

Using ICT to Give Communities a Voice

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It is always hard to be the last speaker, especially in a panel of eight persons (who I presume all like to talk). So this is going to be a very short speech.

Let me start by going into something very old fashioned. Tonyo talked about the social media so just to provide contrast, I decided to use some old Filipino sayings – *mga kawikaan* – to drive home the points I wish to make. And we Filipinos do have a lot of sayings, such as ---

- Kung hindi ukol, hindi bubukol
- Magkulang ka na sa asawa huwag lamang sa iyong anak. (Pwede ring: Magkulang ka na sa asawa, huwag lamang sa iyong byenan)
- Matalino man ang matsing, matsing pa rin... este, napaglalalangan din.

These words may seem old to us, given that we now live in the age of tweeter, instagram, facebook and other wonderful tools that Tonyo spoke about.

But all these tools are actually just that: TOOLS. They become relevant only if we use them and if we use them to bring about change.

Both the old media and ICT are very powerful tools, in fact. Tools that if the communities can access and learn to use will give these communities the voice they need to be heard. Communities like the one in Zamboanga del Norte in Mindanao where teachers reportedly have to pay to get themselves hired in public schools, or in Tuguegarao City up north where governors can attack a broadcaster on air and not be charged with any criminal offense, or in Maguindanao where the internal revenue allotment of the LGU is treated like a personal account by its governors.

But one may ask: Why would these be of interest to the public? Why for example would a multi-million public toilet in Catarman, Northern Samar be of interest to the entire country? Or even the world since the Internet audience is the world. Well, there is another kawikaan for that: ***Ang sakit ng kalingkingan ay sakit ng buong katawan.*** And if incidents like I mentioned are happening not just in one place but all over the country, then it is time for us to do something about it. ***Kapag puno na ang salop, dapat nang kalusin.*** And this we can do if the communities have access to the tools, like the social media and mainstream media.

Right now we have newscasts that feature reports submitted by what we call “citizen journalists”. In ABS-CBN it is Bayan Mo Ipatrol Mo, in GMA7 it is You Scoop. All news organizations are now accepting reports from citizens, and some of these have brought about small but significant changes for the concerned communities. Such as a school in Bohol that had no walls – would you believe – but due to a citizen reporting about it, the community was able to get the local government to repair the school. We also have bloggers, like Tonyo, and other netizens who individually contribute to raising public awareness by discussing local and national issues.

These are mostly individual efforts. But imagine if you have entire communities watching, monitoring, reporting on what is happening? Imagine communities sending reactions to developments happening in the country seconds after they occur. Imagine the multitude of voices that we would be able hear.

THAT WOULD BE REAL PEOPLE POWER.

The challenge now is how to bring these tools to the people. And this is partly what this project aims to do. Marrying two powerful tools – old media and new media – to address age-old problems of poverty, corruption, inefficiency in governance or simple lack of information... and then finding new ways to address these issues. The amplification that these tools can provide is, as you can imagine, extremely, extremely significant.

Then there is also the challenge of overcoming biases from all sides: There is the bias from mainstream media against new media. I have heard of well-respected journalists saying citizen journalism is a bane for the Philippine media. Then there is the bias from new media practitioners who see the ways of the old media as restrictive. The communities, too, primarily due to lack of information, view both old and new media as intimidating, even terrorizing. Access, too, is a big issue for most communities. No matter what surveys say, that Filipinos are among the most visible in the Internet, once you go outside the urban centers, *naghihingalo na ang internet. At lalo na kung may areas na nawawalan ng power* for as long as 6 hours every day.

The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines is proud to be a part of this effort. We will be taking on primarily the training component of the project, which is what NUJP actually loves doing – interacting with the local media and local communities, hoping to help bring change, no matter how small. NUJP has in the past conducted workshops for journalists and civil society groups on how to report on various aspects of LGU work, from the budget to procurement systems.

Mas madali sana kung merong Freedom of Information law in place, for us journalists, for advocacy groups and for ordinary citizens. The problem is, the promise that President Aquino made remains unfulfilled.

The one Filipino quote that I do not want is one that a former president has popularized: ***Weather weather lang yan. Or kanya-kanyang panahon lang.*** We believe that vigilance is an all-season necessity. We believe that empowering communities and helping them voice out their concerns is not just for the election season, Christmas nor even Valentine's Day.

To end, I would like to give you more *kawikaan*:

This one is my favorite, but mainly because I love seafood: ***And tulog na hipon, tinatangay ng agos.*** A sleeping shrimp is carried away by the current. So we need to educate ourselves of the new technologies.

Lastly, ***kung may tiyaga, may nilaga.*** I don't think we need to explain that one.

Magandang umaga po.