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Alternative news agency as an instrument of social change

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1 Title & practice or experience

Philippine News and Features: Alternative news agency as an instrument of social change

1.2 Category & practice/experience and brief description

The experience documented here tells how an independent news agency continues to help achieve little victories for society's small people – landless farmers, underpaid workers, indigenous folk, women and children. It also tells how this news agency has developed a kind of journalism that adheres to the core values of balance, fairness and accuracy, even as it ensures that those on the margins – who compose the majority – are heard clearly.

This news agency has helped set a trend in issue-oriented, rather than simply personality-based, news- and feature-writing as well as analysis and commentaries. Mainstream newspapers, for instance, generally play up the arrival of a Hollywood star or some foreign dignitary. But this alternative news agency gives more importance to the likes of farmers fasting in front of the agrarian reform office to protest the conversion of their land into a golf course.

This news agency also covers government bureaucracies such as the National Congress, the various cabinet agencies, and even the presidential palace. It emphasizes, however, issues and matters of public interest.

It also examines government policies and programs, as well as “development projects” of the private sector, that further marginalize lowly folk. So-called “development projects” include big dams and big open-pit or open-cast mines that displace indigenous folk, conversion of productive farmlands into real estate enclaves, and other ventures that threaten both people and the environment.

With 12 years as an alternative news agency under its belt, the independent Manila-based Philippine News and Features (PNF) has shown that journalism can also be oriented toward helping develop and raise social consciousness for social change.

1.3 Name of person or institution responsible for the practice or experience

Philippine News and Features (PNF)

1.4 Name and position of key or relevant persons or officials involved

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1.6 Name of person and/or institution conducting the research

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2. THE PROBLEM OR SITUATION BEING ADDRESSED BY THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

The *Philippine Signs*, a bi-weekly newspaper and forerunner of **Philippine News and Features (PNF)**, came out in 1984, during the time of the late Ferdinand Marcos' martial law regime.

The *Philippine Signs* contained news, features, analyses and commentaries about issues such as human rights violations, economic issues such as the country's rising foreign debt to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, farmers' demand for real agrarian reform, labor strikes, and coverage of the various levels of sectoral protests against Marcos' rule.

In a political climate which was not exactly conducive to press freedom, the *Philippine Signs* and a number of other "alternative" newspapers, alongside underground publications called the "mosquito press", found readership among a public hungry for an alternative perspective to what emanated from the mainstream media.

The alternative newspapers under Marcos went mainstream under the presidency of Corazon Aquino, who took over the reins of power following the former's ouster in 1986. During Aquino's presidency, other newspapers also emerged. At this point, the *Philippine Signs*, which was being published by a group led by socially critical church people, could not compete with the business-backed mainstream newspapers. The men and women behind the *Philippine Signs* thought of an alternative: set up a news agency which would come out with a regular dispatch of news, features, analyses and commentaries. The mainstream newspapers would be the news agency's outlets.

The news agency became known as Philippine News and Features or PNF, originally the pseudonym of a correspondent of the now defunct *Philippine Signs*.

PNF immediately set itself a special mission: to help articulate, interpret, analyze and comment on the basic issues the mainstream media tend to gloss over. These issues include the continuing clamor for no-nonsense agrarian reform, environmental woes, and the various issues and advocacies marginalized sectors have since taken up. These sectors include landless peasants, laborers, indigenous peoples, women and children. While PNF recognizes that all these issues have existed since the time of the Marcos regime, it also acknowledges that the world situation has changed since 1986.

PNF thus sees a new challenge: the eclipse of the bipolarized world. 1986 onwards saw the emergence of the current trend of "globalization", rapidly integrating national economies into a world economy. States are under pressure to "reform" their political institutions and social and economic policies to accord with globalization. However, citing worldwide evidence, PNF has seen that globalization, despite its claims of creating new wealth, is further driving a wedge between the few haves and the many have-nots among the world's family of nations. The result: a rising economic imbalance among nations and within them. This spurs social tension. PNF warns that the human rights of peoples, communities and individuals might be trampled on, and their social and cultural values undermined, once these hamper globalization's

drive toward “market efficiency” and “maximized profits”.

