

## **Journalist-Bloggers and the Public Sphere in the Philippines: Exploratory Questions**

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*Abstract:*

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### **Introduction**

The Philippines marked twenty years of democratic transition in 2006. The authoritarian regime of former president Ferdinand Marcos was toppled by a peaceful uprising in February 1986 and was replaced by the popularly installed Aquino government. National and local elections have been held since 1987.

In 2001, massive protests deposed popularly elected president Joseph Estrada after a failed impeachment trial triggered by corruption allegations.<sup>1</sup> He was succeeded by his vice president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who was subsequently elected to the presidency in May 2004 in a controversial and tightly contested election.

In June 2005, audiotapes surfaced allegedly featuring Arroyo conversing on the telephone with election commissioner Virgilio Garcillano while election results were being tallied (May-June 2004). In a series of conversations, Arroyo's distinctive voice can be heard querying Garcillano about election results.<sup>2</sup> The scandal, dubbed "Gloriagate" (or "Hello Garci") by the media, triggered fresh allegations of fraud, calls for resignation, systemic overhaul, civil disobedience and even armed intervention by the military. The repercussions continue to unfold after years of sporadic protests and the absence of institutional remedies (several impeachment complaints in the House of Representatives were quashed by Arroyo allies).

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<sup>1</sup> The uprisings are called EDSA1 and EDSA 2 respectively, after the name of the Manila thoroughfare on which protesters converged for peaceful protest.

<sup>2</sup> The voices on the tapes were categorically identified by a number of audio specialists as belonging to Arroyo and Garcillano. Arroyo later apologized on national television for the impropriety of the act, but denied that they manipulated election results.

More than two decades since its restoration, therefore, Philippine democracy remains problematic and fragile. Although voter turnouts regularly breach the 80 per cent mark, fraud, patronage and violence still pervade Philippine elections, rendering the quality of democratic representation dubious in many instances (Teehankee 2002). State institutions remain weak, unaccountable and resistant to reform (Hutchcroft and Rocamora, 2003; Grugel, 2002). Venues for popular political participation such as political parties are generally unavailable, as the country's party system is virtually non-existent—the major political parties tend to be non-ideological, opportunistic groupings meant as campaign machines of specific candidates (Banlaoi and Carlos, 1998; Montinola, 1999).<sup>3</sup> So-called 'civil society', the mass of non-government, civic and political organizations that played a crucial role in previous political uprisings, no longer appear to command a significant following or serve as focal points of protest. Some have coalesced around "Gloriagate" but have failed to organize massive street protests, which, given the success of EDSAs 1 and 2, are seen as one of the few and effective modes of collective political action.

Philippine mainstream media have devoted considerable coverage to the Gloriagate scandal. However, though Philippine media are largely privately owned and free from government censorship, they are inadequate for substantive, sustained public discussions on the issue. Most Filipinos access news and public affairs information via television and radio, but television has remained "superficial and tabloid-like...as a news medium" (Santos 2002: 255), providing little opportunity for in-depth discussion, much less debate, on any public issue.

It is in this context that the Internet has emerged as a new and significant source of information and a forum for debate in the Philippines. It was a weblog, the blog of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), which first uploaded the Arroyo-Garcillano audio files in June 2005. The uploading of the digital version of the tapes circumvented legal obstacles preventing the broadcasting of the tapes on mainstream television and radio.<sup>4</sup> It also bypassed injunctions against the public airing of the tapes during the Congressional investigation.

The audio files were downloaded from the PCIJ blog by a total of 1,076,913 users between June 2005 and March 2007<sup>5</sup>. This figure does not include

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<sup>3</sup> Small, leftist parties are more ideologically coherent but do not have significant mass memberships. The possible exception is the (armed) Communist Party of the Philippines, whose membership size is a matter of speculation, and is in any case opposed to liberal democracy.

