

Sheila Coronel on Media Coverage of Elections

Interview by Rachel E. Khan



“For the people and by the people” describes, in a nutshell, the basis for a democratic system of governance, namely people’s participation in government. But the crux of participation is not in the making of laws or policies. It is in the process of selecting the people’s representatives by means of elections.

In a country with a population of nearly 80 million, how do voters make a decision on whom to elect? In this regard, information provided by media is crucial. As pointed out by political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1987: 86-87), “Electoral power per se is the mechanical guarantee of democracy; but the substantial guarantee is given by the conditions under which the citizens get the information and are exposed to the opinion makers.”

*Effective democracy depends on an informed citizenry. And an informed citizenry greatly depends on the free and responsible media in the delivery of accurate and substantial information about the candidates and the election process. To shed light on how Philippine media have covered elections in the country, **Plaridel** interviewed in December 2003 Sheila Coronel, a journalist who has made significant contributions to election reporting.*

Coronel is executive director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ). In 2001, the PCIJ was responsible for exposing former President Joseph Estrada’s luxurious expenditures on mansions, one of the news stories that led to his impeachment and eventual ouster. The organization has also exposed various attempts at election fraud and bribery within the media.

For excellence in investigative journalism, Coronel was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and the Creative Communications Arts in 2003. She was also elevated to the Hall of Fame of the prestigious Jaime V. Ongpin Awards for Excellence in Journalism for garnering the top prize at least four times in a span of 12 years.

Coronel has a Master of Science (MS) in Political Sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Political Science from the University of the Philippines.

Coronel’s views on Philippine media’s coverage of past elections should help the public appreciate the role that media can and should play in the May 2004 elections.

Q: *How would you assess media's performance in the 1998 elections?*

A: In 1998, the media did an exceptional job as regards voter education, but then, as now, news coverage still needs to be honed.

Q: *In what way does news coverage need to be honed?*

A: [In 2004] the candidates will have very sophisticated media managers and public relations people who will try to project the strengths of their candidates and play down their weaknesses. In the past, media have very much played along – deliberately or not – with the agenda of the various political candidates.

Q: *Do you think that media have failed in their watchdog function? What should they look into?*

A: Media's function is more than just that of a watchdog. Basically, a watchdog just waits for something to happen and then "barks." Media should be more conscious of how they are being used or manipulated and how they are being coopted by various interest groups.

I think the media's role is not just to look at, say, cheating in the elections. They should actually examine the candidates' stand on important issues.

Q: *What type of "consciousness" should media have of its role in an election coverage?*

A: Media should look into whether or not they are playing a proactive role or merely being carried along; whether or not they are seeking to enlighten the electorate or joining the bandwagon; whether they are bringing into the news agenda issues which are not necessarily being brought out in the campaigns of the candidates but issues that the candidates need to address.

What usually happens is that journalists are preempted by the political agenda of the candidates. The latter define the election discourse.

I think media should help define the issues. They should take the cue from the citizens as to what the issues are. What happens now is that media let the campaign organizations and the public relation machineries of the candidates define the issues and how the election discourse is going to be framed.

For example, during the Estrada campaign, clearly the Estrada camp framed [the choice of president] as a class issue i.e., the poor for Estrada. The media went along with that. They uncritically accepted what the Estrada campaign projected.

Media should help voters to decode and deconstruct the messages and to be more critical as viewers, listeners or readers of the news. The media should enlighten the citizens as to how they are being manipulated, and expose the attempts to manipulate them. Media cannot just do a “who, what, where, when” kind of reporting.

Q: *What makes election coverage different from beat [daily news] coverage?*

A: Election coverage is centered on one major event. The elections, especially presidential elections, are major political exercises that involve the majority of Filipinos since they are conducted only once every six years. The media are there not only to report what is going on, but to help people make wise choices in the elections and to understand the importance of their vote.

Being so powerful now, the media will influence to a great extent the people’s choices. Therefore, how the media present issues, what issues they choose to present, how they profile the candidates, how they present the candidates and how they frame the race will have a very great impact on the conduct and outcome of the elections.

For day-to-day beat coverage, everybody goes out in different directions. But during elections, everyone is focused on that single event.

Media can either squander this opportunity to educate people or make full use of it. They can either be an agent of democratization or a tool of the candidates.

Q: *Do you think media contribute to the growing number of celebrity candidates?*

A: I think the reason celebrities are doing so well is because they have a built-in advantage as celebrities. Whatever they do, like eating ice cream or taking a walk in the park, is considered news. Other people need to exert more effort in order to be noticed by the media.

