims in a politically motivated massacre in 2009 were journalists, prompting the United Nations to declare the Philippines as the most dangerous place for journalists in 2010.⁵ Further hampering public discourse is the fact that news programs are usually sensationalistic and superficial.⁶ Also, in 2002, only 7 million out of 75 million Filipinos read newspapers, with the annual increase in readership forecasted to be minimal, whereas as of 2010, 29 million out of 99 million (27.9%) of Filipinos were active online. Philosopher Jürgen Habermas says that the “multiplicity of informal discussions on public issues” is the “core of the democratic public sphere;” therefore, in empowering citizens to make their voices heard, social media promote the spirit of democracy by reflecting and fueling far-reaching political statements.

For instance, in 2005, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ),⁷ circumventing broadcast restrictions, uploaded tapes allegedly involving then-President Gloria Arroyo and then-Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano talking about rigging the 2004 elections in what was dubbed the “Hello Garci” scandal,⁸ prompting calls for Arroyo’s resignation and generating social unrest. This example shows that discourse generated by social media can compel people to follow an issue, and that it is possible to get multiple perspectives to a narrative, creating a “dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary.”⁹

⁵ Robert Gonzaga, "PH: Most dangerous place for journalists," *Inquirer.net*, 24 Nov. 2010, Web 16 Sept. 2011 <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20101124-304957/PH-Most-dangerous-place-for-journalists>>.

⁶ Santos, 2003: 255, quoted in Carla Montemayor and Ricardo Azagra, "Journalist-bloggers and the public sphere in the Philippines: Some exploratory questions," 62.

⁷ The Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism is a non-profit media group run by nine professional journalists; however, they mostly release content through their blog at <http://www.pcij.org>

⁸ Carla Montemayor and Ricardo Azagra, "Journalist-bloggers and the public sphere in the Philippines: Some exploratory questions," 62.

⁹ Kahn and Kellner, 2004, quoted in Carla Montemayor and Ricardo Azagra, "Journalist-bloggers and the public sphere in the Philippines: Some exploratory questions," 67.

Social media have also served as an “independent citizen watchdog”¹⁰ for journalism, calling out reporters for inaccuracies or mistakes. In 2004, after a paid advertisement narrated 11-year-old Faye San Juan’s supposed victory against all odds in an international contest, journalists scrambled to interview her for more details. It took a blogger nicknamed “flyingroc” to investigate and subsequently debunk Faye’s story after finding it suspicious.¹¹ Also, after failed negotiations in the 2010 Manila hostage crisis led to the deaths of eight hostages, online pundits criticized the media for their aggressive coverage, which was speculated to have hindered rescue operations.¹²¹³ Such criticism can push media institutions to reflect on their actions, because there is always the underlying danger of journalists being disconnected¹⁴ from the public and unaware of their weaknesses.

Perhaps the most frequently recurring role of social media in the Philippines, however, is its function as an “awareness system”¹⁵ that sheds light on obscure news pieces issues usually overlooked by traditional media for perceived lack of newsworthiness. After all, the average citizen feels more strongly about issues closer to him/her than a large-scale issue.¹⁶ In raising awareness on seemingly trivial issues, these social media users paint vivid pictures of ideas that were once abstract. Consequently, journalists are encouraged to check social media to see what issues the online populace currently deems significant. For one, Filipinos complain of rampant corruption in the country, and corruption was given a face in 2009 when Robin Henley wrote an

¹⁰ Tiffany Lim, “Shifting Journalistic Norms and Sovereignty: Philippine Weblogs as a Form of Alternative Journalism,” 17 Dec. 2007 (college research paper).

¹¹ See <http://flyingroc.org/comment.php?id=84> for the investigation on the Faye San Juan hoax, as well as the original text of the paid advertisement.

¹² See <http://thepoc.net/breaking-news/breaking-stories/9461-hostage-crisis-triggers-outrage.html> and <http://www.metropolitanmanila.com/?p=1857> for a compilation of articles and reactions

¹³ Also, live coverage of the hostage-taker’s brother being carried away by the police was speculated to have triggered the shooting of hostages.

¹⁴ Joyce Yip, “Exploring the second phase of public journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 7.2 (2006): 212-36, Web, 16 Sept. 2011. <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/%7Ejour/documents/joyce/Exp_2th_Public_J.pdf>.

¹⁵ Alfred Hermida, “Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism,” 297.

¹⁶ Personal interview with Bea Mandac, September 8, 2011

online article¹⁷ denouncing local Customs for imposing unreasonable taxes on imported books, inciting outrage and prompting then-President Arroyo to lift such taxes¹⁸. Some have also observed that animal rights are not properly observed in the Philippines, and what better way to illustrate this than a blog entry about the sorry state of the Manila Zoo?¹⁹ Incriminating articles and pictures on social networks have led to actions being taken against animal abusers,²⁰ such as the prosecution of a student who boasted online that he killed a kitten at random.²¹

Interestingly, such reports mostly came from personal blog entries, which, after circulating online, became trending topics on Twitter. Thus, even those who use social media for leisure can have their fifteen minutes of journalistic fame²² and generate awareness and action. In this light, journalism, which was originally characterized as a “professional discipline”²³ for verification and organized presentation of data, has taken on an additional role: as an awareness system, it becomes an introducer of “rationales for social change.”²⁴ Traditionally, journalism presented the facts for audiences to make their own interpretations and decisions, but due to one-sided communication, this intended effect was not emphasized. With social media, however, journalists are encouraged not only to be reporters but also “sense-makers,”²⁵ seeing their information as capable of developing a “shared culture”²⁶ and “collective intelligence.”²⁷ This