<sup>4</sup> The National Telecommunications Commission issued warnings to all television and radio stations in June 2005 that their licenses would be revoked if they aired the tapes, which were allegedly obtained through wiretapping and were 'inciting to rebellion'. The Supreme Court ruled in February 2008 that these restrictions were unconstitutional and restrictive of the freedom of the press.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with PCIJ website administrator Alecks Pabico. March 11 2007, Quezon City, Philippines.

downloads from PCIJ mirror sites (put up by private individuals). It is also separate from the number of downloads of the transcripts of the tapes.

The uploading of the audiotapes by a respected, if non-mainstream, media organization such as the PCIJ marked a critical point in the crisis. It allowed Filipinos with Internet access to listen to the conversations and make their own assessments about their credibility. The audio files were downloaded and subsequently spliced into ring tones for mobile phones as a form of humorous protest (the President's voice issued from ringing mobile phones across the country). Most importantly, information circulated via the Internet spurred further online and offline debate regarding the legitimacy of the Arroyo presidency and the political options facing the country. Political blogs that featured running commentary on the scandal logged record volumes of "hits" and comments from Filipinos inside the country and abroad. While street protests and other political initiatives appeared to be weak, Filipinos furiously debated the facts and implications of Gloriagate online, along with the character and future of Philippine democracy.

The Internet is a relatively new medium in the Philippines where telecommunications infrastructure is still not universally accessible. In 2000, there were an estimated 2 million Internet subscribers<sup>6</sup> in the country (Evers and Gerke, 2004)—less than 3 per cent of the total population (84 million). According to the Asian Development Bank, Internet users<sup>7</sup> in the same year numbered 6.2 for every 1,000 people compared to 419.1 for Singapore and 68.8 for Malaysia<sup>8</sup>, neighboring countries in the Southeast Asian region (Quibria, et al 2002: 4).

In 2006, Filipino Internet users were estimated at 7,820,000 or 9.1% of the population. In April 2007, this grew to 14,000,000 or 16 % of the population, which is estimated at being over 87 million.<sup>9</sup> This means that only a small segment of the population can access political information, as well as political discussions, online. Still, Internet figures indicate an improvement over Filipinos' access to print media. In 2000, for example, the daily circulation figures for the biggest English-language broadsheet, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, was only 257,416 (<http://www.seamedia.org>). Even assuming a pass-on rate of 5, this amounted to just over a million Inquirer readers.<sup>10</sup> Newspaper sales, in general, have not grown significantly in the fifteen years (1987-2002) since democratic restoration (Santos 2002:253).

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<sup>6</sup> Internet subscribers are defined as clients of Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

<sup>7</sup> Internet users are defined as people who access the Internet through their own PCs, or through Internet cafes, schools, offices, etc.

<sup>8</sup> The proportion of Internet users per thousand people is usually referred to as the Internet diffusion rate.

<sup>9</sup> Statistics compiled from various sources at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/ph.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> The Inquirer has had an online version since 1998.

The Internet, due to its unique characteristics as a mass medium and a communicative space, offers new opportunities for political discourse not possible through traditional media such as print and broadcast. A critical quality of the Internet is that it is in itself a vast source of information archived in digital format. This information can be retrieved at will by users, cited and referenced in political discussion. Such a characteristic is necessary if political discussion is to progress beyond emotional, *ad hominem* exchanges and unsupported argument that are the hallmarks of popular television and radio talk shows in the country.

Beyond information-sharing, the Internet facilitates interaction using platforms such as listservs, newsgroups, discussion boards, chat rooms and more recently, weblogs (or blogs). Interactivity on the Internet enables many-to-many communication and sustained debate, compared to the one-way mode of other media such as newspapers and television. In theory, its open, 'democratic' architecture allows anybody with the linguistic and technical competence, to voice opinion and join political discussion.

These qualities have prompted scholars to view the Internet as possessing the potential to create or extend a "public sphere" in the Habermasian tradition: a shared space, or multiple shared spaces, where the free and unhampered exchange of information and ideas occurs and leads to the formation of political consensus (Dahlgren 2001). Others (Dahlberg, 2001; Fromkin, 2002; Wijnia, 2005; Wilhelm, 1999) have suggested that the Internet enables "deliberation" among citizens, again based on the Habermasian concept that stresses open, equal and rational-critical discussion among citizens with the objective of achieving "rationally motivated consensus" (Dahlgren, 2005: 156).