Estrada had that advantage and so did the others. And that will happen again in the coming elections.

For example, Fernando Poe, Jr. has more attractive footage from his movies and from elsewhere. In other words, the game is in favor of those who are “telegenic” to begin with.

Television is now the number one news medium. Most people get their news from television and that is why the race is stacked in favor of those who look good on television and know how to play to TV.

This is where the celebrities have the edge. It is not necessarily because broadcast networks are biased. It is simply because people who have been in media or showbiz most of their lives know how to work the medium.

Q: *What kind of training should journalists have in order to prepare themselves for election coverage?*

A: I think the newsrooms have to ensure that there is special training for elections so that their people are informed about the nitty-gritty of the actual voting process and the detection of fraud, among others.

I think that some of the training should look more closely at the context in which the elections are taking place. For instance, media persons should learn how to cover the various forces that play a role in the elections – the political parties, the Church, the power brokers, the organization of the campaigns and the money behind them.

Ethical issues of election coverage are also very important. These are not just related to bribes or payolas but also to more subtle aspects such as who spends for campaign coverage, how much time should be given to each candidate and how media can ensure fair coverage of the different candidates.

In a situation where the images are stacked in favor of the celebrities, media have to make a special effort to be fair. Media cannot just do what they do regularly with the routine coverage of beats.

Q: *How can media prevent biased reporting?*

A: First of all, they should be conscious of their role. I think most news organizations do not consciously make an effort to avoid bias.

They have to start by being more critical of the kind of photographs and footages they use or the survey firms that they quote. There are shady survey companies that only crop up during the elections that are used to present a bandwagon effect or to influence voting. Most of the time, the media persons are uncritical and realize their mistakes much later.

I think there should be more introspection and reflection on past coverage. What went wrong? Where were the gaps? What could have been done better? I do not think this is happening in most newsrooms. If media will not do this themselves, then media NGOs should help bring this to media's attention.

Media should look at not just rating stories, but, more fundamentally, what the electorate needs to know.

Q: *Most news organizations have a practice of sending only one set of reporters to cover a particular political party. Do you think this is a healthy practice or can this lead to biased reporting?*

A: It may be unhealthy in the sense that the reporter develops a cozy relationship with the political party. However, being there for a sustained period of time allows the reporter to know the campaign organization really well, to find out the best persons to talk to and to know the organization intimately. It is hard to say. It depends on the reporter and the news organization and on how well they handle the situation.

Q: *What kind of relationship should a reporter have with his or her sources, especially the candidates?*

A: A sort of grudging respect. I think the best relationship between a journalist and the source is that the source knows that he or she cannot influence the journalist. The latter gets respected and is given access precisely because of that. Of course, a journalist from big news organizations may not have the best relationship with his or her source, but the latter cannot afford to ignore this particular journalist.

But I think even the smaller ones in the past, like the *BusinessWorld* and *Manila Chronicle* reporters, even if they were not paid, the candidates talked to them and people respected them. Because they could not be bought, they were given access.

So I think that it is possible for journalists to be independent and critical and still have access. That has been our experience.

Q: *How rampant is corruption of the media during the election period?*

A: As we noted in our book, *News for Sale*, the problem is that the election period is really the time when everybody wants to corrupt the media because of the latter's power.

Corruption in media is done in various ways, the crudest being paying off journalists, particularly reporters, editors or columnists. But as we found out in 1998 – and it is happening again in 2004 – some candidates have long-term contracts, especially in radio stations. So what in reality is propaganda of candidates is passed off as legitimate news. These contracts go to news organizations directly, not to the individual journalists. In effect, it is like wholesale bribery.

There have been no sanctions on this. Our research showed that huge amounts of money – from five million pesos to twenty million pesos – were paid to assure airtime in radio stations. And that is apart from retail bribery.

There are various ways in which media are co-opted during elections. The money is just too much that it is very difficult to resist. And sometimes it is not money. Cars are offered and all sorts of perks.

Q: *How can this type of corruption be prevented?*

A: I think various groups are trying to do something. I heard that the Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility (CMFR) is trying to do a content analysis of television coverage and will release its report in the course of the campaign. Also, the rival candidates, i.e. those who do not have the money to bribe, will hopefully call attention to the bribery in the media.

On our part, we are updating our study on *News for Sale* for 2004 to include new forms of corruption. The media are so powerful and as with any other powerful institution, there is a need to watch them.

