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Mass Media Resistance to Filipino

Barry Lowe



The relationship between minority languages and the media often serves as a barometer of a nation's attitude towards the preservation of minority languages and the cultural and ethnic rights those languages represent. A nation that supports its minority ethnic and cultural communities may demonstrate that support by enacting policies that guarantee media access for minority languages. A nation anchored to a ruling ideology that emphasises conformity to a central culture and national language may pursue policies that tend to marginalize minority languages and exclude them from mainstream representation, as through the mass media. Often a country's attitude towards its minority languages is linked to the past and is an expression of guilt or regret over the way speakers of minority languages were treated under past policies and ideologies. Post-colonial societies may promote the retention of minority languages to compensate for colonial policies that had the effect of marginalising or threatening to extinguish those languages. An example is Britain whose current policies towards its minority indigenous languages—Welsh and Scottish Gaelic—include state-sponsored access to media outlets. Other nations subsidize minority language access to the media as a way of expressing support for the evolution of a multi-cultural society. These countries—Australia is a good example—stress the role of the mass media as vehicles of language and culture and important agents for the retention and promotion of minority languages. Australia's Special Broadcasting Service broadcasts in more than seventy immigrant languages while the Alice Springs-based *Imparja* TV produces and transmits programs in a range of Aboriginal languages. These two institutions underscore two decades of commitment by a succession of Australian governments to support minority languages as a means of promoting a national ideology

based on cultural diversity and tolerance. At the opposite end of the scale are those countries that regard the expression of cultural diversity as a threat to national unity—countries that see their ethnic minorities as a “problem”—and respond by actively discouraging mainstream media access to minority languages. Greece, which has a hostile attitude towards cultural expression by its Macedonian and Albanian minorities, is an example of a nation that directs its ideological concept of nationhood against full participation of its minority communities in the cultural vehicle of mass communication.

But there are a number of countries where language rights are not salient issues defined by government policies and public attitudes but where the issue of access to the mass media is crucial to the role and status of minority languages. Most of them are developing countries and a common feature is their linguistic pluralism (Switzerland is a rare First World example). For these countries the issue of minority language rights is linked to issues of development, modernisation, industrialisation and sometimes westernisation. An unstated question for some of these countries is whether the retention of linguistic pluralism is compatible with development; whether minority speech communities stand to be left behind in the nation's growth; whether a linguistically diverse society is a backward society and whether a national language is a better vehicle to ride the road to progress.

Although there is no immediate crisis for Philippine minority languages—only in a few tiny and highly vulnerable communities are they actually threatened with extinction—the impact of changes during the last three decades, particularly changes brought by the growing role of the mass media in public life, is relentlessly pushing these languages further into the margins of cultural expression. Last ditch stands of resistance are being made by a few minority language institutions. One of them is the focus of this note.

Theoretical Perspectives

One branch of mass media theory that takes a particular interest in ethnic minorities and the rights of speakers of minority languages is development communication. Development communication appeared as a new theory of the media in the seventies, partly as a reaction to the pre-existing paradigms that tended to describe media conditions and practices of the First World and were clearly less

relevant to Third World societies. The origins of development communication are linked to a UNESCO (1980) commission on international communication issues and the resulting declaration of a communication manifesto for the developing world called the New World Information and Communication Order (Maslog 1992). This manifesto introduced the concept of development communication, outlining a philosophy of media practice that emphasised the transformational potential of mass communication, i.e. that media institutions and practitioners had a primary responsibility to aid and promote development in their societies. This theory, as described by Hachten (1987), is predicated on the idea of a strategic alliance between state institutions and media organisations to pursue national objectives for the betterment of society. Some Western media theorists have responded to the articulation of this theory by dismissing it as an attempt to rationalise authoritarian approaches to media practice by justifying such policies in the national interest. Development communication emphasises participatory strategies for mass communication agencies to spread the message of development. Its focus is on the positive potential of the mass media and their potential to uplift the poor. It therefore requires grass roots access to mass communication

The Philippine National Languages

All Filipinos who attend school—almost the entire population—learn English and Filipino. The Philippines is regarded as an English-speaking country, one of the world's largest in terms of population. Because it is acquired through education and not from the cradle, English is regarded as a prestigious language that represents aspirations for advancement. Its status is higher than the regional languages that most Filipinos speak first. Filipino is a necessary language for everyone to learn. It serves as a lingua franca that unites Filipinos across their regional linguistic boundaries. The status of Filipino and English as official and unofficial national languages has coincided with a trend in which they are blended together into a code-mixed hybrid known as Taglish that is increasingly used by the country's upwardly mobile class.

Filipino and English occupy parallel territories in the mass media. English is the language of the upmarket broadsheet press but Filipino dominates the mass circulation tabloids, some of which are

bilingual (such as *Tempo*, the Philippines' biggest selling national newspaper). Philippine TV networks use a higher proportion of locally produced programs than most other countries in Asia, so English-language products from Hollywood and other Western exporters are not able to overwhelm Filipino products, except on the cable networks which still have relatively small audiences. Locally-produced TV soaps, sitcoms and dramas are predominantly in Filipino. The movie industry, one of Asia's most buoyant, uses Filipino almost exclusively. The radio scene displays a diverse range of language use but a majority of the news, commentary and talk-back programs favor Filipino.

