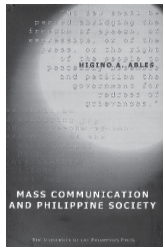
Useful Data Presentation, Glaring Dearth of Information

by Danilo A. Arao



Mass Communication and Philippine Society
by Higino A. Ables
Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2003
(195 pp)

Though publications on mass communication abound, it remains a welcome treat for media students, educators, practitioners and even plain enthusiasts to have books that seek to provide updates on issues and concerns related to their field of interest.

Higino Alindogan Ables' 195-page ***Mass Communication and Philippine Society*** (2003) attempts not just to acquaint interested readers with the goings-on in Philippine mass communication. It also aims to give a context of how mass communication developed through the years, and identify media-related issues and concerns for future research.

The book has four parts, namely Historical Background of Philippine Media (Chapters 1 to 3), whi ch discusses important media-related events from the Spanish occupation to the Martial Law period; The Media in Contemporary Philippines, 1987-2001 (Chapters 4 to 6), which analyzes the print and electronic media at that time and presents selected media-related agencies; Ethical and Regulatory Dimensions of the Mass Media (Chapters 7 to 9), which identifies constitutional provisions and other laws pertinent to media and guides readers in analyzing ethical problems related to media practice; and Theories and Research Problems in Mass Communication (Chapters 10 and 11), which examines conceptual, empirical and theoretical perspectives in the study of mass communication and identifies media-related issues and concerns for further research.

Just like other local works on writing, communication and mass media such as ***Journalism for Filipinos*** (Malinao), Ables (2003) discusses the advent of new media (62-69). He investigates the developments in personal computing, mobile or cellular phone technology and data storage. As regards the latter, he focuses on the availability of electronic books in the market through CD-ROM which offers "portability and adjustability for reading ease" (Ables 2003: 66).

To provide variety to an otherwise academic style of presentation, the author reprints selected columns discussing media trends and patterns written by Jerry Barican (***Philippine Daily Inquirer***), Conrado de Quiros (***Philippine Daily Inquirer***) and Jose C. Sison (***Philippine Star***). Ables also includes an editorial published in the ***Philippine Daily Inquirer*** on 10 June 2001 entitled "Broadcast Arrogance" which criticizes a radio commentator for replacing "solid and well-researched reportage" with "knee-jerk commentaries and acerbic rantings" (112).

Since the book was prepared under a Textbook Writing Grant from the University of the Philippines (UP) System's Creative and Research Scholarship Fund, the author provides useful reading materials like constitutional provisions related to mass media and communication (92-94), NCR Print Publications, their publishers and circulation (155-160), The Filipino Journalist's Code of Ethics (161-165), Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP) Code of Conduct (166-168), excerpts from the Television Code of the KBP (169-174), and Republic Act No. 9006 or the Fair Election Act (175-182).

There are also selected figures that communication students would find useful, such as the highlights of the Philippine Information Agency's (PIA) report on media coverage (77) and the PIA's Issues Monitoring (78). Other readers may also welcome the inclusion of controversial photographs (116, 118) published in the ***Philippine Daily Inquirer*** in the author's discussion of media ethics.

While the book's strength lies in the usefulness of the data presented, the dearth of information is evident in selected topics.

Most noticeable is the absence of a section on Filipino films. Any book that seeks to shed light on mass communication should naturally include an in-depth discussion of film. Instead, Ables merely mentions that during the American regime, "film was largely used for entertainment" but occasionally had some

political purpose, such as when "film clips of war scenes were shown in the...1940s" (26). He also stresses that at that time, "the media – newspapers, magazines, movies – made Filipinos familiar with 'Hollywood productions, the beautiful homeland of the Americans, the good life across the Pacific'" (Taylor cited in Ables 2003: 24). He fails to scrutinize the historical development of the Philippine film industry, as well as the current issues and concerns related to it.

On other forms of mass media in the Philippines, Ables mainly uses secondary sources of information in his study of their historical development. This is understandable since he only aims to provide the necessary context to his investigation of contemporary issues. What is lacking, however, is the identification and analysis of target audiences of selected media, which are vital to understanding their nature and orientation. For instance, the publication of the first newspaper in the Islands, ***Del Superior Govierno***, in 1811 is reportedly due to the "sense of patriotism," and it seeks to "pacify an impatient Spanish population" (8). Further, ***Kalayaan*** – published in 1896 and distributed in "Manila, Cavite, Morong (now Rizal Province), Kalookan, Malabon and other places" (Agoncillo cited in Ables 2003: 20) – obviously has a different target audience, but this is not deeply examined in relation to publications by the Spaniards.