I think citizens also have to be more vigilant and more critical of what they read in the papers and what they see on television. People have not always voted for the media favorites. That means the people are not just swallowing what the media say all the time. That is, except for the news anchors and celebrities.

Q: *What steps should media take to strive for objectivity?*

A: It is very hard to say. First of all, most news organizations should strive for objectivity because no matter how objective or non-partisan a journalist or editor is, if the owner of the newspaper or station has a preference, then that bias is going to show. Second, if a news organization enters into contract with some candidates and not with others, then definitely that station will be biased in favor of a particular candidate, i.e. he or she who buys airtime during the campaign. And third, reporters are easier to check since there are several layers in the newsroom,

like the editors and sub-editors. Therefore, it is easy for the editors to check, but only if they are vigilant. Moreover, they need to have the support of the publishers/owners.

But if the big media celebrities, like the news anchors, are the ones who are biased, then it is very hard to rein them in because they have fiefdoms of their own.

That is why I think, in all issues, not just elections, it is a combination of people inside the newsrooms, journalists, outside organizations such as media NGOs and concerned citizens, working to ensure professional news coverage.

However, even in countries where media corruption is not a big problem, partisanship and mistakes in reporting are still rampant. Look at the US media. Commercial interests and the ratings determine the content, especially that of television.

For example, in ABS-CBN, they can track the ratings of public affairs programs and they will naturally have more news on the candidates who rate well. This is not because they are supporting that candidate. The need to get the ratings determines the content of news programming on television. That is a bias in itself because naturally what will get the ratings is the coverage of celebrities, of beautiful faces and not of the serious ones who want to discuss issues.

It is a very uneven playing field to start with. If media just look at the ratings, then bias and partisanship will always be there, because there will be bias and partisanship for what will rate. Even if corruption is removed, the commercial considerations will still influence the news.

Q: *Is this situation unique to the Philippines? How do we compare with our ASEAN neighbors?*

A: If it is any comfort, there are at least 10 PMs in Thailand who are news anchors or personalities. So it is not just a Philippine phenomenon. I think that you have to juxtapose the shift towards democracy and the

media boom. After periods of authoritarianism, there is a vacuum that is filled by celebrities in the absence of alternative political personalities.

It is a sign, I think, of a maturing democracy. The latter means that one has to play to a mass audience and in the modern age it is done through the mass media. In a period where there are new political parties and people are still unable to navigate in this new democratic setup, there is a gap that media celebrities fill.

So it is also happening in Thailand, and even in the state of California (US), but not quite on the same scale as it is happening here.

It comes at a time when media are the primordial molder of public opinion. But media are not one-sided. They are interactive. Public taste is very fickle, and celebrities, despite what happened to Estrada, still have some sort of appeal. Eventually, just as *trapos* (traditional politicians) lost their appeal, celebrities will lose theirs once people see what they are really capable of. I think there will be a constant search for new types of leaders.

Q: *How dangerous is covering the elections in the Philippines? Can one be in danger of losing life or limb?*

A: I cannot remember anyone, of all the journalists killed since 1986, who was killed because of election coverage. Most of them have been killed because of commentaries on radio or reporting on crime but not on elections or even coups [d' etat] and Mindanao. They were deliberately targeted. They were not caught in a crossfire.

This makes the Philippines a special case. The danger is not in the coverage. The danger is that you will be paid.

Q: *What are the challenges that responsible journalists face during election coverage?*

A: The biggest challenge in election coverage is to be heard above the din. There is so much noise and it is very hard to be heard. Being put forth are the conflicting

agenda and propaganda. One has to consider that it is not just presidents who are running, there are also 12 senators, among many others. So it is going to be very hard for serious journalism to be heard in such an atmosphere.

What we try to do is prepare way in advance for elections and to come out with studies that will add more depth to the discourse. In 1998, we produced the book *Pork and other Perks* which is about corruption. This year we are producing a documentary on how presidents are sold and the myth making behind them, which we hope will help form a more critical electorate. We are also coming out with a book that analyzes the record of the post-Marcos Congress from 1987 to 2002.

We try to make a contribution but it is a real challenge because, in some way, election time seems like a silly season – people are dancing and singing in the streets and one is against the current if he or she tries to talk about something serious. But still, we have to keep trying.

Reference

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Rachel E. Khan obtained her Master's degree in Journalism from Columbia University, New York under a Fulbright scholarship. She is an assistant professor at the Department of Journalism, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication. She is also a freelance writer; her works have been published in the Philippine Journalism Review, Asiaweek, BusinessWorld and other national broadsheets.