

Media's Ties with NGOs/POs and Rebel Groups in the Context of the Mindanao Peace Process

RUFA CAGOCO-GUIAM

Due to threats from local warlords, influential politicians and wealthy migrant capitalists, media practitioners in Cotabato are generally conservative and tend to be pragmatic. While not a direct party to the peace talks, the media's role as a vehicle of information on the peace negotiations between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) was crucial. However, the local NGOs and POs generally think that media coverage of the peace process was insufficient because it overlooked their related activities and the historical roots of the Mindanao conflict. For their part, the media perceive the NGOs and POs as leftist and not as sources of vital information. The media attributed the inadequate reportage of the peace talks to lack of creativity among local journalists, secrecy of the negotiations, government's lack of transparency and the media owners' capitalist orientation. They believed that the management had the prerogative to set what to print and to air but it appeared that self-censorship was more at work. To be truly facilitative, media must seek out NGOs and POs which, in turn, must build friendly ties with the former. The peace process, being a delicate matter, requires media persons to be sensitive to the various ramifications of their news coverage.

Introduction

Media's coverage of the peace process in Southern Mindanao has spurred public discussions on the increasing role of media play in setting agenda for policy making. Such discussions necessarily include questions on the relationships that media and its practitioners forge with people who are inextricably linked to the peace process: rebel groups and the critical mass of non-government and people's organizations (NGOs/POs) which may or may not be supportive of the rebel groups.

This paper mainly describes such relationships. It looks at the various relationships that media practitioners have to establish in their pursuit of a fair coverage of the peace process, or what they perceive to be fair and balanced coverage. It also describes how the public perceives media's coverage of the peace process and what are the primary irritants or tensions in the process of forging peace in Southern Mindanao.

The setting

Like many provinces in Mindanao, the Cotabato provinces — Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, North and South Cotabato — are noted for their lush vegetation and fertile river valleys. These characteristics could have paved the way for rapid progress and development for teeming populations of both indigenous and migrant groups. Ironically, the four provinces, carved out of the once-majestic Cotabato Empire Province, now host the country's 16 most economically depressed towns, according to National Economic Development Authority (NEDA).

Compounding the abject poverty of many of the residents of the said provinces is the unstable peace and order situation prevailing in some towns, notably in Maguindanao, Sultan Kudarat and Cotabato. Pocket wars, skirmishes between the military and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), armed encounters between rival political groups, vendetta killings (locally known as *rido*) — all these have pushed both native and migrant populations in some towns of these provinces to the depths of misery and powerlessness.

While officially the seat of government of the ARMM, Cotabato City is not a part of the autonomous government. In 1989, its residents voted "No" in a plebiscite held to determine which provinces and cities would comprise the autonomous region. The plebiscite was a prerequisite in the creation of the ARMM under the 1987 Constitution and Republic Act 6734, otherwise known as the Organic Act. Many of the provinces and cities claimed by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) as the areas of autonomy voted against their inclusion in the autonomous region. These provinces and cities have a majority Christian population except for Marawi City. The said city voted against its becoming a part of the ARMM despite being populated predominantly by Muslim Maranaws. Its residents take pride in its being the "only Islamic city" in Mindanao and in the entire country. The reason why its residents voted against its inclusion in the ARMM could not be the same as that of Cotabato City residents. The latter has a majority Christian population.

In terms of geographical location, Cotabato City is a delta of 17,599 hectares crisscrossed by smaller tributaries of the Pulangí, or the Rio Grande de Mindanao. (*Pulangí* is a Maguindanaon term which means "river." Many residents of the city erroneously refer to the Rio Grande as the *Pulangí River*.) Before it became a chartered city on June 19, 1959,

Cotabato town was an integral part of the once Empire Province of Cotabato. This once-biggest province in the Philippines was subdivided during the early part of then President Marcos' administration. The subdivision was allegedly aimed at defusing unrest among local Christian and Muslim political leaders who bickered over political turf. After the subdivision, the province became four provincial units: North Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao. The first two units became the bailiwicks of Christian political leaders, and the latter two were granted to Muslim politicians. But two decades later, it is only the province of Maguindanao which can solely claim to have a solid Maguindanaon Muslim leadership. The three other provinces have since been dominated by Christian political leaders. Maguindanao also happens to be the smallest in terms of land area and the poorest among the four Cotabato provinces.

After the subdivision, Cotabato City became a part of the first congressional district of Maguindanao province.

The latest projections on the city's population place it within the 180,000-200,000 range. In terms of religious affiliations, about 60 percent of this number are Christians of various denominations, with the Roman Catholic group as the most numerous, and also the most politically influential. The other 40 per cent of the population are Muslims of various ethnolinguistic groups, with the Maguindanaons dominating in terms of numbers.

Aside from its being the seat of government of the ARMM, Cotabato City is also the regional center of Region XII, or Central Mindanao. This administrative region is composed of the provinces of Cotabato (North), Sultan Kudarat, and Lanao del Norte as well as the cities of Iligan, Cotabato and Marawi. Government line agencies have their regional offices in the city, standing cheek by jowl to offices of government line agencies devolved to the ARMM. This has earned for Cotabato City the distinction of being the only city in the country which hosts two regional administrative regions — Region XII and ARMM.

