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The real threat to freedom of expression is slow Internet

By JOHN TRIA

SEVERAL canards or untruths have emerged from last week's news mill. The biggest one is the idea that the non-renewal of a certain media company's operating license "shuts down" their publications, tantamount to a "closure order." The second, more vile canard is that the "closure" in this "politically charged atmosphere" is a "threat to press freedom."

Reader please note the quotation marks to describe so many of these ideologically loaded concepts. Coming from certain mouths, they are all misused to mean something apart from the idea they actually impart. These inflated ideas are misleading and wrong.

For one, our freedom of speech is not the subject of one corporation's operating license. Publications can always continue operating, reporting the news without the need of a mother company, investors, or even

an office. To think that these were necessary is to surrender the freedom to the existence of capital.

Freedom of expression is as self-evident as a right. Today's technology affords us ways to get our message across without the need of traditional appurtenances. How you get that message across will determine the need for such tools such as the set-up of a corporation, the use of offices and equipment, the use and proper maintenance of which are governed by other rules.

Thus, the publication set up this way needs to comply with basic regulations are necessary and beneficial for any company, whether in media or otherwise, all meant for the proper and safe operation of the business.

The fact is that not everyone complies. I have seen many companies whose business permits and operating licenses should be revoked simply because their offices are fire traps. Some have even failed to observe the labor code in their dealings with their employees, entering into convoluted contracting arrange-

ments to avoid proper hiring.

Of course, we give them the opportunity to comply with these infractions. However, should they refuse to, or unreasonably challenge the need to do so, then close them down by all means. If they are a media company, they are better off doing something else, as their credibility to provide us with information and opinions, or speak "truth to power" is a lie. It gives flesh to the adage that those who point fingers must do so with clean hands, and that those who live in glass houses must not throw stones. Firing from such a standpoint makes it all go back or fall on you.

Therefore, to protest and say that being told to suffer the penalty of admitted wrongdoing of one company is a threat to everyone's press freedom is a stretch. It is almost an insult to other compliant companies who pay their staff well, and a slap at the faces of free thinking people who retain the freedoms and use quite a lot of it in their social media posts and everyday conversation, who are

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part of a new and larger audience of media users in much wider loops of frequent communication than what some publications pretend to.

Slow internet hampers freedom of expression

Knowing this, the lack of stable and fast Internet bars many from being able to receive and give information. The 66 million Filipinos on social media are a much more politically engaged lot, having been more politicized over the last year of Publicus Asia's surveys show. This has also facilitated the participation of many of us in southern parts of the country who for a long time had to deal with delayed information compared to our manila-based peers.

These findings also negate the accusation of some that the social media presence is artificial, the result of hiring thousands of trolls to inflict online damage against certain people.

Nonetheless, what this means is that the Filipino media public has

such a wider, more engaged audience, and is one that has made its reactions felt in recent tax reform discussions, the issuance of 10 year passports, the issues surrounding the safe operation of our airports, and the war in Marawi.

Internet-based and social media has also held a mirror up to mainstream media coverage. Watch the livestreams of Malacañang press conferences, and see the reactions of the public on some of the questions of the reporters. Whether they are proud of their questions is up to them, and whether the audience feels that the questions are appropriate, or whether they represent their sentiments is expressed. Freedom of expression also allows the public, especially those of us in the Visayas and Mindanao, to critique those in media. The Internet has made this happen.

The Internet has changed the media game, and this compels government to facilitate the emergence of faster Internet, with a service that allows millions to access information,

and participate in emerging processes that will have an effect on their daily lives. Recent news of the entry of other players, and the increased investment of current providers to improve their is encouraging. We shall see if and how these improve.

With this, the public can demand better information than what they are getting, which explains why they will seek other sources of information, often not from mainstream media to balance their diet of information. They will dig into the context when reporters fail to do so, to get a better grasp of what they are reading. The Internet is mined for such things.

It therefore behooves many of us in mainstream media to get the best, accurate content with a deeper context that informs, enlightens, and encourages democratic participation, rather than allow us to descend into mere cesspool of gossip, innuendo, twisted statements, and gotcha questions.

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