Radio broadcasting in the Philippines, an industry characterised by numerous small provincial stations emphasising localised programming, is really the last bastion of the regional languages. Many provincial stations host talk-back and news commentary programs that are conducted in the local language, or in a mixture of Filipino, English and the local tongue. The TV networks have tried nightly news bulletins in regional languages—Cebuano and Ilongo—but these 20-minute programs represent a tiny proportion of their networks' total air time. The situation for local languages in the print media is even worse. At present there are only three serial publications predominantly in languages other than English or Filipino: a general interest magazine in Ilokano—*Bannawag* (Dawn), a general interest magazine in Hiligaynon—*Hiligaynon* and a weekly newspaper in Ilokano—*Timek ti Amianan* (Voice of the North).

Timek ti Amianan

Ilokano is the native language of the Ilocos region: Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur and La Union, but its range extends well beyond that geographic boundary, across to the east coast of northern Luzon and encompassing a large area of the Philippines. It is also the main language of the Filipino diaspora. Ilocanos are avid seekers of opportunity abroad. Ilokano is one of Hawaii's main languages. The University of Hawaii teaches Ilokano in its undergraduate programs. Ilokano is also the language spoken by a majority of Hong Kong's domestic workers and is Hong Kong's fourth most widely spoken language.

The Ilokano language also sustains the last remaining vestige of a regional language press industry that once spanned the length and

breadth of the archipelago (Maslog 1993; Sonza 1993). *Timek ti Amianan* is now the last Philippine newspaper published substantially in a language other than English or Filipino and as such represents a last pocket of resistance to the spread of the two national languages into the communication networks of the outer regions. The *Timek* is based in Vigan and prints 3500 copies a week. It is a tabloid-size newspaper of eight pages, and displays some eccentric features that may offer a clue to its survival. It is a personality-driven publication that owes much of its character and reputation for persistence to its high-profile editor, Alfredo Benzon. Benzon (personal communication, April 1996), a lawyer by profession, took over the editorship of the newspaper two years ago from its founding editor, a local Catholic priest who retired after nurturing the paper through the first eight years of its existence.

Benzon champions causes that he believes will help empower and uplift the humble barrio-folk he perceives as his readers. The *Timek*'s masthead carries the motto "For Justice, Peace, Solidarity and Development." Its crusade against injustice is linked to Benzon's commitment to using Ilokano as the vehicle of its message. He believes his readers are more likely to understand and affirm *Timek* and its views if it speaks to them in their own mother tongue. "By using Ilokano we can speak to them in their hearts," says Benzon. He makes frequent use of Ilokano idioms and metaphors in his editorials. He says he is constantly trying to expand his own knowledge of Ilokano vocabulary—reversing the influence of the years he spent studying in Tagalog-speaking Manila and in using English and Filipino in his legal practice—to enhance his ability to reach his readers in their own words.

Philippine Languages and the Press

Timek ti Amianan's lone voice against the trend for regional Philippine languages to disappear in the provincial press is not likely to halt the process. Several other Philippine regional newspapers have retreated in recent years from policies of devoting at least half their editorial space to the first language of their readers. The *Negros Chronicle* used to proclaim itself as a bilingual journal with its news space shared between English and Cebuano. Now its Cebuano content has been reduced to a few token columns. The *Iloilo News Express*, also once demonstrably bilingual, now confines its Hiligaynon content to the back page only.

Provincial newspapers in many parts of the Philippines—particularly in the more prosperous regions—are a healthy and vital sector of the nation's mass media industry with strong potential for profitability and growth (Maslog 1993). They are also important outlets for public information and fora of debate on local issues. They underpin the country's democratic traditions by providing a watchdog role against the abuse of power by politicians and officials. Their transition from community newspapers published in the language of the community—or at least bilingual newspapers—into newspapers published in the elite languages of the metropolis, takes them one step away from the people they were originally established to serve. This transition seems inevitable as the chase for advertising revenue locates them more and more in the domain of the better-educated English and Filipino-using elites.

In fact the decline of regional languages, except as spoken vernaculars, underscores a class basis for language use in the Philippines. The official languages of the metropolis are generally perceived as more prestigious, more advanced, more closely linked to the national desire for progress, development, modernity and prosperity. Their dominant use in key institutions—finance, politics, the mass media—increases their desirability. People seek to align themselves with the aspirations those languages represent by showing preference for them over their native regional languages. This option of preferring to use English or Filipino is more accessible to the more educated and more affluent members of provincial society. Ironically, the humble barrio folk who are most likely to prefer media products in their mother tongue, are the same people who are being progressively excluded from having a voice in the media by the changing market conditions that are making Filipino and English media products more profitable.

Conclusion

If mass communication is more effective when it is delivered in the receiver's mother tongue than in an acquired second language, the ability of many Filipinos to participate in the national debate may have been diminished by this historical trend against inclusion of regional languages in the mass media. This might suggest that the supportive model of official attitudes towards minority languages and their role and status in the media is the more enlightened one. Minority languages deserve public support for their ability to enrich and

enhance participation in public life. However the polity economy of mass media industries may determine that state intervention in this area cannot resist indefinitely the market forces that will inevitably push unprofitable media products out to the margins. Critics of Australia's multiculturalism argue that the government's support for ethnic minority culture, including languages, carries a hidden agenda of trying to distract non-Anglo Celtic immigrants from their need to participate in mainstream institutions. Policies that seek to repress minority languages may, in the long term, prove to be counterproductive.

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