The Philippines is not exempt from the harsh impacts of neo-liberal globalization. In this light, PNF sees its tasks (“to develop and raise social awareness and to foster change, human dignity and genuine development”) to have become more challenging than ever. PNF has to be attentive, for example, in monitoring new government policies embracing globalization designs.

For instance, a mining law approved in 1995, has practically liberalized and opened up the country’s mining industry to foreign mining prospectors. The law has courted conflict. Many villagers in indigenous communities, where gold, copper, silver and other minerals are found, either have been displaced or are under threat of being forced out of their ancestral land. The liberalization of mining, bioprospecting and biopiracy, massive conversion of food-producing lands into real and industrial estates, the contractualization of labor, and the social conflicts spurred by these phenomena are among the impacts of globalization which PNF seeks to help address.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE AND ITS MAIN FEATURES

PNF comes out with a regular packet of news, features, analyses and commentaries. In its earlier stage, PNF’s dispatch was distributed weekly (every Saturday) to its subscribers, which include almost all of Manila’s over a dozen newspapers. Its writers and correspondents in Manila and in the provinces therefore had to send in their stories by 12:00 noon Friday or even as early as Thursday to give time for editing and packaging.

As PNF’s capacity (writers’ skills and proficiency) improved, it later came out with a twice-a-week dispatch. Aside from the Saturday edition, another midweek dispatch was added. The deadline for submitting articles for this midweek edition was 12:00 noon Wednesday or even earlier. Distribution was early morning Thursday.

A dispatch usually carries an average of eight to ten articles. These are mostly features, news features and investigative reports. From time to time, the dispatch also includes an analysis and a commentary.

The average length per article is two pages, single space, and double space after every paragraph on short bond. A simple news feature can be a page or a page and a half long. Special features and investigative reports, however, can go as far as three pages. Other lengthy special reports are cut into two, three or even four parts, and these are expected to be reprinted in installments.

Unless in exceptional circumstances, PNF’s story lengths are kept to a minimum for practical reasons. Shorter stories have better chances of getting

reprinted than longer ones. There are some newspapers, however, which have special sections for lengthier pieces. But based on PNF's experience, it is often best to keep an article as brief and concise as possible.

In its early stages, PNF's articles were edited by a veteran editor who had been in the journalism profession even before Marcos imposed martial law. Another equally competent and excellent woman editor-writer soon took over for a time. The job was soon delegated to a senior staff member who eventually got trained in editing. Assisting the editor is a managing editor who also helps rewrite or edit manuscripts, aside from making sure that writers and correspondents on the field submit their stories.

From time to time, the editor or managing editor sends memos to province-based writers and correspondents. These memos usually contain suggested story ideas or subjects which writers and correspondents can pursue.

For a well-planned and synchronized coverage of both old and emerging issues and events, province-based writers and correspondents periodically meet with their editors in Manila. Planning and strategizing help writers focus. Writers and editors would have to meet on how to cover, for example, a national election. Such meetings are necessary to help writers do stories that have a cutting edge over other media outfits. A PNF story angle, for instance, would delve into how and where politicians get money for their political campaigns. This entails some effort like chasing the politicians' money trail, research, interviews and other investigative requirements.

Beats

PNF's Manila-based writers are assigned beats or special areas of coverage. Somebody is assigned, for example, to cover the "popular movements" (labor, urban poor, women, etc.) beat; another, the government beat (which includes the presidential palace, Congress, education and health departments, etc.); and there are other beats such as the business sector.

Province-based writers and correspondents have a general beat. But they are encouraged to focus on major issues which affect the marginalized sectors in their areas. A writer based in the Cordillera upland region in northern Philippines, for example, can set his eyes more on issues and problems affecting the region's indigenous communities. Specifically, he can look into the impact of a current rush of foreign mining prospectors lured by the new government policy of liberalizing the mining industry.

This issue alone has many key players, such as the mining companies and government officials on one hand, and the affected people on the other. By applying journalism's core values of balance, fairness and accuracy, the PNF writer can present, interpret and analyze a variety of voices and viewpoints on

the mining issue. But he also ensures that the powerless and even voiceless victims of big commercial mining are heard clearly.