The recent period of political instability in the Philippines and the sudden availability of new Internet platforms such as blogs provide a rare opportunity to test assumptions about how the Internet may facilitate or extend the public sphere within a consolidating democracy. Most studies on the Internet and blogs are in Western democracies, where the density of Internet connections is high and democratic institutions are firmly established, but where there has been a pronounced decline in traditional forms of political participation over the last three to four decades. Such conditions do not obtain in a developing country like the Philippines where as mentioned, Internet access is not widespread, where formal political institutions tend to be unstable and exclusionary, and the extent of citizens' participation in political life largely limited to voting and street protests. In such a context, can the Internet be an effective site for discussing public issues, contesting political power and organizing reform?

This paper explores conceptual approaches in the study of blogs, the Internet and the public sphere in the context of a democratizing polity like the Philippines. It is extracted from an in-depth study examining the characteristics of political blogs and the role of journalist-bloggers in the Philippines during the one-year period when the Gloriagate scandal was at its peak (June 2005 to June 2006).

The full-length study employs content analysis of five (5) political blogs, in-depth interviews with their authors and a survey of blog readers. For now this paper discusses key premises and theoretical perspectives, and descriptions of the unique phenomenon of journalist-bloggers in the Philippine setting and their role in facilitating political discussion among Filipinos.

### **The public sphere and the Internet in the tropics**

There are obvious conceptual issues that must be addressed when interpreting the idea of a Habermasian public sphere within the context of a developing country.

Habermas theorized about the liberal, bourgeois public sphere in Enlightenment-era Europe. His is a historically specific analysis situated within the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, just as capitalism and industry were advancing in the region, science was gaining ascendancy over religion, and the powers and legitimacy of absolute monarchical rule were fading. It is within this context that Habermas traces the emergence of a distinct political space within English coffeehouses and French salons where private individuals gathered to discuss public issues.

Habermas describes this development as unprecedented:

“The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason.”  
(Habermas 1989:27)

Central to the development of this informed and rational public was the print media. According to Habermas, the public sphere developed from an affluent reading public that had access to the growing volume of literary materials: books, pamphlets, journals and periodicals. These individuals converged voluntarily and informally in coffeehouses and salons and engaged in debate that initially centered on literature and art and then moved on to politics.

This study will not attempt to transpose Habermasian ideals for advanced capitalist societies onto a developing economy with a far younger democratic tradition. It will instead take kernels of Habermasian thought that are relevant to the question of democratization in the Philippines.

Habermas expounds on “communicative action” as a legitimating and sustaining requirement for democracy in late capitalist societies. Implicitly, the same ideal can be said to be an aspirational model for societies that develop in the same

political and economic trajectory. The question, then, is not whether Habermasian principles are already manifest in younger democracies and developing countries, for they cannot be expected to be. There are significant differences in the institutional bases that Habermas cites as requirements for a public sphere.

We must ask instead what crucial elements in the twin Habermasian ideas of the public sphere and deliberative democracy can be approximated within the context of a developing country such as the Philippines using an enabling medium like the Internet. These are:

--The idea of a space or multiple spaces where discussion and argument can occur freely and without coercion among citizens who desire to illuminate and resolve public issues and perhaps act collectively.

--The idea of political parity in public discourse: that citizens can deliberate as equals on public issues despite differences in social status. At the heart of this construct are the centrality of reason over power and the merit of arguments over social, economic or political standing.

--The idea of privileged or specialized numerical minorities in society—‘elites’—initiating and facilitating political talk, and such talk influencing state decisions and actions.

The question of access, especially in countries like the Philippines, is a significant one. Exclusion and disempowerment are principal features of Philippine political and socio-economic life. Consequently, the digital divide is the dominant frame used to analyze the Internet’s implications for political democracy. Is it not futile to examine how the Internet may impact democracy in a country where only a tiny minority has access to it? If the technology is not universally or even widely available, if majority of the population do not possess the accompanying skills to use it for political debate and mobilization, can we assume that it has no democratizing value at all?