The media in Cotabato and the ARMM

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■ Like many community papers and radio stations in other parts of the country, Cotabato media are generally conservative in their political orientation. They are hardly able to fulfill one of the Fourth Estate's avowed ideals: "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable."

media's topmost concern. Many local media practitioners do so at serious risk to life and limb.

avowed ideals: "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." On a superficial level, they could claim to be "comforting" the region's impoverished masses in terms of their public service programs and intermittent and spotty coverage of events and issues affecting the marginalized sectors of the local population. "Afflicting" the comfortable in the region, many of whom happen to be local warlords, influential politicians and wealthy migrant capitalists, has hardly been, and perhaps will never be, local

Thus, local media practitioners tend to stay within the limits set by a conservative political world view. Rather than tread the least trodden path of "comforting the afflicted" among local residents, reporters and writers generally accede to being pragmatic and realistic. Being "pragmatic" and "realistic" may take various forms for the local underpaid and overworked media practitioner. It can range from swallowing hook, line and sinker all press releases from politicians, military and government agencies to accepting or even asking for money after a press conference. For some, it also means being on the "secret" payroll of local politicians.

In terms of professional preparation, local journalists and broadcasters are limited to on-the-job trainings and staff development seminars. The latter is the advantage of those employed by well-established local media entities, like the Notre Dame Broadcasting Corporation (NDBC) which owns and manages five radio stations in Cotabato City and Central Mindanao. The rest of the pack have to make do with whatever limited resources their radio stations or papers give them as added fringe benefits.

Many of Cotabato's media practitioners became so through experience and long exposure to media work. Of the 11 broadcast journalists (radio) interviewed for this case study, only one graduated with a Mass Communications degree from a reputable university in Davao City. She now manages two of NDBC's stations in Kidapawan, Cotabato province.

The rest are holders of liberal arts degrees in sociology, psychology, philosophy or international relations. One finished a degree in Business Administration. Two are college undergraduates.

In Cotabato City, media practitioners have to straddle both radio and print media in order to maximize their earnings and expand their exposure to national media. Local radio reporters are stringers or correspondents of national dailies in the region. They also write for local tabloids like the *Mindanao Cross* and the *Mindanao Kris*.

Some reporters write for the *Mindanao Trend* and another local weekly. At the same time, they also file reports with Manila-based wires like Reuters, Agence France Presse (AFP) and the German news agency, the Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA). One interviewee, Datu Amir Baraguir, who used to be associate editor for the *Cross* now writes a regular column for a national opinion tabloid, *Isyu*.

A description of local media practitioners in terms of their professional training, orientation and the sociopolitical conditions where they work is necessary to appreciate the kind and/or quality of their coverage of such a complicated political issue like the peace process.

Methodology

The data for this case study are collated from one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and conversations with print and broadcast media practitioners (11 respondents) and NGO/PO leaders/workers (10 respondents). An in-depth interview was conducted with a key informant, Caloy Bautista, a former radio station manager who has had extensive experience in news and public affairs. He has since then moved away from actual media work (news and public affairs) and is now doing production work for Visayan radio dramas (soap operas) for the NDBC Production Center in Kidapawan, Cotabato. He is also active in NGO work, particularly in advocacy for indigenous people's rights to a balanced environment. He has more than twenty years of media work experience. He is now part of an NGO called the Task Force Sandawa, which openly opposes the establishment of the geothermal plant at the foot of Mt. Apo, in Cotabato and Davao del Sur.

A separate set of interview questions was given to each of the media practitioners and the NGO workers. For the FGDs, a set of guide questions

was drawn up (See appendix for the questionnaires). The interviews were done by the writer's junior mass communication students who had been trained in doing media interviews. The writer herself conducted the two FGDs (one in Cotabato City and the other in Kidapawan), and the key informant interview.

All other data are culled from the writer's experience as editor-in-chief of the *Mindanao Cross* for almost five years (1991-1995). In addition, data from a series of multisectoral consultations in the four ARMM provinces validated some of the findings in the interviews and FGDs. The said consultations were in line with the people's agenda for peace and development under the new ARMM leadership. They culminated in a regional workshop in General Santos City on December 17, 1996.

Definition of terms

For this case study, the term "media" applies to both print and broadcast media entities which are based in Cotabato City whose coverage area includes Central Mindanao. Since local television networks have no local news and public affairs programs, TV broadcasters are excluded from this study.

Moreover, we use the term "media" here to refer to local mainstream media. The rebel groups, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), have their respective "press" and information bureaus, which churn out periodic newsletters, the *Maradika*, and the *Mahardika*, respectively. These two are not part of "local media" referred to in this case study.

The peace process being analyzed refers to the series of peace negotiations and other substantial talks leading to the settlement of the armed conflict between the MNLF and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). For this paper, the process encompasses the various activities and initiatives of NGOs/POs to promote peace. This includes their peace advocacy and social development programs for the marginalized sectors of the local population, especially among the indigenous and Moro peoples.

The peace negotiations between the GRP and the MILF are not included in this study. Neither does it include the coverage of the peace negotiations between the GRP and the Communist Party of the Philippines-

New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) although the latter operates extensively in Central Mindanao and even in the entire island.