Writing style and guidelines

PNF employs practically the same standard journalism techniques and values in writing news, features, news features, analyses and commentaries. If there is any difference, it is in the angling of stories. As cited earlier, PNF strives to present opposing views and voices, but ensures that the voiceless and powerless are also heard.

PNF's seven-point writing principles are the key to further understanding journalism as PNF practices it. Thus:

- “1. We shall adhere to journalism's core values of balance, fairness and accuracy, even as we declare our bias for the poor, marginalized sectors of society. We shall endeavor to present the variety of voices and viewpoints on vital national concerns and issues, but ensure that those on the margins – who compose the majority – are heard clearly.
2. In writing on an issue where competing cause-oriented (advocacy) groups put forward differing viewpoints and calls to action, we shall apply balance, fairness and accuracy in such a way as to enable the public to discern which viewpoint and call to action best responds to the issue. We shall continue to give priority coverage to organizations with a proven track record of credibility and leadership.
3. We shall illuminate issues by digging into the underlying tensions of seemingly surface conflicts and help the people make sense of what goes on around them. We shall challenge the people to confront issues adversely affecting them. We shall endeavor to show them the possibilities that exist, or that they can create, for moving forward.
4. We shall maintain and enhance the authenticity, depth and credibility that PNF dispatches have earned through the years. We shall try harder always to get correct facts to provide background, context and perspective to our news stories, features, analyses and commentaries.
5. We shall foster change that will enhance human dignity and enable the Filipino people to develop along the path of their choosing, and shall oppose and expose ‘change’ that seeks to achieve the opposite effects.
6. We shall examine and challenge government policies and programs, as well as ‘development projects’ of the private sector, that are inimical to the people's interests to expose the ill intents underlying the hype. We shall endeavor to detail their harmful impacts (actual or potential), and critique the aspects that such policies, programs and projects may miss, gloss over or inadequately deal with.

7. We shall develop reportorial ‘niches’ that PNF writers and contributors are most competent to handle in a sustained way, and which the media outlets may not be covering adequately.” (PNF *Statement of Principles*, as revised in August 1997)

Featurized stories

PNF minimizes, if not does away with, spot or straight news reporting. Although it sometimes includes straight news, PNF prefers to featurize its stories, adding more background and context to a current event. This is because PNF cannot compete with wire agencies which give spot news stories almost every minute.

In being able to featurize, PNF is helping not only to inform readers about an event or issue, but also to clarify the various underpinnings of and emerging trends from an issue. A PNF story therefore stresses the whys and wherefores of an issue.

Let us take a look at how PNF covered, for example, an issue involving the use by some vegetable farmers of cyanide as a pest antidote. The usual straight news reporting would simply state that some farmers are using cyanide, which is hazardous to consumers. More often than not, the farmers would get the blame for the whole mess.

PNF, on the other hand, dug deeper into the issue and found out that farmers’ use of cyanide was just the tip of the iceberg. It found out that farmers had resorted to using cyanide because of their helplessness against certain pests, which had become resistant to even the most potent pesticide.

PNF also discovered that the farmers experimented with various possible ways to control pests. Farmers, for example, had experimented with “cocktailing” or mixing two or more brands of pesticides, which they thought would be more effective, but to no avail. They experimented with cyanide, and it snuffed out the most resistant cabbage pest, the diamondback moth. PNF thus concluded that lack of government intervention coupled with the farmers’ desperation and helplessness caused the cyanide fiasco.

In the process of unearthing the surrounding issues of the cyanide fiasco, PNF also exposed a parallel issue: multinational agrochemical firms’ profiting from the farmers’ helplessness and desperation. As farmers “cocktailed” or mixed two or more pesticide brands, which is inadvisable, this meant more profits for the companies. PNF cited hard facts and data from annual sales reports of and interviews with distributors.

PNF’s presentation of the cyanide issue was critical of the government’s role and responsibility. From then on, the government’s agriculture department began to give importance to an alternative pest-control method organic-

farming advocates had earlier been pushing – the use of an insect predator called diadegma, which preys on the larvae of the diamondback moth.