First, these questions can be approached inversely: There is a vast body of scholarly work that points to the impoverishment of political debate by universally available technologies such as television. The “dumbing down” argument in journalism studies and political communication is premised on the very idea that the rigor of public discourse is eroded by mass markets in broadcasting and print media.

Second, Habermas speaks of the multiplicity of informal discussions on public issues as a central characteristic of a democratic public sphere. The public sphere (online or offline) can emerge from “new, small-scale communicative associative institutions that over time merge into larger ones, or at least join forces.” (Fromkin, 2002:2). Political discourse initiated and sustained by a small

tribe of elite individuals, therefore, need not pre-empt nor threaten the formation of a wider, more democratic public sphere.

It can therefore be assumed that while universal access to communications technologies such as the Internet is ultimately desirable for democratizing politics

- 1) The reality is that this is not immediately attainable given socio-economic conditions.
- 2) That it may not necessarily result in robust and substantive public discourse.
- 3) It is not an absolute pre-condition for any technology to exert democratizing influence.

This study takes a cue from the “penetration/participation paradox” posited by scholar Cherian George who studied ‘contentious journalism’ movements in Malaysia and Singapore. Finding that such grassroots movements galvanized by online forums tended to be more vibrant in Malaysia, which had significantly lower internet penetration rates compared to Singapore, George posits that:

“Even in a country where vast majority of the people have no computers or internet access, the technology can have a significant impact if it is in the right hands (or wrong ones, as the case may be). Knowing the medium’s penetration rate in a society may give the quantitatively-minded comfort of firm ground, but it tells us little about the internet’s utility.” (George 2006:16).

Another Asian scholar stresses the need to examine the actual usage of technology (over its assumed intrinsically democratizing qualities) as a more useful handle to determine impact. Banerjee, in a broad reflection on the Internet and democracy in Asia, asserts that:

“no technology has uniform and undifferentiated effects across countries and contexts. It is the actual and effective use of the Internet by individuals, groups and political parties that is a key determinant of the real impact that the medium can have on political processes and outcomes” (Banerjee, 2006:23).

## **Why blogs?**

Blogs are relatively new online platforms that have gained popularity over the last few years. The primary characteristics of blogs are: 1) timeliness (regular and updated entries in reverse chronological order) 2) attribution (hyperlinks permit access to documents, websites, news and other blogs) 3) archival capacity (old entries remain accessible) 4) networking capacity (permanent links to other blogs and other websites are displayed in a blog in a section called “blogroll”) 5) “voice” (blogs are personal, authorial platforms) and 6) ease of syndication (the use of RSS or XML technology) (Blood, 2000; Drezner, 2004; Gill, 2004).

Depending on the settings decided upon by the blogger, blogs also typically allow comments from readers. Such comments are displayed along with the main entry

and with other comments. This is an extremely important feature of blogs compared to other online forums: blogs have interactive properties that allow for continuing discussion and argumentation among the blogger and the readers, and among the readers themselves.

A great majority of blogs are personal journals. Herring et al (2005) puts forward a figure of 70.4 % for their study. Only a small minority of blogs can be considered political blogs. However, in the United States where they first gained prominence, political blogs attract huge readerships and feature prominently in the “A-list” of blogs. Several are credited with influencing mainstream media and political events (Farrell and Drezner, 2004; Hewitt, 2005; Looney, 2004).

Political blogs in the Philippines are few but likewise widely read, especially during the unfolding of “Gloriagate”. Three of the blogs in this study consistently ranked within the Top 50 Philippine blogs in two different blog ranking sites over the 2005-2007 period based on the number of unique visits and in-bound links.