NGOs/POs are the critical mass involved in the advocacy and social development programs which are mainly for those affected by the armed conflict between the MNLF and the GRP. Among those interviewed for this study are leaders/active supporters of these organizations, some of whom have been consulted by the members of either panels in forging the peace agreement.

The "rebel group" referred to in this study is the MNLF. Some references may be made to the rival faction, the MILF, inasmuch as the former has become part of the ARMM government after the September 9, 1996 regional elections.

Media and the Peace Process

The role of media in the peace process

Media's presentation of events as reality is framed by the dominant world views of media owners (*Parenti, 1986*). Media owners generally come from the elite or upper middle class sectors of society who are schooled in conservative, largely self-perpetuating sociopolitical systems. The world views of media owners tend to converge toward political conservatism although some claim to be liberal in their views.

In the Philippines, conservatism in political orientation is inextricably linked with the goals of a capitalist, consumerist society. Agenda setting in media work necessarily includes consideration of what news stories appeal to the public which has generally been conditioned to think in similar conventional fashion.

Because of their role in setting agenda on what the public should think about (*Parenti, ibid.*), the mass media entities

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play a crucial role in the peace process. Media may not be the party directly negotiating for peace but their intermediary role as facilitator or as vehicle of information about the process can either make or break the peace. Awareness of this vital position that makes it incumbent upon media persons, print and broadcast journalists alike, to take their influential role seriously. Taking their role seriously means that they have to do their homework, i.e. prepare themselves extensively before a coverage of the peace process at any juncture. They have to research the historical basis of the conflict and if possible inquire about the Philippine government policy guidelines for the peace negotiations. The peace process *is a process, and not an isolated news event*. It should therefore be covered or reported as such. However, journalists tend to reduce the complexities of the process into simple answers to the four Ws and one H which many news reporters are familiar with. Rebels and soldiers are not the only ones who can make war. Irresponsible and reckless journalists do, especially if they combine their lack of initiative with sensationalized reporting (see *Guiam, with a note by Arguillas, 1996*).

United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, himself a veteran in various peace processes, once said: "Peace is more than a cessation of hostilities. True peace is based on development, on democracy and respect for human rights. Peace is when societies are at peace with themselves and with the environment." Ghali's concept of peace implies that it is a process just like development or democracy. It is not a static, immutable news event. And we need not belabor here that it is not bereft of sociopolitical and economic or even religious repercussions.

Reportage of the peace process

Covering the peace process has been hot copy for local media because peace and the issues closely linked with it are everybody's concern. However, since the peace process is a complicated issue, its coverage by the media borders on the superficial issues which lend themselves to the usual framework of what has been defined as news.

Generally, Cotabato City-based NGOs and POs think that media coverage of the peace process was not sufficient. They believe that the coverage excluded the background on the armed conflict in Mindanao. NGO leaders like Wahab Guialal, Director of the Moro People's Resource Center (MPRC) in Cotabato City, believes that an understanding of this

important aspect of the Mindanao conflict may have cushioned the widespread negative reaction to the peace agreement between the MNLF and the GRP.

Moreover, NGO leaders and workers also expressed that their activities pursuant to their peace and development advocacy programs have not been accorded substantial attention by local media. The lack of media attention has also contributed to the popular misinformation on the vital issues encompassed by the peace process. The respondents cite several reasons for this lack of media projection of NGO/PO activities. Among these are: many local media persons have a bias against NGOs/POs; these organizations are rarely regarded by media as sources of information regarding "saleable" news stories; and the NGOs/POs themselves do not have enough resources to hire people who are trained in public relations (media liaisoning work).

Regarding the first reason, the NGO/PO leaders explain that local media persons' bias against them stems from the nature of their work. They advocate causes which have close affinity with those advanced by rebel groups, especially the leftist ones. Given the conservative nature of local media, its practitioners tend to be adverse to groups which are perceived to be "red" in terms of political orientation.

Media seldom ask for NGOs/POs for information regarding "saleable" news stories. This is because these groups are organized by "non-personalities," i.e. persons who are not prominent. Nor are these organizations rocked by controversies, in the same way that most government offices are. These organizations rarely become politically influential, especially in a generally conservative community. These characteristics of NGOs/POs do not fit mainstream media's definition of what makes news. Thus, they are rarely sought as sources of information.

A few exceptions can be cited here. In 1992, Cotabato City parish priest Fr. Colin Bagaforo, DCC, organized a local election watchdog called the Kaakbay ng Sambayanan para sa Maayos na Halalan (KASAMAH). The group drew its membership from leaders of various NGOs and POs in the city and the province of Maguindanao. Before and after the elections in 1992, KASAMAH enjoyed prominence in both print and broadcast media coverage. A year after, one of KASAMAH's top leaders, a Maguindanaon government employee who was then the president of

another NGO, the Maguindanaon Professionals Association (MAPEA), was shot dead right in front of his residence. Investigators failed to establish the motive of the killing and identify the killers. But the consensus in local media circles was that his assassination was related to his advocacy of clean and honest elections. Just months before his death, Hadji Umba Campiao, then MAPEA president and KASAMAH vice-chairman went to the editorial office of the *Mindanao Cross* to show documents indicating massive election irregularities in some Maguindanao towns. He told both the editor-in-chief and the news editor of the paper to print the story but to withhold some names until he is able to get all the documents. The *Cross* ran this story as requested by Campiao. He was shot a few weeks later.