The study of particular target audiences of publications during the Spanish colonial period is necessary to resolve whether or not ***Del Superior Govierno*** and other publications for Spaniards should form part of the History of Filipino Journalism since, given their nature and orientation, such publications may be more accurately classified under the topic History of Spanish Journalism in the Philippines. Ables does not mention this academic issue as regards interpreting developments related to Philippine journalism. Given the need to properly contextualize the publications that existed during the Spanish period, readers – particularly communication students and educators – should be made more aware of the need to make this distinction. Indeed, the difference between the two classifications is not just a matter of semantics. The same may be said for publications that saw print during the Japanese and American occupation.

The author's investigation of the revolutionary press also gives the impression that it ended with the country's independence from direct foreign control in 1946. Citing a study by Valenzuela (1933), Ables argues that "since the character of...journalism in the Philippines between the years 1986 and 1900 was dominantly revolutionary, it may be safely said that Philippine Revolutionary Journalism existed during that period" (16). Regardless of one's ideological convictions, it is necessary to stress that revolutionary journalism continues to exist, as manifested by various underground publications like ***Ang Bayan*** and ***Liberation*** of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP), respectively. The NDFP even claims that ***Radyo Gil-ayab*** (the latter is an Iluko term for "blaze") in Cagayan Valley would be inaugurated in January 2004. According to a news article in the ***Philippine Daily Inquirer*** (January 6, 2004), "Northern Luzon rebels have been using radio since the 1970s to air their stand on issues like militarization, agrarian reform and regional autonomy" (A13).

As regards radio and television, Ables chronicles the historical development of these media, but his approach is mainly descriptive. Although he makes it clear that the introduction of electronic media is largely due to the Americans, he does not look into the manner in which these media were adapted to the Philippine setting.

Moreover, the chapter on electronic media (i.e., Chapter 5) only provides basic data on radio and television, mainly from the ***Philippine Media Factbook 2000***. It would have been better if Ables also analyzed data from the government's Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (the latest of which was conducted in 1994) to properly assess how the audience's literacy and education affect electronic media consumption. This can help the readers become more aware of the concept of media literacy, which Ables fails to consider.

It is unfortunate that the evaluation of the alternative press is only confined to the Martial Law era from 1972 to 1981. This implies, albeit unwittingly, that the alternative press has ceased to exist with what Ables describes as the restoration of democracy in 1986. The nature and orientation of the alternative press beyond Martial Law must be examined in order to more properly contextualize the social terrain in which the Philippine mass media operate. At present, there is evidence to prove the existence of

the alternative press in print (e.g., ***Pinoy Weekly***, ***ST Exposure***), broadcast (e.g., ***Ngayon Na, Bayan!*** aired weekdays on DZRJ at 2 p.m.), film (e.g., ***Orapronobis***, a 92-minute film directed by Lino Brocka in 1989), and new media (e.g., ***Bulatlat.com***, ***Gin.ph***).

On the framework for studying media and society, Ables should have distinguished between mainstream and alternative media and assessed how they developed through the years. This distinction should naturally result in the discussion of various social forces that seek change from either within or beyond the status quo, as well as those that advocate retention of existing social structures. The analysis of social forces could then be a step towards appreciating the existing relationship between media and society. Based on his analysis of contemporary mass media, Ables mainly focuses on the mainstream media.

As stated, the inclusion of new media is most welcome, but there is no history of how new media developed in the Philippines. The discussion of new media's history centers on the development of personal computers (PCs) in general, and the investigation of online publications in the Philippines is selective at the very least. Only the websites of the ***Philippine Star*** and the ***Philippine Daily Inquirer*** are identified, completely ignoring the fact that even various community based publications also maintain and develop websites.

There are also no selected data on information technology, particularly those that affect the state of new media in the country, such as the penetration rate of PCs, internet service providers (ISPs), telephone density and electrification. These data are crucial in analyzing the accessibility and affordability of technologies and equipment that must be used to avail of new media.