Political blogs, for the purposes of this study, are blogs that largely and consistently discuss national political issues in the Philippines (national government, the Arroyo presidency, elections, electoral and political reform, etc.) Not included are satirical blogs with political themes. Also excluded are personal/hobby blogs which may occasionally mention political issues but have not posted entries on “Gloriagate” in a regular and sustained manner. Authors all reside and produce their blogs in the Philippines (in fact, Manila) and all happen to be natural-born Filipinos. This study does not include political blogs that may discuss Philippine politics but are authored by non-Filipinos.<sup>11</sup>

The political blogs in this study were selected using two methods: 1) by manually scanning popular political blogs and linking to other blogs in their blogrolls and 2) by examining the content of the most popular blogs listed in [www.pinoytopblogs.com](http://www.pinoytopblogs.com), a (now defunct) blog-ranking site for Philippine blogs and [Technorati.com](http://Technorati.com) (Philippine blogs).

All the five blogs examined existed before the Gloriagate scandal erupted. All are written predominantly in English.

The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism blog ([www.pcij.org/blog](http://www.pcij.org/blog)). Introduced in 2005, it is run by the staff writers of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, a not-for-profit media organization that has reported on corruption, social and environmental issues and the media over the last two decades. (As mentioned previously, they were the first blog to upload the “Gloriagate” audiotapes.) The blog was initiated by the head of its multi-media

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<sup>11</sup> The question of “What makes a blog Filipino?” is a complex one that is the subject of a separate debate involving the complexities of identity within the Filipino diaspora.

desk, Alecks Pabico, who is the main interviewee for this research (all staff members post entries on the blog).

*Sassy Lawyer* ([www.houseonahill.net](http://www.houseonahill.net)) was at several points in the timeline for this study, the most popular political blog in the Philippines, according to Pinoytopblogs.com. It has been in existence since 2000 and is authored by Connie Veneracion, a (retired) lawyer. She is now also an opinion columnist for the *Manila Standard Today*.

*Quezon.ph* ([www.quezon.ph/blog](http://www.quezon.ph/blog)) is the personal blog of a practicing journalist, Manuel L. Quezon III. He writes an opinion column for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Arab News*. This is likewise a popular blog which appears on the blogrolls of almost all political and media blogs.

*Mongster's Nest* (<http://mongpalatino.motime.com/>) is a blog run by online journalist Raymond "Mong" Palatino. Palatino writes for Yahoo! News and his blog is featured by Global Voices, a blog-aggregating site run by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society which is based at the Harvard Law School. Palatino is a youth activist who used to head the University of the Philippines' student council, as well as the National Union of Students in the Philippines, a group affiliated with a coalition of militant Left organizations. In 2007, he ran for the Philippine House of Representatives as a nominee of a youth party Kabataan (Youth).

*Newsstand* (<http://newsstand.blogs.com/>) is a blog by John Nery, a senior editor and columnist at the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. He has also worked as a television producer.

All the bloggers in this study, and in fact most prominent political bloggers in the Philippine blogosphere, are professional journalists. Four of the blogs are personal projects that exist outside of the media organizations they work for. The exception is the PCIJ blog, which is an institutional blog. The one "citizen blogger", lawyer Connie Veneracion ("Sassy Lawyer"), was (during the course of the Gloriagate scandal) recruited to write an opinion column in The *Manila Standard Today*, a newspaper perceived to be biased in favor of President Arroyo.

The dominance and popularity of journalist-bloggers in the Philippine political blogging scene is a unique feature of the Philippine blogosphere. In the United States, the most prominent political blogs such as *DailyKos*, *Instapundit*, *The Drudge Report*, etc. are authored by non-journalists. There is in fact a distinctly critical and competitive attitude towards the mainstream media (termed MSM) in the American blogosphere, on both liberal and conservative sides of the political spectrum.

Blogs are interesting and important in the study of the Internet and democracy for more than their ubiquity. For one, blogs are authorial platforms stressing individuality and personal commentary. Although they allow for “objective” information to be embedded in the bloggers’ entries (through hyperlinks) and allow for comments and interaction with readers, it is the blogger who drives or curtails the discussion by choosing topics and moderating comments. Unlike Usenets or chatrooms where every individual has more or less the same status as all other users, the blog is primarily the blogger’s project. This has implications for the character of political discussion and deliberation that blogs engender. Do bloggers perform agenda-setting functions by introducing topics and thereby stimulating “threads” of discussion? How do the identities and status of bloggers (who tend not to be anonymous in political blogging) influence the political views and responses of readers and commentators?<sup>12</sup> How can consensus be built within and among such individuated forums?