In the foregoing example, the NGO was led by a prominent and influential personality, i.e., Fr. Bagaforo. Moreover, the nature of their work made this particular NGO a vital source of information for media in terms of election monitoring (the elections being a prominent news event). On top of all these, something newsworthy happened to one of its leaders. All these gained for KASAMAH substantial media attention.

Most local NGOs/POs are cash-strapped. They start with minimum funding from a foreign funding agency to support grassroots organizing or social development work among disadvantaged/marginalized sectors like landless farmers and urban poor. Many of these organizations are also manned by a skeletal force of three to five people, doing multi-tasking duties. As they can hardly keep up with the work they have committed themselves to do, media liaisoning, as a result, is their last priority. Sometimes, it helps when NGOs/POs have some friends in local media. Their access to air time or printed space can be made easier with this kind of personal networks.

Unlike NGOs/POs, rebel groups have a distinct advantage in terms of achieving media projection. They are armed. Media reports (sourced from the military) indicate that majority of the loose firearms in Central Mindanao are with either of the two Moro rebel fronts, the MNLF and the MILF. Obviously, this facility has been used to maximize the rebel groups' access to air time or printed space. The kind of media projection may not be favorable to the rebel group, but just the same, they are able to inform people of their existence. They can show their armed might in encounters, ambushes or lightning attacks or raids of military checkpoints. Naturally,

these events are the stuff police or military-sourced stories are made of. These would surely gain for the rebel group maximum media attention.

In the coverage of the peace process itself, NGOs/POs think that media did not give fair reports on its relevant issues. According to one informant, Sam Mundas, media coverage may be extensive, in terms of mileage or number of minutes given by a news and public affairs (for broadcast) and number of column inches in a newspaper. But length of time or article is one thing: the content of what has been discussed on air or in print is another thing. Mundas is the chief of the intelligence division of the 4th Infantry Battalion of the MNLF based in Camp Ibrahim Sema, Datu Odin Sinsuat town, Maguindanao province. He added that the MNLF is thankful for the spate of attention given by both broadcast and print media to the peace process, and media's friendly relations with MNLF leaders. But he feels that some media persons (especially radio anchors) were clearly biased against them. He can sense it in the way they questioned MNLF spokespersons or informants. They also did not give the informant/interviewee the chance to ramble on since they cut them off by asking subsequent questions. It is as if they wrung the interviewee dry, so to speak. On the other hand, when they interviewed anyone from the government panel, they were more cautious with their questions, and allow the informant/interviewee more leeway in making extemporaneous remarks on the air. In many cases, adds Mundas, this spontaneous rambling of government panel or military spokespersons or of any government official gave misleading information to the public. And this was not checked by the anchorpersons concerned.

Mundas cites the instance when Rep. Daisy Fuentes (Laban, South Cotabato) was interviewed over a Cotabato City-based radio station. This was during the height of the heated public debates on the agreement between the MNLF and the GRP which gave rise to the creation of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD). Rep. Fuentes, Rep. Ma. Clara Lobregat (Zamboanga) and Rep. Lualhati Antonino (General Santos City) expressed their staunch opposition to the creation of the Council in various fora in Mindanao and Metro Manila. Their opposition gained them maximum media exposure, prompting some pundits to say that these are orchestrated for the three congresswomen's electoral bids in 1998. (Whether this is true or not is another story.) When Fuentes was interviewed, audience participation was allowed in terms of phone-in questions. When a caller asked Fuentes

on the reasons for her aversion to SPCPD and if she can extend help to the new leadership in the ARMM (i.e. the MNLF led by Nur Misuari), she responded by asking the caller another question: "Since when have the Christians started making trouble in Mindanao?" She even added, "You (referring to the caller, based on his Christian-sounding name) are a Christian, did you make trouble for the Muslims in Cotabato City?" Here, had anchorperson been sensitive and responsible he should have butted to clarify issues tackled. But as it happened, the anchorperson just allowed Fuentes to air her biases against the Muslims in general and the SPCPD in particular. Indeed, she was quite articulate about her opposition to the new peace arrangement in Mindanao. For some NGOs which are supportive of the agreement, her opposition projected the typical bias of most settler elites toward the native inhabitants and indigenous peoples, especially the Islamized groups (Moro people) of Mindanao.

Caloy Bautista of the Kidapawan-based Task Force Sandawa agrees with Mundas' observations. He believes this is due to the conservative orientation of most members of the local media. Bautista also feels that local media practitioners only toe the same ideological line their media owners have, i.e., to preserve existing power structures. Giving prominence to rebel groups, NGOs/POs and the causes they are fighting for may tip the balance of power in favor of the former.

Media's assessments of the coverage

Seven media persons interviewed for this study believe that their own coverage of the peace process has been sufficient. Of the seven, five are radio broadcasters and one is a print journalist. They also think that media in general have given a fair and balanced reporting of the issues related to the peace process. They all feel that giving a fair and balanced reportage of the peace process is a *sine qua non* of their existence as media persons.