That Ables devotes a chapter on media-related institutions is commendable (Chapter 6, 74-82); however, he only discusses the mandates of the Philippine Information Agency (PIA), National Press Club (NPC), Philippine Press Institute (PPI) and the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB). In terms of depth of discussion, he admits giving "more prominence to the work being done" (74) by the government-run PIA though the reason for this is not explained.

In his assessment of selected media-related institutions, he stresses, "The Philippines is not wanting in organizations that are supposed to exercise regulatory powers on a formal or informal

capacity. These bodies are also organized to set performance standards and give rewards for excellence. Moreover, they also offer training programs to improve the professional capabilities of media practitioners" (82). However, Ables does not consider the principle of self-regulation in media. Moreover, his identification of the regulatory bodies is problematic because media-related non-government organizations (NGOs) like the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) are lumped together with government agencies like MTRCB and the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC). This may give an unsuspecting reader the idea that they are all government entities.

The identification of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) is only incidental since studies of its executive director, Sheila Coronel, are occasionally cited in various chapters. The CMFR is mentioned in connection with its joint study with the PCIJ on corruption (113), and in the discussion of the organizations that were established to "check the malpractices of journalists" (48). The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), meanwhile, is not mentioned at all.

In the context of self-regulation, the CMFR seeks "to establish a framework of responsibility and ethics in the practice of the press" through, among others, the publication of the ***Philippine Journalism Review*** and the organization of the Jaime V. Ongpin Awards for Excellence in Journalism ("About Us" 2003). Aside from specializing in investigative reporting ("Journalism with an Impact" 2002), the PCIJ also initiates media-related studies, one of the most prominent being the 1998 study on media corruption, which Ables cited in his book. Both CMFR and PCIJ also initiate training for media practitioners to improve their craft. The NUJP, for its part, promotes unionism in media and therefore seeks to protect the rights and welfare of journalists. Formally launched in July 1988, it engages in media advocacy by initiating studies on media-related concerns like the killing of journalists in recent years (Arao 2003).

As regards laws and regulations on the media, Ables should have included the Shield Law (i.e., Republic Act No. 53 as amended by RA 1477) which, according to Teodoro (n.d.), ensures that journalists are not "forced to reveal their sources" except on matters of national security. Chapter 8 mainly focuses on the responsibilities of journalists, but the laws they can invoke in the practice of their profession are not identified.

Chapter 10, meanwhile, summarizes selected mass communication theories. His examples, however, are mainly culled from foreign textbooks. For instance, to illustrate the Hypodermic Needle Model, he cites the "Invasion from Mars" incident (132) in the US in 1938. Ables does not relate the theories to the Philippine setting, making it hard for the reader to fully understand his description and occasional critique of the theories.

He explains that due to social inequality, power conflicts and "the concomitant issues regarding knowledge and information, we should consider the alternative paradigm for theory and research propounded by (Denis) McQuail" (141). According to Ables, this paradigm is called the "critical perspective" and its main components are sensitivity to ideological content in the media that tends to support the establishment, and the rejection of the argument that content has fixed meanings and thus its impact is measurable and predictable. McQuail, after all, argues that meanings are "constructed by the audience according to its social situation and interests" (cited in Ables 2003: 140). Such abstractions are not simplified. Consequently, the author's exhortation to "consider" the alternative paradigm becomes unappreciated, and the importance of his statement remains unclear. Ables, therefore, does not provide a viable framework for evaluating mass communication and society in the Philippines.

Reading the section Topics for Communication Research (Chapter 11), one expects the author to identify what he thinks are issues and concerns that must be studied, citing their relevance and urgency, if necessary. Ables, however, merely cites the research agenda of a previous study by Pernia in 2001, a list of topics for research prepared at a conference of communication experts held in Manila in September 2000, and selected research problems posed by Downing in 1996. This approach makes it difficult for the reader to ascertain the author's analysis of areas of mass communication that should be looked into.

In this concluding chapter, Ables stresses that the wheels of research "keep rolling on, yielding only tentative answers to never-ending questions" (151). As it is, readers should take this book as a work in progress. It is hoped that an update, if forthcoming, will include the comments that are stated herein.

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