Related to this is the fact that blogs, and especially political blogs, require a certain level of writing and analytical skill, time and other resources to maintain. Bloggers are an elite, and political bloggers even more so. This obviously impacts on their assumed role in the public sphere. All the blogs except one surveyed for this study, for example, are written predominantly in English, the preferred language of middle class Filipinos. From this, the educational and socio-economic backgrounds of the bloggers and their readers can be inferred. It is highly unlikely that poor, uneducated Filipinos are blogging or reading blogs written in English (even assuming that they had Internet access).

Arguably, blogs present increased opportunities for political discussion, though only to a specific socio-economic segment of the population. This may not necessarily be negative by itself, if we go by the virtues of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas describes. However, it does raise the question of whether the amplified voices of elites further marginalize those who are already excluded from public discourse. This is a critical issue, especially for polities like the Philippines, where deep social and political cleavages exist and where political consensus is difficult to form and sustain due to a host of obstacles, among them geographical and linguistic<sup>13</sup>.

Conversely, it can be argued that the impetus for political change can come from reform-minded elites. Historically, nationalist and reformist movements in the country, including the Communist Party of the Philippines, have been initiated and organized by small groups of university-educated, middle class Filipinos.

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<sup>12</sup> Manuel L. Quezon III, for example, is the grandson of a former Philippine president. Quezon is a highly conspicuous surname in the Philippines.

<sup>13</sup> The Philippines is an archipelago of over 7,000 islands. There are two official languages, Filipino (or Tagalog) and English, both taught in school. English proficiency is tied to educational and socio-economic profiles. There are 87 other local languages in use.

The historical development of the Philippine press is inextricably linked to the emergence and evolution of the Philippine upper and middle classes. *El Echo Filipino* and *La Solidaridad*, for example, are two early examples of periodicals that articulated the reform agenda of the Filipino *mestizo* and *ilustrado* (mixed race middle class groups) classes in the 1800's (Daroy, 2001: 42).

The value of blogs to a democratizing polity may also reside in the way it transforms journalistic practices and the habits of the publics that read and view news. The Internet can make non-mainstream news organizations accessible to a greater number of people and thus break the monopoly of big media corporations on information flows and interpretation. Blogging, in particular, allows both journalists and readers to analyze news they consider important but are omitted or discussed superficially by commercial media organizations. Blogs "make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary come alive both on and offline and so emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to a heightened degree" (Kahn and Kellner, 2004a:7). This allows for a "multi-directional information flow" that allows citizens to exchange knowledge, converse and co-construct a broader picture of the world (MacKinnon, 2004).

While also critical of some media practices, most of the Philippine bloggers examined in this study do not appear to see any contradiction in being professional journalists (being part of the mainstream media) and being part of the blogosphere. In fact, both Quezon and Nery see the division as artificial, as their blogs are not anonymous, so readers are therefore aware of their work as journalists. An exception is Connie Veneracion, who rejects being classified as a journalist and is highly critical of mainstream media practitioners, including fellow bloggers.

Nevertheless, all view their blogs as a space outside their news organizations to highlight and analyze information excluded from or not prioritized in routine reportage and opinion pages, while others place an emphasis on the space they provide for readers to discuss and interpret news. The PCIJ blog, for example, which is an institutional blog, is distinct from the PCIJ website, which only features reports. Comments from readers, discussions and debates, are featured separately in the blog. Journalist-bloggers in this study also regularly blog about "the story behind the story" in what can be construed as a self-critical and reflexive exercise that rarely manifests in mainstream media.

Finally, blogging has implications for press freedom in a fragile democracy like the Philippines. As violence against journalists and restrictions on media practices continue, the blogosphere becomes an extended space for journalists to publish politically sensitive stories and to criticize government authorities. It also becomes a space where individual journalists expound on their political

choices and affiliations—a space where journalists can be citizens, as well as conveyors of news and opinion.

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