The four other respondents, including the key informant, Caloy Bautista, think otherwise. The four, however, have varying reasons why they think media coverage of the peace process was insufficient. But all of them, except Bautista, think that it is the nature of the peace negotiations itself which made their coverage insufficient. They said that government negotiators prevailed upon them not to report everything regarding the negotiations for fear that it would jeopardize the outcome of the peace talks. This is what Rommel Rebolledo, one of the co-owners

of a new Cotabato City-based weekly tabloid, *Mindanao Trend*, thinks. Rebolledo is also the city chief of the Philippine News Agency (PNA).

Moreover, local media persons claim that there were several instances when media were barred from any of the more "serious" talks, leaving them with not much choice but to wait for a press statement from either of the two panels.

Jess Cortez, a veteran radio man who manages two Cotabato city-based stations of the Nation Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), said that media coverage of NGO/PO activities related to the peace process was also not sufficient. He admits that even media persons themselves lacked adequate information on many issues, especially with regards to the creation of the SPCPD. But he said that government is largely to be blamed for this. "We were not given enough time to digest everything that is happening, and to ask questions on some vital issues and events occurring in our midst," Cortez explained. He was especially referring to what he and many other local media persons perceive to be a "sudden" decision of Chairman Nur Misuari of the MNLF to run for governorship of the ARMM. "I thought he meant it when he said earlier this year that he'd rather go fishing than enter politics. But it seemed that he swallowed his own words from what had happened," he concluded.

Florante Formento, former anchor for the daily public affairs program (*Bantayan*) of dxMS, of the Notre Dame Broadcasting Corporation, also thinks that the government was not totally transparent with the issues involved in the peace talks. Since the early part of 1996, Formento transferred to a rival station owned by Radio Mindanao Network (RMN), dxMY. He manages the station and anchors the latter's daily public affairs program, *Vigilantes*.

Formento said Malacañang officials withheld some of the vital information regarding the peace process. "They don't let the public know what has taken place during some of the talks," he claims. This is why he thinks media coverage was insufficient.

Malou Cadelina-Manar, researcher and host of NDBC's award-winning radio documentary *Sa Likod ng Balita*, says that media coverage on the activities undertaken by NGOs/POs to promote peace was insufficient. Cadelina-Manar explains that many local journalists and

broadcasters lack adequate knowledge and understanding of the role of these organizations in the peace process and in general, in peacebuilding. Like Caloy Bautista, Cadelina-Manar has a strong NGO-orientation, having worked with a women's NGO in Kidapawan before she became involved with media work. She started as a member of the NDBC media resource team, NDBC's research and documentary arm.

Cadelina-Manar also believes that part of journalists' lack of understanding of the role of NGOs/POs in the peace process is the former's conservative interpretation of what constitutes peace. "Majority of media practitioners still believe that peace is just the absence of war," Manar stressed in an interview. "They fail to recognize the roots of the conflict ... there's armed revolution because the majority of Mindanao's inhabitants languish in abject poverty, and also because government has been unfair in its policies regarding the poor and marginalized," she added. Manar, however, believes that despite the insufficiency of reportage of the peace process, media were fair and balanced in their reporting of the related events and issues. This is because they allowed both parties involved in the formal negotiations to air their respective stands on the various "talking points" of the agreement forged on September 2, 1996. For her part, she said, she tackled these issues in her radio documentary program several times.

On the other hand, a city-based opinion writer for a national daily, Datu Amir Baraguir, thinks that media coverage on the peace process was insufficient largely because of the capitalistic orientation of most media owners. Some aspects of the peace process are quite complicated and require erudition and creativity on the part of a journalist to package them into interesting news stories. Baraguir says many local journalists lack the latter qualities. Results of consultations or workshops aimed at eliciting the people's agenda for achieving peace and development, for instance, rarely get prominent attention on both print and broadcast media. Baraguir thinks that this is because local media are oriented to the conventional criteria of what makes public issues newsworthy and therefore, saleable. He cites the case of Abdulrajak Janjalani of the now notorious Abu Sayyaf. When Janjalani was still preaching in the mosques of Basilan regarding the need for a militant Islamic revivalism, nobody paid attention to him. He was not newsworthy then. But when he started using armed might to make the causes of Abu Sayyaf known, he was in the front pages of not only local, but more importantly, of national papers.

His name was also in the headlines in almost all newscasts and public affairs programs. He and the Abu Sayyaf became an instant media hit.

Baraguir is a freelance journalist. He writes a regular opinion column for *Isyu*, a national tabloid which is probably the only newspaper in the country which prints opinions rather than news.

Role of media organizations

All media practitioners, except freelancers like Baraguir, think that their respective media organizations have been quite supportive of the peace process. This was stressed in an FGD conducted with the members of the *dxMS* News and Public Affairs Team. Rudy Montejo, *dxMS* station manager also confirmed in an interview that NDBC management ensures that adequate air time is given to the discussion of issues pertinent to the peace process. Moreover, it is part of NDBC's mission to promote peace among the culturally diverse peoples in this part of Mindanao.