Also as a result of PNF's in-depth reporting, the government was able to get financial support from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for biologically safe pest-control methods. The government also organized what it called Farmers' Field Schools where farmers are oriented and trained in the use of safe alternative pest-control and management methods.

In this case, the finger of blame on the cyanide mess was not directed at the farmer. In fact, through the PNF report, it was found that the farmer himself was a victim. After the PNF report, the government responded accordingly, stressing on a better pest-control approach other than relying on destructive pesticides.

Other writing approaches

Other PNF feature-writing forms and approaches include profile, backgrounder, wrap-up or trend analysis, and others such as a-day-in-the-life feature of a farmer, urban poor, worker or working mother.

Profile

A profile can apply to a village or a person. Profiling a village can be descriptive. Description of a village or community includes hard data such as on annual crop production, health and medical facilities and health and medical woes, and transportation and communication access, and, of course, selected quotes from people in the community. A PNF article that came out on July 5, 1995, for example, had this heading, "Western Visayas: Rich Land With A Sick People".

The article tells about a region in central Philippines which boasts of being a food basket but manifests "a curious anomaly" – the region's population "lives constantly without proper food and nourishment". The story's central idea or theme is "hunger and malnutrition amid abundance". It was around this theme that the writer focused his data and information gathering. The writer took data and information from the agriculture department and nutrition council, interviewed officials of these agencies, and cited specific cases of malnourished mothers and children. Quoting an expert, the writer **was** able to point out somewhere in the story that the root of the problem was not lack of food but poor families' "not having access to food".

Persons that PNF profile include ordinary farmers, tribal elders, laborers, women leaders and other people on the margins who are often overshadowed by big personalities. In Western-oriented journalism, one value in news- and feature-writing is "prominence", which suggests that big personalities in poli-

tics, showbusiness and business can command interest from readers. But PNF has turned this “prominence” value upside down.

PNF, for example, featured a village medicine man in northern Philippines who, although illiterate, was able to discover herbal antidotes to intestinal diseases and scabies, among others. The article showed how the man first tested his herbal concoctions on “laboratory animals” – his pet dogs and pigs, which suffered from diarrhea. After his animals got well, the man tried his concoction on his grandchildren. They got well. Many of the villagers, who hardly had any access to government clinics or hospitals, sought the knowledge of their own medicine man. Therefore, in a way, the profile of the man also gave readers an idea of the village (i.e., that the village had no health facilities, which also says something about government neglect).

Backgrounder

A backgrounder aims to give some historical context to a long-standing issue or problem. A backgrounder about the Philippines’ 32-year-old armed conflict, for example, can relate how the conflict evolved from peasants’ landlessness and from the unfair deals they experienced under landlords and usurers.

Wrap-up and trend analysis

Under this technique, **PNF** seeks to see the interconnection of seemingly unrelated events, analyze them and draw conclusions. Of course, other research and investigative work is needed to strengthen and validate whatever conclusions that have been drawn.

A-day-in-the-life ...feature

If one wants, for example, to tell about the difficulty faced by a family living in a cramped four-square-meter room in a mining company’s bunkhouse, one can employ this technique. Perhaps one could focus on a miner’s wife, from how she starts her day until the time she puts the children to sleep. In the process, the writer discovers how the wife is harassed when the toilet needs flushing and there is not a drop of water from the faucet. This entails some effort because it requires the writer to live in the bunkhouse himself. A probing interview might suffice, but actually immersing oneself in the goings-on in a bunkhouse helps the writer to be more effective in communicating what it is really like to live in such an abode.

PNF has other approaches in writing the feature piece. But much depends on the individual creativity, gift of observation, data and information gathering ability, ability to find and develop the right sources, and other skills of the writer.

PNF's commentaries and analyses also focus on issues affecting the public, particularly the majority on the fringes of society. Commentaries and analyses, which are more often written by PNF's editors and senior writers, can cover subjects such as the impact of a new government policy or an official's pronouncement, and a current event or issue such as an election.

Continuing training and assessments

PNF always strives for professionalism. To help achieve this, writers are encouraged to participate in journalism workshops offered by credible sponsors. From time to time, PNF's staff writers and editors, along with an invited resource person, also discuss and share what needs to be improved on.

