

Public Lives

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The mass media in a democracy

The mass media devoted considerable attention to the recent filing by obscure individuals of their certificates of candidacy for the presidency. The news accounts mocked their improbable claims and outlandish statements and provided the public all the reasons to label them nuisance candidates. Though the form used was one of dismissive derision, such reportage is nonetheless consistent with the mass media's critical role in a democracy. That role has to do with supplying the conditions for rational political debate that will help citizens form solid opinions and make informed choices.

I submit this is a role the media in our society have not played consistently and effectively. They have not clarified the concrete issues facing the nation. They have not given the public the background information they need to form educated arguments on these issues. They have not raised the questions that candidates must answer if they are to be regarded as serious contenders for public office.

When media fail in this role, democracy is indeed reduced to a popularity contest. Individuals are recruited to leadership positions merely on the basis of their mass appeal, itself a media creation, rather than on their record of service to the country or known stand on basic issues. They are prompted to set aside their own anxieties over their lack of preparedness by vague visions of a government based solely on charisma and inspiration. Voters are not challenged to clarify and defend the reasons for their preferences. They are kept blind to the fatal consequences of their instinctive choices.

There was a time when celebrities and personalities who had made their mark in other fields would not permit themselves to be easily drawn into politics. The responsibilities of public office intimidated them, but, more than this, the political parties in charge of leadership recruitment took the requirements of public service seriously. They

demanded not just a pleasing face or an easily recalled name, but solid qualifications.

All this has changed in the age of mass communication. Exposed to the light of public scrutiny, the traditional governing classes no longer seem awesome nor their positions unreachable. Their flaws and failings have also become more visible. Everyone now thinks he or she can be president or senator. Released from the grip of power blocs that traditionally commanded votes, voters now confidently assert their right to choose their leaders. The mass media have surely given them their heroes but, unfortunately, not the civic maturation necessary to enable them to participate equally and freely in a constitutional democracy.

A system like constitutional democracy reserves to the public sphere the political functions of setting goals, identifying the means for achieving these goals, and mobilizing the community toward their attainment through consensus-formation. The framework within which these functions are to be performed is the public debate, where the only force that is accepted is the force of the better argument. In a rational democracy, popularity must be earned on the basis of the strength of one's vision and arguments, rather than on one's pre-political qualities.

I do not object to the entry of mass media celebrities into the field of politics, and neither do I think they are necessarily inferior to professional politicians. They have as much right as lawyers, soldiers, preachers, and relatives of politicians to seek public office. But they should not rely solely on the advantage of their pre-political popularity to win public consent. They should participate in the ongoing public debate and open themselves to the perils of public ridicule as well as to the challenges of superior insight and argumentation. All this is however possible only if a critical process is set in motion by the mass media -- the same mass media that have manipulated and controlled public discourse. What are the chances of this happening?

I believe the mass media situation in our country is sufficiently plural to allow the kind of rational contestation needed to produce a valid social consensus. What is needed is a commitment on the part of the

media owners to supply the basic elements for a public forum that will enable the Filipino nation to achieve a self-understanding of its problems and create a powerful will to solve these. A forum like this will not only weed out pretenders and charlatans, it will also help voters re-examine their own perceptions and biases.

Only if the mass media are prepared to play an activist role like this would it be possible for us to avoid the pitfalls of a deeply flawed democracy. The key is the attainment of public consensus through open rational argumentation. Without public debate on the crucial issues facing the national community, the democratic idea of one-person one-vote is empty. We may as well make do with surveys rather than hold expensive elections.

The philosopher Habermas distinguished between a plebiscitary democracy that is content with counting heads, and a discursive democracy that is concerned with promoting dialogue and achieving consensus. The distinction is a reminder that the purpose of an election is not just to choose leaders; it is also, more importantly, to provide citizens an opportunity to review their collective goals and renew their commitment to the nation.

May 2004 signify a new beginning for our country!

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