Montejo adds that if ever management exerts influence on their public affairs team on what to air, it is due to their "editorial prerogative." "There is always the consideration for public safety, or what is the paramount public interest We have to be responsible media practitioners all the time ... this is because of the role that media play in shaping the minds of the people," Montejo concludes.

Edwin Fernandez, *dxMS* news and public affairs team leader, agrees. "If management exerts influence on us, it is always for the good of everybody, for the media practitioners and for the greater masses of our listeners in general," he argues.

When asked whether media owners exert influence on what to air or print regarding the activities of rebel groups or NGOs/POs, many of the media practitioners claim that there is no direct influence as in outright policies on what should be aired or printed. Rebollido of the *Mindanao Trend* thinks there is only some kind of a "self-censorship." Some media practitioners consciously avoid airing or printing stories which will have negative repercussions on specific groups of people in order to avoid conflict.

Moreover, regarding controversial issues like massive government anomalies, some media organizations advise their practitioners to

discuss them lightly lest they will become "dead heroes." One broadcast journalist (who requested anonymity) said: "It's rather shameful to admit, but the reality here is that most of us are still afraid of our personal safety because of our families. We'd rather play it safe by focusing on generalities rather than specifics."

The exertion of influence of media owners, therefore, is on specific issues rather than broad policy guidelines. In terms of the peace process, media owners have been very open with the practitioners' initiatives of establishing rapport with both government and rebel groups. They need to have this in order to maintain a comparative advantage over other media organizations. This is what members of NDBC are proud of. They claim to have established close links with the leadership of both MNLF and MILF. This is also claimed by the other media organizations in the city which can also have direct access to rebel leaders in the two fronts. Indeed, it pays to have open lines of communications with news sources, especially the rebel fronts.

Some media organizations also encourage their media practitioners to forge links with local NGO networks. This is what May Leoncito-Pinol, manager of Kidapawan-based NDBC stations, *dxND-AM* and *dxDM-FM* believes in. Kidapawan has a very strong NGO/PO network, and the members of these organizations are quite active in raising public awareness of vital social issues, especially on the peace process. Linkage with these organizations, says Leoncito-Pinol, puts media in the forefront of promoting the peace process. "We become an effective vehicle for clarifying issues which can hamper the peace process as a whole," he stressed. Among the media interviewees, she is the only one who holds a mass communications degree from Ateneo de Davao University.

Tensions in the Peace Process

The Peace Accord signed on September 2, 1996 between the GRP and the MNLF was the culmination of a long drawn-out and complicated series of talks, secret meetings, negotiations, and similar activities. Because of the process' international security implications, it involved not only the members of the Philippine bureaucracy and the rebel representatives, but also the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)

and the Indonesian government. The latter was the host of most of the substantial talks.

The complicated nature of the peace process lends itself to a lot of misunderstandings, if not handled carefully by those who are tasked to disseminate information regarding the activities encompassed by the process. This necessarily includes the media and the information bureaus of both the government and the rebel group.

In a review of the media coverage of the peace process from June to December 1994, the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (1995) cited the prevailing view on the relationship between the press (media) and government policymakers. This predominant view looks at the two as "having no relationship at all, other than adversarial interaction."

This prevailing view is one source of tensions in the coverage of the peace process. Many media practitioners tend to become suspicious of government functionaries. On the other hand, government has not been efficient in making its efforts appreciated by media, and the public in general. Its failure to hold widespread consultations regarding the creation of the SPCPD, for instance, triggered a lot of negative reactions, not only from the basic sectors of civil society but also from the media.

Ma. Ida Giguiento, Director of the Notre Dame University Peace Education Center, thinks that the lack of public consultations on the various "talking points" of the peace agreement between the MNLF and the GRP had greatly affected the efforts initiated by civil society to build peace in Mindanao. "The anger of the people is legitimate ... local government leaders are to be faulted for not disseminating information on the peace process to their people It is a good thing we have a formidable group of NGOs whose members are dedicated to peace building. In a way, they were the ones who filled the information gap by holding their own consultations," Giguiento said in an interview.

The lack of knowledge on the historical basis of the conflict in Mindanao and the prejudices against the Islamized groups are among the factors that have created tensions in covering the peace process. This is the contention of the NGO and PO respondents in this case study. Wahab Guialal of MPRC goes even further by saying that religious differences among the diverse peoples in Mindanao are being heightened

in the various radio fora on the peace process. "The public discussions on the issues related to the peace process seemed to have rekindled the old Muslim-Christian animosities, and the roots of the conflict are not properly addressed," he argues.

The case of Rep. Daisy Avance-Fuentes' interview on a local radio station brings to mind this contention of most NGO representatives. When she brought up the issue of whether the Christians have created trouble in Mindanao without being checked by the anchorman, she was in effect confirming the general public's stereotype of Muslims as troublemakers and the dregs of the earth. This serious limitation on the part of the anchorman also showed that he does not have adequate knowledge of the conflict. Worse, it indicated his cultural insensitivity.