¹⁷ See <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/dispatch-6-the-great-book-blockade-of-2009>

¹⁸ See <http://www.philstar.com/Article.aspx?articleId=471074&publicationSubCategoryId=63>

¹⁹ See <http://kuro-akira.livejournal.com/88463.html> for the original entry, <http://kuro-akira.livejournal.com/89597.html> for the follow-up and <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/5874/palace-expresses-concern-over-manila-zoo%E2%80%99s-sorry-state> on the government’s reaction

²⁰ See <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/223374/wet-puppy-on-clothesline-arouses-online-ire>

²¹ See <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/220553/nation/qc-court-convicts-up-student-in-landmark-animal-cruelty-case>

²² Personal interview with John Nery, December 7, 2007

²³ Project for Excellence in Journalism, quoted in Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," 300.

²⁴ James E. Katz, "Social Structure, New Communication Technology and Citizen Journalism," N.p., 1 Sept. 2008., Web, 16 Sept. 2011. <http://www.socialscience.t-mobile.hu/2008/Katz_abstract_with_photo.pdf>, 2.

²⁵ Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," 304.

²⁶ Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," 303.

²⁷ Gillmor, quoted in Farhi, 2009, quoted in Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," 302.

sense of a community can be seen in how news quickly spreads and is discussed online and how, during disasters such as Typhoon Ondoy/Ketsana in 2009, social media were used to look for missing people, coordinate volunteer efforts and report on the flooding in various areas. In other words, social media illustrate how information combined with discourse generate awareness of more than mere facts but also of what actions should be taken.

Naturally, despite complementing journalism, social media also have shortcomings. First, often cited is the lack of accuracy, usually sacrificed for immediacy. Hoaxes can rapidly spread, leading to mass panic. Nevertheless, journalists that use Twitter as a source of real-time coverage still play gatekeeper by selecting which tweets are worth posting and, while such may be inaccurate, media institutions still justify retweeting them as a case of people wanting information, however incomplete or unverified.²⁸ To further address the perceived inaccuracy of social media content, workshops on the responsible use of social media and netizens regulating one another would be helpful.

Next, social media at its worst can become a “virtual public square”²⁹ due to relative anonymity breeding audacity. Christopher Lao became infamous this year after a video clip of him driving through flooded waters and complaining that he wasn’t informed that the road was impassable made the rounds, showing that simple lapses in judgment and personality flaws can be exaggeratedly amplified online. Social media can foster a shame culture that, inevitably, will also have repercussions beyond cyberspace. To counter this, netizens are encouraged to exercise restraint and make ethical posts, because legalized ethical standards for netizens could be abused by censor-happy authorities and thus take away the function of social media as an exercise in free speech, positive and negative externalities notwithstanding.

²⁸ Hermann, 2009, quoted in Alfred Hermida, "Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism," 300.

²⁹ Personal interview with John Nery, December 7, 2007

Lastly, questions have been raised on the impact of social media on journalism and the greater society. Poverty and illiteracy being rampant, social media are only accessible to a limited number of Filipinos, so could it be that the issues aired via social media are only those of the upper and middle classes, with the poor still marginalized and voiceless? Text messaging, the most readily available social media tool for lower classes, is hardly used to air grievances as often as other tools. Slacktivism, or the notion that one can make a difference through pointless, feel-good activities is a related problem. Countering this argument, however, journalist and blogger John Nery believes that while social media has not reached the “critical many,” it has reached the “critical few;” namely, the influential, intellectual people who are in a position and/or have the resources to initiate change.³⁰ Of course, it takes netizens actively updated with the masses’ lives for change to be possible. For instance, participatory news sites could emulate the model of Tao Po,³¹ a news website wherein in-house writers and citizens from varying social classes alike submit their stories and feedback on government agencies’ services, with staff writers actually contacting the involved government agencies to inform them of citizens’ grievances and get their side of the story.³²

In conclusion, social media and journalism belong to a “symbiotic ecosystem.”³³ In this postmodern society that has grown cynical and suspicious of grand narratives, social media present news as a “multi-faceted and fragmented”³⁴ experience, drawing attention to smaller issues which are nevertheless important because fixing day-to-day issues is a building block towards improving a nation’s governance and culture. Citizens also realize that belonging to –

³⁰ Personal interview with John Nery, December 7, 2007

³¹ “Tao Po” is Filipino for “Is anyone there?” and it can be visited at <http://www.taopo.org>.

³² Personal interview with Bea Mandac, September 8, 2011

³³ Rosenberg, in Rosen, 2005, in Tiffany Lim, “Shifting Journalistic Norms and Sovereignty: Philippine Weblogs as a Form of Alternative Journalism,” 17 Dec. 2007 (college research paper).

³⁴ Alfred Hermida, “Twittering the News: The Emergence of Ambient Journalism,” 300.

and playing a part in – a larger community is not an unattainable goal, especially if they band together. However, one still cannot dismiss traditional media as outdated or irrelevant, as they are also striving for a more participatory model, albeit not to the extent of social media. Besides, traditional media picking up on issues made known via social media can help engage “a wider segment of the community”³⁵ and inspire greater support and discourse. Indeed, with the tandem of social media and journalism, the idea that “the personal is political” is truly alive.

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³⁵ Joyce Yip, "Exploring the second phase of public journalism."