PNF would also schedule meetings during which the agency's performance is evaluated. PNF usually holds quarterly, mid-year and year-end assessments and evaluation. Through these, "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats" or SWOTs are pinpointed, the main aim of which is to draw vital lessons.

During these assessments, the staff analyze contents of articles which have been reprinted many times and those not reprinted at all. Again, the purpose is to draw lessons.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE AND ITS ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS

PNF is a major program of Crossroads Publications, Inc. or CPI, a non-stock, non-profit outfit. A Board of Directors comprising a mix of church people, veteran journalists and two rank-and-file staff representatives sets CPI's policy directions.

At its height from 1987 until 1997, PNF maintained a staff of 11, who included an editor, a managing editor, seven writers strategically posted nationwide, an editorial assistant and a messenger. Three staff writers were based in Manila, covering the government, the business sector and popular movements. The other staff writers were province-based. One covered the northern provinces of Luzon island; another, southern Luzon; and two others, central Philippines. For a time, PNF maintained a writer in Mindanao island in southern Philippines. There were also correspondents and contributors to cover areas out of reach of regular staff writers.

PNF also is linked with region- or province-based independent news agencies, which contribute exclusive articles. In fact, PNF helped found what was called the Federated Independent News Services or FINS, a national federa-

tion of independent news agencies which includes southern Philippines' Media Mindanao News Service (MMNS), Negros island's COBRA-ANS (Correspondents and Broadcasters Association News Service), and northern Philippines' Northern Dispatch or Nordis.

As a major program, PNF has been entrusted to carry out CPI's mission to help in the overall national endeavor for social change. PNF's weapon is communication and its battlefield, the major newspapers and, if possible, the broadcast media.

Aside from PNF, there are special projects and other program desks designed to help strengthen and reinforce PNF. PNF, for example, has a sister publication called *Philippine Agenda*, a magazine which high school students use in their social science subjects. Like PNF's dispatch, *Philippine Agenda* also churns out features and analyses about issues affecting farmers, laborers, indigenous peoples, women, children, consumers and other marginalized sectors.

CPI's other program desks are pro-print and marketing. The pro-print desk accepts layout and printing jobs. This desk was intended to generate income and help in meeting CPI's "self-reliance" goals.

The marketing desk takes charge of "selling" PNF to prospective subscribers. It also promotes and sells CPI's other products and services such as *Philippine Agenda* and pro-print's services, both of which were targeted to help in realizing CPI's self-reliance goals.

Of CPI's three major programs, PNF bears CPI's mission and vision – which is to help in the national endeavor for social change. To an equal extent, *Philippine Agenda*, which caters to students, is also geared toward this end.

5. PROBLEMS OR OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED AND HOW THEY WERE OVERCOME

One problem PNF encountered was the "leftist" label some sectors used to hurl at the independent news agency. This is because PNF usually features issues and advocacies also being raised by groups perceived to be "left-leaning". But PNF was able to overcome this by its professionalism.

The mainstream media has come to patronize PNF because it adheres to the core values of accuracy, balance and fairness. Hunger, landlessness, environmental destruction, unfair labor practices and the like may be "left" issues. But these are also issues of public concern and interest, and PNF has written about them in a style and approach acceptable to the mainstream media.

Another major problem that PNF and the whole CPI have been wrestling with since mid-1997 was the sudden halt in funding from a foreign donor. The

funding halt came at a time when CPI had not yet achieved even its 50 percent self-reliance targets. The halt was so sudden and drastic that CPI was forced to reduce its staff numbers.

Despite what happened, PNF was determined to pursue its mission. The services of PNF's staff writers were practically terminated. But PNF continues to come out with a weekly dispatch, written by former staff writers who still contribute articles and edited by editors who now work part-time.

As at the time of writing of this research, PNF and the whole CPI are still in the process of finding ways by which to revitalize the once-vibrant PNF. PNF at this point is down but not out. One possibility that the CPI board and former staff are looking into is a cooperative-run PNF. Under this set-up, PNF and the whole CPI may not have to rely on external support for their operations.

6. EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

PNF has helped articulate the voice of those on the fringes of society. It has also helped form public opinion on crucial issues such as the hazards of highly potent pesticides, which were banned in developed countries but were being sold in the Philippines. It has likewise brought to the attention of concerned authorities problems of farmers and villagers such as a neglected bridge, and lack of schools and health facilities.

PNF also helped set a trend in issue-based reporting and feature-writing and investigative journalism. Other media outfits have followed suit, also venturing into more in-depth journalism.

7. SUITABILITY AND POSSIBILITY FOR UPSCALING

PNF since mid-1997 has downscaled its operations because of funding woes. But it intends to resume and possibly expand its reach. PNF before had intended to expand its market to encompass the broadcast media.

PNF had also come out with a monthly magazine which high school students could use in their social studies classes. Employing PNF's issue-based and investigative journalism, the magazine had helped explain and clarify in simple, easy-to-understand language the complex issues of the day. With the funding problem, this magazine has been temporarily halted. The magazine is one of those programs which PNF intends to revive once it reestablishes itself. But despite the funding crisis, PNF has shown that a news agency can diversify its services, if only to reach a wider readership.

8. SIGNIFICANCE FOR (AND IMPACT ON) POLICY-MAKING

PNF's significance for and impact on policy-making cannot be underestimated. At one time in 1995, PNF came out with an article exposing the dangers and health hazards of a pesticide intended to snuff out golden apple snails, which had been wreaking damage in the country's rice fields.

The PNF writer who did the story cited an upland woman farmer exposed to the pesticide, quoted medical experts and cited studies supporting the conclusion that the pesticide against golden apple snails was doing more harm than good to both people and the environment. The woman farmer the writer interviewed complained of rotting fingernails and toenails and itchy and dry skin. The medical expert and other studies said that the pesticide had been banned in developed countries because it causes cancer.

After the PNF report came out in Manila's major papers, the German manufacturer of the snail pesticide filed a P20 million (US\$500,000) libel suit against the writer, PNF's editors, the medical doctor quoted in the story, and the editors of the papers which reprinted the article. The case dragged on for almost two years but was later dismissed. The case also became moot and academic after the government declared that the snail pesticide should be banned because of its hazards to public health and the environment. PNF would like to believe that its investigative report about the whole fiasco helped influence the government's decision.

There are other examples of PNF articles that had, in one way or another, helped draw government action. These include an article about a neglected vital road bridge connecting two islands in central Philippines. Soon after the article came out, the government's public works and highways department repaired the bridge. To PNF, the repair of the bridge was a victory for the small farmers who use the bridge to transport their products.

Another example was how legislators made use of PNF's articles as sources of data for their legislation. Data from PNF's articles about the problems of potato farmers, for example, were incorporated in the rationale for a draft bill on a Magna Carta for farmers. This was so because some members of the Lower House of Congress also subscribe to PNF's regular dispatch. Of course, this was also on top of public opinion generated by PNF's published articles.

9. POSSIBILITY AND SCOPE OF TRANSFERRING TO OTHER COMMUNITIES OR COUNTRIES

Every Third World country needs information for empowerment, and an independent news agency, free from the dictates of vested interests and big

business, is an appropriate weapon. An independent news agency can help articulate the voice of the powerless and the neglected.

In the Philippines alone, some committed journalists in southern Philippines' Mindanao island put up a similar news agency called the Media Mindanao News Service (MMNS). MMNS also helped set the trend in issue-based and investigative journalism in the island, which the Manila-centered mass media failed to sufficiently cover.

As long as the mainstream media has some space for issue-based journalism pieces, an independent news agency is a feasible proposal. All it needs is professionalism and a large dose of commitment. Professionalism includes mastering the craft and ethics of journalism. Commitment, on the other hand, involves advocacy of socially relevant issues.

10. OTHER COMMENTS

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) come out with their own publications. Unfortunately, these publications end up gathering dust in some corner without being read. Tapping the mainstream media through an independent news agency is thus a better alternative. NGOs, therefore, could pool their resources and start a news agency.

References

1. PNF, *Statement of Principles*, as revised in August 1997.
2. Reprinted PNF articles.