The following other factors were cited by both media and NGO respondents: failure of the government to be very transparent on the different phases of the peace talks (they mentioned the "secret talks" at which no media person was allowed); failure on the part of government to conduct wide consultations and to include other rebel groups in the peace talks; lack of trust between the two parties involved in the negotiations; the lack of confidence building; and the efforts of some sectors to sabotage the peace process for their own pecuniary gains.

The lack of trust between the two parties, according to a media informant (who requested anonymity) was evident in one of the consultations with Mindanao government officials in Malacañang. One of the President's closest advisers on the peace process reportedly tried to convince Rep. Fuentes not to oppose the creation of SPCPD, and to accept the terms included in the Final Agreement between the MNLF and the GRP. He alleged that he overheard this official nudging Rep. Fuentes and telling her to accept the SPCPD "*tatal lolokohin lang natin sila. Hindi naman talaga tayo nagtitiwala sa kanila ...*" (we will just dupe them. Anyway we don't really trust them ...). It is quite difficult to confirm this story but several media persons heard about this and confirmed that this conversation really took place.

For two groups to have fought each other for almost twenty years, mutual distrust is to be expected. But recently, after the signing of the peace accord, representatives of both the GRP and the MNLF have said on radio that they have established good rapport with each other, and this

agreement, they hope, will be the foundation of a long-lasting friendly relationship based on mutual trust.

The lack of confidence building, says Malou Cadelina-Manar of NDBC's *dxMS* public affairs team, can be seen in the current military build up of the Philippine government armed forces in many parts of Mindanao. On the part of the rebel group, this is shown in their refusal to give up their arms.

There are perceptions that some selfish interest groups are really bent on sabotaging the peace process. One NGO informant cites the group in Zamboanga which probably has the financial backing of absentee landlords. "The peace agreement has opened a window for the rebel group to implement their vision of what Mindanao should be like, and definitely, this is not what the landlords like," she says. (She prefers not to be named for security reasons).

Kidapawan-based media practitioners (all of whom come from NDBC's AM station there, *dxND*) mentioned during a focus group discussion that after the signing of the peace agreement, several groups and individuals asked for radio time to announce the existence of SPCPD chapters in the different towns of Cotabato province. Moreover, some persons claimed to have become the local spokespersons of the MNLF. They also conducted massive membership recruitment (for a fee) among the unlettered and impoverished rural folks for SPCPD. For a while, this created tensions among the local NGO network in Kidapawan because no such thing as municipal chapters of SPCPD had been established by either the MNLF or the government. At that time, the SPCPD had yet to be organized. The tensions were exacerbated when the MNLF and the government did not issue an official statement regarding the existence of these groups nor the legitimacy of the claims of their leaders as MNLF "spokespersons." The local media in Kidapawan had to "force" a public discussion on the issue by asking responsible persons of both parties to make an official statement. It was only after this media initiative that the tensions somehow subsided.

Implications and Recommendations

The foregoing discussion points to the crucial role that media play in an issue of wide public interest like the peace process. Given this role,

local media's capability in maximizing the benefits of being a real "medium" — in the sense of facilitating and clarifying issues of public interest — still leaves much to be desired.

Moreover, there is a need to rethink conventional media's orientation of its adversarial relationship with government. By this we do not mean that media will become beholden to any government agency, or functionary. Media must, at all times, maintain its financial and managerial autonomy in order to be able to assert its mandate as a genuine "comforter of the afflicted." This does not mean, however, that media and government cannot work together, especially for the promotion of a genuine and long-lasting peace.

For this to be realized, there is a need for local media to be well-informed on government policies and other activities. At the same time, the government must keep its line of communications always open to the media in order to be transparent to those who can disseminate vital information to the public. But a caveat is needed here: press releases which sound more like "praise" reports of a government functionary or office and do not have solid factual basis cannot hold water for long.

In a free market of ideas obtaining in a capitalist oriented economy like the Philippines, the market is not entirely free for anyone to participate and compete. Like the world market which is dominated by big, super economies, the market of ideas fostered by media is dominated by the elite which naturally frame our perceptions of reality. The world views of minority (or "minoritized," as some advocates would say) groups cannot compete with the dominant ways of thinking since they are not given easy access to media organizations.

In addition, the criteria of what news stories sell are definitely in support of a consumerist-oriented, elitist world: social prominence as celebrities or government officials, (e.g., when Pres. Ramos catches a cold becomes front-page material because he is the President of the country). But nobody cares if a balut vendor dies of a preventable disease like tuberculosis. He just becomes a statistic, not a newsworthy item. This is why the efforts of NGOs and POs in advancing the peace process or in facilitating empowerment of peoples at the grassroots level can hardly land on the front or back pages of a newspaper. NGOs/POs do not

espouse the same self-perpetuating world views and structures that the elite in society do.

As mentioned earlier, the peace process is a complicated process, not a single, isolated news event. Its coverage, therefore, requires the media persons to be sensitive to its various ramifications, especially on the historical background of why there is a peace agreement or process to start with. There is also the need to be sensitive to the nuances of going through peace negotiations. This means that media practitioners covering any peace process must orient themselves in conflict management and resolution. Certain requisites are built into the process of negotiating for peace after several years of armed conflict. Issues cannot be simplified into boxes which answer the traditional questions asked of informants of a news story. A continuing education program for journalists in this regard is highly recommended.

For media to be truly facilitative, it should take a more proactive role in seeking out NGOs/POs and other low-profile interest groups in civil society to give them adequate air time or print space to share with the public their initiatives at promoting peace. Facilitating dialogues among and between civil society sectors could be a task that media could seriously think of to realize this goal.

On the part of NGOs/POs, they should be more aware of the ability of media to popularize their "alternative" ways of empowering people at the grassroots level. They should be proactive too, in maximizing their friendly relationships with media practitioners. In this way, they will not be only talking to each other, i.e., perpetuating the same circle of cause-oriented groups. At the same time, they should start competing in the "free" market of ideas earlier described.

Noel Copin, president of a Paris-based journalists' association called *Reporters sans Frontières*, wrote in 1995 an article which was the main paper tackled in the 17th World Congress of the International Catholic

■ In a free market of ideas obtaining in a capitalist oriented economy like the Philippines, the market is not entirely free for anyone to participate and compete. Like the world market which is dominated by big, super economies, the market of ideas fostered by media is dominated by the elite which naturally frame our perceptions of reality.

Union of the Press (UCIP) held in Graz, Austria. In the article, titled "Only Truth Leads to Peace," Copin noted that journalists, like other concerned sectors of society, play a vital role in forging peace in a world which seems to be preoccupied with too much violence. But unlike other sectors, journalists can make or break the peace with *what* and *how* they report events or activities related to the peace process.

Perhaps, the following excerpts from Copin's article can give journalists and all media practitioners the challenge to promote peace throughout their work:

The greatest chance for us, journalists, is our possibility to go beyond all frontiers, physical and moral, and to eliminate fear and hatred among humans Our duty, corresponding to this chance, is to tell what we have seen. The role of the journalist is not to remain on one side of the barricade to incite others to defend or attack. It is to tell the truth of both sides. At the base of journalism, there is or there should be understanding of the other.

"Understanding of the other" can spawn a world of dialogue with protagonists in the peace process. This does not mean promoting a world where there is absolutely no conflict. But media's sensitivity to their role of making people understand the "truth of both sides" would make a world of difference — a world of endless dialogue. Then we can have, as the famous Moroccan feminist, Fatima Mernissi, described in her book *Islam and Democracy*, a world which is "like a mirror in which all cultures can shine in their own uniqueness." ●

Notes

- 1 Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*, 1986.
- 2 Rufa Cagoco-Guiam. "Retrospects and Prospects: Toward a Peaceful Mindanao" in *Moro Kurier*, First Quarter, 1996. (This was the same paper presented by the author at a conference-workshop on the Role of Media Reportage in Peace, Unification and National Development, Zamboanga City, January 26-27, 1996. This paper was reacted to by Carolyn Arguillas, Mindanao bureau chief of the Philippine Daily Inquirer.)
- 3 Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility, *Peace Process and the Media*, 1995.
- 4 Noel Copin, "Only Truth Leads to Peace," keynote address given to the participants in the 17th World Congress of the International Union of Catholic Journalists in Graz, Austria, 1995.
- 5 Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy*, 1992.

Appendix

Questions for Informants

For Media Practitioners

1. Is the media coverage of activities undertaken by NGOs/POs and rebel groups regarding the peace process sufficient or not? Please explain your answer.
2. How do you compare the extent of media coverage given to NGOs/POs/rebel groups with that given to government (especially the military) and other sectors or line agencies? Why do you think this is so?
3. Is the reporting of activities of NGOs/POs/rebel groups fair or not? Explain.
4. Do you think publishers /media owners exert influence on their editorial staff/public affairs staff on what to print (for print media) and to air (for broadcast media) regarding the activities of NGOs/POs/rebel groups? In your case, is this true? Why do you think so.
5. Has your own media organization hampered or helped promote the peace process? How was this done?
6. As a media practitioner, what do you think are the factors that cause tensions in the peace process? What are the factors that can help promote the peace process?
7. What are your recommendations for the following:
 - a. enhancing media coverage on NGO/PO activities regarding the peace process;
 - b. balanced coverage of both government and rebel forces' activities/actions; and
 - c. advancement or promotion of lasting peace in the region.

For the NGO Workers

1. Is the media coverage of activities undertaken by NGOs/POs and rebel groups regarding the peace process sufficient or not and why?
2. How do you compare the extent of media coverage given to these organizations with that given to government (i.e. military) and other sectors/line agencies? Why is this so?
3. Is the reporting of activities of NGOs/POs/rebel groups fair or not? Why is this so?
4. Do you believe that publishers exert influence on their editorial /public affairs staff on what to print and to air regarding the activities of NGOs/POs/rebel groups? How do you think is this manifested in both print and broadcast media? Do you think this is helpful in advancing the goals of the peace process?
5. To what extent has the media hampered or hindered or helped advance the peace process? Explain your answer.

6. As an NGO worker or representative, what do you think are the factors that cause tensions in the peace process?
7. What are your recommendations for the following:
 - a. enhancing media coverage on NGO/PO activities related to the peace process;
 - b. balanced coverage of both government and rebel forces' activities; and
 - c. strategies to promote long lasting peace.